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Opening extract from

A Twist of Fortune

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One

First Home

I'm Sam Pargeter and this is my story. When it began, I was nearly twelve. By the time it ended, I was fourteen. So you see, it's a long story and some bad things happened on the way – just to warn you in case you worry about stuff like that.

It started the day Pa told us his news. We were all there in the cottage, Ma, Eliza, Alfie and me. Sitting at the table. Listening to what he said. He told us with a big grin on his face as if it was a joke – but it wasn't. My stomach jolted and the hairs stood up on the back of my neck. I knew things were going to be different now.

Before that day, I thought nothing would ever change. I thought we'd live in the country for ever. Pa would work on Mister Garwood's farm, and Eliza and me would help with the hay in summer and scare the crows in spring. Though we were as poor as church mice, it was a grand life. We liked chasing rabbits and climbing trees and looking for birds' eggs. Even Eliza, who was only ten, could climb the biggest trees. Not many girls could do that, but she could.

'Watch me, Sam,' she'd say. And she'd shin up the trunk of

an oak in a flash, not caring if she got into trouble for tearing her frock.

Alfie was just four years old and Ma spoiled him something rotten. Maybe it was cos baby Henry had died some years back. Ma cried a lot then, I remember. She cried really hard when we put him in the tiny box Pa made and buried him in the churchyard. I made a little wooden cross and carved 'Henry' on it and we picked buttercups and laid them by it. It was a sad day.

A year after that, Alfie was born. We all thought he was special and Ma stopped crying and smiled again and everything was happy.

I won't pretend our cottage was grand. It wasn't much bigger than a garden shed built of brick and rotting timber and, when it rained, water dripped through the thatch right into the house.

'Well, blow me down, that's a lucky thing,' Ma would say. 'No need to fetch water from the well, my loves.'

While the rain dripped into a bucket, me and our Eliza would sit by the fire, Alfie would settle on Ma's knee and she'd tell us stories. I loved Ma's stories. They were full of magical places and adventure. My favourite was about Aladdin, the boy with the magic lamp. Ma always said he had bright blue eyes like me and Pa, and he could run like the wind just like my sister, and he had curls like Alfie. But I don't reckon Aladdin had red hair like us.

Sometimes, on rainy days, Pa would teach us reading and writing. He knew about books, see, because he'd been to

school when he was young. He tried to teach Ma too but she wasn't so interested. Pa had three books he kept on the shelf and most days he'd read to us after tea. One was the Bible bound in black leather with gold lettering and the other two were stories by Charles Dickens. We all liked *Pickwick Papers* cos it was very funny.

'Do that silly voice for Mister Pickwick, Pa,' Eliza would say, and he'd pinch his nose between his fingers and speak all high-pitched so that we rocked with laughter.

My favourite was *Oliver Twist* which was about a poor orphan who got into terrible trouble. A thief called Fagin taught Oliver to steal and Pa did a scary voice for him and made us shiver and Alfie would say, 'Bad man. Bad man.'

I expect you're wondering that if life was so good, what did Pa say that shocked me so much and changed everything. Well, I'll tell you. That day we thought Pa had gone to work on the farm as usual, but he came back early and said he had something to tell us. Ma made a pot of tea, looking nervous I thought – though I didn't know why she should. We all settled round the table wondering what the news could be.

'It's like this,' Pa said. 'The harvest wasn't good last year and Mister Garwood can't afford to pay me. So his son, Jacob, will work on the farm instead.'

'That's not fair,' said Eliza.

'Not fair,' Alfie repeated, which made Pa laugh.

'Jacob will be thirteen next week,' said Pa, 'and he's a strong lad. He'll be a good worker.'

'What will you do, Pa?' I asked.

He grinned and winked at us. But he didn't fool me. I could tell that deep down he wasn't happy.

'I'm glad you asked, Sam,' he said. 'Today I went to see a friend of Mister Garwood's who's a wealthy man with business in foreign parts.' He leaned forward and tried to make his smile even wider. 'So I'm going on an adventure!'

'Can we come?' Eliza asked.

'I'm afraid not, sweetheart. It's just me.'

Eliza's face fell and Pa put his hand on hers.

'I'll be sailing to America, you see,' Pa said. 'It's a big country with lots of open spaces and amazing wild animals. I'll be able to tell you all about it when I come back. That's exciting, isn't it?'

But it wasn't exciting. It was horrible! I didn't want him to go away. Eliza must have felt the same because she leaped out of her chair and flew into one of her tempers, screaming and yelling, which set Alfie off crying.

'No, no, no! You can't leave us!' she bawled, thumping Pa's chest with her fists.

He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight, trying to calm her down. 'I have to go, my chicken. I need to earn money. We have to eat, don't we?'

'I'm nearly twelve,' I said. 'Why can't I get a job?'

'You're not old enough to do man's work, son. If I go to America, I'll earn good money for us all.'

Well, it didn't sound right to me. 'That's daft,' I said. 'How's leaving us going to help?'

Pa sat down, pulling Eliza, still sobbing, onto his knee. 'I'm

going to America to grow cotton.'

'You mean you'll be a farmer?'

'I'll be a boss man in charge of cotton fields. I'll send money home to Ma and I'll work hard and I'll soon be rich. Then I'll come back.'

'Well, that's a lucky thing,' said Ma, trying to be brave. 'You'll be home before we know it.' But I could tell she was upset because I saw her wipe away a tear when she thought we weren't looking. I expect she'd known what Pa was planning but it was a terrible shock for Eliza and me. Alfie was too young to understand, see.

Eliza sniffed back her tears. 'Will you be back next week?' she asked. I thought that was a stupid thing to say. I knew America was a long way away. Over the sea. Miles and miles from home – he wouldn't even be halfway there in a week.

Pa kissed her forehead. 'Not so soon,' he said. 'I'll be back in a year or so, my pet. Perhaps.'

That set her off howling and hollering so bad that Alfie, who didn't know what was going on, got scared and joined in.

'Aww! What a terrible noise, my loves!' said Ma, pulling a face and shaking her head. 'Shall we have a nice noise instead?' Which is what she always said when we were arguing or making a fuss. Then she started singing with a voice as sweet as a lark. Eliza loved to sing too, and her voice was just like Ma's. After getting her crying under control, she joined in and the two of them sang 'Daisy's Dimples' while the rest of us listened.

'Beautiful,' said Pa, settling in his chair to light his pipe. 'That's the most beautiful sound in the whole world.'

The day came when Pa had to leave. He took me to one side and said, 'While I'm away, Sam, I want you to look after Ma and your sister and brother. You'll be twelve soon. Can you be the man of the house, do you think? Can you manage that?'

Part of me wanted to say, 'Course, I can. I can do it.' But part of me wanted to scream, 'Don't leave us, Pa! Don't go!' All I did was nod my head and say, 'I'll manage.'

Later, we stood at the gate as Pa set off for America to make his fortune.

'Be good, all of you. Make sure you read to them, Sam,' he called as he walked away down the lane. 'I'll write as soon as I get there.'

And he lifted his hand and waved to us and we waved back until he was over the brow of the hill and out of sight.