

Title: For Love of a Child

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Summary: Hermione travels to Australia to find her parents and learns the true meaning of love and sacrifice.

Timeframe: Two and a half months after the Battle of Hogwarts in Book 7

Audience: PG-13

Category: After Book Seven (before Epilog)

Warnings: Intense Emotion

Length: 53 pages

## For Love of a Child

### Chapter 1 -- Future Plans

Voldemort is dead. The war is over. The trials by the Wizengamot of surviving Death Eaters and other sympathizers of the Dark Lord are in progress. Justice is being served.

Harry and Hermione are at the Burrow, where they have been living since shortly after the Battle of Hogwarts.

It is the day after Harry's birthday, which he celebrated with Hermione and the Weasley family.

Harry and Hermione are in the kitchen eating breakfast with Ginny, Ron, and Mr and Mrs Weasley.

"A wonderful breakfast, Mrs Weasley," said Hermione, elbowing Ron.

"Yea... great, Mum," responded Ron, rubbing his assaulted ribs.

Ginny and Harry grinned at each other.

Mrs Weasley looked narrowly at Ron and said, "Thank you, Hermione." Then she placed her hands out flat on the table and while looking around at them, said, "I think it's time we discussed your futures... Harry... Ron... Hermione..." She paused for emphasis after each of their names.

Before anyone could comment, she continued, "You all missed your last year of school... And I think you should return this year to *complete* your education."

She paused a moment and then added, "It will be nice for Ginny to be in the same classes with you."

Ginny rolled her eyes and said, incredulously, "Mum, you *can't* be serious. Why would Harry need to go back to school?"

"Ginny, this does not concern you," retorted Mrs Weasley.

"Uh, Molly dear..." interrupted Mr Weasley, heading off an argument with Ginny, who had opened her mouth to shoot back. "I happen to know the Auror Office has just invited Harry to start his studies to become an Auror. They are making a special exemption and waiving the NEWT requirements in his case -- for obvious reasons. This has the full support of the Minister for Magic, and I have not heard a single objection from anyone in the Ministry. This is still Ministry-only information and that is why I haven't told you... Harry knows, of course."

Harry chimed in, "Right. And I plan to accept. I already told Ginny... uh, and Ron... and Hermione. But thanks for thinking of me, Mrs Weasley." Harry looked a little embarrassed.

"Well, congratulations, of course," replied Mrs Weasley coolly, shooting a why-didn't-you-tell-me look at Mr Weasley. Then she turned to look at Ron.

"Ronald surely needs to return to school to complete his education," she said, turning her head to glance at Mr Weasley, expecting him to chime in.

He did, but to Mrs Weasley's great surprise, said "Ron told me just before breakfast that George has offered him a partnership at Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, and he has accepted."

"But his education..." spluttered Mrs Weasley.

"Mum, George didn't get his NEWTs either. I don't want to go back to school. This is a real opportunity. I can't pass it up. Please understand," said Ron, pleading his case.

Mrs Weasley looked at Mr Weasley for support, but he said, "Molly, I think he's right about this."

"Well, Ginny is *definitely* going back to Hogwarts, and I will brook no argument as she is not yet of age," stated Mrs Weasley firmly while folding her arms and leaning back in her chair.

To everyone's surprise, Ginny made no objection. After a few seconds, with a sly grin she said, "I already *have* what I want," and winked at Harry, who blushed.

Harry hastily addressed Mr and Mrs Weasley, “Mr and Mrs Weasley, Ginny and I are in love.”

“Well, of course you are,” replied Mr and Mrs Weasley together.

Mr Weasley continued, “We’ve known since you stayed with us before Bill and Fleur’s wedding. We also know that hiding your love saved Ginny from the Death Eaters. You not only saved the wizarding world, you saved our daughter for the second time. Look what happened to Luna. Imagine what would have happened to Ginny if they had known.”

Molly nodded, sending Harry a look of great admiration and love.

Harry blushed with embarrassment again.

Ginny and Molly each stretched out a hand and placed them on his.

Mr Weasley spoke again looking at Harry, “But now you two have all the time in the world, so I’m sure you have no objection to Ginny completing her education.”

“I don’t, not at all,” said Harry earnestly. “In fact, Ginny and I have already agreed on that.”

Ginny chimed in. “I still have so much to learn, and I want to see my school friends again.”

Hermione thought to herself, ‘Three down, one to go.’ She, Harry, Ginny, and Ron had already discussed all this among themselves right after Harry’s birthday party.

All eyes turned toward Hermione.

“And do you have a surprise for us too, Hermione?” intoned Mrs Weasley, now back with her hands stretched out on the table.

Hermione took a breath and said. “I intend to complete my education, and I have already discussed a special extended program of study beyond Hogwarts with Professor McGonagall. It’s just...”

Mrs Weasley, nodding approvingly, interrupted her, “Very good. Very good, indeed,” while giving Ron a she’s-made-the-right-decision-why-can’t-you look.

Hermione hastily continued, “It’s just that it will have to wait until I get back.”

“What?” said Mrs Weasley in surprise. “Get back from where?”

“From... Australia.” Hermione exhaled heavily as she said it and then continued, her voice quavering, “I have to find my *parents*.”

Hermione choked up and began to cry, hiding her face in her hands.

Mr and Mrs Weasley looked at each other.

“What is it, dear?” asked Mrs Weasley with great concern.

Ron answered. “Before we left last year to find the Horcruxes, Hermione modified her parents’ memories to protect them. She sent them to Australia. They think they are Wendell and Monica Wilkins... who *don’t have a daughter*.”

Mr Weasley was speechless. Mrs Weasley gasped and placed her hands over her mouth. She hastily stood from her chair and moved to lean over and hug Hermione from behind.

Mrs Weasley sobbed, “Oh Hermione, we didn't know. Such selfless love... I can't imagine how hard it was to do such a thing.” Mrs Weasley looked up at Ron and said, “You are so lucky to have this wonderful girl.”

Mr Weasley looked at Ron and said, “You're going too.” It wasn't a question.

“Right... I neglected to mention that part earlier,” Ron said, and then added, “George already knows.”

Ron continued, “We're leaving in three days. If we're lucky, we'll be back before the start of school. We'd appreciate it if you'd pick up Hermione's school supplies in Diagon Alley. Just charge it to my account with Wizard Wheezes at Gringotts. George set it up for me when he found out what we were going to do.”

Hermione had regained her composure and said, “Thank you, Ron. I was being silly with worry.”

Mrs Weasley released her hug but remained standing behind Hermione with motherly hands on her shoulders. “Nonsense, dear; it's perfectly natural to be worried. I'm sure they're fine. You'll find them.”

“Thank you,” said Hermione softly.

After a few seconds, Mrs Weasley said dryly, “In the future, I'd prefer it if we were limited to just one surprise announcement per meal. I'm getting a little too old for this sort of thing.

## Chapter 2 -- G'day Mate

“We've landed, Ron. You can open your eyes,” sighed Hermione.

Ron opened just one eye and turned his head to peer out the window. He was sitting very rigidly in his seat, his hands tightly gripping the ends of the arm rests. This had been his posture the entire ten hour flight from Hong Kong to Sydney, and the twelve hour flight before it from London. Ron's bladder control was amazing. Then again, very uncharacteristically, he had not had anything to eat or drink since leaving Heathrow.

Seeing the plane was on the ground, Ron opened his other eye and then relaxed back into his seat with a great sigh of relief.

He saw the exasperated look on Hermione's face and said, “I don't care what you say; this is completely *unnatural*. Most of the time, you can't even see the ground. Muggles are mental. We're using broomsticks to get back.”

“Seriously, Ron...? You expect my parents to fly on broomsticks halfway around the world?”

“Well then, we'll go by boat,” Ron retorted.

“Ron, that would take a *month*. And it's *very* expensive,” answered Hermione.

“Well then, we'll use Portkey, or Floo Network, or side-along Apparition. We should have used them to *get* here,” argued Ron.

“I've told you; the Ministries of both countries would have to approve the Portkey and we need to keep this quiet; the Floo Networks of countries are not connected; and it would take dozens and dozens of Apparitions to get here. Plus, you know how susceptible to splinching you are. It was just too risky,” Hermione explained patiently.

“You should have Confunded me to think I was on a train,” he muttered.

“Ron, please stop,” sighed Hermione.

Actually, Hermione had thought of that, but hoped Ron would get used to flying, so she said, “Don't be silly. You would have talked nonsense to the stewards.”

“Who cares? They would have thought I was joking,” said Ron sounding annoyed.

They continued to bicker until the plane arrived at the gate. Their unusual conversation did not attract attention of nearby passengers because Hermione had judiciously used *Muffliato* to keep their conversation private.

Customs and Immigration went smoothly. Ron was worried that they would need to use the Imperius Curse. Using this unforgivable curse was less of a taboo to them now since they had used it during "the war" -- as they now referred to it -- but they agreed it was only truly justified in extreme situations, definitely life and death.

Fortunately, Hermione was now exceptionally good with Confounding and Memory Charms. Muggle officials happily accepted the modified copy of her own British passport that she had made for Ron using the Geminio Charm. It looked right, but Hermione knew it would not pass Muggle electronic verification -- hence the need for magic to get through border and immigration control.

Hermione had developed a way of holding her wand backward in her hand so the wand lay against her forearm, completely undetected up her sleeve. She now almost always wore long sleeved blouses in the Muggle world to enable this technique. And she could perform all her spells non-verbally. All anyone would see was her holding her hand behind her head as if she were patting her bushy brown hair in place.

The Australian Customs and Immigration agents did comment that it was unusual for international arrivals to only have hand baggage, but of course, everything checked out just fine. Ron and Hermione, posing as students on holiday, were soon on their way.

Hermione had the same small beaded handbag she carried during their hunt for the Horcruxes the previous year. She had also performed the same Undetectable Extension Charm on a small rucksack that Ron was carrying. Despite that, they were traveling light. Hermione had, to Ron's surprise, dispensed with the small library she usually carried. Instead, she only carried books about Australia -- both magical and Muggle. She had also helped Ron pack clothes that would attract less attention, since they would be spending so much time in the Muggle world on their travels. Any Muggle looking at them would think: university students.

Hermione was carrying a lot of Galleons and a pile of Muggle paper money. She explained how paper money worked to Ron. She also explained how she would have to exchange English Muggle money for Australian Muggle money because England used 'pounds' and Australia used 'dollars'. Muggle paper money was just too confusing to Ron; he usually just let Hermione deal with it. However, he had no difficulty using the small shiny plastic cards that Hermione preferred. He could just hand them to Muggle clerks without having to figure anything out. He even thought the wizarding world should have them, which surprised Hermione, since he usually said everything in the Muggle world was 'weird.'

Hermione hired a cab to take them into the city. Their destination was the Sydney Opera House. The driver dropped them off in a turnaround for busses and taxis.

They walked onto the opera house grounds and up to a small building with a sign reading "Information, Tickets, and Tours". There was a small queue of Muggles waiting in front of the service windows. There was also another sign attached high on the right corner of the building, like a pub sign, labeled "Magical Tourist Information." It had a flashing curved arrow which pointed around the side of the building. Obviously, Muggles could not see this sign. Hermione and Ron walked around the building to the rear and went through a bright green door with the same label.

They were standing in a room that was much larger than the building looked from the outside. There was a counter opposite the door with several stations. Only one station had a clerk, a nondescript fairly young woman with short blond hair, wearing a plain khaki smock. She gave them a bored look. There seemed to be only one other employee behind the counter. He was sitting at a desk, hidden behind a newspaper. He had on the same color khaki pants and shirt. On one side wall were racks full of colorful brochures and a table with two drink dispensers and cups. On the other side wall were several fireplaces with small magical fires with dancing green flames and a receptacle of Floo powder on each mantle. A few sets of old worn chairs and small tables were available against the other wall in the waiting area.

