

Lost Between the Continents Book I

# **Another Chance**

*“No Place to call home”*



# Praise for *Another Chance*



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To my sons

Todd and Jeff

This is where we came from.





# Acknowledgments

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## **Author Bio**

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# Preface

Herein lies the bridge over the Atlantic for the Woodward family; the missing link in our family's history. We knew the steps taken by Ernest Woodward from his journey down the Ohio River to the present. We did not know much about the first 17 years of his life in London, England.

Through research of the time period he was in London, 1889-1906, and interviews with older members of the family, we were able to connect the dots in his London life. That all helped make sense of his subsequent endeavors in America.

His quest to have a family that loved him back was reflective of his once privileged childhood until the age of 12. From that time until he was 17, he navigated waters that were completely foreign to him, just to survive.

The love of his life, who he met in Marietta, Ohio, bore nine children with him and beget thirty-one grandchildren. Her name was Frances and she was a jolly sort. She likened Ernest to Johnny Appleseed — spreading little Woodward seeds down the Ohio River.

Joseph Woodward



## Ernest turns 5

Ernest tiptoed past his mother's room so he wouldn't disturb her. She had been ill for a long time, and the slightest sound could wake her. Miss Adams took care of her and would shush him anytime he made a noise. He knew it had something to do with her breathing because he would hear her trying to take a deep breath, and make a funny sound.

Ernest would be 5 years old on the following Tuesday and Miss Adams was going to make him a big birthday cake. His father was coming back from his trip at the weekend and bringing him a special birthday gift. He stopped at his sister's room, but she had already gone downstairs. Miss Adams was making some hotcakes in the kitchen and they smelled good.

She said, "Good morning, Ernest. Please sit down with Flossie and eat while you can. The doctor will be here this morning."

Their house was a large two-story in a neighborhood with porches and big trees. Their father's warehouse was about 3 miles away at London docks. He was in the shipping business and traveled extensively. It was early 1894 and the dockworkers' strike was finally over. Things were getting back to normal again and business was picking up.

Malcolm Woodward was winding up his business in Spain and this trip had been special. His son was turning 5 and he had a special gift for him; a gift that he spent considerable time finding. It was a

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hand-carved bull made out of teakwood that he had found in a shop next to the bullring in Malaga. The bull was shiny dark with its right foot raised as if it was getting ready to charge the matador. This would look good on Ernest's dresser.

He put the birthday box in his suitcase and headed for the train station. The ride back was bittersweet. It was good to be going home because it had been a demanding week. It was upsetting because Ruby, the woman he loved, was seriously ill. He didn't have to go on the road again for about three weeks and wanted to be as close to her as he could. She had pneumonia that began as a chest cold and gradually got worse. He thought about his children and wondered what he'd do if she didn't make it. Their doctor kept a close eye on her and Miss Adams, their housekeeper, followed his instructions to the letter. Malcolm was to stop by his office the next day for an update.

Flossie, his elder child, helped around the house with Ernest and was especially helpful in the kitchen. She was almost 11 now and beginning to look more like her mother. Ruby had spent a lot of time with her in the kitchen, baking and cooking family favorites. Ernest had helped Flossie bake shortbread for him to eat on the train when he left for Malaga.

The children met him at the door when his carriage arrived and were a welcome sight. Ernest was getting taller and Flossie was becoming a young lady. Ernest hugged on his dad's leg and looked up at him with that quizzical smile, like "Where's my gift?"

Malcolm plopped the suitcase on the floor and said, "Young man, if you can find it, you can open it today!"

Everyone broke into laughter. His son, the master of the house, was all boy. He was focused on one thing — "Where's my gift?"

When Ernest opened the box, he was stunned. This wasn't a ball, or a little boy's book. It looked like the real bull that his dad showed him a picture of when he went to a bull fight.



He held it up so everyone could see and asked Miss Adams, “Can I show it to Mama?”

“Yes, you can, honey. Just give me a minute to get her up.”

Ernest was excited and grabbed his dad’s hand and said, “Come with me, Papa. Let’s show Mama my birthday gift.”



## Ruby dearest

Miss Adams motioned them into the room. Ruby was propped up on pillows. Her hair was combed and she had on the best smile she could muster. Malcolm stood and watched while his little man sat on the bed and showed her his birthday gift. He was very close to her. On the night stand beside her bed lay a stack of pictures that he would draw for her every day — the tree in the front yard, the bird bath in the side yard and a drawing of their piano downstairs. He loved his mother and everyone kept assuring him she was going to get better.

Malcolm thought back to when they got married. Ruby was such a partner, supporting him in his business and always doing something with the children. He was anxious to talk to Dr Simmons and get a report on how she was doing. But for today, he was going to enjoy being with her and the children. He sat on the other side of the bed and held her hand. She gave him a faint squeeze in his big hand. He almost broke down. What a champion he had married. He wasn't a religious man but prayed she would come out of this illness.

Flossie came into the room and told her mother how nice she looked. Ruby gave her a pretty smile, then drifted off.

Miss Adams said, "We'd better let Mama rest now," and Malcolm leaned down and kissed her forehead.

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The three of them sat at the dining room table and had some apple juice because it was Ernest's favorite. The mood was empty and the conversation sparse. Father and daughter were grasping the reality of the situation and the little man could sense trouble for Mama. That night, Ernest slipped by his mama's room and opened his big sister's door a crack. Flossie was lying on the bed sobbing. He hurried in to put his arms around her and began to whimper under the pressure of it all. Flossie just held onto him and they became each other's rock.

Malcolm was suddenly stressed about being tied to his business. He knew he was missing out on the best years of his family — but had no answers. His business had become a machine and he the lone piston.

Malcolm was already at the office when Dr Simmons arrived.

They shook hands and the doctor said, "Come on back, Malcolm. Let's talk. I know you've just got back from your trip, and I'm sure you noticed the decline in Ruby's condition."

Malcolm responded, "Yes, I have. Is there anything you can do for her? Is she going to make it?"

Dr Simmons leaned forward and looked Malcolm right in the eye and said, "Short of a miracle, the pneumonia seems to have a mind of its own. I saw her on Monday and she had declined since my last visit. Miss Adams watches her closely and I could see the stress in her from not being able to do something for her. I gave Ruby a shot of morphine then and another yesterday to make it easier for her. I'm shooting straight with you, Malcolm. This is out of my hands. I could admit her to the hospital for around-the-clock care, but she would be miserable there. She wants to be at home with her family. Please make arrangements to stay at home for a while. It may be all you get with her. I'll stop by daily to see that she's comfortable."

