

Dudley turned.

'Oh, he grunted. It's you.'

'How long have you been "Big D" then?' said Harry.

'Shut it,' snarled Dudley, turning away.

'Cool name,' said Harry, grinning and falling into step beside his cousin. But you'll always be "Ickle Diddykins" to me.'

'I said, SHUT IT!' said Dudley, whose ham-like hands had curled into fists.

'Don't the boys know that's what your mum calls you?'

'Shut your face.'

'You don't tell *her* to shut her face. What about "Popkin" and "Dinky Diddydums", can I use them then?'

Dudley said nothing. The effort of keeping himself from hitting Harry seemed to demand all his self-control.

'So who've you been beating up tonight?' Harry asked, his grin fading. 'Another ten-year-old? I know you did Mark Evans two nights ago -'

'He was asking for it,' snarled Dudley.

'Oh yeah?'

'He cheeked me.'

'Yeah? Did he say you look like a pig that's been taught to walk on its hind legs? 'Cause that's not cheek, Dud, that's true.'

A muscle was twitching in Dudley's jaw. It gave Harry enormous satisfaction to know how furious he was making Dudley; he felt as though he was siphoning off his own frustration into his cousin, the only outlet he had.

They turned right down the narrow alleyway where Harry had first seen Sirius and which formed a short cut between Magnolia Crescent and Wisteria Walk. It was empty and much darker than the streets it linked because there were no street lamps. Their footsteps were muffled between garage walls on one side and a high fence on the other.

'Think you're a big man carrying that thing, don't you?' Dudley said after a few seconds.

'What thing?'

'That - that thing you are hiding.'

Harry grinned again.

'Not as stupid as you look, are you, Dud? But I s'pose, if you were, you wouldn't be able to walk and talk at the same time.'

Harry pulled out his wand. He saw Dudley look sideways at it.

'You're not allowed,' Dudley said at once. 'I know you're not. You'd get expelled from that freak school you go to.'

'How d'you know they haven't changed the rules, Big D?'

'They haven't,' said Dudley, though he didn't sound completely convinced.

Harry laughed softly.

'You haven't got the guts to take me on without that thing, have you?' Dudley snarled.

'Whereas you just need four mates behind you before you can beat up a ten-year-old. You know that boxing title you keep banging on about? How old was your opponent? Seven? Eight?'

'He was sixteen, for your information,' snarled Dudley, and he was out cold for twenty minutes after I'd finished with him and he was twice as heavy as you. You just wait till I tell Dad you had that thing out -'

'Running to Daddy now, are you? Is his ickle boxing champ frightened of nasty Harry's wand?'

'Not this brave at night, are you?' sneered Dudley.

'This is night, Diddykins. That's what we call it when it goes all dark like this.'

'I mean when you're in bed!' Dudley snarled.

He had stopped walking. Harry stopped too, staring at his cousin. From the little he could see of Dudley's large face, he was wearing a strangely triumphant look.

'What d'you mean, I'm not brave when I'm in bed?' said Harry, completely nonplussed. 'What am I supposed to be frightened of, pillows or something?'

'I heard you last night,' said Dudley breathlessly. 'Talking in your sleep. *Moaning*.'

'What d'you mean?' Harry said again, but there was a cold, plunging sensation in his stomach. He had revisited the graveyard last night in his dreams.

Dudley gave a harsh bark of laughter, then adopted a high-pitched whimpering voice.

"Don't kill Cedric! Don't kill Cedric!" Who's Cedric – your boyfriend?

'I – you're lying,' said Harry automatically. But his mouth had gone dry. He knew Dudley wasn't lying – how else would he know about Cedric?

"Dad! Help me, Dad! He's going to kill me, Dad! Boo hoo!"

Shut up, said Harry quietly. Shut up, Dudley, I'm warning you!

"Come and help me, Dad! Mum, come and help me! He's killed Cedric! Dad, help me! He's going to –" *Don't you point that thing at me!*

Dudley backed into the alley wall. Harry was pointing the wand directly at Dudley's heart. Harry could feel fourteen years' hatred of Dudley pounding in his veins – what wouldn't he give to strike now, to jinx Dudley so thoroughly he'd have to crawl home like an insect, struck dumb, sprouting feelers ...

'Don't ever talk about that again,' Harry snarled. 'D'you understand me?'

'Point that thing somewhere else!'

I said, *do you understand me?*

'Point it somewhere else!'

'DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?'

'GET THAT THING AWAY FROM –'

Dudley gave an odd, shuddering gasp, as though he had been doused in icy water.

Something had happened to the night. The star-strewn indigo sky was suddenly pitch black and lightless – the stars, the moon, the misty street lamps at either end of the alley had vanished. The distant rumble of cars and the whisper of trees had gone. The balmy evening was suddenly piercingly, biting cold. They were surrounded by total,

impenetrable, silent darkness, as though some giant hand had dropped a thick, icy mantle over the entire alleyway, blinding them.