Ron and Hermione were the only customers.

Hermione walked up to the clerk at the counter. "Excuse me. We need a place to stay. Can you recommend something nice?"

"Have you checked the brochures?" asked the clerk, knowing too well they had not. "Everything available is in the brochures. Pick one and use the Floo Network to get there. Very simple..." She sounded as if she had recited this a million times before.

"Oh. Right," said Hermione and she moved to the brochure rack.

Ron smiled at the clerk and said, "Uh, g'day. Not very busy?"

The clerk didn't smile, but rolled her eyes and said, "It's the middle of winter, isn't it."

"Oh. Right," said Ron. He turned to join Hermione, but heard the counter clerk mutter, "Pommies..." The clerk reading the newspaper chuckled.

Hermione was already reading a brochure when Ron joined her. "Ron, this place looks nice."

"Fine," said Ron. "I'm tired."

Hermione approached the blond clerk again. "Do you know where I can get help locating Muggles somewhere in Australia?"

The clerk raised her eyebrows. The employee reading the newspaper lowered it to look at them for the first time. He looked about the same age as the girl, but with shaggy black hair and a least a week's growth of beard. "You want to find some *Muggles*?" he asked as he stared at them.

The clerk finally said, "No idea... maybe the Ministry?"

"How do I get there?" asked Hermione.

The clerk just stared at her, and then said, "There's a brochure..."

Hermione turned and went back to the brochure rack and soon found what she was looking for. With the two brochures in her hand she said quietly, "Let's go, Ron."

They walked over to the wall of fireplaces. Hermione took some Floo powder. She then turned toward the clerk, smiled and said sweetly, "Thank you so much for your kind help."

The clerk continued to stare at them; the corners of her mouth twitched. The male employee had resumed reading the newspaper.

Hermione took hold of Ron's arm, pulling him into the fireplace with her. She threw down the Floo powder and said clearly, "The Magical Retreat B&B".

They disappeared in a burst of emerald green fire.

### Chapter 3 -- The Magical Retreat B&B

Ron and Hermione arrived in a large fireplace with a sputtering magical fire. They stepped out into a very pleasant room. It was Victorian style and appeared to be a parlor. There was flowered wallpaper, sheer curtains on the tall mullioned windows, dark stained wood furniture, velvet covered chairs and puffs, a large oriental rug, and a wide entry way without doors into the hallway. A matching entry way across the hall looked into a dining room with a long heavy table and ten oval-backed chairs, and an ornate china cabinet.

In the parlor, incense, heavy and sweet, was burning in several small brass braziers on the mantel, creating a slight haze in the room. A tall grandfather clock chimed loudly twice, though the time was just after eleven o'clock in the morning.



Hermione took it all in. She smiled and nodded. Ron was oblivious. He said, "I didn't know you could do side-along travel using Floo powder."

"Well, you can," replied Hermione.

"And why did you thank that rude clerk?" asked Ron, changing the subject.

"It never hurts to be polite, Ron," chided Hermione.

"Fine, but she was a..."

"Don't say it," interrupted Hermione reprovingly.

"Well, she was," complained Ron.

"Never mind," said Hermione as they both heard a door open and close down the hallway.

A tiny old man hurried into the room wearing Old West style Muggle clothes. He had a very weathered face, as if he had spent years in the sun. The top of his head was bald, but he had long thick snow-white sideburns down to his jaw line. They flowed up over his ears and around the back of his head ending in a long pony tail. But the feature which stood out the most was his eyes, which were large, almost bulging, like a house-elf, and bright blue. They twinkled when he smiled and he had a very broad smile on his face.

He pressed his hands together and bowed, saying, "Welcome, welcome, to our humble magical retreat. I'm Phidias Tweak, the proprietor. Please forgive me for takin' so long to greet you. We don't usually get winter guests." His voice was high but rough, as if his throat were raw. He also had a slight Australian accent.

Hermione said, "I'm Hermione Granger and this is Ron Weasley. We are students from England on vacation. We'd like a room... I mean, two rooms," she said, quickly correcting herself as she saw Ron turn red and Phidias raise his eyebrows.

"And how long'll you be stayin' with us?" asked Mr Tweak.

"I'm really not sure," Hermione answered. "There is so much to see. But I expect several days at least, perhaps a week."

"That's fine." He turned and called out loudly toward the hallway, "Tilly...! ...Guests!"

They heard a door open and close again. A very tall -- taller than Ron -- plump red-haired woman in classic Muggle Victorian maid's clothing entered the parlor.

Her hair was pulled back in a soft bun. She was wiping her hands on her apron, apparently having come from the kitchen. The smells of delicious food had followed her into the room. She was much younger than Mr Tweak, but clearly past middle age. She must have been very pretty once, but now her face was heavily lined, as if she had seen too much of life. Unlike Mr Tweak, her skin was pale. But like him, her eyes were bright blue and also twinkled when she smiled.

“This’s my wife, Tilly. Tilly, this’s Miss Granger and Mr Weasley. They’re students from England on vacation. They’ll be stayin’ for some days.”

Mrs Tweak opened her hands wide and said, “How nice to meet you. I hope you have a wonderful vacation. Please let us know if we can help you in any way.” Her voice was low and soothing. She did not have an Australian accent. There was no accent Hermione could think of.

“I’ll put ’em in rooms one and two,” said Phidias.

Mrs Tweak said, “Breakfast is at seven o’clock sharp in the dining room. And because it’s off season and you are our only guests; you are welcome to have dinner with us in the kitchen... also at seven. Just let me know ahead of time on the latter.”

“Thank you so much,” said Hermione. “I think Ron and I both need naps after our long trip, but it would be lovely to have dinner with you,” she said looking at Ron, who nodded. “Please wake us at six thirty if we are not already up.”

Mr Tweak showed them to their rooms upstairs. They were simply furnished, but clean and bright. He handed them their room keys and said, “The bathroom’s at the end of the hall. We’ll see you at supper. Sleep tight.”

## Chapter 4 -- New Friends

Hermione had not been as tired as Ron, because she had slept on the plane. She woke up at five o’clock and went downstairs.

She went out the front door to look around. There was a wide covered porch that surrounded the house, which was painted bright yellow with white trim. It had scalloped shingled siding and filigree decoration on all the cornices. The house had three uneven stories and many gables. But most interesting to Hermione was the location.

It was in the middle of nowhere. There was nothing but red earth and scrub brush as far as the eye could see in any direction. If there had once been a dirt road to the house, it had long ago been erased by the elements.

There was a nice vegetable garden in the back, a chicken coop, a small shed, and a barn for pigs and sheep, which at the moment were snorting and bleating in wood-fenced pens. There was also a well, a holding tank, and a tall wind mill which was turning merrily, despite the fact there was no wind and not a cloud in the sky. The sun was low in the west. Hermione went back into the house.

Hermione looked into the parlor. Ron had not come down, so she went down the hall and knocked on what she guessed was the kitchen door.

“Come in, dear,” sounded Mrs Tweak’s friendly and soothing voice.

Hermione went in and stood just inside the door. Mrs Tweak was rolling dough on the kitchen work table. Mr Tweak was sitting at the kitchen dining table with an unlit pipe in his mouth.

“We saw you walking outside, dear,” said Mrs Tweak. “What do you think of our ‘retreat’?”

“It’s lovely,” said Hermione sincerely.

“Not too... remote... for you?” asked Mr Tweak with a grin.

“No ...really. The Floo Network makes it just a step away from everything,” replied Hermione, again sincerely.

“Exactly,” chirped Mr Tweak. “But you should know, the Aussie Floo Network is different than yours. It has ‘specially powerful magic and many relay stations to support the long distances here. Our Ministry has an entire department dedicated to maintainin’ it. We pay a hefty tax to be connected to it. Some stubborn old hermit wizards refuse to pay and use unauthorized port keys to get around.

Mr Tweak sucked on his pipe once and then continued. “We’re two thousand miles from Sydney in Western Australia, a two hour time difference. Only a very powerful witch or wizard can Disapparate from here abouts to the nearest big city, Perth. I did it once when I was young and barely made it alive. You can’t walk to anywhere from here unless you know where the water holes are or, like us, can use magic to get it. On brooms, you’d have to fly half a day. That’s assumin’ in either case, you knew where you wanted to go. ...It’s nothin’ to be nervous about, just the facts,” he added as Mrs Tweak gave him a look.

Mrs Tweak added, “Some of our guests can’t handle the physical isolation and leave early, even immediately. We don’t mind. That’s why we named it ‘retreat’. It’s for people like we are... that like complete peace and quiet.”

Hermione did not mind it at all. She had not had any peace and quiet for a very long time. It was such a relief, something she had not realized she needed. She said, "I understand completely," and sighed, "It's really nice."

Mr Tweak sucked again on his still unlit pipe.

Mrs Tweak smiled and then asked with a concerned look, "Why are you here, dear? You aren't on vacation. You don't have to tell us, but I sense deep sadness within you. Maybe we can help."

Hermione was startled by her words.

"Tilly's an empath," Mr Tweak explained. "She can't do a lick of Legilimency, but instead, can sense emotions better than anyone I've ever seen. ... You can trust her."

Hermione's eyes welled up.

Mr Tweak got up and ushered Hermione to a chair at the kitchen table.

She told them *everything*.

When she was finished, Mr and Mrs Tweak looked at each other.

"Wow... Voldemort... Harry Potter... your parents," whispered Mrs Tweak.

Mr Tweak let out a low whistle. "You're an amazing young woman, Hermione. Is Ron your boyfriend?"

"Phidias, sometimes you can be so insensitive. Of course he is," scolded Mrs Tweak.

"So how can we help you?" said Mr Tweak, ignoring his wife.

Just then Ron opened the door and asked, "Did I miss dinner?"

## Chapter 5 -- Phidias and Tilly

After dinner, they spent the rest of the evening talking. It was not just about Hermione's quest, but also about themselves and their families. They laughed and cried. By the time they went to bed, Hermione and Ron felt as though they had known Phidias and Tilly -- who adamantly refused to be called Mr and Mrs Tweak any longer -- all their lives. And for the rest of their visit, it would be all meals in the kitchen -- no stuffy dining room for breakfast.

Phidias had been born at a cattle station. His mother was a witch, his father a Muggle. His father had left them when Phidias was too young to remember. He loved life in the Outback, but his mother had made him go to wizard school. He did not like any subjects except The Study of Magical Creatures. When he finished school, he traveled the world, working at different jobs, learning more about the creatures that fascinated him.

While in China, he worked for a dragon breeder and decided he liked “dragon husbandry” more than anything else. But after a few years there, he got homesick and decided he would try raising dragons in Australia. He spent a long time searching for a suitable place and came upon an old sheep station that had gone bust decades earlier -- having been just too isolated. That made it perfect for him.

It was pretty run down, especially the house. But he fixed it up, got connected to the Floo Network, hired a small crew, and even got married. This was long before Tilly. His first wife, also a witch, was the one who had decorated the house so nicely.

Phidias raised Chinese Fireballs exclusively along with the pigs and sheep needed to feed them.

Things went very well for a few years. Then the second big Muggle war came along and the Oriental dragon market crashed. His wife became unhappy. He had to let everyone go except the foreman. One morning he woke up to find his wife and the foreman gone. He never saw or heard from either of them again.

After the war, the dragon market picked back up, but his heart wasn't in it anymore. After another five years, he sold his last dragon and shut down the business. He lived like a hermit for years with his few remaining farm animals. But he did not mind; he found he liked the isolation and solitude.