With that, Ernest left the doctor's office and hurried to his warehouse and told his men the situation. His office manager of

15 years stopped at the house weekly to check on things and knew what should be done for the clients. She had composed a letter for Malcolm to send out to their customers explaining it would be business as usual except that he would be taking time off to be with his wife during her illness.

When Malcolm reached the house, the children had already eaten lunch and turned on the radio in the kitchen. They both gave him a hug and he could tell he needed to steady the ship. They were rattled and it showed. He couldn't tell them as straight as Dr Simmons had told him, but he could be constructive with redirecting their focus to visiting with their mother three times a day. They could read her a short story, take drawings of all the things she liked in the house, show her something they made in the kitchen, and just be quietly caring for her by loving her. They'd just be little visits so it wouldn't wear her out.

The children somehow knew to give it their best. They had the feeling they were helping. Miss Adams kept encouraging them to keep it up — that their mother looked forward to their visits. Flossie taught Ernest the “rabbit pie” song and he was going to sing it that night and wanted his dad to hear it too. This was going to be special. Miss Adams made some pastries and brought tea up for the occasion.

Malcolm brought in a wooden box for Ernest to stand on. Flossie was the announcer and explained that Ernest learned this old English song just for tonight, and he began —

“Rabbit, rabbit, rabbit pie!  
Come my ladies, come and buy,  
Else your babies they will cry.”

Ernest smiled and bowed like a little gentleman. There was not a dry eye in the room. Ruby put her hands together for a little clap and they all joined in. It brought them together. They had each learned to enjoy the minute that was in front of them.

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Malcolm was awakened late into the night. He slept in the guest room so Ruby wouldn't be disturbed. He walked down the hall and when he reached the master-bedroom door, he paused and listened. Ruby was breathing hard and sounded hoarse. He opened the door and looked in. She was still asleep but struggling with inhaling. He sat by her and wiped her brow. She calmed down for a bit and Malcolm talked to her in a calm quiet voice.

He knew the time was near and Ruby opened her eyes and looked at him with the hint of a smile. He spoke of their deep love and the journey they had worked side by side to create. He went on to express the meaning of the two beautiful children they were so fortunate to have; that they had duplicated themselves with their own handprints; and that it's the children who carry life forward.

Ruby motioned him to come closer. He put his head close to hers and she whispered, "Thank you, Malcolm, for a wonderful life. Take care of our babies. I love you."

Moments later she was motionless. He stayed next to her for a long time — still talking to her quietly. Telling her what it meant to him having a partner that was there no matter what. He then covered her ceremoniously with a white sheet.

As daylight came, he went to Miss Adams' room downstairs. She was already stirring and he called her name.

She opened the door immediately and asked, "Is she comfortable, sir?"

Malcolm was teary-eyed and said, "She's gone."

## Life goes on

Ernest ran to pick up the bat. Flossie was showing him how to play cricket, but first, he needed to learn how to whack the ball. She was the bowler and he had no pads, so she was being gentle with him. He took a swing and missed but the ball hit him in the leg.

Flossie said, "That would have hit the wicket."

Ernest started laughing. "So, what would have happened if you hit the wicket?"

"You would be out," she said.

They had been going at it all morning and Ernest was starting to get the hang of it. Flossie wound up for another delivery and "Whack!" Ernest got hold of it and sent the ball across the street.

Flossie said, "Good hit, Ernest! Let's get something to eat."

Miss Adams was way ahead of them and had sandwiches waiting on the table. Ernest was still drinking apple juice but Flossie was 13 now and wanted tea.

The children had been through a lot, she thought. It had been almost two years since their mother had died. Life seemed to be getting back to normal and Mr Woodward had settled into his routine as well. He couldn't help that he had to be on the road in his business, but he tried to be home by Thursday night so he could spend more time with his children. It was coming up on Christmas again and she hoped this year wouldn't be as somber as the last two were. Ruby hadn't been gone that long it seemed, and

the day-to-day routine for the children went quite smoothly. It was the holidays, and special events seemed to stir up old memories, especially for Ernest. He had a picture of his mother on his dresser with a candle next to it. She could tell when he was going through it, because she could smell the candle when he lit it for his mama.

Malcolm had his assistant get some tickets for him to attend a cricket match with his children. Ernest was getting good at hitting the ball and catching it in the field, and had made a few attempts at bowling. Malcolm had played cricket when he was younger and was able to help his youngster in all phases of the game. He hadn't hit a ball in 20 years and surprised himself how he could still direct the ball.

Flossie and Ernest were beyond excited about getting to go with their dad to a cricket match. Malcolm explained things to them throughout the match. Ernest wanted to know how they could run that fast and his dad explained the conditioning that it takes to compete at that level. He also explained the focus that it takes to win; that you had to be in the match and watching every move to know your next move. It was good for father and children to spend this kind of time together. Malcolm could see that the three of them were bound more closely together since they lost their mother. He missed his true love, but as time heals, life goes on. The funeral for Ruby helped each of them put closure to the long illness. It was best to have kept Ruby at home around the people she loved and not shut in a hospital room. Her last moments were spent in her own surroundings with the man that she loved.

The next few years seemed to fly by. Malcolm was able to take the children on holiday a couple of times. They loved train journeys and Ernest wanted to work for his dad someday, because he got to travel a lot by train.

On one such trip to Ireland, they got to stay by the sea and the children brought sea shells home in boxes. That was Flossie's idea of travel. She was a true romantic and loved to sit by the sea in the evening and look up at the sky. She often wondered where her life would take her.



## Back to business

Malcolm had one more stop to make in Edinburgh. This was a customer who had used his shipping services before, so it was good to reconnect with him. Dimitri's office was close to the front of his building, so he was quick to greet Malcolm and they met in his conference room. He had a new client in Portugal and was familiar with Malcolm's shipping routes that would fit his needs. While they were talking, one of his office staff came in with a bottle of whisky.

Dimitri said, "What are you doing, Catherine? It's a little early for that!"

She said, "This just came for you from the new vendor you talked to. He wants you to sell it, not drink it."

Malcolm got a kick out of this lady's air of confidence. She was tall and had an unusual look for an office worker.

Dimitri remembered his manners and said, "I'm sorry, Malcolm. This is Catherine, my new assistant."

Malcolm stood up and acknowledged her with a smile.

Later, he told Dimitri that she reminded him of a curator of a museum he and Ruby had encountered in London.

Dimitri laughed and said, "There's no doubt in my mind she could do that. She knows a lot about art and as you can see, she's not bashful."

Malcolm thought about her on the way back to London. Yes, he was a widower but hardly a middle-aged man. No, he couldn't entertain the idea of meeting someone. He had children to raise on top of his busy traveling schedule.

