



CHAPTER ONE

Owl Post

Harry Potter was a highly unusual boy in many ways. For one thing, he hated the summer holidays more than any other time of year. For another, he really wanted to do his homework, but was forced to do it in secret, in the dead of night. And he also happened to be a wizard.

It was nearly midnight, and he was lying on his front in bed, the blankets drawn right over his head like a tent, a torch in one hand and a large leather-bound book (*A History of Magic*, by Bathilda Bagshot) propped open against the pillow. Harry moved the tip of his eagle-feather quill down the page, frowning as he looked for something that would help him write his essay, 'Witch-Burning in the Fourteenth Century Was Completely Pointless – discuss'.

The quill paused at the top of a likely-looking paragraph. Harry pushed his round glasses up his nose, moved his torch closer to the book and read:

Non-magic people (more commonly known as Muggles) were particularly afraid of magic in medieval times, but not very good at recognising it. On the rare occasion that they did catch a real witch or wizard, burning had no effect whatsoever. The witch or wizard would perform a basic Flame-Freezing Charm and then pretend to shriek with pain while enjoying a gentle, tickling sensation. Indeed, Wendelin the Weird enjoyed being burnt so much that she allowed herself to be caught no fewer than forty-seven times in various disguises.

Harry put his quill between his teeth and reached underneath his pillow for his ink bottle and a roll of parchment. Slowly and very carefully he unscrewed the ink bottle, dipped his quill into it and began to write, pausing every now and then to listen, because if any of the Dursleys heard the scratching of his quill on their way to the bathroom, he'd probably find himself locked in the cupboard under the stairs for the rest of the summer.

The Dursley family of number four, Privet Drive, was the reason that Harry never enjoyed his summer holidays. Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia and their son, Dudley, were Harry's only living relatives. They were Muggles, and they had a very medieval attitude towards magic. Harry's dead parents, who had been a witch and wizard themselves, were never mentioned under the Dursleys' roof. For years, Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had hoped that if they kept Harry as downtrodden as possible, they would be able to squash the

magic out of him. To their fury, they had been unsuccessful, and now lived in terror of anyone finding out that Harry had spent most of the last two years at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The most the Dursleys could do these days was to lock away Harry's spellbooks, wand, cauldron and broomstick at the start of the summer holidays, and forbid him to talk to the neighbours.

This separation from his spellbooks had been a real problem for Harry, because his teachers at Hogwarts had given him a lot of holiday work. One of the essays, a particularly nasty one about Shrinking Potions, was for Harry's least favourite teacher, Professor Snape, who would be delighted to have an excuse to give Harry detention for a month. Harry had therefore seized his chance in the first week of the holidays. While Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia and Dudley had gone out into the front garden to admire Uncle Vernon's new company car (in very loud voices, so that the rest of the street would notice it too), Harry had crept downstairs, picked the lock on the cupboard under the stairs, grabbed some of his books and hidden them in his bedroom. As long as he didn't leave spots of ink on the sheets, the Dursleys need never know that he was studying magic by night.

Harry was keen to avoid trouble with his aunt and uncle at the moment, as they were already in a bad mood with him, all because he'd received a telephone call from a fellow wizard one week into the school holidays.

Ron Weasley, who was one of Harry's best friends at Hogwarts, came from a whole family of wizards. This meant

that he knew a lot of things Harry didn't, but had never used a telephone before. Most unluckily, it had been Uncle Vernon who had answered the call.

'Vernon Dursley speaking.'

Harry, who happened to be in the room at the time, froze as he heard Ron's voice answer.

'HELLO? HELLO? CAN YOU HEAR ME? I – WANT – TO – TALK – TO – HARRY – POTTER!'

Ron was yelling so loudly that Uncle Vernon jumped and held the receiver a foot away from his ear, staring at it with an expression of mingled fury and alarm.

'WHO IS THIS?' he roared in the direction of the mouth-piece. 'WHO ARE YOU?'

'RON – WEASLEY!' Ron bellowed back, as though he and Uncle Vernon were speaking from opposite ends of a football pitch. 'I'M – A – FRIEND – OF – HARRY'S – FROM – SCHOOL –'

Uncle Vernon's small eyes swivelled around to Harry, who was rooted to the spot.

'THERE IS NO HARRY POTTER HERE!' he roared, now holding the receiver at arm's length, as though frightened it might explode. 'I DON'T KNOW WHAT SCHOOL YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT! NEVER CONTACT ME AGAIN! DON'T YOU COME NEAR MY FAMILY!'

And he threw the receiver back onto the telephone as if dropping a poisonous spider.

The row that had followed had been one of the worst ever.