Then one day Tilly showed up. She just popped out of the fireplace and collapsed on the Oriental rug one evening while he was sitting watching the fire and smoking his pipe.

Tilly -- Matilda Stone, her Christian name -- had grown up on a farm in the country. She was Muggle born. She loved everything about farm life. The typical youthful magical powers of a witch did not show up until very late in her case -- just before her eleventh birthday. She thinks that was because they were overwhelmed by her dominant power, empathy -- the ability to understand, sympathize with and, most importantly, to personally feel the emotions of others.

These had shown up very early, as a toddler, and had grown stronger every year. Not until she first went to Muggle school, did she and her parents become aware of... *the problem*. Being confined with a large group of people -- especially

a first grade classroom full of emotional hurricanes -- was more than she could handle. The emotions were like a tidal wave; she felt like she was drowning in them. The school authorities thought she was mentally disturbed and refused to keep her in school.

Her parents were forced to home school her. This was fine for a while, but as she got older, her empathy grew stronger. They took her to see specialists, who all recommended institutionalizing her. But just before that happened, her magical powers appeared -- and in force. The Australian Ministry of Magic had never encountered such powerful magic in a child. They explained to her parents that Tilly was a witch and required special education. Rather than being relieved and hopeful, her parents were repelled. They rejected their own daughter.

Ironically, Tilly's empathy allowed her to understand and accept her parent's feelings. It was not until she had left with the Ministry officials that she felt her own broken heart. The magical school officials who had charge of her expected her to be fine, having found her true place in the magical world. Tilly shared their optimism because of her empathy. But it did not last. She was unable to cope with the crowd of students in magic school either. The Ministry hospitalized her.

The healers were very sympathetic. Tilly was perfectly fine in a small, controlled environment. They tried various therapies, including slowly increasing the size of groups she would be placed in so she "could become accustomed to it." But nothing worked. So Tilly ended up remaining in the hospital until she came of age. At that point, they decided they did not need to keep her since there was one simple solution for her problem which she well understood -- isolation. The hospital staff had been like a family to her, so, distressingly, it was like losing her family a second time.

Tilly bummed around both the magical and Muggle worlds for a couple of years. Because she did not have either a magical or Muggle education, she could not get a decent job. Plus, having spent seven years in a hospital "mental ward" was not a very good reference.

Then her life took a traumatic turn.

Tilly was walking late at night in a less reputable part of Brisbane, when she was brutally attacked by a Muggle man. In her earlier experiences with mild aggression, her empathy had always caused the aggressor to calm down. This time was different. The man was criminally insane. The violence of the attack somehow caused her to temporarily lose her empathy. She was terrified and feared for her life. Suddenly, her attacker froze -- himself paralyzed by fear and terror. She could sense it. Then he collapsed, clutching at his chest and lay still. Tilly knew he was dead.

From that moment on, Tilly could *project* any emotion into someone, regardless of whether or not it was her own emotion at that moment. And she could make it as strong and last as long as she wanted. It was a terrible power.

Tilly still had her empathy, but she could flip a switch in her mind and project it or any other emotion at will. She soon learned that making people feel how you wanted them to feel was more powerful than making them think what you want them to think. Emotion often overrides reason -- especially if you can make the emotion as strong as it needs to be to make it so.

Tilly quickly became rich and powerful. She was loved. She was feared. She hardly ever used her wand anymore.

She decided to visit her parents to show them how successful she had become.

The old familiar sights and smells of the farm put her in a very good mood. However, the moment her parents saw her, she felt their undiminished disgust and rejection at having produced a witch. They had not changed. But she had. Her anger was uncontrolled. She flipped off her empathy switch and put them into a permanent state of severe depression as she stormed off.

Within minutes of leaving, however, she regretted her action, and returned to the farm. But it was too late. Her parents were dead -- the authorities ruled it a double suicide.

Tilly said she still could not remember what happened after seeing her dead parents. She had found them lying embracing on their bed, their wrists deeply cut open. She had been overwhelmed by her own emotions and lost control. The emotions of anyone near her were like an avalanche -- it was agony. Even happy emotions were painful.

Thoughts of taking her own life flooded Tilly's mind.

She had to get away. The last thing she remembered was entering a fireplace, using Floo powder and saying, "Help me."

She woke up to Phidias bringing her breakfast in bed.

The quiet, the isolation, the farm smells, and... Phidias -- as mellow and even tempered as a person could possibly be -- were what she needed. She slowly recovered.

Over time, Phidias and Tilly discovered they were perfect for each other. He was nearly thirty years older than she, but it did not matter. She cooked. He cleaned. They shared the farm chores, which they both enjoyed. She added the garden. They decided to marry, but Tilly was afraid to be near other people.



Phidias had a minister and two witnesses come to the house instead of going into a community. Tilly was just able to handle it. They tested going to a small town. As long as Phidias was by her side and the number of people near them was small, Tilly was fine. Without him close by, she became unsettled.

They worked out that Tilly could handle being on her own with ten people -- at most.

Phidias suggested the idea of a bed and breakfast as a way to interact with people, which he thought would be good for her, but without over doing it. It would be on their terms in a controlled environment, much like it had been at the hospital. Tilly was reluctant, but agreed to try. And it worked out very well. Her cooking was so good, they ended up having many repeat guests and most new guests were referred by regulars.

Hermione really liked Tilly. Her life was so tragic. She had overcome so much to become a truly good person. But Hermione sensed that Tilly would never forgive herself for the terrible revenge she had exacted on her parents. It made Hermione feel even guiltier for what she had done to her own parents, even though she had done it to protect them.

Hermione brooded. She had not given her parents any choice. It was not ethical. And it was probably technically illegal, since the parents of Muggle-borns were one of specific exceptions (Muggles married to witches and wizards being another) to the law that required Muggles to have their memories modified when necessary to hide the magical world. She had discussed the ethics and legality with Ron. But was it immoral? She was wrestling with this part. Hermione tried to put the question out of her mind.

Ron really liked Phidias. The fact that Phidias had raised dragons greatly impressed Ron. He told Phidias about his brother Charlie, studying dragons in Romania. They shared dragon stories for hours. Ron told him about Hagrid trying to secretly raise Norbert, the Norwegian Ridgeback; Harry besting the Hungarian Horntail during on the Triwizard Tournament; and escaping from Gringotts on the back of a Ukrainian Ironbelly with Harry and Hermione.

Of course, Ron greatly exaggerated his stories and Hermione kept tut-tutting and shaking her head.

Tilly laughed and said Phidias's stories got bigger with every retelling too.

Phidias just chuckled and sucked on his pipe.

Phidias and Tilly were now their friends.



## Chapter 6 -- The Search

At breakfast the next morning, they began to discuss the best way to search for Hermione's parents.

"My parents are dentists -- they take care of people's teeth," Hermione added automatically. She had learned to do this when mentioning dentistry in the magical world, though neither Phidias nor Tilly had looked puzzled. "I thought I'd start by checking Muggle medical licensing agency records. In the Muggle world, you can't be a healer without being licensed by the government," she explained, though again there were no puzzled looks.

"If that doesn't work, I can check with the Muggle immigration service, then the tax services, social services, telephone service..."

"Hermione, how are you going to get the Muggle government officials to give you the information?" asked Ron, interrupting her. "You've told me before; Muggles have laws against giving out personal information because it's so easy to steal their money... uh, because it's mostly just numbers in machines and nothing real or solid."

Phidias raised his eyebrows this time.

Tilly said, "I understand this bit. I'll explain it to you later, dear..." while looking at Phidias. "...Go on, Hermione."

"Well..." said Hermione, annoyed by Ron's question, "I'll use Confunding and Memory Charms like I did when we traveled. I'll make them believe I'm authorized to have the information."

"Do you think that will work?" asked Ron. "It seems more complicated than just having someone believe in a fake passport."

"It seems the same to *me*," intoned Hermione with an I'm-the-one-whose-been-doing-all-the-charm-work-so-far-and-doing-just-fine-thank-you-very-much attitude. She then crossed her arms.

"Well, don't you think it would be a good idea to *test* it first?" asked Ron testily.

"Are you *volunteering*?" snapped Hermione.

"Maybe we can get the Ministry of Magic to help," offered Tilly, partly in an effort to interrupt the start of a bickering session.

"What information would your Ministry have on Muggles?" asked Hermione.

“Well, they wouldn't. But they have wizards secretly working in various positions in the Muggle Ministry to keep tabs on things that might impact our world. It seems to me it would be easier to approach our side and ask them to get the information for us,” Tilly suggested.

“I hadn't thought of that,” admitted Hermione. “It sounds like a great idea. Do you have any contacts in your Ministry we can use to get this going quickly?”

“Ah... Well, not in my case,” said Tilly. “My history has made me ‘persona non grata’ with the Ministry. Phidias, on the other hand, still has friends in the Department for the Management of Magical Creatures. He always operated his business legally and above board, didn't you, dear?”

Phidias nodded, but grinned mischievously.

Ron said, “We need to make sure we don't give the real reason we need the information. What Hermione did might be technically illegal here too. But I'm sure we can come up with a reasonable story.” He reached out and gave Hermione's hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Thank you, Ron,” said Hermione and she bit her lip.

Phidias, who had been silent since the conversation started, withdrew his pipe and said, “Right, on all that, but this seems very *complicated* to me. I always believe the simplest solution is the best.”

They all looked at him.

Finally, Tilly said, “Well?”

“Just send them a letter,” he said matter-of-factly.

“How?” said Hermione incredulously. “I don't know where they live.”

Tilly nodded her agreement.

Then Ron slapped the table and exclaimed with sudden realization, “*Of course!*” He looked at Hermione and Tilly. “You two are thinking like Muggles. Send them a letter... by *Owl Post*. Use *magic* to find them!”

Ron continued, “When you send a letter by Owl Post, you only need the person's name. You don't need the address -- it's completely optional, but we usually include it by habit.” He looked at Hermione. “Remember when Harry sent letters to Sirius when he was on the run? He didn't have an address, just his name.”

Phidias nodded and resumed sucking on his pipe.

Hermione shrieked, "You're right! *You're right!* It's so obvious. Thank you, Phidias!" And she ran around the table and hugged him.

Tilly frowned. "Phidias, you let us ramble on for five minutes. I bet you had the solution from the start."

He grinned. Taking his pipe out of his mouth again and holding it out, he quipped, "Can I smoke my pipe in the house as a reward, dear?"

"Umm..." she said, pretending to consider it, "No. ... You know the rules. You don't smoke in the house; I don't spit in your tea."

The all laughed until their sides hurt.

Then, Phidias demonstrably placed his pipe on the kitchen table and said, "Then I think this calls for a *drink* instead."

Tilly said, "Really now, it's not even nine o'clock in the morning."

"Well, this's a celebration and it's Happy Hour somewhere. Who's in favor?" demanded Phidias, grinning.

Everyone said, "Aye!"

## Chapter 7 -- The Letter

Phidias retrieved Firewhisky and glasses from a cabinet and placed them on the kitchen table. He poured them all a healthy portion, with a little extra for Ron and himself. Then they toasted each other and Phidias for his suggestion.

Ron resumed the discussion. "So how do we compose the letter to get them to respond? They aren't likely to know how to use Owl Post."

"Well," said Hermione thoughtfully, "It *is* extremely unusual for a Muggle unaware of the magical world to receive a letter by Owl Post, but I think the best approach is to be completely honest and explain everything in the letter... and hope they respond."

Phidias added, "You aren't limited to one attempt. They may ignore the first one, or several, but eventually, I think they'll be curious and answer."