One morning at his office, Malcolm's assistant brought in a letter addressed to him from Scotland. He knew it wasn't from a customer because the stationery and handwriting was feminine. Bea, his assistant, was curious as well, but politely left the room. Malcolm hesitated to open it at first. The postmark was from Edinburgh and his excitement began to build. There was only one female he thought it might be from, and he had only briefly met her. He picked up his letter opener and fumbled around getting to a single piece of stationery. He pulled it out and looked at the bottom first and there it was — signed "Catherine".

He stood up by his window to hold it in the light and started to read it.

Dear Mr Woodward,

I enjoyed meeting you at Dimitri's office and later heard of your misfortune. I felt compelled to offer my sympathies because I have lost my spouse and know a little of what you're going through. Please don't think I'm being too forward by mentioning it; when you're back in Edinburgh, maybe we could get together and chat. I have children too, and sometimes it can be overwhelming to feel like you fit in anywhere.'

Sincerely,  
Catherine

Malcolm was taken aback by the timing of this surprise. She had certainly made an impression on him that day. He had thought about it from time to time, and was curious about her. It wasn't in his nature to expect to hear from a lady first. In his day, the man offered the first effort, but it seemed fine. Dimitri had let him know she was the assertive type and he was enamored that he was holding this letter.

He penned a note back to her that the next time he called on Dimitri, he would let her know in advance and it would probably be best to keep this between them.

## Stepping forward

Flossie's Aunt Edna was taking her to the dressmaker to be fitted for an evening gown. She was 17 and attended an independent school. Their spring formal was coming up and Aunt Edna had taken over from Ruby in such matters. Flossie was going to be escorted by a young man a year ahead of her at their school.

Malcolm was thinking, "This is happening rather fast for my little girl." Ernest wanted to know if she knew how to dance. She explained they have a dance class at school but she had never danced with a boy before. She chided Ernest a bit. Would he like to dance with her so she could get used to it? Of course, he left the room and there would be none of that.

Miss Adams had everyone come to the bottom of the stairs. Flossie was going to model her new dress and needed the practice. What a picture she was. Miss Adams had fixed her hair and she had make-up on. Her dress was a pale yellow with ruffles everywhere. Her shoulders were just covered with an open neck. There was just enough room for a small pendant and Miss Adams had found the perfect piece for the occasion. It was a golden amber pendant from Ruby's jewelry case.

Ernest was standing back in awe. He was suddenly seeing his sister as a mature young woman. His father was fighting back the tears. She was certainly the image of her mother before her.

Ernest finally managed a "You look pretty, Flossie." She smiled and said, "Thank you, little brother."

The big day came and Flossie was nervous. The snap on her new purse was sticking and Ernest showed how handy he was by fixing it with a pair of pliers. He was proud to help his sister. He felt like he was being left behind somehow. Flossie was growing up fast and he was just 11. His dad told him, “She’s got seven years on you, boy. Wait until you’re 17 and see how fast things change.”

The door chimes sounded and her escort had arrived. His name was Robert Brown and he looked very dashing in his formal suit. Flossie didn’t know him very well — the headmaster’s social committee paired up all of the escorts. Robert had arrived in his family’s carriage. When he brought Flossie down the porch stairs, Mr Brown was waiting for them at the curb and it was easy to see he was proud of his son. Malcolm came out to say “Hello” and chatted for a minute, and off they went like Cinderella in a coach.

As they neared the school’s auditorium, they could hear music playing and there were lots of people around the entrance. Several carriages were ahead of them and Flossie was glad to have a minute to compose herself. All of a sudden, she felt like she had grown up a little hastily. But soon she saw somebody she knew and it was time to act the part. Robert was a real gentleman helping her step down from the carriage and touched her arm with his elbow and she latched on. They made a pretty sight walking up the stairs. Mr Brown parked the carriage and joined the other parents in the lobby. They could watch the children but weren’t allowed on the dance floor.

The school had a short program for them. They were announced as they entered the auditorium and seated at tea tables around the edge of the dance floor. Girls served refreshments and busied themselves around the tables. A group of theater musicians provided the music. It was an exciting time for the students and parents alike. The parents were getting to observe their children on their best behavior and the students were excited to be on a date.

As the music started, one of the staff welcomed them on the dance floor and the fun began. The boys were being gentlemen, pulling the chairs out for their dance partners, and the girls were walking very carefully in heels and had big smiles on their faces. The music pieces were ballads to start out with and then they picked up the rhythm. Towards the middle of the program, two large carts of cake and ice cream made their way around the tables. The mood lightened considerably and the dancers became children again. This was fun. Soon a voice announced a free dance — the students could ask someone else to dance. Robert, being very dashing, excused himself and walked to the other side of the floor to ask one of his classmates to dance. At first, Flossie felt like she stuck out like a sore thumb being by herself. She didn't know anyone she wanted to dance with, much less to get up and walk by herself as if to be wandering around looking for someone to ask.

Someone touched her shoulder. It startled her at first and she looked up and saw this very handsome young man looking at her.

He said, "Would you like to dance? I noticed you sitting by yourself and realized I wasn't the only one whose date left them."

Flossie couldn't help but smile at him. What a unique way to be asked to dance! This fellow was tall with curly, light-brown hair. His eyes smiled for him and they were dark blue.

She forgot all about Robert and said, "Certainly, I'd like to dance with you. He pulled her chair out, stuck out his elbow, and to the floor they went.

He said, "My name's Tad. What's yours?"

She grinned at him and said, "I'm Flossie Woodward and you are a good dancer."

Soon they were dancing like there was no one else on the dance floor. Suddenly, she realized they had danced a couple of songs and she looked for Robert. He was sitting at the table by himself looking at them.

She said, “Tad, you better take me back to my table. My date has been sitting there for a while.”

He escorted her back right away and thanked her for the dance. Robert was very polite about sitting by himself for two songs.

Flossie took his hand and said, “Dance with me, Robert,” and he jumped at the chance.

The evening had been much better than she thought it would be. When she got home that night, she was still having a good time. This grown-up stuff was quite exciting. She told her dad all about the dance and that she had met this other young man who was very nice. He was proud of her.

As she prepared for bed, she wondered what had happened to Tad. She didn’t get his last name and looked all over for him while trying not to be too obvious.

## Edinburgh calling

Malcolm was trying to think of an excuse to go back to see Dimitri and knew it had to be worthwhile to his client. He was a good businessman and as friendly as their relationship was, time was money to Dimitri. He hesitated to do anything for a few days and then he got a message from Dimitri to schedule a trip there soon. The bottle of whisky that they had a good laugh about was turning into a serious business opportunity. He had interest in Central Europe to move the product there and wanted to hammer out the logistics of supplying them. Malcolm sent back a date he could make it and wrote a quick note to Catherine that he would be at Dimitri's then.

