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J.K. ROWLING

HARRY POTTER

and the  
Order of the Phoenix



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## CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE	I
Dudley Demented	
CHAPTER TWO	19
A Peck of Owls	
CHAPTER THREE	39
The Advance Guard	
CHAPTER FOUR	55
Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place	
CHAPTER FIVE	73
The Order of the Phoenix	
CHAPTER SIX	90
The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black	
CHAPTER SEVEN	111
The Ministry of Magic	
CHAPTER EIGHT	126
The Hearing	
CHAPTER NINE	140
The Woes of Mrs Weasley	
CHAPTER TEN	165
Luna Lovegood	

CHAPTER ELEVEN	185
The Sorting Hat's New Song	
CHAPTER TWELVE	205
Professor Umbridge	
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	232
Detention with Dolores	
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	259
Percy and Padfoot	
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	284
The Hogwarts High Inquisitor	
CHAPTER SIXTEEN	306
In the Hog's Head	
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	324
Educational Decree Number Twenty-Four	
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN	346
Dumbledore's Army	
CHAPTER NINETEEN	368
The Lion and the Serpent	
CHAPTER TWENTY	389
Hagrid's Tale	

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE	408
The Eye of the Snake	
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO	431
St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries	
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE	455
Christmas on the Closed Ward	
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR	477
Occlumency	
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE	502
The Beetle at Bay	
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX	527
Seen and Unforeseen	
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN	553
The Centaur and the Sneak	
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT	576
Snape's Worst Memory	
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE	601
Careers Advice	
CHAPTER THIRTY	624
Grawp	

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE	649
O.W.L.s	
CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO	672
Out of the Fire	
CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE	691
Fight and Flight	
CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR	703
The Department of Mysteries	
CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE	719
Beyond the Veil	
CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX	743
The Only One He Ever Feared	
CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN	755
The Lost Prophecy	
CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT	778
The Second War Begins	

## CHAPTER ONE

## Dudley Demented

The hottest day of the summer so far was drawing to a close and a drowsy silence lay over the large, square houses of Privet Drive. Cars that were usually gleaming stood dusty in their drives and lawns that were once emerald green lay parched and yellowing – for the use of hosepipes had been banned due to drought. Deprived of their usual car-washing and lawn-mowing pursuits, the inhabitants of Privet Drive had retreated into the shade of their cool houses, windows thrown wide in the hope of tempting in a non-existent breeze. The only person left outdoors was a teenage boy who was lying flat on his back in a flowerbed outside number four.

He was a skinny, black-haired, bespectacled boy who had the pinched, slightly unhealthy look of someone who has grown a lot in a short space of time. His jeans were torn and dirty, his T-shirt baggy and faded, and the soles of his trainers were peeling away from the uppers. Harry Potter's appearance did not endear him to the neighbours, who were the sort of people who thought scruffiness ought to be punishable by law, but as he had hidden himself behind a large hydrangea bush this evening he was quite invisible to passers-by. In fact, the only way he would be spotted was if his Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia stuck their heads out of the living-room window and looked straight down into the flowerbed below.

On the whole, Harry thought he was to be congratulated on his idea of hiding here. He was not, perhaps, very comfortable lying on the hot, hard earth but, on the other hand, nobody was glaring at him, grinding their teeth so loudly that he could not hear the news, or shooting nasty questions at him, as had happened every time he had tried sitting down in the living room to watch television with his aunt and uncle.

Almost as though this thought had fluttered through the open window, Vernon Dursley, Harry's uncle, suddenly spoke.

'Glad to see the boy's stopped trying to butt in. Where is he, anyway?'

'I don't know,' said Aunt Petunia, unconcerned. 'Not in the house.'  
Uncle Vernon grunted.

'*Watching the news ...*' he said scathingly. 'I'd like to know what he's really up to. As if a normal boy cares what's on the news – Dudley hasn't got a clue what's going on; doubt he knows who the Prime Minister is! Anyway, it's not as if there'd be anything about *his lot* on our news –'

'Vernon, *shh!*' said Aunt Petunia. 'The window's open!'

'Oh – yes – sorry, dear.'