'HOW DARE YOU GIVE THIS NUMBER TO PEOPLE LIKE – PEOPLE LIKE YOU!' Uncle Vernon had roared, spraying Harry with spit.

Ron obviously realised that he'd got Harry into trouble, because he hadn't called again. Harry's other best friend from Hogwarts, Hermione Granger, hadn't been in touch either. Harry suspected that Ron had warned Hermione not to call, which was a pity, because Hermione, the cleverest witch in Harry's year, had Muggle parents, knew perfectly well how to use a telephone, and would probably have had enough sense not to say that she went to Hogwarts.

So Harry had had no word from any of his wizarding friends for five long weeks, and this summer was turning out to be almost as bad as the last one. There was just one, very small improvement: after swearing that he wouldn't use her to send letters to any of his friends, Harry had been allowed to let his owl, Hedwig, out at night. Uncle Vernon had given in because of the racket Hedwig made if she was locked in her cage all the time.

Harry finished writing about Wendelin the Weird and paused to listen again. The silence in the dark house was broken only by the distant, grunting snores of his enormous cousin, Dudley. It must be very late. Harry's eyes were itching with tiredness. Perhaps he'd finish this essay tomorrow night ...

He replaced the top of the ink bottle, pulled an old pillowcase from under his bed, put the torch, *A History of Magic*, his essay, quill and ink inside it, got out of bed and hid

the lot under a loose floorboard under his bed. Then he stood up, stretched, and checked the time on the luminous alarm clock on his bedside table.

It was one o'clock in the morning. Harry's stomach gave a funny jolt. He had been thirteen years old, without realising it, for a whole hour.

Yet another unusual thing about Harry was how little he looked forward to his birthdays. He had never received a birthday card in his life. The Dursleys had completely ignored his last two birthdays, and he had no reason to suppose they would remember this one.

Harry walked across the dark room, past Hedwig's large, empty cage, to the open window. He leant on the sill, the cool night air pleasant on his face after a long time under the blankets. Hedwig had been absent for two nights now. Harry wasn't worried about her – she'd been gone this long before – but he hoped she'd be back soon. She was the only living creature in this house who didn't flinch at the sight of him.

Harry, though still rather small and skinny for his age, had grown a few inches over the last year. His jet-black hair, however, was just as it always had been: stubbornly untidy, whatever he did to it. The eyes behind his glasses were bright green, and on his forehead, clearly visible through his hair, was a thin scar, shaped like a bolt of lightning.

Of all the unusual things about Harry, this scar was the most extraordinary of all. It was not, as the Dursleys had

pretended for ten years, a souvenir of the car crash that had killed Harry's parents, because Lily and James Potter had not died in a car crash. They had been murdered, murdered by the most feared Dark wizard for a hundred years, Lord Voldemort. Harry had escaped from the same attack with nothing more than a scar on his forehead, when Voldemort's curse, instead of killing him, had rebounded upon its originator. Barely alive, Voldemort had fled ...

But Harry had come face to face with him since at Hogwarts. Remembering their last meeting as he stood at the dark window, Harry had to admit he was lucky even to have reached his thirteenth birthday.

He scanned the starry sky for a sign of Hedwig, perhaps soaring back to him with a dead mouse dangling from her beak, expecting praise. Gazing absently over the rooftops, it was a few seconds before Harry realised what he was seeing.

Silhouetted against the golden moon, and growing larger every moment, was a large, strangely lop-sided creature, and it was flapping in Harry's direction. He stood quite still, watching it sink lower and lower. For a split second, he hesitated, his hand on the window-latch, wondering whether to slam it shut, but then the bizarre creature soared over one of the street lamps of Privet Drive, and Harry, realising what it was, leapt aside.

Through the window soared three owls, two of them holding up the third, which appeared to be unconscious. They landed with a soft *slump* on Harry's bed, and the middle

owl, which was large and grey, keeled right over and lay motionless. There was a large package tied to its legs.

Harry recognised the unconscious owl at once – his name was Errol, and he belonged to the Weasley family. Harry dashed to the bed at once, untied the cords around Errol's legs, took off the parcel and then carried Errol to Hedwig's cage. Errol opened one bleary eye, gave a feeble hoot of thanks, and began to gulp some water.

Harry turned back to the remaining owls. One of them, the large snowy female, was his own Hedwig. She, too, was carrying a parcel, and looked extremely pleased with herself. She gave Harry an affectionate nip with her beak as he removed her burden, then flew across the room to join Errol.

Harry didn't recognise the third owl, a handsome tawny one, but he knew at once where it had come from, because in addition to a third parcel, it was carrying a letter bearing the Hogwarts crest. When Harry relieved this owl of its post it ruffled its feathers importantly, stretched its wings and took off through the window into the night.