He had Miss Adams spruce up a couple of suits to take on the trip. He had been thinking a lot about what he would say to Catherine given the opportunity to express himself. Edinburgh was a long way away to court someone, if indeed it got to that level. He decided to treat it for what it was; two people who had lost their spouses getting together for a chat; no harm — no foul.

He packed some shipping routes he had used in the past and would probably have to make a trip to that area to firm up commitments. He got into Edinburgh early, and met Dimitri at the local hotel. The food was good there and it was a great place for conversation. Their meeting lasted a couple of hours and they headed over to the office. Malcolm was watching for Catherine and a little nervous about the situation. He decided that if anything did

come of this secret meeting with Catherine, he would level with Dimitri what his intentions were.

When they passed the conference room, he saw Catherine putting some literature together on the table. She hadn't seen him and he walked on with Dimitri to his office.

Dimitri's vendor was meeting them in the morning with more samples and literature. He was going through the legalities of getting his products to Central Europe. This was an area Malcolm was good at dealing with and could open doors for this vendor that would save a lot of time and expense for him.

As he walked back to get his briefcase Catherine stepped out of her doorway and said, "Hello". As they shook hands, he felt a piece of paper she placed in his hand and slipped it into his pocket. He couldn't wait to get back to the hotel and see what was going on. When he could look at the paper, she had written down the name of a small restaurant with "7 o'clock" next to it.

The restaurant was on the quiet side of town. Malcolm's heart was beating fast as he got closer to the door. He looked through the window to see if he could see where she was sitting. No luck, the booths had high partitions. He grinned and said to himself, "This is private." The receptionist asked him if he was meeting someone.

He answered, "Yes. A lady called Catherine. Is she here?"

"I'll take you to her table." she replied.

Catherine looked elegant. She had on nice jewelry and a pretty dress. They looked at each other and Malcolm noticed she looked a little nervous too. He asked if she would like a drink; that he could use one.

She laughed and said, "So could I."

As the conversation went from their work to their children, the mood lightened and Malcolm nodded to their attendant that another round would be in order. This was turning into a delightful evening for both of them. He was surprised to hear she had five children. She certainly didn't look it. As the evening wore on, and they discussed life beyond losing their spouses, he felt sorry for her



being left with five children to raise by herself. He felt overwhelmed from time to time raising two without a partner.

She asked how his wife died and he said one word — “Pneumonia.”

Malcolm returned the question and she said three words — “He hanged himself.”

He didn’t see that coming. “What on earth for?” he thought. “Here sits a beautiful woman, so classy and sure of herself. Why?”

She explained he was a drinker and for the most part did it to himself. She had tried to keep him on the straight and narrow, but it just wasn’t in the stars.

They enjoyed a nice dinner together and he asked if he could see her home as it was getting late. She just lived a short distance from the restaurant and it made a nice walk for them. She pointed out her house. They sat on the porch for a moment and she asked if it was a good idea to meet like that.

He said without hesitation, “Yes, you were right. It was good to talk with someone in the same situation. I feel like I matter.”

As they stood up, she said, “Well, you matter to me, Malcolm.”

With that, she grabbed his lapel and kissed him softly.

She said, “Thank you for a nice evening.”

As Malcolm walked back to the hotel, his heart was beating fast. He was both elated and confused. He was elated because this beautiful woman stirred up his emotions by kissing him. He hadn’t felt the need for compassion like that in several years. He felt confused because her husband had committed suicide and left her with children to raise, and yet she had set up this ‘chat’ — and then kissed him. But he felt good about it. Maybe her being assertive wasn’t so bad.

The meeting with Dimitri’s vendor was going well. He knew how to market whisky. He had connections in Bohemia and Poland and of course wanted to make the most of expanding into the neighboring countries. Malcolm was able to give him good advice and they made initial agreements to get started. Malcolm would set up things there and the vendor and Dimitri would get their houses in order.

Catherine came into the room with a file for Dimitri and he introduced her to his vendor and Malcolm said, "Hello". She looked strange to him, almost indifferent. He thought she was probably trying to avoid letting on that they had had dinner the previous night.

When he checked out of his hotel, the clerk handed him an envelope and he recognized the handwriting right away. He was relieved to have it in his hand. Things must be fine.

He boarded the train for home and quickly found a window seat. He couldn't wait to read the letter. He felt like a boy again with just the thought of romance. There was something about this lady that intrigued him. She didn't seem exactly mysterious; she was just a different breed of female that he'd never encountered. The letter smelled of perfume, the same perfume he'd smelled the previous night when she grabbed his lapel. She was certainly hitting the high notes with him. He kept trying to justify the feeling that was welling up inside him without acting like he was still in his teens. He started reading the letter and it put him a little more at ease.

Dearest Malcolm,

Again, thank you for a wonderful evening last night. I haven't felt like that in a long time. I felt free, like someone understood who I was, and actually cared. Please forgive my Goodbye on the porch. It just came out. I felt like I had known you forever and my feelings got away from me. I felt a closeness to you and I could tell you felt the same. You are a kindred spirit.

Given that our situations are similar, we have a lot in common. No one knows what the future holds, but if there's a place for feelings such as ours, where do we go from here? Maybe we could meet somewhere for a couple of days halfway between us. The distance from our homes to each other creates an obstacle of time spent traveling.

Fondly,  
Catherine

He held the letter in his hand and read it over several more times. She made it so easy for him to feel this way. As the train rambled on he began to put scenarios together for them. They could meet somewhere on the coast and rent a small cottage for a couple of days. It would give them a chance to see if these early emotions might be real; and if they were real, what the next step could be.

He knew neither of them were children anymore. This wasn't their first time in love, so it needn't be so formal a process. What if they decided it's a go? What would they do with all those children? He had so much at stake with his business and his family that moving away was out of the question. If anybody picked up and moved, it would have to be Catherine and that might not be so bad. He needed someone at the house who could handle things and there was no doubt that this girl could handle about anything.

"Dimitri was right. She is assertive," he mused.

And there was Flossie, who would soon be going away to school, and Ernest, who still had a way to go in school. Maybe having her children there would be good for Ernest; to have something in common with children about his age. Catherine wouldn't have to work. She would have enough to do running the house and being mother to Flossie and Ernest too.

He had it all worked out, but knew there were a lot of unknowns and a lot of people who had to buy into it. Maybe they had just better find a place to meet and go from there. He needed to think on this and work it out.



## Flossie grows up

Summer was coming and Flossie was going to go to work for her dad two days a week. He wanted her to learn accounting. She had helped her Aunt Edna at her china shop the previous summer and Edna wanted her to come in on Saturdays during the summer, because that was her busiest day of the week and Flossie was good with customers. Malcolm was glad to see his daughter's willingness to help out and learn to be productive.