The Dursleys fell silent. Harry listened to a jingle about Fruit 'n' Bran breakfast cereal while he watched Mrs Figg, a batty cat-loving old lady from nearby Wisteria Walk, amble slowly past. She was frowning and muttering to herself. Harry was very pleased he was concealed behind the bush, as Mrs Figg had recently taken to asking him round for tea whenever she met him in the street. She had rounded the corner and vanished from view before Uncle Vernon's voice floated out of the window again.

'Dudders out for tea?'

'At the Polkisses', said Aunt Petunia fondly. 'He's got so many little friends, he's so popular ...'

Harry suppressed a snort with difficulty. The Dursleys really were astonishingly stupid about their son, Dudley. They had swallowed all his dim-witted lies about having tea with a different member of his

gang every night of the summer holidays. Harry knew perfectly well that Dudley had not been to tea anywhere; he and his gang spent every evening vandalising the play park, smoking on street corners and throwing stones at passing cars and children. Harry had seen them at it during his evening walks around Little Whinging; he had spent most of the holidays wandering the streets, scavenging newspapers from bins along the way.

The opening notes of the music that heralded the seven o'clock news reached Harry's ears and his stomach turned over. Perhaps tonight – after a month of waiting – would be the night.

*'Record numbers of stranded holidaymakers fill airports as the Spanish baggage-handlers' strike reaches its second week –'*

'Give 'em a lifelong siesta, I would,' snarled Uncle Vernon over the end of the newsreader's sentence, but no matter: outside in the flower-bed, Harry's stomach seemed to unclench. If anything had happened, it would surely have been the first item on the news; death and destruction were more important than stranded holidaymakers.

He let out a long, slow breath and stared up at the brilliant blue sky. Every day this summer had been the same: the tension, the expectation, the temporary relief, and then mounting tension again ... and always, growing more insistent all the time, the question of *why* nothing had happened yet.

He kept listening, just in case there was some small clue, not recognised for what it really was by the Muggles – an unexplained disappearance, perhaps, or some strange accident ... but the baggage-handlers' strike was followed by news about the drought in the Southeast ('I hope he's listening next door!' bellowed Uncle Vernon. 'Him with his sprinklers on at three in the morning!'), then a helicopter that had almost crashed in a field in Surrey, then a famous actress's divorce from her famous husband ('As if we're interested in their sordid affairs,' sniffed Aunt Petunia, who had followed the case obsessively in every magazine she could lay her bony hands on).

Harry closed his eyes against the now blazing evening sky as the newsreader said, '*– and finally, Bungy the budgie has found a novel way of*

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*keeping cool this summer. Bungy, who lives at the Five Feathers in Barnsley, has learned to water ski! Mary Dorkins went to find out more!*

Harry opened his eyes. If they had reached water-skiing budgerigars, there would be nothing else worth hearing. He rolled cautiously on to his front and raised himself on to his knees and elbows, preparing to crawl out from under the window.

He had moved about two inches when several things happened in very quick succession.

A loud, echoing *crack* broke the sleepy silence like a gunshot; a cat streaked out from under a parked car and flew out of sight; a shriek, a bellowed oath and the sound of breaking china came from the Dursleys' living room, and as though this was the signal Harry had been waiting for he jumped to his feet, at the same time pulling from the waistband of his jeans a thin wooden wand as if he were unsheathing a sword – but before he could draw himself up to full height, the top of his head collided with the Dursleys' open window. The resultant *crash* made Aunt Petunia scream even louder.

Harry felt as though his head had been split in two. Eyes streaming, he swayed, trying to focus on the street to spot the source of the noise, but he had barely staggered upright when two large purple hands reached through the open window and closed tightly around his throat.

*'Put – it – away!'* Uncle Vernon snarled into Harry's ear. *'Now! Before – anyone – sees!'*

*'Get – off – me!'* Harry gasped. For a few seconds they struggled, Harry pulling at his uncle's sausage-like fingers with his left hand, his right maintaining a firm grip on his raised wand; then, as the pain in the top of Harry's head gave a particularly nasty throb, Uncle Vernon yelped and released Harry as though he had received an electric shock. Some invisible force seemed to have surged through his nephew, making him impossible to hold.

Panting, Harry fell forwards over the hydrangea bush, straightened up and stared around. There was no sign of what had caused the loud cracking noise, but there were several faces peering through various

nearly windows, Harry stuffed his wand hastily back into his jeans and tried to look innocent.

'Lovely evening!' shouted Uncle Vernon, waving at Mrs Number Seven opposite, who was glaring from behind her net curtains. 'Did you hear that car backfire just now? Gave Petunia and me quite a turn!'

