

CHAPTER 1

LITTLE WHINGING'S MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

The midnight hour of July 30th was fast approaching as a wicked storm raged throughout the modest town of Little Whinging: Endless files of tiny dirt-brown houses stood creaking and moaning, pitching slightly, under the sweeping influence of the tempest's howling winds. The homes' grey-shingled rooftops lay helplessly drawn beneath the buckets of chilling rain pouring dramatically from the sky; it rushed in droves over the gutters, spilling onto the perfectly manicured front lawns, coursing along the leveled black tops of the driveways and over the embankments, turning the narrow streets into shallow black rivers. All the while, intermittent bursts of lightening ignited the night sky as it silhouetted against the landscape, which rocked fiercely amidst the driving force of booming thunder.

Sheltered and secured within the second floor bedroom of his Aunt and Uncle's home, #4 Privet Drive, a lean and muscular bespectacled wizard, named Harry Potter, lay wide awake in his bed. The intensity of the late hour, compounded by the cool, damp darkness of the night had set his mind to racing. He was pondering over the owl that his fellow wizard friend, Remus Lupin, had sent him earlier that evening; it alerted him to the impending arrival of several members from the Order of the Phoenix advanced guard, all of whom had been instructed to retrieve him at two a.m. sharp on the morning of July 31st to place him safely into hiding for the remainder of the summer holidays. After all, Harry was to turn seventeen and would be officially regarded to as an adult in the wizard world. The charm that Dumbledore had cast over #4 Privet Drive to protect him throughout his childhood would expire at twelve a.m. on July 31st, leaving him entirely vulnerable to Voldemort and the Dark Side.

Harry shuddered when he recalled the conclusion of Remus's owl, which stated clearly, **in bold lettering**, that he was *not* to leave his Aunt and Uncle's house unless accompanied by designated members of the Order of the Phoenix Guard.

However frightened Harry may have been, he was also quite relieved that in just a few short hours, he would be rid of his nasty Aunt Petunia, his vicious Uncle Vernon, and his spoiled Cousin Dudley for good. Throughout his entire sixteen years of living under their care, the three of them had gone above and beyond the call of duty to make his life completely miserable, reinstating the undeniable validation that they had never taken kindly to him and never would. And after years of his soaking in their mental torment, abuse, and neglect, the feeling was entirely mutual for Harry.

He let out a disgruntled snort upon the recollection of his announcement to them that he'd be moving out: His heartless Aunt pursed her horse-like lips and eyed him over with

aversion, while his miserable Uncle chortled out in great displeasure, “Yes, well, try not to damage anything on your way out! And tell those freaky little friends of yours to keep it down, would you? We don’t need everyone in the neighborhood minding our business!”

Needless to say, Harry wasn’t a bit surprised to bear witness to such hateful responses and was not offended in the least. He continued to surrender his focus to the happiness he would find once he finally abandoned the town of Little Whinging and reunited with his friends, especially his best friends, Ron and Hermione. It had been nearly a month since he’d seen them at the Burrow, when he attended Bill and Fleur’s wedding in early July.

Harry’s mind now drifted to thoughts of his impending seventh and final school year at Hogwarts. He doubted the school could possibly carry on without its Headmaster, Dumbledore, the greatest wizard of their age. He recalled the years of countless lessons that the brilliant and talented wizard had taught him, all the while realizing how much more knowledge there was, yet, for him to acquire.

His heart bottomed into the pit of his stomach as he relived the moment Dumbledore had been brutally murdered on the school grounds two months earlier. He still recalled the horrible night as though it were only yesterday: He and Dumbledore were returning to the castle from their secret mission of attempting to recover and destroy one of Voldemort’s Horcruxes believed to reside within the Slytherin Locket. In order to retrieve the necklace, Dumbledore had to ingest every drop of magic potion that lay in a stone basin surrounding it. By doing so, he had been dramatically weakened, plagued by a horrible curse laced in the liquid’s contents.

On Dumbledore’s orders, Harry, secured beneath his invisibility cloak, rushed him back to the school grounds to fetch Professor Snape, a potions genius, to assist in the Headmaster’s aid. Unfortunately, the instant Harry and Dumbledore cleared the outer grounds of the school, they were addressed by the Dark Mark, Voldemort’s mark, swimming sinisterly over the North Tower of the castle. They soon discovered that Death Eaters had secretly broken into the school to assist Draco Malfoy, a Hogwarts’ student and son of a fellow Death Eater, in the execution of Voldemort’s orders that he slay Dumbledore.