Flossie was glad to get out of the house and have something to do. Sitting around wasn't her idea of having fun. She asked her dad if Ernest could come to the warehouse at least one day a week. He was a big boy and could help the men do things. Malcolm liked the idea and so did Ernest. He just wanted to know when you get to ride the train.

Flossie still thought about the night at the spring formal. She wasn't thinking about Robert. She was thinking about Tad, the good dancer and the one she really liked. She had asked all around school if anyone knew him, and he seemed like a ghost. No one could place him or knew anyone by that name. He soon became a fond memory and she was working now. She had things to do and be responsible for.

One day at the house, the postman knocked on the door. Flossie had known him since she was little and he called her by name.

He said, “Flossie, I believe this is for you,” and he handed her a brown envelope with her name on it.

It was addressed to “Miss Flossie Woodward, somewhere in London, England. I hope this finds you.”

The postman laughed and said, “I think you have a suitor, young lady.”

She knew who had sent this; it had to be Tad. She ran up the stairs to her room and jumped on the bed to open it. What a mystery!

Dear Flossie,

I hope you are reading this now. I tried to find out where you lived before I left with my family for Ireland. My dad got transferred and we moved three days after the spring formal. I had the best time of my life dancing with you. I didn’t want it to stop and I didn’t get a chance to talk to you again — your date was enjoying your company also. Please write to me, if you can, to the address below.

I hope someday I’ll get to see you again.

Tad

Flossie breathed a sigh of relief. She had had the best time of her life as well. She sat down at her desk and wrote him a note acknowledging how much she enjoyed dancing with him, and was sure to include her address. She added a P.S. “Maybe we could be pen pals.” It was good to know what had happened.

## A cottage by the sea

Malcolm had been contemplating ‘that next step’ for a couple of weeks. He finally sat down and wrote Catherine a letter to offer a weekend on the coast. He knew of an area that had cottages within a stone’s throw of the water and if they did this on a weekend, no one would be the wiser. He gave a date that he could do two weeks from then, and sent it off.

He heard back in a few days that she could make it work. He let the family know he would be on the road that weekend.

Malcolm left a day early to get the place ready for company. He picked out the cottage that was closest to the water. Then he bought some wine, cheese, apples and knickknacks. He put on a bathing suit he hadn’t worn in years and found it to be a bit snug. A long walk along the shore put his mind at ease about this rendezvous. It still boiled down to a male and a female sharing common ground for the possibility of a future together. It helped a lot that they both had marriage experience.

Catherine arrived mid-morning and he carried in a heavy suitcase for her. They sat on the back patio and shared a bottle of wine and light conversation. The water was still and it made for a tranquil mood.

He told her that Flossie and Ernest would be working in the business part-time for the summer. She shared that her son, Charles, would be helping Dimitri in the warehouse and that her two oldest girls were becoming young ladies and were experts at knowing everything. Her twin girls liked to bake and mess up the kitchen.

Catherine studied Malcolm as he skipped some stones on the water. He seemed like he was feeling younger and invigorated. He had a certain boyish look when he walked toward her. She asked Malcolm if he'd like to go swimming and he headed for the water to give her a little privacy to change.

He watched her come out on the patio and took a deep breath. She was beautiful all over. She walked to the water, splashed right past him and took a dive. No prompting needed, Malcolm followed her in and they came up for air together. Catherine moved toward him and hugged him gently. He pulled her to him and kissed her with meaning. They both dropped any formal protocol and the domino effect took over.

Soon both were gasping for air and Catherine offered, "It's getting cold out here. Why don't we go inside?"

Later that night, he built a little fire on the beach and they wrapped up in blankets and listened to the waves lapping the shore. They had made it past any inhibitions and were totally at ease with each other. She moved closer to him by the fire and the intimacy continued. Neither felt like talking about their possible future together. They were enjoying this interlude for what it was at this point.

Saturday morning came and they were both famished. Malcolm held her hand as they took a short walk to the local restaurant. They were two needy souls on a short holiday with no current memory of their past. No one else mattered at this juncture. Malcolm began thinking about their original purpose for getting together away from everything. So far, he knew the love-making compatibility was a match.

That afternoon, he brought up the subject of making a go of it together.

He started with, "This has truly been the highlight of my year, Catherine. Getting together like this makes me think that having a



partner would be much better than trying to go it alone with two children.”

Catherine was all ears.

She replied, “Or with five children.”

They got a laugh out of that.

He continued, “Let’s say we get together like this a few times over the next six months and decide if we want to go for it, and get married. How would we work out the logistics? My base of operations is London. I couldn’t pick up and leave to move in with you. It would create chaos for my business. On the other hand, I have this big house that could accommodate us all. How would you feel about relocating to London?”

Catherine replied, “So, I’m the one who has to move out of my little two-bedroom house with my five children, and move in to your nice big house in London? I think I would feel pretty good about that, Malcolm! And it wouldn’t take me six months to figure that out.”

They both convulsed with laughter.



# Central Europe

Malcolm was on his way to Bohemia and had plenty of time to do some reflecting and planning on the train. He was making the trip in preparation for launching Dimitri's whisky enterprise. If he had smooth sailing with the Czechs, Poland would be no problem at all. They had similar protocols for importing alcohol. He had his briefcase spread out on a table in the dining car, and opened the all-too-familiar envelope sticking out of a pocket.

Dearest Malcolm,  
Please forgive my "Goodbye" on the porch last night.

He smiled and thought, "Forgive you? How about letting me thank you?" He kept trying to tell himself he really was half a step away from saying he loved her... not just because she was a goddess in the clutches, but that her whole package was captivating. He thought through every possible scenario, all the pros and cons, and so far it was all pros. He was sure the children would be as happy as he was, and that their big house would have some life to it. A stepbrother and four stepsisters would make it a nice family atmosphere. Catherine could take care of managing the house.

That left Dimitri to deal with. He had to level with him soon. He thought the next time he went back to Scotland, he would go ahead and get Catherine a nice engagement ring if all seemed right for both of them. Then that might be the time to talk to Dimitri.

He was sure they would marry in London — not a big wedding like his and Ruby’s, but a few close friends and family to be proper.

He had just left that morning and was going to miss Ernest’s first day helping out at the warehouse. Flossie was going with him, so he was in good hands.

Dimitri was entrenched in a new wave of business and there was no turning back. His years of delivering products to the open market were paying off. He couldn’t wait for Malcolm to get back with some good news from his new contacts in Central Europe. Malcolm always came through no matter what and this would be no exception.