He continued to grin in a horrible, manic way until all the curious neighbours had disappeared from their various windows, then the grin became a grimace of rage as he beckoned Harry back towards him.

Harry moved a few steps closer, taking care to stop just short of the point at which Uncle Vernon's outstretched hands could resume their strangling.

'What the *devil* do you mean by it, boy?' asked Uncle Vernon in a croaky voice that trembled with fury.

'What do I mean by what?' said Harry coldly. He kept looking left and right up the street, still hoping to see the person who had made the cracking noise.

'Making a racket like a starting pistol right outside our –'

'I didn't make that noise,' said Harry firmly.

Aunt Petunia's thin, horsy face now appeared beside Uncle Vernon's wide, purple one. She looked livid.

'Why were you lurking under our window?'

'Yes – yes, good point, Petunia! *What were you doing under our window, boy?*'

'Listening to the news,' said Harry in a resigned voice.

His aunt and uncle exchanged looks of outrage.

'Listening to the news! *Again?*'

'Well, it changes every day, you see,' said Harry.

'Don't you be clever with me, boy! I want to know what you're really up to – and don't give me any more of this *listening to the news* tosh! You know perfectly well that *your lot* –'

'Careful, Vernon!' breathed Aunt Petunia, and Uncle Vernon lowered his voice so that Harry could barely hear him, '– that *your lot* don't get on *our* news!'

'That's all you know,' said Harry.

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The Dursleys goggled at him for a few seconds, then Aunt Petunia said, 'You're a nasty little liar. What are all those –' she, too, lowered her voice so that Harry had to lip-read the next word, '– owls doing if they're not bringing you news?'

'Aha!' said Uncle Vernon in a triumphant whisper. 'Get out of that one, boy! As if we didn't know you get all your news from those pestilential birds!'

Harry hesitated for a moment. It cost him something to tell the truth this time, even though his aunt and uncle could not possibly know how bad he felt at admitting it.

'The owls ... aren't bringing me news,' he said tonelessly.

'I don't believe it,' said Aunt Petunia at once.

'No more do I,' said Uncle Vernon forcefully.

'We know you're up to something funny,' said Aunt Petunia.

'We're not stupid, you know,' said Uncle Vernon.

'Well, *that's* news to me,' said Harry, his temper rising, and before the Dursleys could call him back, he had wheeled about, crossed the front lawn, stepped over the low garden wall and was striding off up the street.

He was in trouble now and he knew it. He would have to face his aunt and uncle later and pay the price for his rudeness, but he did not care very much just at the moment; he had much more pressing matters on his mind.

Harry was sure the cracking noise had been made by someone Apparating or Disapparating. It was exactly the sound Dobby the house-elf made when he vanished into thin air. Was it possible that Dobby was here in Privet Drive? Could Dobby be following him right at this very moment? As this thought occurred he wheeled around and stared back down Privet Drive, but it appeared to be completely deserted and Harry was sure that Dobby did not know how to become invisible.

He walked on, hardly aware of the route he was taking, for he had pounded these streets so often lately that his feet carried him to his favourite haunts automatically. Every few steps he glanced back over his

should. Someone magical had been near him as he lay among Aunt Petunia's dying begonias, he was sure of it. Why hadn't they spoken to him, why hadn't they made contact, why were they hiding now?

And then, as his feeling of frustration peaked, his certainty leaked away.

Perhaps it hadn't been a magical sound after all. Perhaps he was so desperate for the tiniest sign of contact from the world to which he belonged that he was simply overreacting to perfectly ordinary noises. Could he be sure it hadn't been the sound of something breaking inside a neighbour's house?

Harry felt a dull, sinking sensation in his stomach and before he knew it the feeling of hopelessness that had plagued him all summer rolled over him once again.

Tomorrow morning he would be woken by the alarm at five o'clock so he could pay the owl that delivered the *Daily Prophet* – but was there any point continuing to take it? Harry merely glanced at the front page before throwing it aside these days, when the idiots who ran the paper finally realised that Voldemort was back it would be headline news, and that was the only kind Harry cared about.

If he was lucky, there would also be owls carrying letters from his best friends Ron and Hermione, though any expectation he'd had that their letters would bring him news had long since been dashed.