Without being asked, Tilly left the kitchen and returned with parchment, quill and ink and put them on the table for Hermione. She took up the quill, dipped it in ink,

thought only for a moment while holding the quill poised above the parchment, and then began to write.

*Dear Mr and Mrs Wilkins,*

*I know this is a highly unusual way to receive a letter, but I am not yet at liberty to explain why I am using this method to contact you. Let me assure you this is not a practical joke and all will be explained eventually.*

*The owl that delivered this letter is highly trained and will wait until the sun sets for your reply. Simply place your reply in the enclosed return envelope and hand it to the owl, which will deliver it to me.*

*My parents knew you in England; and I thought I should visit you while I am in Australia.*

*I am a student doing research on ancestry. I have information about your family history which I am sure you will be very interested in hearing. But I can only deliver it in person.*

*All I need is your consent and specific directions to either your home or anywhere else you would prefer to meet with me.*

*Sincerely,*

*Hermione Granger  
c/o Magical Retreat B&B*

Hermione read the letter aloud, and then asked, "What do you think?"

They all said it was fine.

Phidias said, "Could take a week to get where it needs to go. Might as well send it now. My owls 're in the barn. I'll go get Mercury. He's my best." He got up and went out the back door.

Tilly got two envelopes and sealing wax for Hermione. Hermione addressed one with the same signature block in the letter and addressed the other to Wendell and Monica Wilkins. She folded the letter and the return envelope and placed them in the delivery envelope. She sealed it using a blue flame from her wand to melt the wax.

Phidias returned with a large barn owl on his arm. The owl looked very alert. Hermione held out the letter and the owl took it in its beak.

Phidias looked the owl directly in the eyes and said, “Mercury, take this letter to the Wilkins. They’re somewhere in this country. They’re Muggles. Don’t scare ‘em or peck ‘em. Wait ‘til sunset for a reply. If they don’t reply, come home. Understand?” The owl hooted once and ruffled its feathers in anticipation.

Phidias walked to the door, opened it, and released the owl. It soared away.

Hermione said, a little nervously, “And now we wait.”

Tilly put her hand on Hermione’s shoulder.

Ron said cheerfully, “How about some sightseeing in the meantime?” rubbing his hands together.

## Chapter 8 -- Sightseeing

Hermione said she was too nervous to do any sightseeing. But by the third day, Ron had insisted and they went back to Sydney. They visited the Opera House and walked up the cables of the huge Harbor Bridge. Hermione decided she did not like heights in general -- it was not just flying on brooms.

Over the next week they visited the Great Barrier Reef, Ayer’s Rock, Bondi Beach, the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kakadu National Park, the Twelve Apostles, Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary, and Daintree Rainforest.

They also visited magical points of interest, including the Australian Ministry of Magic, which was located invisibly right next to the Muggle Parliament House in Canberra; and the Great Library (also there) which contained originals and copies of all the greatest magical works ever written, including scrolls saved from the Library of Alexandria. Hermione was in heaven. The library never closed and Ron had a hard time getting her to leave. They also visited the magical shopping streets in Sydney and Canberra, but they were not old and charming like Diagon Alley. Australian wizards were more culturally in tune with the twentieth century. Very few Australian witches and wizards appeared to wear traditional robes. Many of the ones they saw wearing robes looked like foreigners.

The most unusual magical point of interest was the Native Magical Cultural Center in Geelong. They learned that Aborigines did not have the usual small percentage of witches and wizards in their population. Instead, they nearly all had some level of magical ability. Some had powers equivalent to “normal” witches and wizards, while some had just a few seemingly random magical gifts. However, the vast majority had only one very special magical ability -- foresight -- to some greater or lesser degree. Those with less than one eighth Aboriginal blood usually had no native magical powers. More surprisingly was that the native peoples did not specifically train their children to develop their powers. It

was just part of their culture -- being one with nature; it was not something to be exploited. The Ministry was only very rarely successful in convincing the parents of those with full magical powers to allow them to be trained by the non-native magical community.

The Floo Network made traveling throughout Australia very easy. The Australian Ministry had established a magical transportation "annex" at every Muggle travel information office in the country. There was one in almost every town and point of interest. You just popped from everywhere to anywhere. Once in the vicinity, you could easily walk or Disapparate to nearby sites.

Ron and Hermione were having a great time. Ron always let Hermione spend time every day in the Great Library. It helped kept her mind off waiting for a return letter. She would always come away with lots of interesting magical historical facts, which she would share with Ron, Phidias and Tilly over dinner. They seemed interested, but Ron thought they might be just being polite -- as he was.

Now that they had been at the Magical Retreat for just over a week, Ron thought he could ask Phidias and Tilly a personal question he had wondered about almost from the beginning.

At breakfast, Ron, sounding as casually as he could, said, "I noticed neither of you use magic very much. In fact, I don't think I've seen your wands..."

"Ronald!" gasped Hermione in a shocked voice.

Ron retreated, "Sorry, I don't mean to offend you. I was just curious."

Phidias glanced at Tilly. Tilly paused for a moment and said matter-of-factly, "No offense at all. It's a fair question. The answer, I think, will make sense. You know my story. I had stopped using my wand. I didn't need it to get what I wanted. Of course, I still carried it to be able to Apparate and ...'just in case'. But after I arrived here, after my... collapse, I found that using it to perform magic for simple household chores, like cooking, elevated my *other* power to a degree that made it hard to control, even with Phidias near me. I rarely Apparate; so now I usually don't carry my wand at all. ...It's in my wardrobe." She looked at Phidias.

"Mine's in the tool shed," said Phidias. "I mainly use it for big outside chores and for emergencies, but out of respect for Tilly, I don't use it for simple housework, like cleanin', or trivial things, like summonin' my pipe. I like workin' with my hands -- manual labor. Always have. It feels normal now. I expect it's how Muggles live life, for the most part.

Ron said, "I don't think I could do that."

Hermione said, shooting him an exasperated look, "You'll just have to excuse Ron. He doesn't mean to be insensitive. Sometimes, he just doesn't think before he speaks."

Ron nodded as he said, "She's right. I mean... I wasn't trying to be... you know."

Tilly said soothingly, "Think nothing of it. No more said." Then she smiled broadly and changed the subject. "Where will you be going today?"

Ron said, "I think we should go to the Great Library," sheepishly grinning at Hermione.

Hermione folded her arms across her chest and said, "Good answer."

## Chapter 9 -- Owl Post

When Ron and Hermione returned to Magical Retreat that evening, Phidias and Tilly were seated and waiting for them in the parlor when they stepped out of the fireplace.

Neither said a word even as Ron and Hermione both realized they were there.

Phidias took his pipe from his mouth and pointed its stem at the small settee table in front of him.

There was a letter on it.

Hermione gasped and lunged for it. She grasped the letter in both hands because they were shaking so badly. She looked at the envelope and exclaimed, "Ron, there's a return address on the envelope! They're in Queensland! We've found them!"

"Aren't you going to read the letter?" asked Ron.

"What? Oh, yes." Hermione fumbled with the envelope trying to open it. It had been cellotaped shut. Finally she said, "I'm just too nervous. Here, you do it," and she handed it to Ron.

Ron used his fingernail to cut through the cellotape. He opened the envelope and pulled out the letter while Hermione hopped like a little child waiting for an ice-cream.

Ron read aloud.

*Dear Hermione,*

*We were amazed and charmed by your letter.*

*We've never heard of anyone using owls to deliver postage, though of course, the Army used pigeons to carry messages a very long time ago. So while quite unusual, the concept is not unique. Still, an owl! And so well trained. We can't wait to hear more about this. We wonder if this is part of your secret.*

*Sadly, we can't recall knowing your parents in England, though your surname is familiar. We hope you will be able to refresh our memories.*

*So, yes, please come. We eagerly await your visit. Please let us know when it is convenient for you. Our schedule is fairly busy. Weekends are best, but weekday evenings are also fine.*

*We are located about six miles east of Mareeba on the Highway 1 (the Kennedy Highway). Our phone number is (613) 9669 4916.*

*Sincerely,*

*Monica Wilkins*

*6039 Kennedy Highway  
Mareeba, Queensland 4880*

Hermione shrieked, "Their phone number! Oh, Ron. They want to see me! I can call them!" She snatched the letter from Ron's hand and read it herself. She was clearly reading it over and over. Then she suddenly hugged Ron around the neck and buried her face in his shoulder and cried.

Ron held her and rubbed her back.

Tilly looked at Phidias and they nodded to each other. They got up quietly and moved to leave the room, but before they were half way, Hermione pulled back from her embrace and with tears in her eyes turned toward them.

"Thank you so *much* for all you've done. I know I wouldn't have found them so quickly and easily without your help." She then released Ron and went and hugged both of them.

Tilly gently patted Hermione's face and said, "Let's all go have dinner. Then we can talk."

## Chapter 10 -- The Plan



Hermione was so excited, she barely ate. Tilly told her she would not get away with it in the morning -- she would make her eat a good breakfast before leaving for the day.

Hermione was chattering on and on about fetching her parents tomorrow, bringing them back to the Magical Retreat in time for dinner, and then staying for a few days so they could get to know Phidias and Tilly before heading back to England. She was excited with anticipation to tell them about all the things that had happened over the last year.

Ron was happy because Hermione was so happy.

Tilly seemed to be sharing in Hermione's glow. She looked as happy as Hermione.

Ron noticed that Phidias was not smiling. His brows were furrowed, and he seemed to be deep in thought, holding his pipe and tapping the stem against his chin.

"What is it, Phidias?" asked Ron.

Hermione stopped her chattering and looked at Phidias. They all did.

Phidias said quietly, "Hermione, you're a *very* smart young lady, perhaps the smartest I've ever known, but I don't think you've thought this through."

"What do you mean?" asked Hermione in surprise.

Phidias looked very serious as he spoke. "From the moment you modified their memories, they started buildin' new lives. They've been here a year. They've got a house; they've got friends. They're part of a community. You can't just snatch them from it. They'd be missed. There'd be inquiries. You need to slow down and *assess the situation* first. Then come up with a plan that makes more sense."

He paused for a moment, but when Hermione did not reply, he continued. "For example, perhaps start with just modifyin' their memories so they feel *really* homesick for England. They can spread the word over a month or so and do all the things they need to properly sever ties with the community. Also, give 'em a memory to contact you after they return to England. Finally, restore their full memories when they're in familiar surroundin's back home. You'll have your parents back, Hermione, just a little later than you'd wished for."

Hermione looked shocked. "I'm so ashamed of myself. You are absolutely right. I let my emotions completely cloud my judgment." Then she gasped and exclaimed, "Oh no!"

“What is it?” asked Ron.

Hermione moaned. “I made the same mistake at the beginning -- when I modified their memories. As far as their friends and neighbors in England know, they just disappeared and left everything. Any inquiries would have found all their assets had been liquidated without a trace. I had it all done, including new passports, through Gringotts -- they don’t ask questions. I had accounts set up in Australia under their new identities. I bet there were police inquiries in England; I never checked. There will be a lot of questions when they return. I should have been more sophisticated.”

Ron jumped in. “But Hermione, there were a lot of mysterious disappearances going on then, so it wasn't *that* unusual. Don't be so hard on yourself. We know you did the right thing. But it's clear the plan now has also got to include how we explain their disappearance and reappearance back home.

Phidias chimed in. “Ron’s Right. But, don't try to boil the ocean tonight. Take it one step at a time. Just decide on what you’re goin’ to do *tomorrow*.”

“Right,” said Hermione. She took a deep breath and then said. “We'll go to Sydney after breakfast. I'll call them and arrange a meeting for the day after tomorrow -- Saturday. Does Mareeba have a commercial airport? If not, what's the closest city with one?”