Catherine was changing in her demeanor right in front of his eyes. She had a silliness about her, maybe even a frivolous attitude. She did the work but didn’t seem as edgy as usual. Having five children depending on you and no husband had to be tough. He figured she could be a handful to be married to because of her take-charge attitude. It still takes two to make a marriage work, and hers turned out to be a disaster with her husband committing suicide. Happy is better than moping around because your husband checked out. He overheard one of the secretaries say, “Whoever made her this happy better watch out. She likes being bitchy.” Dimitri decided to leave it alone.

Malcolm wrote a letter to Catherine when he got back. He was scheduling a trip to Dimitri’s right away to give him the good news, and had room on his schedule to stay through Saturday to see her. He figured Friday would be a good day to tell him what was going on.

When he got back to his office, Malcolm heard all the good reports on Flossie and Ernest helping out with the business. He expected to hear accolades on Flossie but wasn’t sure what he would hear about Ernest. He was still a boy. Well, the boy produced

and helped with everything he was asked to do. He did like to stop and drink a soda here and there when he saw where the men kept them in the kitchen.

Malcolm left that Thursday afternoon for Scotland. He had a nice presentation to make to Dimitri and his vendor. There would be more room for additional products once they got started.

When he got to his hotel, he saw a familiar figure waiting inside. He stopped in his tracks and muttered to himself, “How did she know when I would be here?”

Catherine had on a black dress and looked gorgeous. She stood up when he came to her and it was then that he lost perspective.

He just gave her a big hug and asked, “How did you know I would be here now?”

She gave him a wink and a small giggle and said, “They print your train’s arrival time on the schedule at the train station. I just knew you would be on it.”

Malcolm sat with her in the lobby and talked for a bit. He asked if she still felt the same about their relationship and did she need the six months to think about it.

She laughed and said absolutely not. Then he told her his plan for Saturday to buy her the engagement ring.

She was elated and quickly composed herself, always ready with a wise crack and said, “Why, Malcolm, I don’t recall having seen you on bended knee yet.”

He said, “I was saving that for tonight, my dear.”

“You mean right here?” she queried.

He said, “No, I mean right upstairs in my room.”

Malcolm went to the office and laid out the good news for the two men. It had been a long process up to now and the news of a go signal put everyone at ease. He had not seen Catherine all morning and figured she was being scarce so she wouldn’t give anything away about them.

After lunch, the vendor left and Malcolm asked Dimitri if he had time to stop by the hotel for a drink and he said, “I could use a drink to celebrate the win today.”

They met in the bar and after a bit Malcolm told him, “I asked you here to discuss something serious and thought this would be the best time. I didn’t mean to have this happen, but it did. I’ve been communicating with Catherine for a couple of months and spent last weekend on the coast with her. Things are getting serious.”

Dimitri looked shocked.

He said, “I had no idea my friend. I have noticed she was unusually happy this week, almost giddy. Well, how serious is it, Malcolm?”

“I’m buying the ring tomorrow, Dimitri. All the pieces in the puzzle are starting to fit. Since Ruby died, I have been a lost soul. The children need some order in their lives. I’m good at taking them to a cricket game once in a while, but I’m without that homemaker touch. Miss Adams has been with us forever, but she’s getting on in years.”

Dimitri ordered another drink and said, “So, you need someone to run the house, and Catherine can definitely run things. I’m sure you’re going to take my assistant, aren’t you?”

“Yes, and I’m sorry about that. Things just started working out. I hope you understand.”

“I’m afraid I do understand Malcolm. I understand the law of attraction, but be careful, pal. I hope you guys give it plenty of time to get to know each other. I wish you the best.”

Malcolm appreciated Dimitri’s reservations. He was just trying to watch out for him.

Catherine met Malcolm in the hotel bar at about 6, and they put the week behind them. She was dressed to go out and he wanted to stop by the room to get a jacket. Of course, they ended up ordering room service and the momentum continued. Malcolm felt like he

was in Heaven and popped the question on bended knee. There were no wise cracks or any argument.

Saturday morning was exciting for the couple. They had a quick breakfast and headed out to find an engagement ring for the lady. Catherine was very stylish trying on rings. She looked like nice jewelry belonged on her. The third store they visited had the one she liked — a large diamond with little diamonds circling it with a delicate band. She held her hand up for him to see and he kissed the diamonds. They were officially a couple.





## The announcement

When he came home, he noticed Flossie and Ernest in the side yard playing cricket. Ernest saw him first and came running with Flossie right behind him. Ernest was the bowler and had to show his dad how he could make the ball bounce before it got to Flossie. He wound up for the perfect pitch and fired it right at her. Flossie stood her ground and batted it to the side fence which scored four runs on their makeshift cricket field. Miss Adams was sitting on the side porch and started clapping.

Ernest looked at his dad and said, “She’s always on Flossie’s side.”

Malcolm had a big laugh and looked at his little group that had been holding down the fort while he was gone. The children looked so innocent and wide-eyed. They had a protected childhood and it was refreshing to see their openness. Miss Adams was getting old all of a sudden. She had been loyal to the family since the time Flossie was a little girl and deserved a quiet setting at this stage of her life. Keeping up with these children had to wear her out. He tried to imagine Catherine on the porch watching this, and told himself, “No. She wouldn’t be watching. She’d be hitting the ball.”

He was trying to find the right time to bridge the “I’m going to move six people into our house” subject and knew it would probably take having dinner at the inn, their favorite place to eat, to test the waters.

The children went inside and Malcolm took a seat next to Miss Adams. She was a sweet soul and didn't have a mean bone in her body.

She started the conversation with, "Sir, you look very happy today. Business must be good."

He laughed and said, "Business is very good, Miss Adams. I've been in Central Europe tying down a deal that is working out better than I expected. But thank you for noticing. It's getting busier out there and I probably need to start looking for someone I can train and let him take part of the traveling burden off me."

He thought this was a good time to test the water with her about his pending marital change.

He said, "You know, Miss Adams, Ruby's been gone a fair amount of time and I'm still a young man."

Miss Adams interrupted Malcolm with, "Sir, you have found someone! I knew it when I saw you greeting the children, and I'm so happy for you. You need a partner."

Malcolm thought, "Well, glory be! Miss Adams is very observant."

He took her hand and squeezed it. "Thank you, my loyal housekeeper, for your support. This means everything to me."

She went on, "I hope she knows what a good heart you have, young man."

Malcolm grinned. She had a way with words.

That night, at the inn, Flossie broke the ice by saying, "We're usually celebrating something when we eat here, Dad. What's the occasion?"

Malcolm thought, "What is it with these women? Are they all clairvoyant?"

He said, "Good question, honey. I was going to wait until dessert got here to talk about this, but I'll tell you now. I have met someone that I'm very fond of and would like you to meet her soon. I met her at Dimitri's office in Scotland. We're about the same age and she is fun to be around."