*We can't say much about you-know-what, obviously ... We've been told not to say anything important in case our letters go astray ... We're quite busy but I can't give you details here ... There's a fair amount going on, we'll tell you everything when we see you ...*

But when were they going to see him? Nobody seemed too bothered with a precise date. Hermione had scribbled *I expect we'll be seeing you quite soon* inside his birthday card, but how soon was soon? As far as Harry could tell from the vague hints in their letters, Hermione and Ron were in the same place, presumably at Ron's parents' house. He could hardly bear to think of the pair of them having fun at The Burrow when he was stuck in Privet Drive. In fact, he was so angry with them he had thrown away, unopened, the two boxes of Honeydukes

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chocolates they'd sent him for his birthday. He'd regretted it later, after the wilted salad Aunt Petunia had provided for dinner that night.

And what were Ron and Hermione busy with? Why wasn't he, Harry, busy? Hadn't he proved himself capable of handling much more than them? Had they all forgotten what he had done? Hadn't it been *he* who had entered that graveyard and watched Cedric being murdered, and been tied to that tombstone and nearly killed?

*Don't think about that*, Harry told himself sternly for the hundredth time that summer. It was bad enough that he kept revisiting the graveyard in his nightmares, without dwelling on it in his waking moments too.

He turned a corner into Magnolia Crescent; halfway along he passed the narrow alleyway down the side of a garage where he had first clapped eyes on his godfather. Sirius, at least, seemed to understand how Harry was feeling. Admittedly, his letters were just as empty of proper news as Ron and Hermione's, but at least they contained words of caution and consolation instead of tantalising hints:

*I know this must be frustrating for you ... Keep your nose clean and everything will be OK ... Be careful and don't do anything rash ...*

Well, thought Harry, as he crossed Magnolia Crescent, turned into Magnolia Road and headed towards the darkening play park, he had (by and large) done as Sirius advised. He had at least resisted the temptation to tie his trunk to his broomstick and set off for The Burrow by himself. In fact, Harry thought his behaviour had been very good considering how frustrated and angry he felt at being stuck in Privet Drive so long, reduced to hiding in flowerbeds in the hope of hearing something that might point to what Lord Voldemort was doing. Nevertheless, it was quite galling to be told not to be rash by a man who had served twelve years in the wizard prison, Azkaban, escaped, attempted to commit the murder he had been convicted for in the first place, then gone on the run with a stolen Hippogriff.

Harry vaulted over the locked park gate and set off across the parched grass. The park was as empty as the surrounding streets. When he reached the swings he sank on to the only one that Dudley and his

friends had not yet managed to break, pulled one arm around the chain and stared moodily at the ground. He would not be able to hide in the Dursleys' flowerbed again. Tomorrow, he would have to think of some fresh way of listening to the news. In the meantime, he had nothing to look forward to but another restless, disturbed night, because even when he escaped the nightmares about Cedric he had unsettling dreams about long dark corridors, all finishing in dead ends and locked doors, which he supposed had something to do with the trapped feeling he had when he was awake. Often the old scar on his forehead prickled uncomfortably, but he did not fool himself that Ron or Hermione or Sirius would find that very interesting any more. In the past, his scar hurting had warned that Voldemort was getting stronger again, but now that Voldemort was back they would probably remind him that its regular irritation was only to be expected ... nothing to worry about ... old news ...

The injustice of it all welled up inside him so that he wanted to yell with fury. If it hadn't been for him, nobody would even have known Voldemort was back! And his reward was to be stuck in Little Whinging for four solid weeks, completely cut off from the magical world, reduced to squatting among dying begonias so that he could hear about water-skiing budgerigars! How could Dumbledore have forgotten him so easily? Why had Ron and Hermione got together without inviting him along, too? How much longer was he supposed to endure Sirius telling him to sit tight and be a good boy; or resist the temptation to write to the stupid *Daily Prophet* and point out that Voldemort had returned? These furious thoughts whirled around in Harry's head, and his insides writhed with anger as a sultry, velvety night fell around him, the air full of the smell of warm, dry grass, and the only sound that of the low grumble of traffic on the road beyond the park railings.

He did not know how long he had sat on the swing before the sound of voices interrupted his musings and he looked up. The street lamps from the surrounding roads were casting a misty glow strong enough to silhouette a group of people making their way across the park. One of them was singing a loud, crude song. The others were