“Not Mareeba; it’s small. Cairns, I think,” answered Tilly. “I'll check.” And she left the kitchen.

“We're not *flying*, I hope,” said Ron apprehensively.

“Of course not, silly,” responded Hermione. “It will just be part of our story. We'll say we flew from Sydney. We'll take the Floo Network to Cairns and then a taxi to their house. That will allow us, as Phidias has wisely suggested, to *assess the situation*.”

Tilly came back. “It is Cairns. It's nice there. The coast line is lush.”

Phidias said, “Also assess your *emotions* when you talk to them on the phone tomorrow. You need to be sure you can handle the face to face meeting. Also be sure and tell them you'll be bringin’ your friend Ron. And make sure you have good answers ready for all their obvious questions.”

Hermione was nodding in agreement with each suggestion except for the last one. “What questions?” she asked.

Tilly laughed. “Hermione, remember your letter? -- *owls; all will be explained eventually; my parents knew you in England; I’m a student doing ancestry*

*research; I have information about your family history which I can only deliver in person...* You captured their interest. They'll have questions and want answers. You're assessing, not Obliviating."

"Damn!" swore Hermione. "This is getting even more complicated. I thought you liked simple plans, Phidias?" Hermione was beginning to look a little flustered.

Phidias smiled and said, "I do... but sometimes simple runs up against doin' the right thing."

Hermione sighed. "Yes, you're right again." She paused and then said, "I still may have to Confund them a bit... but that's only if I run into questions I can't answer," she added as Phidias opened his mouth to speak. "My original plan to simply restore their memories and fly home didn't require all this deception and intrigue."

Hermione pursed her lips then concluded, "I'm glad we have most of tomorrow to work all this out. I'd appreciate all the advice you can offer."

"At your service, Ma'am," said Phidias bowing his head and tipping his pipe in his hand as if he were doffing a hat.

## Chapter 11 -- Arrangements

They did not talk much over breakfast.

Hermione decided she would go to Sydney right after breakfast to make the phone call to schedule the visit. "I can't wait until we've worked out a background story. I won't be able to concentrate. If they ask me anything, I'll just say I want to save all questions for when we meet."

Hermione also decided she did not want Ron to come, but didn't give a reason.

Ron did not argue and waited in the parlor after she left.

Hermione was back in less than fifteen minutes. She looked distracted.

"Did you make the call?" asked Ron, getting out of his chair.

"Yes. We'll meet them tomorrow at noon at their house. Where are Phidias and Tilly?"

"Still in the kitchen I expect," answered Ron. "You've only been gone a few minutes."

Hermione walked out of the parlor to the kitchen with Ron right behind her.

Phidias and Tilly were surprised to see Hermione back so soon too.

“What happened,” asked Tilly?

Hermione related the story. “I called them from a hotel in Sydney. Someone answered saying ‘Wilkins’ House’. I didn’t recognize the voice. It was female. I said who I was and asked to speak to Mr or Mrs Wilkins. The person said they were busy but had left instructions that if I called, to propose meeting them tomorrow at twelve o’clock for lunch at their house. I assumed I was talking to their receptionist. She was very formal and stiff. They must be operating their dental practice out of their home instead of a clinic. I said the time was fine and she confirmed the address in the letter but also gave directions from the Cairns airport -- twenty miles west on Highway 1. That was it.”

“Hmm,” said Phidias. “Not what we expected, but not too surprisin’ given their occupations.”

Tilly said sympathetically, “I know you’re disappointed you didn’t get to talk to them.”

“You didn’t get a chance for an emotional assessment either,” said Phidias. “Do you have any reservations ‘bout goin’ tomorrow? You could postpone ‘til you’re able to talk to ‘em personally on that ‘phone call’ contraption first.”

Hermione answered immediately, “No, No... I’m sure I’m fine. I was very, very nervous dialing the call, but as soon as it connected, I felt calm. I didn’t want Ron there to see me if I froze up just trying to dial,” she admitted.

“OK then,” said Ron. “Who am I and what am I researching?”

Hermione rolled her eyes.

They began creating their cover story with Phidias and Tilly. Ron was all for the exotic and cloak and dagger. Phidias kept them to simple stories that were as close to the truth as possible.

They were university students and good friends (dating) doing research on family histories. Hermione’s parents were dentists too and that’s how they had known the Wilkins in England. They had met through a medical society. Hermione’s research had discovered that the two families, the Grangers and the Wilkins, were related at the third cousin level and that there had been a touch of madness in one branch of the shared tree.

This last bit was Ron's idea to account for where Hermione's letter said she only wanted to deliver the information in person -- family madness not being something you'd put in a letter. They made up a family tree for the Wilkins side because Hermione had not given them one when she'd modified their memories. Hermione would use her own family tree for the Granger side. She could use a little bit of Confunding on the details if necessary.

The owl explanation stumped them for a while. Ron suggested they were involved in a secret Military project -- based on the comment in the Wilkins' reply about the Army having used pigeons. Phidias finally came up with the idea. They had been on a three day trek in the Outback with a native guide who claimed he could get an owl to deliver the letter Hermione had forgotten to mail before setting out. Hermione thought it was pretty good story, but said she'd Confund them if it did not work.

Once they had their story outlined, Hermione and Ron rehearsed with Phidias and Tilly. They discovered they had to add a lot more detail to cover more general questions like: Where do you live in England? Where did you go to school? How long have you known each other? Do you have any brothers and sisters? How did you travel? When did you arrive? When are you going back? What have you seen of Australia? ...and more. For these questions too, staying as close to the truth as possible remained the best strategy.

When Hermione checked the time, it was only eleven o'clock in the morning. It had taken a lot less time than she had expected to build a story.

Hermione wanted to start fleshing out more of the long term plan, but Phidias said it should wait until after their meeting with the Wilkins. Hermione noticed that Phidias usually referred to them as the Wilkins rather than as her parents. She thought maybe this was the approach she should take until she had them back. But it was difficult.

Ron said knowingly, "Hermione, remember how we always plan, plan, plan and then, when we act, everything unravels, and we end up improvising. So let's just this once give it a rest. Let's take a break and go to the Library so you can get your mind off it. Besides, we don't want to impose for lunch too."

Tilly said, "Not to worry, Ron. B&Bs don't serve lunch and we've gotten out of the habit ourselves. We just do breakfast for guests and supper for ourselves... and friends. If we ate lunch too, we'd be fatter than our pigs."

They all laughed.

## Chapter 12 -- Off to Cairns

After breakfast on Saturday, Ron and Hermione rehearsed twice more. They both had their story down pat.

As they were preparing to leave at nine o'clock, Phidias said, "They might invite you to stay, Hermione, because you will now be seen as a distant relation versus a total stranger. I'd advise against it. Instead, say you have plans, but would like to visit one more time before leaving Australia. This last bit you want to arrange in any case. Set up the date for the next visit based on what you learn."

Ron could tell Hermione was thinking it over. So he said. "Sounds good, but if we don't see you at dinner, you'll know we had to play it by ear. We're used to it."

Hermione nodded.

Tilly followed them to the parlor, hugged Hermione and said, "Good luck."

Ron grabbed some Floo powder. Hermione was already standing in the fireplace. Ron stepped in, grabbed her arm, threw the Floo powder down and clearly said 'Cairns'." They disappeared in a burst of emerald green flame.

They passed the whirl of various Floo Network hub fireplaces and stepped out into a typical Australian magical travel information office. And as usual, no one paid them any attention. They left. The Muggle tourist information center was about two miles south of the Cairns airport on Highway 1. There was a taxi stand outside; they hired a cab.

The cab driver was an overweight middle-age man, darkly tanned, wearing a colorful tropical shirt. He turned his head and asked Ron, "Where to, Mate?" in a thick, almost theatrical, Australian accent. Hermione could see a prominent gold tooth. Still, he seemed friendly.

Ron said, "Toward Mareeba... 6039 Kennedy Highway."

"The orphanage?" he asked in confirmation.

"Orphanage?" questioned Ron and Hermione together, clearly with surprise.

"Yea. ...The Wilkins House Orphanage ...a few miles outside Mareeba. I live thereabouts in Mareeba Township myself.

"We're looking for Wendell and Monica Wilkins," said Hermione.

"Yea, that's them. Great folks, them." Now instead of looking at them in the rearview mirror, he turned sideways in his seat.

“But they're dentists. Is their clinic at the orphanage?” asked Hermione, plainly confused.

“Well now, they *talked* about settin' up as dentists when they first come -- must'a been 'bout a year ago now -- but they said they had this strong urge to help lost kids. So they took over an old Christian orphanage for girls that was pretty run down and fixed her up real nice. The kids love 'em. I think they fix the kids teeth, but they don't take no one else. Wish they did. This gold tooth's botherin' me.” He stretched his lips wide to expose the tooth for their inspection, and then said, “So are you still wantin' to go?”

Ron and Hermione looked at each other.

Hermione said, “Yes, we have an appointment at noon.”

“So... are you thinkin' of adoptin'? You look a little young.” The driver smirked.

“We're not married,” Hermione said stiffly. “I'm a distant relative of the Wilkins.”

“Ah.” The driver turned back to face forward. “It's about 25 miles... up in the hills... a good bit of windin' road. Be there in 'bout thirty minutes.”

The driver put the cab in gear and zoomed off, forcing Ron and Hermione back into their seats.

Hermione's mind was racing. What had happened?

Ron leaned close to Hermione so he would not be overheard. “Like Phidias said, let's just see how things are and not try to move too fast. If we need to come back more than once, fine. OK?”

Hermione nodded. But she was worried. This had not started out anything like she had imagined.

## Chapter 13 -- Wendell and Monica

“She's just up ahead on the left,” said the driver.

Ron and Hermione peered out the window as the driver slowed and turned into a short gravel driveway that opened into a large empty gravel parking area in front of a wide two-story white wooden building backing onto a beautifully wooded area. It had a deep porch the width of the building. There were many evenly spaced windows, all with functional bright green shutters. The building and porch had a matching green metal roof. The paint on everything was fresh and clean. There was a tall flagpole with the Australian flag in the middle of a grassy circular

area bordered by large white painted stones and centered on the building in the parking area. The building had a double wide entry door painted the same bright green color. Over the door was a wide sign which read *Wilkins House Orphanage and School for Girls*.

The driver stopped near the porch steps leading to the front door.

“This is it,” said the driver.

Ron paid the fare on the meter and added a very small tip.

The driver looked at it dismissively and said, “Right... Give my regards to the Wilkins. I'm Stan, by the way.” He smiled broadly, exposing the troublesome gold tooth, and then drove off.

Ron turned. Hermione was already standing in front of the door looking at the sign. He joined her and said, “Ready?”

Hermione nodded and rang the bell.

A few seconds later, the door opened. A young girl in a simple blue dress with white apron peered at them and said very politely, “May I help you?”

Hermione said, “I am Hermione Granger. I have an appointment to see Mr and Mrs Wilkins.”

The little girl nodded and said, “Please follow me.”

She led them through an empty foyer and across a hallway to an office with an open half-door and a plain wooden chair stationed to the left. She did not go in but leaned her head over the lower door and said, “Miss Smith, Miss Granger and a gentleman are here to see Mr and Mrs Wilkins.”

They heard a chair scrape and a pretty girl who looked to be only a year or two younger than Hermione came to the door and opened it. She had long straight auburn hair, deep liquid brown eyes, and was dressed just like the little girl. But she had no expression on her face.

“Hello, Miss Granger.” Her voice was cold and stiff. “We talked on the phone. I am Miss Smith, Mr and Mrs Wilkins' assistant. You are a little early. However, they are expecting you. I will escort you to see them now.” She turned to the little girl. “Samantha, please mind the phone until I return.”