Draco had been the first of the group of Death Eaters to filter out of the castle and meet the ailing Dumbledore and an invisibility cloaked Harry, the moment the two arrived on the scene. Draco disarmed Dumbledore, who had spent his only chance at defending himself to perform the Petrificus Totalus Jinx on an invisibility-cloaked Harry to ensure that Harry would stay hidden and protected from harm. Minutes later, the remaining group of Death Eaters joined Draco’s side, followed closely by Professor Snape, who shoved the cowering Draco aside and performed the fatal Avada Kedavra curse on Dumbledore, instead.

Harry cringed when he recalled how he tried desperately, to no avail, to release himself from the Petrificus Jinx to save Dumbledore’s life. But, the spell was far too powerful

and had kept him frozen and silenced until Dumbledore was dead and the Death Eaters, Draco, and Professor Snape were making their escape off the castle grounds; it was only then that Harry was able to move and join in the fight. In a desperate measure to capture Snape, Harry chased after him, relentlessly throwing out curse after curse in the direction of the evil traitor. Unfortunately, much to the chagrin of Harry, Snape had managed to block every one of his curses and cleared the castle grounds, apparating to freedom.

To the present, Harry could still feel every bit of the horrific shock that had enveloped him from the experience of that night. Much as he had always loathed Snape, the able wizard had long been considered to be one of Dumbledore's most trusted allies. He was a former Death Eater who was said to have risen-up against Voldemort by becoming a double spy for the Order of the Phoenix for top-secret reasons known only to Dumbledore. It was incomprehensible to Harry how Snape had been able to deceive Dumbledore, the members of the Order, and the whole of the Ministry for nearly two decades, without folding.

A fiery anger now welled inside of Harry as he envisioned Voldemort, Snape, and the remaining gaggle of Death Eaters contaminating the masses of innocent people with their dreadful temperaments and Unforgivable Curses. He imagined himself scaling the ends of the earth, collecting Voldemort's Horcruxes, destroying them, and eliminating the dark wizard and every one of his followers for good. Then, Harry would personally see to it that the nefarious Severus Snape would pay dearly for murdering his mentor.

Just then, the delicate pealing of an alarm clock bell jolted Harry's thoughts to the present moment. He turned to address his nightstand, eyeing the tarnished silver timekeeper resting atop it, and an overwhelming sense of dread enveloped him; it was midnight; he was seventeen; Dumbledore's shield protection charm had officially expired. From that moment on, no one and nothing would keep Harry from having to face his destiny as 'the chosen one,' the one prophesized to see to the Dark Lord's demise.

He closed his eyes in objection, desperately wishing with all his might that he was eleven again, that he could return to the moment when he first discovered he was a wizard. He wanted so badly for Dumbledore to be alive, to be there to guide him and protect him. If only he could just go back....

With the passing of his thoughts, Harry was abruptly shaken by the heavy, rhythmic pounding of hurried footsteps befalling from outside his bedroom window. Intermittent popping noises, much like that of giant balloons exploding under thick blankets, were mixing in at various intervals. He rolled over in his bed, pulled his wand out from beneath his moth eaten pillow, and bolted upright, listening intently. After all, it was essential that he remain vigilant; Voldemort, the Death Eaters, and every evil living creature on earth was awaiting the perfect opportunity to capture and kill him. At least now that he was considered an adult wizard, he was legally permitted to perform magic outside of Hogwarts without fear of reprimand from the Ministry. He felt a bit more at ease knowing that he had the freedom to defend himself at will, whenever necessary.

With his wand at the ready, Harry slowly and cautiously leapt to his feet and slithered over to the window. He slid behind and concealed himself within the long moss-green-colored draperies hanging ineptly on either side.

With a gentle tapping of his wand on the windowsill, he muttered softly, “Apro.” The window raised open and Harry stood before it, barefoot in his green checked boxers and white cotton T-shirt, peering outside.