Harry sat down on his bed, grabbed Errol's package, ripped off the brown paper and discovered a present wrapped in gold, and his first ever birthday card. Fingers trembling slightly, he opened the envelope. Two pieces of paper fell out – a letter and a newspaper cutting.

The cutting had clearly come out of the wizarding newspaper, the *Daily Prophet*, because the people in the black

and white picture were moving. Harry picked up the cutting, smoothed it out and read:

MINISTRY OF MAGIC EMPLOYEE SCOOPS GRAND PRIZE

Arthur Weasley, Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office at the Ministry of Magic, has won the annual *Daily Prophet* Grand Prize Galleon Draw.

A delighted Mr Weasley told the *Daily Prophet*, 'We will be spending the gold on a summer holiday in Egypt, where our eldest son, Bill, works as a curse breaker for Gringotts Wizarding Bank.'

The Weasley family will be spending a month in Egypt, returning for the start of the new school year at Hogwarts, which five of the Weasley children currently attend.

Harry scanned the moving photograph, and a grin spread across his face as he saw all nine of the Weasleys waving furiously at him, standing in front of a large pyramid. Plump little Mrs Weasley, tall, balding Mr Weasley, six sons and one daughter, all (though the black and white picture didn't show it) with flaming red hair. Right in the middle of the picture was Ron, tall and gangling, with his pet rat Scabbers on his shoulder and his arm around his little sister, Ginny.

Harry couldn't think of anyone who deserved to win a large pile of gold more than the Weasleys, who were very nice and extremely poor. He picked up Ron's letter and unfolded it.

Dear Harry,

Happy birthday!

Look, I'm really sorry about that telephone call. I hope the Muggles didn't give you a hard time. I asked Dad, and he reckons I shouldn't have shouted.

It's brilliant here in Egypt. Bill's taken us round all the tombs and you wouldn't believe the curses those old Egyptian wizards put on them. Mum wouldn't let Ginny come in the last one. There were all these mutant skeletons in there, of Muggles who'd broken in and grown extra heads and stuff.

I couldn't believe it when Dad won the Daily Prophet Draw. Seven hundred galleons! Most of it's gone on this holiday, but they're going to buy me a new wand for next year.

Harry remembered only too well the occasion when Ron's old wand had snapped. It had happened when the car the two of them had been flying to Hogwarts had crashed into a tree in the school grounds.

We'll be back about a week before term starts and we'll be going up to London to get my wand and our new books. Any chance of meeting you there?

Don't let the Muggles get you down!

Try and come to London,

Ron

PS: Percy's Head Boy. He got the letter last week.

Harry glanced back at the photograph. Percy, who was in his seventh and final year at Hogwarts, was looking particularly smug. He had pinned his Head Boy badge to the fez perched jauntily on top of his neat hair, his horn-rimmed glasses flashing in the Egyptian sun.

Harry now turned to his present and unwrapped it. Inside was what looked like a miniature glass spinning top. There was another note from Ron beneath it.

Harry – this is a Pocket Sneakoscope. If there's someone untrustworthy around, it's supposed to light up and spin. Bill says it's rubbish sold for wizard tourists and isn't reliable, because it kept lighting up at dinner last night. But he didn't realise Fred and George had put beetles in his soup.

Bye – Ron

Harry put the Pocket Sneakoscope on his bedside table, where it stood quite still, balanced on its point, reflecting the luminous hands of his clock. He looked at it happily for a few seconds, then picked up the parcel Hedwig had brought.

Inside this, too, there was a wrapped present, a card and a letter, this time from Hermione.

Dear Harry,

Ron wrote to me and told me about his phone call to your Uncle Vernon. I do hope you're all right.

I'm on holiday in France at the moment and I didn't know how I was going to send this to you - what if they'd opened it at Customs? - but then Hedwig turned up! I think she wanted to make sure you got something for your birthday for a change. I bought your present by owl-order: there was an advertisement in the Daily Prophet (I've been getting it delivered, it's so good to keep up with what's going on in the wizarding world). Did you see that picture of Ron and his family a week ago? I bet he's learning loads, I'm really jealous - the ancient Egyptian wizards were fascinating.

There's some interesting local history of witchcraft here, too. I've rewritten my whole History of Magic essay to include some of the things I've found out. I hope it's not too long, it's two rolls of parchment more than Professor Binns asked for.

Ron says he's going to be in London in the last week of the holidays. Can you make it? Will your aunt and uncle let you come? I really hope you can. If not, I'll see you on the Hogwarts Express on September the first!