“Yes, Miss Smith,” said the little girl who hurried into the office.

“Please follow me,” said Miss Smith, and she led the way.



It was a short walk down the hallway to another short connecting hallway with a single door at the end, which had a sign on it saying *The Residence*.

Miss Smith rang the bell, but did not wait. She opened the door and held out her arm gesturing Hermione and Ron to go in.

She said, "I'll leave you here."

Hermione entered with Ron behind her. It was a very clean and simply furnished parlor which aligned with what they had already seen of the place, but Hermione had no eyes but for the two people getting to their feet to greet them.

They were Hermione's parents, no question, as Ron remembered them from Diagon Alley and King's Cross. The only difference he saw was in their clothing. It was very simple, just like the girls -- white blouse and black skirt on her mother and white shirt and black pants on her father. They both looked healthy but stood rather stiffly and were not smiling.

Mr Wilkins spoke first, which was probably a good thing. It gave Hermione time to compose herself.

"Miss Granger, it is so very nice to meet you. I am so very sorry we were not able to talk to you personally on the phone."

Mr Wilkins sounded pompous, though Ron.

"We are lucky to have Jennifer... Miss Smith, as our assistant. She is our oldest and will be leaving next year for university," he finished.

"Introductions, dear," said Mrs Wilkins sweetly.

"Ah, yes..., the formalities," he intoned. "It is one of the things we emphasize here at Wilkins House. Society is losing so many of the essential elements which..."

"Miss Granger, I am Monica Wilkins. This is my husband Wendell. We are both so very pleased to meet you."

She sounded above it all too, thought Ron.

But Hermione did not miss a beat. She said, "I'm pleased to meet you. I am Hermione Granger. This is my good friend, Ronald Weasley."

Ron smiled and said, "I'm pleased to meet you," and then performed an awkward little bow.

Then Mr Wilkins clapped his hands together and said quite loudly, "Well, that's over with!" He walked over smiling broadly, and warmly shook Hermione's and then Ron's hands. Looking at Ron, he said, "Is it Ron or Ronny?" all traces of formality and stuffiness were gone.

Ron stammered, "Ron, sir."

"Call me Wen. She's Monica, alright?" he said, pointing backwards with his thumb over his shoulder. He slapped Ron on the shoulder. "I'm glad to see you didn't let Hermione here travel by herself. This country can be a little rough on unaccompanied young women. Right, dear?"

Mrs Wilkins had joined him and was just finishing giving Hermione a welcoming hug. "Absolutely!" she answered emphatically. Then she reached out and shook Ron's hand and then put one arm around his shoulders like his mother did and gave him a warm squeeze.

Mr Wilkins grinned, looked at them both and said, "We were just yanking your chain a bit with the introductions. Hope you didn't mind."

"No!" Hermione and Ron exclaimed in unison with a great feeling of relief.

Mr Wilkins looked intently at Hermione and exclaimed, "We *loved* your letter. Now, tell us about that owl!"

## Chapter 14 -- Change in Plans

It was like Phidias and Tilly all over again.

Wen and Monica were two people you could not help but like. They were fun, and interesting. They pumped Ron and Hermione with questions. Ron was glad they had spent the time preparing answers. Nothing was going to get past either of them.

Ron had not spent enough time with Hermione's parents, the Grangers, to get to know them. But he really liked Wen and Monica after only a few minutes. Hermione and Monica were now deep in their own conversation. Ron could detect nothing unusual from Hermione. She seemed completely at ease.

Wen stood up and pretended to clang an invisible gong and announced, "Lunch Time! ...Follow me."

He marched them through the parlor into the apartment hallway, then through a door into a small kitchen, through a completely empty pantry, and out a door onto

a grassy lawn. They were behind the main building. Wen said over his shoulder, "We eat outside when the weather's nice."

There were about thirty girls of various ages sitting at about twenty picnic tables eating lunch. It looked like they were nearly done eating. They all smiled and waved at the Wilkins.

Wen walked to the middle table, which was empty and said in a loud voice with his arms raised wide, "Good afternoon, children." He performed a deft pirouette so he could see them all.

They all responded cheering, "G'day, Mate!"

Wen beamed. "I'd like you to meet our new friends, Miss Granger and Mr Weasley."

The children all said, "Welcome!" in unison.

"Miss Granger is a relative of ours and Mr Weasley is her friend from school. They are visiting from England." Wen continued to turn as he spoke.

The children clapped.

"We'll be walking around the house later to see what you're doing." Wen then wagged his finger at them and finished by saying with a mock stern look on his face, "Be good!"

The children all put a thumb to their nose and wiggled their fingers in the air, then laughed and returned to finish their lunch and talk among themselves.

Wen gestured for Hermione and Ron to sit down across from himself and Monica.

Four young girls came out of a door from another wing of the main building with trays and placed one before each of them. It was a warm meal of a simple stew with bread, butter and a carton of milk, plus an apple for desert.

"We eat what they eat," said Monica, "and we eat all our meals with them."

As Hermione, Ron and the Wilkins ate, the children that finished carried their trays back into the building through the door their lunch had been delivered.

Monica continued, "The girls rotate through different age-appropriate duties, except for Jennifer. We're pretty self-sufficient, though we don't grow our own food. I'd like to start doing a little of that next spring. We have thirty-six girls right now and have space for a hundred. We've added eight girls since we took over,

that's about one a month. We'd fill up tomorrow if we took infants and non school-aged girls, but this is primarily a school, so we aren't structured like a classic orphanage. We've had great support from the township and get enough money for decent teachers. We're the only staff here on weekends."

Wen added, "Plus we've put a lot of our own money into fixing it up. It was very run down and... the kids..." his voice quavered at the end.

Monica picked up for him. "Well ...there had been abuse. I think it's one of the reasons the town was so happy to see us take over."

Hermione looked at Ron. She looked concerned.

Ron asked, "Do many girls get adopted?"

Monica shook her head. "None, so far. We're hoping for one soon." Monica looked at Wen, and then continued. "It's hard for school-aged children. Most couples want infants or toddlers."

Hermione asked, "What made you decide to give up dentistry and do this?"

Wen and Monica looked at each other and shook their heads.

Wen spoke. "We've asked ourselves the same question. We don't have an answer. It was like a compulsion we suddenly both shared. We're not even sure how we ended up in Mareeba Township. We arrived in Brisbane and traveled north until we got to Cairns. We met this funny taxi driver, Stan, who complained about a problem with his gold tooth. He said his town needed a better dentist and we had him drive us there. He pointed out the orphanage on the way and said the girls weren't treated right. After that, everything seemed to lead us toward where we are today."

Monica picked up. "The reason we invited you here, the reason we've asked you so many questions is because we seem to have forgotten about our lives in England. It's like shared amnesia. But the strangest thing is when we try to remember it, we find ourselves almost forced to focus on the present. So when we got your letter with an opportunity to find out more about our past in England, we couldn't wait to meet you. Does this make any sense?"

Hermione said sadly, "It does."

For the first time, Ron saw tears in Hermione's eyes.

Monica and Wen thought she was moved by their story. But they could not know what Hermione was really going through.

Perhaps to lighten the atmosphere, Wen stood up and said, "Let's go back inside. We'll show you around."

Because it was the weekend, there were no regular classes going on. The classrooms were bright and welcoming and reflected a lot of learning activity. Not all were empty. Three were being used by girls for artwork, music, and reading. There were workrooms for laundry and sewing, plus the kitchen. There was also a single large multi-purpose room for assembly and meals. It had a large bulletin board at the back with each child's schedule for school, chores, and free time. The sleeping quarters were upstairs. Girls under twelve shared a large open room. Girls twelve and over were divided four each to smaller rooms. Each girl had a wardrobe and a trunk. The single large bathroom had all private toilets and showers stalls.

After the tour, they went back to the residence, which they now understood was the small wing of the building. The other much larger wing off the main building contained the laundry, kitchen, and multi-purpose room.

Monica offered them tea, which they accepted.

They resumed their lively conversations from before lunch. The conversations were mainly paired between the two men and the two women.

Ron saw that Hermione and Monica again had their heads pressed together and were speaking softly.

Wen glanced over at them and said quietly to Ron, "They seemed to have really hit it off. I hope this isn't a 'one off' visit."

Monica swiveled her head and said smartly, "I heard that... Hermione said they'd come back again before they leave the country."

"Well, that's good," said Wen. "I was hoping to get a little more time with Hermione myself." He winked at Ron.

Monica shook her head at him. "I was just trying to persuade Hermione to stay with us for a few days. Hermione can have the guest bedroom and Ron can have the couch."

"I'm sorry," Ron said, "but we have firm plans."

Monica frowned. "Well, that's what Hermione said too. Wen, you persuade them, please."

Just then, the door to the residence opened and Jennifer came in. She said, "I've finished for the day."

Then she glided over to Wen, bent down and kissed him on the cheek, and then did the same to Monica. She straightened and said without any emotion, "I will be in my room if you need me, Mr and Mrs Wilkins." She turned, left the parlor and went down the hall. They heard a door open and close at the other end of the residence.

Monica said, "Jennifer is almost seventeen. She's two years older than the next oldest girl. When we first visited the place, she was being treated like a slave by the old matron... the witch. And it wasn't much better for the other girls. They weren't getting a proper education either."

Ron was surprised and looked at Hermione, but her attention was focused on Monica, who continued.

"It was *criminal* physical and mental abuse. She didn't even try to hide it from us. ...I think that, more than anything, made us decide to take over this place."

Wen smiled at Monica and said, "Jennifer is amazing. She is incredibly smart and capable. She studied on her own for years and years. We had her tested and she has earned early admission to Melbourne University. She is still just a little... *withdrawn* ...which is understandable."

Monica smiled at Wen and said, her voice choking up, "We *love* Jennifer as our own child and have submitted paperwork to *adopt* her."

Hermione, gasped.

Monica and Wen looked at her.

"Is everything alright, dear?" asked Monica softly.

"Yes, Yes. ...I'm sorry. ...I was just surprised. ...It's wonderful ...really wonderful. ...Isn't it, Ron?" Hermione's voice quavered and was higher than normal.

Ron, realizing Hermione's distress, took over the conversation. With a voice which he hoped sounded full of conviction, said, "I think it's *great!* Really *excellent!* I know it's going to make you both *really* happy. I can see it in your faces. We'll be adding Jennifer to your family tree then... fairly soon, I'm guessing."

"We hope by Christmas," said Monica. Wen nodded. They were beaming.

"That's just great. And on that good news...", Ron stood up. "I think we need to take our leave. Need to catch a five o'clock flight back to... to...."

“Sydney,” added Hermione, getting up. “We've had such a wonderful time. I'll call you to arrange another visit before we leave the country.”

Monica and Wen stood up too. Monica said, “I wish you didn't have to go. Even though we've just met, I feel as though I've known you all my life. I was hoping you'd have some time to get to know Jennifer.”

“Yes... Next time...” Hermione said weakly.

Wen said, “OK... I can see you've made up your minds, but I wish you could stay a little longer... I'll go call a taxi.” He left the room.

Monica and Hermione looked at each other and it was as if a switch had been turned. They both hugged each other and started sobbing.

Wen was back in a minute and said, seeing the two women, “What did I miss?”

Ron thought he knew, but whispered, “Hormones?”

Wen laughed.

This time, Hermione turned and said, regaining her composure, “I *heard* that.” The two women let go of each other and tried to dry their eyes.

“Cab will be here soon. We'll walk you out.” Wen held the door to the residence open for them.

They walked without speaking to the gravel parking lot and waited by the flagpole for less than a minute.