Ernest asked if she could play cricket.

“I would bet on it, Ernest. She’s very athletic. I know she’s a good swimmer.”

Flossie was taking all of this in and she asked, “Is she going to move here?”

Malcolm answered, “Yes, it looks that way.”

Flossie went on, “I mean move here to our house.”

Malcolm was trying not to let this get out of hand, but since Flossie was wanting to get to the bottom of it, he thought it best to go ahead and level with them.

“Yes, to our house. I plan to marry her. Your dear mother has been gone for a long time and we had hoped to grow old together; to be there for each other. As you get older, your interest turns more to companionship. You two have all the energy in the world. You can play cricket all afternoon and then go to dinner and still have to be told to go to bed. Later in life, sitting on the porch with your mate is great entertainment.”

Flossie said, “I’m sure that if you’re the same age, she must have children as well. They’re moving here also?”

Malcolm thought, “This girl of mine is way too smart. I feel like I’m on trial here.”

“Yes, in due time, my love. We’re still in the planning stages, so give me a little room to weigh all of this.”

Flossie’s lower lip started to pout like she did on occasion as a child. He knew this was going quite fast for her and he would have to step carefully to make it work for everybody.

Ernest seemed like he understood but only had one question, “Does she have any boys?”

Malcolm smiled and said she has one boy. “His name is Charles and he’s very close to your age. Maybe you can teach him to play cricket.”

Ernest liked that.

Flossie, on the other hand, still had a clouded look on her face. He knew the next question from her would be “Does she have a girl?”

Flossie looked Malcolm right in the eye and asked, “How many girls does she have?”

Malcolm thought, “I need to send her to study law, not arts.”

He gathered himself and said, “She has one set of twins and two older girls that are younger than you, Flossie.”

He noticed a note of accord with his daughter and figured she didn’t want any one older than her to be taking her position that was next to him.

Ice cream and berry pie made it to the table in perfect time. It was their favorite and they dug in. He dug in himself. It was his favorite also, but he was digging in as part of his private celebration. He had put all of the information out there, and no one had left the table. Step 1 was done.

# Toe in the water

Catherine was getting ready for her trial run in London. The question was whether she should bring a couple of her children with her. Her choice would be Charles and Brenda. They had the most mature manner of her brood. Malcolm's vote was to bring them, because he thought his children would have a chance to interact with them and probably help the process be more open. She decided to bring them at the last minute, and the visit was on.

They were arriving on Saturday morning, and Miss Adams was cooking up a big roast for dinner. The house smelled good, and it made Malcolm hungry just walking through it. Flossie and Ernest had made lines in the side yard with ground-up chalk for their impressive cricket field. Miss Adams helped them grind the chalk with the meat grinder from the kitchen. Malcolm made them a better set of wickets for the bowler to aim at.

They arrived mid-morning and both sets of children were excited. Ernest had brought some sodas home from the men's kitchen at the warehouse. They gathered at the side porch where Miss Adams had prepared some pastries. First, Malcolm introduced Catherine to his children and then she introduced Malcolm to hers. After the children had been introduced to each other, they migrated to the wickets and hung out while Flossie explained cricket to them.

Flossie bowled to Charles and Brenda while Ernest coached them how to hit the ball. The children seemed quite comfortable

with each other. All were on their best behavior. Catherine's team got a couple of good shots right away and everyone clapped — Miss Adams especially; she was a real cricket fan.

After a bit, Flossie asked her dad and Catherine if they would give it a go and they jumped right up to participate. Catherine got into a batting position and Malcolm thought, "She's done this before" and "Whack!" — she sent the ball sailing over the hedges. There was much clapping. Now it was Malcolm's turn and he sent the ball scurrying toward the side line for a run. Everyone had a smile on their face and it was a good mix of excitement and friendliness.

Miss Adams had the dining room set up regally with the best china and silver from the shop of Aunt Edna, who was coming to eat with them. Ernest carried in the large roast for Miss Adams and Flossie poured the tea. When Aunt Edna was introduced, they all sat down.

Malcolm had a few short words to say. "This is truly a great occasion. To sit together with our two families, and enjoy each other's company, is very auspicious. Welcome to our home."

Everyone raised their glasses in a toast. Catherine thanked Malcolm and the children for opening their house to them.

Malcolm watched the children interact with each other and they seemed to be genuinely at ease. He had Miss Adams sit next to his sister because she kept Edna informed on how the children were doing. After dinner, they took a tour of the house and Catherine and the children were very impressed. Malcolm showed his rock collection to Catherine after the rest had gone downstairs. He had it in a top draw of his gentleman's dresser. He explained how his father had helped him get started collecting pretty stones on the shore of the Thames. He had over a hundred stones he had polished. He liked looking at them because they reminded him of his father.

Catherine got closer to him and gave him a little peck on the cheek. She had tears in her eyes. He asked if she was alright and she smiled.

“Your place is beautiful, Malcolm.”

Malcolm said, “Let’s make it *our* place.”

The weekend went well and the couple set a date to get married. The children were friends already and were included in the festivities.

The wedding was two months away and the real planning turned out to be getting Catherine and her children moved into the big house. Each set of Catherine’s girls would share a bedroom. Ernest’s room was at the top of the stairs next to where the twins, Audrey and Brenda would be. The master bedroom was at the end of the hall. The two older girls, Kate and Sylvia, had the one next to Flossie’s room and Charles’ room was across from the twins’ room.

The wedding would take place at St John’s Church, not far from the house. It would be a small wedding with 20 or so family members and close friends. The couple would honeymoon at the cottage by the sea as per Catherine’s wishes.

Over the next several weeks, Catherine brought all of her children to London three times. There seemed to be excitement on both sides of the aisle as the wedding date closed in on them. Two of Malcolm’s men took the train to Edinburgh and moved the things Catherine wanted to keep back to London.

Miss Adams worked with Catherine trying to get her and the children comfortable in their new surroundings. Catherine was excitable as the wedding date neared, and wanted things perfect. She went over the menu for the wedding dinner at the house and asked Miss Adams if she could handle that many people coming to eat. Miss Adams explained that the owner of the inn was a personal friend of Malcolm’s, and they always let them handle a big gathering like this.

Catherine responded quickly, “You’re going to have it catered?”

“Yes, ma’am. We always do if it’s a houseful.”

Catherine walked away and said, “That’s a bit lavish!”

Miss Adams was a little surprised by Catherine's seeming irritability and followed her into the dining room.

"Can I get you anything, ma'am?"

Catherine acquiesced and said, "I'm sorry, Miss Adams. I've just got a lot of pressure on me. Please don't mention this to Malcolm."

"Yes, ma'am," Miss Adams replied.