A thick fog blanketed the area in steep, broken pockets up and down all of Privet Drive, while a heavy rain splashed wildly over the gutters that hung above his window. Through the intense obstacles of the storm, Harry noticed the source of the late night disturbance: Someone was hurtling down the sodden streets in his direction. He managed to catch a glimpse of the figure as it dashed beneath the soft glow of scattered streetlights, observing a hazy image of a tall young woman with long dark hair, dressed in dark fitted clothing. She was behaving, under his scrutiny, quite panic-stricken. As she drew nearer to him, he observed something QUITE peculiar about her: In the midst of such an intense rainstorm, she appeared to be completely dry from head to foot! He strained his eyes further and noted a transparent sphere-shaped structure fully surrounding her as she ran, forcing the rain to ricochet away from her in all directions. She held a long stick-like figure in her left hand, which she was vigorously waving over her head and behind her. Brilliant flashes of bright-purple light erupted from the tip of the stick at various altitudes, followed by the same loud popping noises he had heard echoing down the street only seconds earlier. He gasped in awe as he noticed that with each flash emitted from her wand, several houses along the streets instantly vanished from atop their perfectly leveled properties.

“She’s a wizard!” Harry exclaimed in a raspy whisper.

Dashing from behind the tatty draperies, Harry collected his clothing from the edge of his narrow unmade bed, pulled on his trousers and overcoat, and hastily laced up his white trainers. Snatching his invisibility cloak from inside of his trunk, he took off running toward his bedroom doorway; he threw the door wide and sprinted out of his room, into the floral papered hallway, and toward the stairs; then he rushed down the rickety wooden staircase with his wand at the ready, recklessly draping his invisibility cloak over him as he went. There was a certainty inside him that said the mysterious young woman would soon be rounding the front of the house and that he would be likely to catch a better glimpse of her through the peephole in the front door.

After coming to a screeching halt at the foot of the staircase, Harry hesitated for an instant, collected his breath, then heaved himself up against the front door and peered through the peephole. He was completely taken aback, yelping out in surprise at the sight of a bright-green eye returning his stare. Tripping backward, Harry wheeled around with his wand clutched tightly in his hand, and darted toward the back of the house, dashing down the long picture-speckled hallway, and into the full service kitchen: His revised plan was to slip out the back door of the house and shift around to the front corner of the

property in order to get a clear grasp of the situation. He wasn't certain who on earth the mysterious woman was, or what her intentions were, and he wasn't taking any chances.

Now, finding his way to the back door at the extreme left back wall of the kitchen, Harry slowly and cautiously unbolted the three brass locks, removed the chain from the top of it, and clapped a firm hold of the doorknob. He hesitated, panting heavily, his heart thumping wildly in his chest. Then, drawing his wand forward, and with one last bravado seeking breath, he threw open the door...

There stood the girl Harry had seen racing down Privet Drive mere moments earlier, the same girl he'd caught staring back at him through the peep-hole in the front entryway: She was young, perhaps a few years older than he was, fairly tall, thin, and quite voluptuous. Beautiful, long locks of thick, wavy dark hair flowed fashionably from the top of her head to the center of her back, and a few scattered strands of it fell seductively in loose ringlets, framing out the features of her stunning face. She had the most fascinating deep-green sparkling eyes, topped with longest, thickest eyelashes Harry had ever seen. Just below the corner of this gorgeous creature's right eye lay a small dark beauty mark which appeared quite conspicuously against her fair skin. Her lips were kissed delicately in a deep burgundy-rose hue and her cheeks had been blushed with a subtle shimmering glow. Around her neck, there hung a gold-link choker; a golden heart-shaped locket dangled freely from it. She was dressed seductively in a tight burgundy corset-top delicately trimmed with a black lace-up front and scalloped bottom edge, which flowed into a knee-length, layered black flair skirt with an extreme asymmetrical hem. On her feet, she donned a pair of fully laced, perfectly polished, jet-back high heel boots that stretched proudly to her mid-calf.

Harry remained in complete awe of the girl, his mouth drawn open wide. He was utterly speechless. Never had he been in the presence of such an incredibly perfect woman. Even the stunning Veela he'd seen three summers ago at the Quidditch World Cup couldn't compare to the phenomenal vision standing before him now.

Swiftly, he removed his invisibility cloak from around himself and tossed it to the ground beside him, stuttering lamely, "Uh—h-h-hi."

Looking petrified, the girl appeared to be in a severe state of shock: She stood in place, panting and swaying perilously back and forth beneath the narrow frame of the entryway. She studied him intensely, her wand clutched tightly in her left hand. Then, abruptly, she stumbled into him and fainted.

Harry managed to catch her just before she met the floor.