A cab pulled into the driveway and drove over to the same spot near the front door.

Of course, it was Stan. He rolled down the window, stuck his head out and said, “Hey, Wen. Hey, Monica. These two been botherin' ya?”

Wen laughed. “Stan, they're *family*. You take good care of them for us.”

“Will do,” Stan said and performed a mock salute. He pulled his head back in and rolled up his window.

Hermione hugged Wen and Monica one last time. Then turned, ran to the cab and got it.

Ron shook their hands and said, “It was great meeting you. You are doing something wonderful here.”

Wen said, "You take good care of that girl. She's something special."

Ron said, "I know," and he meant it.

Ron turned and got into the cab. He waved to Wen and Monica as they drove away.

Hermione had her head buried in her hands and cried all the way back to Cairns.

They returned to Magical Retreat well before dinner.

Hermione went to her room and did not come down to eat. Ron thought about trying to talk to her, but decided against it. She needed rest and time to think through what had happened.

Ron sat with Phidias and Tilly in the kitchen. He told them everything.

When Ron finished, Phidias shook his head slowly and said, "That was quite a scoutin' trip after all. I couldn't have imagined anything like that. This plan is really going to take some thought."

Tilly said, "I'm not so sure."

Phidias asked in a suspicious tone, "What do you mean, Tilly?"

"I'm not saying just yet, Phidias," Tilly said with a don't-start-with-me tone. "We need to hear what Hermione has to say first."

"Fair enough," replied Phidias. "Let her get her rest. We'll talk to her in the morning."

## Chapter 15 -- Hermione's Choice

Phidias, Tilly and Ron were sitting at the kitchen table the next morning when Hermione came in.

She looked awful -- still in her rumpled dressing gown, hair frizzed out, eyes red and puffy, tear stained cheeks, and a crusty deposit around her nostrils. She shuffled over to the table and sat down with her shoulders hunched. She hiccupped miserably. Then she started to sob.

Phidias looked concerned. He took his pipe from his mouth and placed it on the table. He glanced at Tilly and gave his head a little nod toward Hermione.



Tilly said, "You are in a right state, dear girl." She got up and took a clean towel from a drawer, dampened it at the sink, then came over and started to gently wipe Hermione's face.

After a minute, Hermione took it and finished the job. She dropped the towel in her lap. Then she looked up and wailed, "*What am I going to do?*"

Hermione hiccupped again. "I'm sure Ron's told you what happened. But it's even worse than that," she moaned. "Monica confided in me something very personal after they told us about their strange memory gaps. She said she went to their doctor in Mareeba for a routine physical exam. The doctor told her she had made a mistake on her medical history form. Monica had indicated she had never been pregnant. The doctor told her that she had delivered at least one baby. She told the doctor it wasn't possible. The doctor declared it was unmistakable."

Hermione sobbed, "Monica told me she was afraid she had done something horrible in her past and her memory loss was a consequence of it. She thinks Wen is just going along with it to make her feel better. She said adopting Jennifer is the only thing she is living for."

"That's all I could think about all night long... *IT'S ALL MY FAULT!*" Hermione shrieked and started crying in earnest.

Ron could not say anything.

Tilly pulled her chair next to Hermione and put her arms around her.

Phidias said softly, "I know it'll be very difficult, but we..."

Hermione yelled, cutting across him, "NO WE CAN'T!" and pulled away from Tilly.

But then Hermione suddenly seemed to get hold of herself. She stopped crying and said slowly, "I *can't*... fix this... I will only... make it... *worse*."

She lowered her voice and spoke calmly and with conviction. "You were right, Phidias. They have *new* lives... *wonderful* lives. They have touched the lives of so many others... and *Jennifer*. How can I destroy all that?"

Hermione lowered her head and said quietly, "I've decided... I'm *not* going to restore their memories and take them back."

Ron looked stunned but did not say anything.

Hermione began to pant. "I think... I think... I can *live* with it," she said slowly and deliberately between breaths. "But even in... their new lives... they are still... affected... by the damage... I caused... in creating it. ...I desperately... want to... fix... that damage... But I don't... dare... try. ...I know... I'll only... make it... worse..." She shook her head. "It's... *too... complicated!*"

She stopped for a minute and got control of her breathing. Then she resumed and her voice was filled with bitterness. "I now know what I did was *immoral*. It doesn't matter that I had the best intentions ...or that you all understand why I did it ...and perhaps even think I was being noble. ...It was *WRONG!* ...And worst of all, I can't stop trying to think of ways to use Memory Charms to fix the damage, even though I know it *won't* work."

Hermione moaned in anguish, "It's *killing* me." She buried her face in her hands.

Ron did not know what to say. He'd never seen Hermione like this. He wanted to help her, but did not know what to do. He looked at Phidias for an answer; but Phidias was looking intently at Tilly, not Hermione.

Tilly said very softly, "Let me help you, Hermione."

## Chapter 16 -- Acceptance

"What can you *do?*" croaked Hermione, clearly in despair, her face still in her hands.

Tilly reached out and briefly touched Hermione's head. "I can *give* you... *acceptance*... but you have to ask me to help you. I won't force it."

Hermione lifted her head from her hands and looked at Tilly. "Acceptance will help me?"

"It will." Tilly paused and then added, "I promise."

Hermione looked at Tilly questioningly.

Tilly continued, "A part of you wants to suffer to atone for what you did. Hermione, you are a *good* person. You did try to do the right thing. No one could have foreseen the circumstances that created this situation. It was war. You *saved* your parents. They are alive and well. And now you are willing to sacrifice your own happiness for theirs. Let me help you to accept it. You will then understand that I can help *them* too. Will you let me help you? Please, Hermione."

Ron finally saw what he could do. His voice shaking, he pleaded, "Please, let her help you, Hermione. I can't stand to see you like this. I love you."

Hermione looked at Ron. With what seemed to be a glimmer of hope in a sea of despair, she breathed, "Please help me, Tilly."

Tilly stood up and moved to stand behind Hermione. She placed her hands on Hermione's shoulders and said, "Close your eyes and relax."

Hermione slowly relaxed back into her chair and closed her eyes.

Tilly closed her eyes. Only a second later, she removed her hands and stepped back. Then she took her chair across from Phidias.

Hermione's head lolled and her chin rested on her chest.

Ron asked nervously, "Is she all right? What did you do?"

Phidias picked up his pipe from the table and said, "My guess is *permanent acceptance* and five minutes of *blissful emptiness*."

"Right you are," said Tilly, observing Hermione carefully.

"That blissful one's better than a good night's sleep," chuckled Phidias. "She'll be fine. You'll see in a couple of minutes." He began to suck on his pipe for the first time since Hermione had entered the kitchen.

They sat watching Hermione. She was taking very slow deep breaths. Ron thought it was very relaxing just watching her and he yawned.

"It has that affect on me too," said Phidias, and then he yawned. Tilly did not yawn, saying, "I'm used to it."

Ron and Phidias gave several more yawns.

Then Hermione snorted loudly, and her head jerked.

"She's coming out of it," said Phidias.

Hermione raised her head off her chest and tilted it back until it lolled the other way. Her mouth gaped open. The she snorted again, leveled her head and smacked her lips a few times. Then she sat up straight and opened her eyes.

Hermione looked at Tilly and said with surprise, "I still remember everything. I remember *how* I felt. But I don't *feel* that way now. I..."

"You accept it now and you will as long as you live. I didn't change those memories, I just changed how you feel about them," said Tilly.

Hermione leaned over and hugged her. "I can't thank you enough. I was in a very dark place. I was thinking I'd..."

"No reason to think about that anymore either, is there?" Phidias cut in.

"No, you're right," said Hermione.

"Thank God," said Ron. "I was really worried. I didn't know what to say."

"Ron, you said what I needed to hear." Hermione stood up, leaned way over the table, grabbed Ron's head, pulled it toward her, and kissed him full on the lips.

## Chapter 17 -- A New Plan

Ron blushed a deep shade of red. But even as Hermione released him, she was all business again.

The old Hermione was back.

"I want you to do this for my parents too, Tilly," said Hermione, retaking her seat.

"Good," replied Tilly, "But like you, they have to agree to let me help them."

"I understand. I'm sure I can persuade them," said Hermione confidently. "I'll say you are a psychologist and a certified clinical hypnotist. The Wilkins' don't know about the magical world and have no reason to believe in magic. I'm sure Monica will accept 'professional' help and I bet she can convince Wen after she's gone through it."

"Also, I've been thinking about Jennifer," added Hermione. "She seems *unnaturally* stiff to me. She may be troubled *too* -- Wen implied it. I know she was abused. Do you think you can read her and see if she needs help too?"

"Of course, dear," said Tilly reassuringly.

Ron spoke up. "I was thinking the whole school could use a dose of bliss... Wait, wait, I was joking," he quickly added as he saw a look of alarm on Tilly's face. "Except for Jennifer, those kids are happier now than they've probably ever been. You'll see," said Ron reassuringly.

Phidias cleared his throat. "Well, let's talk about that. ...A school full of children isn't a good environment for Tilly. She'll need to stay as far away from 'em as possible."

"I agree," said Hermione. "I'll phone Wilkins House later today and schedule a return visit -- let's say for Wednesday, in the evening, since it's a school day. It's probably sooner than they expected, but I'll say it was the best day for two other friends I want to bring along to meet them." Suddenly inspired, she looked at Phidias, "I'll say *you* are the native guide from the owl story."

Phidias raised his eyebrows.

Hermione was in her element -- full planning mode. "We'll say you're one-eighth on your mother's side. You definitely pass for being 'outdoorsy'. They'll love to meet you, Phidias."

She turned to face Tilly. "We'll say we just met *you* at the University of Melbourne and discussed what the Wilkins' have done at the orphanage, and that you wanted to informally interview them about their techniques." Then to everyone, she said, "I'll make the appointment for early evening; let's say seven o'clock. The children will have eaten and be upstairs."

Ron said, "Nice plan, Hermione -- as always."

"Thank you, Ron," she said sweetly.

Ron suggested, "While you are using the phone thing, why don't you arrange to have Stan the taxi driver pick us up in Cairns, where he did before, at six thirty and then be on standby to take us back."

"I'll do that too. Anything else?" asked Hermione less sweetly.

"Why don't you get us tickets for the next cruise ship back to England?" Ron asked hopefully.

"Ron, we're returning the same way we came. We have fully refundable round trip tickets and can schedule any return date we want," Hermione replied sternly.

"Just asking," said Ron, inoffensively raising his hands in surrender. To Phidias he whispered a little too loudly, "I guess that wasn't covered in the *acceptance* bit."

"I heard that, Ronald," scolded Hermione.

They all laughed.

## Chapter 18 -- Friends Helping Friends

As before, Hermione phoned Wilkins House and talked with Jennifer. She was just as formal and stiff as the first time. Hermione explained the reason for the weekday evening visit, the two additional visitors and who they were. She insisted Jennifer check with Wen and Monica while she waited on the line. Jennifer did so reluctantly but reported back that they had agreed, though they had wished for a longer weekend visit. Hermione lied and told Jennifer their next visit would be longer -- knowing this would be the last.

On Wednesday, Hermione had Phidias wear his regular Old West style clothes since they fit the native guide story. She helped Tilly pick items from her wardrobe that best fit the psychologist story -- a simple but professional looking skirt and jacket.

Their travel over the Floo Network went without a hitch. Phidias and Tilly were carrying their wands. Tilly had been a little nervous, but Phidias kept her calm. She gave Phidias her wand as soon as they reached Cairns.