For a split second Harry thought he had done magic without meaning to, despite the fact that he'd been resisting as hard as he could – then his reason caught up with his senses – he didn't have the power to turn off the stars. He turned his head this way and that, trying to see something, but the darkness pressed on his eyes like a weightless veil.

Dudley's terrified voice broke in Harry's ear.

'W-what are you d-doing? St-stop it!'

'I'm not doing anything! Shut up and don't move!'

'I c-can't see! I've g-gone blind! I –'

'I said shut up!'

Harry stood stock-still, turning his sightless eyes left and right. The cold was so intense he was shivering all over; goose bumps had erupted up his arms and the hairs on the back of his neck were standing up – he opened his eyes to their fullest extent, staring blankly around, unseeing.

It was impossible ... they couldn't be here ... not in Little Whinging ... he strained his ears ... he would hear them before he saw them ...

'I'll t-tell Dad! Dudley whimpered. 'W-where are you? What are you d-do-?'

'Will you shut up?' Harry hissed, 'I'm trying to lis-'

But he fell silent. He had heard just the thing he had been dreading.

There was something in the alleyway apart from themselves, something that was drawing long, hoarse, rattling breaths. Harry felt a horrible jolt of dread as he stood trembling in the freezing air.

'C-cut it out! Stop doing it! I'll h-hit you, I swear I will!'

'Dudley, shut-'

WHAM.

A fist made contact with the side of Harry's head, lifting him off his feet. Small white lights popped in front of his eyes. For the second time in an hour Harry felt as though his head had been cleaved in two, next

moment, he had landed hard on the ground and his wand had flown out of his hand.

'You moron, Dudley!' Harry yelled, his eyes watering with pain as he scrambled to his hands and knees, feeling around frantically in the blackness. He heard Dudley blundering away, hitting the alley fence, stumbling.

DUDLEY, COME BACK YOU'RE RUNNING RIGHT AT IT!

There was a horrible squealing yell and Dudley's footsteps stopped. At the same moment, Harry felt a creeping chill behind him that could mean only one thing. There was more than one.

DUDLEY, KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT. WHATEVER YOU DO, KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT. WAND! Harry muttered frantically, his hands flying over the ground like spiders. 'Where's – wand – come on – *lumos!*

He said the spell automatically, desperate for light to help him in his search – and to his disbelief relief, light flared inches from his right hand – the wand-tip had ignited. Harry snatched it up, scrambled to his feet and turned around.

His stomach turned over.

A towering, hooded figure was gliding smoothly towards him, hovering over the ground, no feet or face visible beneath its robes, sucking on the night as it came.

Stumbling backwards, Harry raised his wand.

'Expecto patronum!'

A silvery wisp of vapour shot from the tip of the wand and the Dementor slowed, but the spell hadn't worked properly; tripping over his own feet, Harry retreated further as the Dementor bore down upon him, panic fogging his brain – *concentrate* –

A pair of grey, slimy, scabbed hands slid from inside the Dementor's robes, reaching for him. A rushing noise filled Harry's ears.

'Expecto patronum!'

His voice sounded dim and distant. Another wisp of silver smoke, feebler than the last, drifted from the wand – he couldn't do it any more, he couldn't work the spell.

There was laughter inside his own head, shrill, high-pitched laughter ... he could smell the Dementor's putrid, death-cold breath filling his own lungs, drowning him – *think ... something happy ...*

But there was no happiness in him ... the Dementor's icy fingers were closing on his throat – the high-pitched laughter was growing louder and louder, and a voice spoke inside his head: *'Bow to death, Harry ... it might even be painless ... I would not know ... I have never died ...'*

He was never going to see Ron and Hermione again –

And their faces burst clearly into his mind as he fought for breath.

'EXPECTO PATRONUM!'

An enormous silver stag erupted from the tip of Harry's wand, its antlers caught the Dementor in the place where the heart should have been, it was thrown backwards, weightless as darkness, and as the stag charged, the Dementor swooped away, bat-like and defeated.

'THIS WAY!' Harry shouted at the stag. Wheeling around, he sprinted down the alleyway, holding the lit wand aloft. **'DUDLEY? DUDLEY!'**

He had run barely a dozen steps when he reached them: Dudley was curled up on the ground, his arms clamped over his face. A second Dementor was crouching low over him, gripping his wrists in its slimy hands, prising them slowly, almost lovingly apart, lowering its hooded head towards Dudley's face as though about to kiss him.

'GET IT!' Harry bellowed, and with a rushing, roaring sound, the silver stag he had conjured came galloping past him. The Dementor's eyeless face was barely an inch from Dudley's when the silver antlers caught it; the thing was thrown up into the air and, like its fellow, it soared away and was absorbed into the darkness; the stag cantered to the end of the alleyway and dissolved into silver mist.

Moon, stars and street lamps burst back into life. A warm breeze swept the alleyway. Trees rustled in neighbouring gardens and the mundane rumble of cars in Mognolia Crescent filled the air again. Harry stood quite still, all his senses vibrating, taking in the abrupt return to normality. After a moment, he became aware that his T-shirt was sticking to him; he was drenched in sweat.