Love from
Hermione

P.S. Ron says Percy's Head Boy. I'll bet Percy's really pleased. Ron doesn't seem too happy about it.

Harry laughed again as he put Hermione's letter aside and picked up her present. It was very heavy. Knowing Hermione, he was sure it would be a large book full of very difficult spells – but it wasn't. His heart gave a huge bound as he ripped back the paper and saw a sleek black leather case with silver words stamped across it: *Broomstick Servicing Kit*.

'Wow, Hermione!' Harry whispered, unzipping the case to look inside.

There was a large jar of Fleetwood's High-Finish Handle Polish, a pair of gleaming silver Tail-Twig Clippers, a tiny brass compass to clip onto your broom for long journeys, and a *Handbook of Do-it-Yourself Broomcare*.

Apart from his friends, the thing that Harry missed most about Hogwarts was Quidditch, the most popular sport in the magical world – highly dangerous, very exciting and played on broomsticks. Harry happened to be a very good Quidditch player; he had been the youngest person in a century to be picked for one of the Hogwarts house teams. One of Harry's most prized possessions was his Nimbus Two Thousand racing broom.

Harry put the leather case aside and picked up his last parcel. He recognised the untidy scrawl on the brown paper at once: this was from Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper. He tore off the top layer of paper and glimpsed something green and leathery, but before he could unwrap it properly, the

parcel gave a strange quiver, and whatever was inside it snapped loudly – as though it had jaws.

Harry froze. He knew that Hagrid would never send him anything dangerous on purpose, but then, Hagrid didn't have a normal person's view of what was dangerous. Hagrid had been known to befriend giant spiders, buy vicious, three-headed dogs from men in pubs and sneak illegal dragon eggs into his cabin.

Harry poked the parcel nervously. It snapped loudly again. Harry reached for the lamp on his bedside table, gripped it firmly in one hand and raised it over his head, ready to strike. Then he seized the rest of the wrapping paper in his other hand and pulled.

And out fell – a book. Harry just had time to register its handsome green cover, emblazoned with the golden title, *The Monster Book of Monsters*, before it flipped onto its edge and scuttled sideways along the bed like some weird crab.

'Uh oh,' Harry muttered.

The book toppled off the bed with a loud clunk and shuffled rapidly across the room. Harry followed it stealthily. The book was hiding in the dark space under his desk. Praying that the Dursleys were still fast asleep, Harry got down on his hands and knees and reached towards it.

'Ouch!'

The book snapped shut on his hand and then flapped past him, still scuttling on its covers. Harry scrambled around, threw himself forward and managed to flatten it. Uncle Vernon gave a loud, sleepy grunt in the room next door.

Hedwig and Errol watched interestedly as Harry clamped the struggling book tightly in his arms, hurried to his chest of drawers and pulled out a belt, which he buckled tightly around it. *The Monster Book* shuddered angrily, but could no longer flap and snap, so Harry threw it down on the bed and reached for Hagrid's card.

DEAR HARRY,
HAPPY BIRTHDAY!
THINK YOU MIGHT FIND THIS USEFUL
FOR NEXT YEAR. WON'T SAY NO MORE HERE.
TELL YOU WHEN I SEE YOU.
HOPE THE MUGGLES ARE TREATING
YOU RIGHT.
ALL THE BEST,
HAGRID

It struck Harry as ominous that Hagrid thought a biting book would come in useful, but he put up Hagrid's card next to Ron and Hermione's, grinning more broadly than ever. Now there was only the letter from Hogwarts left.

Noticing that it was rather thicker than usual, Harry slit open the envelope, pulled out the first page of parchment within and read:

Dear Mr Potter,
Please note that the new school year will begin on
September the first. The Hogwarts Express will leave

from King's Cross Station, platform nine and three-quarters, at eleven o'clock.

Third-years are permitted to visit the village of Hogsmeade at certain weekends. Please give the enclosed permission form to your parent or guardian to sign.

A list of books for next year is enclosed.

Yours sincerely,

Professor M. McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

Harry pulled out the Hogsmeade permission form and looked at it, no longer grinning. It would be wonderful to visit Hogsmeade at weekends; he knew it was an entirely wizarding village, and he had never set foot there. But how on earth was he going to persuade Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia to sign the form?

He looked over at the alarm clock. It was now two o'clock in the morning.

Deciding that he'd worry about the Hogsmeade form when he woke up, Harry got back into bed and reached up to cross off another day on the chart he'd made for himself, counting down the days left until his return to Hogwarts. Then he took off his glasses and lay down, eyes open, facing his three birthday cards.

Extremely unusual though he was, at that moment Harry Potter felt just like everyone else: glad, for the first time in his life, that it was his birthday.