The Cairns Muggle travel information center was closed and Stan, who was waiting to drive them to the orphanage, was a little too inquisitive when they walked out from behind the deserted building. Ron had to do a little Confunding behind Stan's back. Stan drove them to the orphanage without further conversation and told them he would wait in the parking lot at no charge. Hermione made sure Ron gave him a very big tip this time, which pleased Stan.

Jennifer was waiting for them at the orphanage front door and escorted them to the residence. This time she remained with them. There was no pretext of formal introductions this time. It was "g'day mates," handshakes, back slapping and hugging welcomes for Phidias and Tilly from Wen and Monica. Jennifer shook hands briefly.

Wen loved Phidias' hair. He had to hear the owl story first. Phidias is quite a storyteller, and he spun the tallest tale Ron and Hermione had ever heard about finding and training Mercury. But it was great. Everyone clapped... except Jennifer.

Hermione then took the lead and asked Wen to explain to Tilly their philosophy of running an orphanage.

While Wen was explaining to Tilly, Hermione whispered to Monica that Tilly could hypnotize her and greatly help relieve her anxiety, describing how Tilly had helped her. Monica was very interested.

When there was a break in the discussion of the orphanage, Monica said to Tilly, "Hermione tells me you can hypnotize people and help relieve their... stress... and you that you helped her."

Tilly said, "Yes, I can... and I did help Hermione. Do you want me to help you?"

Monica said, "Yes." Though she looked a little anxious.

Wen's brow was knitted. "Are you sure, Monica?"

"Hermione said it worked for her. I'd like to try it," Monica said resolutely.

"Alright," he agreed.

Tilly nodded, stood up and said, "Sit back in the couch and relax."

Monica did.

Tilly moved to stand in front of her, leaned over and placed her hands on Monica's shoulders. "Close your eyes. You will go to sleep and wake up refreshed in one minute." Monica closed her eyes. Then Tilly shut her eyes for a second and removed her hands from Monica's shoulders.

Monica started breathing very slowly and deeply.

Wen stared in surprise and whispered, "She really *is* asleep... amazing!"

Tilly said, "There is no need to whisper. She won't awake until the time is up."

A minute can seem like a long time when you are staring at someone sleeping, but soon, Monica snorted once, smacked her lips, sat up and opened her eyes. She looked around and then suddenly jumped up and hugged Tilly.

Wen said, astonished, "I guess it *worked*. How do you feel, Monica?"

"*Wonderful!*" she exclaimed, "The best I've felt since we left England."

"Really?" responded Wen. "Do you think I should have a go?"

"Definitely!" exclaimed Monica.

Wen sat back in his overstuffed chair and relaxed.

Tilly said, "Do you want me to help you?"

"Yes, please," said Wen.

Tilly repeated the procedure.

When Wen woke up, he had the same reaction as Monica. He jumped up and hugged Tilly. Then he hugged Hermione, Ron, Phidias, Monica and Jennifer. When he released Jennifer, he said enthusiastically, "Jen, you have to try this *too!*"

Jennifer said nervously, "I don't know," and stepped back.

Tilly said, "I usually only help minors who are under my clinical care, unless I have the consent of the parents or legal guardians. I assume I have your consent as the legal guardians?"

"Yes," said Monica and Wen together.

Tilly continued, "I would still like the underage subject's consent, but I can proceed without it... if you insist."

But before Wen and Monica could answer, Tilly held up her hands. "*Before* you answer, I'd like you both to talk it over with Jennifer while the rest of us step out of the room. A short break is probably good for me. It may not look like it, but this takes a bit of a toll on me."

## Chapter 19 -- Jennifer's Secret

Hermione was wondering what was going on? Why was Tilly offering them the option of forcing Jennifer? She looked at Phidias, who had a look on his face which indicated he was thinking the same thing. Even Ron looked concerned.

Tilly gestured them toward the door of the residence. She followed Phidias, Ron and Hermione out into the dimly lit hallway. They walked down to the front office, stood in a circle and put their heads close together.

Hermione whispered, "Tilly, what is going on with Jennifer? You said the recipient had to *accept* the procedure."

"Hermione, those are my self-imposed rules for *normal* situations. This isn't one," Tilly stated gravely.

"What do you mean?" asked Hermione.

"Jennifer is full of incredible hatred and rage. She has revenge and *murder* in her heart."



“What?” the rest of them said in unison, well above a whisper.

Tilly shushed them. “*Listen* to me! That's not the worst of it. Almost all of it is directed at Wen and Monica.”

This time, only Ron and Hermione exclaimed, “*No!*” “*Impossible!*”

Phidias whispered emphatically, “*Listen to her!* She knows what she's talking about.”

Tilly explained. “There is *no* mistake. When she looks at either of them, it's daggers-in-the-heart hatred. I'm surprised she hasn't already acted on it. She must be waiting for a particular moment, which I can't even guess at. But I *can* guess at the *reason* for all this. I think she has transferred her feelings for the matron who abused her onto the Wilkins. The abuser left, but the Wilkins took over the same position of power. It's hatred of the orphanage and all it represents that has built up for what's happened to her over years and years of pain and suffering. It is clearly *not* rational; the Wilkins are totally innocent, but they represent what she *hates*.”

Then she added, “I'm not a psychologist; I just pretend to be one for my house guests,” in an effort to lighten the dark mood that now gripped them.

Only Ron chuckled.

Hermione asked anxiously, “What can you *do*?”

Tilly explained, “I need to do more than *acceptance*. For this level of rage, *acceptance* would be like trying to block the Killing Curse. I need to eliminate the rage and replace it with something that won't leave an emotional vacuum that would make her completely withdraw from society.”

“Like what?” asked Ron.

“*Love*, of course,” answered Hermione.

“Right,” said Tilly. “This case is very, very difficult. I haven't done anything like this in years. But it has to be done *now*. Wen and Monica are sure to die soon otherwise.”

Tilly looked at Hermione. “You told us Jennifer was scheduled to leave for University next year. Maybe that's it -- she intends to do it when she leaves.”

“Or when the *adoption papers* are approved! That's sooner -- before Christmas,” gasped Hermione.

“Whatever. It's got to be done *now*. Something unexpected could trigger it at *any* time,” said Phidias.

Tilly gave instructions. “Hermione, if necessary, stun the Wilkins and put Jennifer under the Full Body Bind Curse. I need her mind fully functional. You can clean up afterwards with Confundus or Memory Charms. Ron, be ready to back Hermione up. I'd ask Phidias, but he's out of practice on dueling.”

Hermione and Ron said, “OK.”

Phidias said, “More than that. I'll be needin' to focus on keepin' Tilly stable if all that magic starts flyin' around.”

“How long will it take?” asked Hermione.

“Just a little longer than usual; I don't need to touch her. That's really just for show... it helps people feel better for some reason,” replied Tilly matter-of-factly. Then she said, “If we have to go with the stunning, the signal will be me saying: ‘We need to do this.’ OK?”

They all said, “OK.” together.

Then Tilly closed the discussion. “Let's go. We've been gone long enough.”

Hermione was scared. As she walked down the hall, she suddenly had a horrible premonition of finding Wen and Monica dead in the parlor, covered with blood and Jennifer standing over their bodies with a kitchen knife. She could not shake the image.

Tilly leaned toward Hermione and whispered, “*Relax*.”

## Chapter 20 -- A Child's Love

They were at the residence door and then back inside the parlor -- no bodies, blood or knife. Hermione was able to relax a bit more.

Wen and Monica were sitting on either side of Jennifer on the couch holding her hands. They looked a little tense.

Ron, Hermione and Phidias stood side by side just inside the residence door behind Tilly. They had their wands ready to deploy at her signal.

Jennifer said in a soft monotone, “If Wen and Monica want me to do it, I will.” She was not smiling.

Tilly smiled, walked over and stood in front of Jenifer and said, "Do you want me to help you?"

Without emotion, Jennifer said, "Yes."

Tilly said, "Now relax and close your eyes."

Wen and Monica let go of Jennifer's hands and gave her more room. Jenifer closed her eyes, but remained sitting stiffly. However, after about twenty seconds, she let her body relax. Tilly leaned over, put her hands on Jenifer's shoulders and closed her eyes.

After a few seconds, a little longer than with the others, she removed her hands, stood up and said, "I have given Jennifer fifteen minutes of sleep instead of the normal minute. I sensed an extremely high level of anxiety in her. Has she suffered significantly in the past -- perhaps the loss of her parents in a traumatic way?"

Monica's eyes welled up. Wen, took a deep breath, and said, "Not that... much, much worse. She was terribly abused for years by the original matron of this facility... Awful things we don't want to talk about."

Tilly said, "Ah. That explains it... I hope I was able to be of some help. So now we wait."

Jennifer's breathing was especially deep and slow. Monica stroked Jenifer's hair. Wen held her hand.

The rest of them sat down and waited. No one said anything else as Jenifer slept. But they all yawned many times ...except Tilly.

Finally Jennifer stirred. There was the standard snort and lip smacking, but she did not sit upright and open her eyes. Instead, she yawned and stretched her arms like she was awaking from a very long and restful sleep. She leaned to one side and rested her head on Wen's shoulder then slowly opened her eyes. They fell on Monica.

Jenifer smiled and said, "Mum?" Then she turned slightly, looked up at Wen and said, "Dad?"

Monica and Wen burst into tears and hugged her.

Jennifer cried too and said, "I love you."

Then she looked at Tilly and said with tears of gratitude, "I know and understand what you did. Thank you! *Thank You!* You saved me from myself."

She then put her hands on her soon to be parents' arms and returned their loving embrace.

Tilly said, "I think it's time for us to go. No need to show us out. We understand. Hermione will be in touch soon."

Wen and Monica looked up at Tilly. The smiles and tears in their eyes said everything. They nodded their heads and silently mouthed, "Thank you. Thank you."

Tilly waived Phidias, Ron and Hermione out of their chairs and out the door of the residence.

As they walked down the hall toward the front door, Hermione realized she was not crying. She understood even more what Tilly had done for her. Finally, she asked, "Tilly, everything is OK, right?"

"I'm positive," said Tilly. "Remember, I don't remove memories; I just change the emotions connected to them. I gave her *acceptance* of the past, *regret* for her desire for murderous revenge, especially the misplaced target of it, and finally, *love* for the two people who truly love her as a daughter. When I had done that, all the hate was gone; I didn't have to remove it."

At the front door, Tilly stopped, looked back toward the residence and then at Hermione. "Jennifer is a remarkable girl -- like *you*, Hermione."

## Chapter 21 -- Hermione's Wish

Ron and Hermione stayed almost another week at Magical Retreat. They might have stayed longer, except that two new guests showed up on day four. Breakfast in the kitchen ended. They were able to have dinner in the kitchen if the other guests stayed out late, but that only happened once. The new guests dined out early and liked to sit in the parlor complaining about the Ministry. So it was a good enough reason to leave.

Phidias and Tilly did not want to be paid. They said it had been an unusually entertaining off season for them. But Hermione left a large sack of Galleons containing a 'Thank You' note in a kitchen cupboard with a temporary Disillusionment Charm on it.

They all shed long tearful goodbyes and promised to write often. Hermione knew in her heart she would see Phidias and Tilly again someday.

Finally, Ron and Hermione had to go. One last time they said goodbyes and hugged Phidias and Tilly. Then the two travelers took some Floo powder, stepped into the fireplace at the Magical Retreat B&B, and vanished in a burst of emerald green flames.

Later, while they waited at the airport to start the first leg of their return flights, Ron said to Hermione, "I'm very sorry you didn't get your wish."

Hermione kissed Ron on the cheek and then, with an *accepting* smile, said, "Well, I did actually, but in reverse... The Wilkins got the daughter *they* were so desperately missing."

The End