Malcolm had just returned from his office and sat down beside Miss Adams on the side porch, her favorite place to have a cup of tea in the afternoon. He asked how the move was going and she told him the men had just finished putting some things in the attic as there just wasn't enough room for in the girls' bedrooms. He asked if all this excitement was wearing her out.

She said, "No, I'm handling everything pretty well. Sir, I don't think you're going to need me here with your new wife taking over. I'm thinking about retiring someday and your fiancée seems very efficient the way she wants things done."

"She's very efficient and she's very assertive, Miss Adams. That's just her personality. Where would you go to retire?"

She said, "I would move to my older brother's house in Gloucester. He's getting on in years and has no children to help him. He's asked me a couple of times in his letters if I would like to move in with him."

Malcolm thought for a minute. He knew she would retire sometime, but just wondered if she would be of help to Catherine until she got settled.

Miss Adams interrupted his contemplating and offered, "Sir, this is my house to take care of. It's all I've known for almost 15 years. I don't think there's any room for me with Catherine running things. If you don't mind, I'll bow out when you get back from your honeymoon."

Malcolm was saddened. He and his children loved Miss Adams. He didn't want to see her go but understood that the one thing you can count on in life is that everything changes.



He said, “I respect your decision, Miss Adams. If you change your mind, just let me know.”

She said, “Thank you, sir. That means a lot to me.”

Malcolm continued checking himself; whether he was doing right by everyone involved — he hardly knew Catherine’s children — and whether it was good for his children.

He had attended a lecture from a couple who had spent a lot of time in Africa, photographing wild animals and studying the food chain. During the question and answer period, someone asked about a picture they had shown of a female lion in hot pursuit of a gazelle. The question was how you can stand by and watch a gazelle become the lion’s lunch without trying to interfere.

The speaker had replied, “You don’t interfere because it’s their science. One has to respect the natural order of the Serengeti. We’re in their home and biological laws are why nature is still there to study. It’s no different from a wildebeest giving birth to its young. The narrow window of time the young one has to get on its feet and run beside its mother to stay alive is their science. The herd is going to move.”

Malcolm knew that both sets of children had different backgrounds and their science is who they become, because of, or in spite of, their encounters with life.

He checked himself on Miss Adams’ grasp of why she couldn’t fit into this mix. Was it because she was just getting on in years, and didn’t have the patience to deal with a younger female like Catherine? Or did she pick up something that was a warning signal to her tenure here? He needed to talk to her some more, when the time was right.



## A child's view

Ernest was in his room putting his soldiers away — his dad's birthday present to him the previous year. It consisted of a complete battalion of Napoleon's infantry and he had them spread out on the window sills. Flossie had told him they were worth some money so he always put the cannons in the center because they looked like they cost more.

Catherine entered his room and looked around with her hands on her hips and said, "What are you doing, Ernest?"

He said, "I'm putting away my soldiers. My dad got them for my birthday last year."

She walked over to his dresser and asked, "What's all of this?"

He came over to show her his stuff and said, "Most of it is what he brings me when he has to travel for a long time. See my bull? His name is Diablo. This was from his last trip to Spain."

She said, "Well, you need to put all this stuff in a box. It makes your room look cluttered."

He said, "My dad likes to come in here and look at it with me. I don't think he would like it if he couldn't see all of my stuff."

She gave him a look and said, "You'll find that I like things neat and tidy."

He said, "Yes, ma'am."

Flossie and Miss Adams were putting away china from the previous night's dinner and talking about the signs at the park for

joining a local cricket team. They thought it would be a good chance for Ernest to get coached the right way. Miss Adams said maybe Charles would like to go too. Flossie thought that was a great idea and then they could practice together.

They heard something like a scuffle in the next room and listened. They could hear Catherine talk to Charles in a low scolding voice.

“You will do exactly as I say, Charles, or else! There will be no playing cricket today.”

They heard a faint, “Yes, ma’am.”

Miss Adams looked at Flossie and whispered, “I think Catherine will rule the roost, or else.”

Flossie tried to imagine this woman filling in for her dear mother and couldn’t see it. Miss Adams told her to watch out for Ernest; that Catherine seemed rather demanding.

Flossie was going into the office that day. Bea, her dad’s assistant, was going to let her balance the ledger that morning for training. She was looking forward to it; she was learning so much every time she went in. Her dad had an appointment that afternoon and wanted her to sit in and take notes; to be professional.

She decided to look the part and put on her mother’s pearl necklace. She had her jewelry cabinet in her room now and loved to try on different neck pieces and model them in front of the mirror. It made her feel like her mama would be proud.

She thought about the angry exchange that she and Miss Adams had witnessed and decided not to mention it to her dad. There was a lot going on at the house and she didn’t want to upset it. Her dad was trying to make a change for the better and deserved to have a partner in life. She was sure he missed taking their mother to dinner and the long conversations they had by the fireplace. She remembered her mother’s saying —“Everything happens for a reason and what will be will be”.

Ernest was in the yard playing the part of the bowler. He was throwing the ball trying to bounce it just before it hit the side of the garage. He was waiting for Charles to come out. His mother had him doing something and it was taking a long time.

Finally, he came out and Ernest tossed the bat to him and said, "Let's try a few."

Charles looked down and said, "I'm not allowed."

Ernest asked him, "Why not?"

He said, "I must have done something wrong."

"You don't know what you did wrong?"

Charles looked down again and said, "You don't know my mum."

Ernest was getting a glimpse of things to come and didn't understand it. He would ask Flossie about it when she got home that night.

Miss Adams was worried about how the children were going to adapt to this arrangement. They were her darlings and she didn't want to see them have to make room for this woman's attitude. They were good children, and with the exception of Ernest being somewhat spoiled, they were solid. After all, he was the younger, and given that his mother died when he was just 5, he had been the center of attention for a long time. His dad had always called him the 'master of the house' and, he was all of that.

Malcolm watched as Flossie walked into the office. What a pretty young lady! She had the necklace on that he had brought back from France for her mother. She also was wearing a little make-up. It took him back to younger days when her mother looked like that. He decided to have a cup of tea with her and pulled out two chairs from his table.

She gave him a hug and he asked, "How are things going at the house so far?"

She replied, "Good. I think we're all getting used to each other a little more every day."

That sounded good to him and he poured them some tea. It seemed like things were going to work out by the time they would be married. He was looking forward to getting settled in and having some order back in their lives.

Malcolm's appointment came in and Flossie got to sit up straight and take notes. The gentleman was in the import business and the meeting went well. He was somewhat taken with Flossie, and Malcolm was impressed with her demeanor as a businesswoman. She was polite and friendly to a point, but took copious notes for her father and left it at that.

That night, at dinner, Charles was quiet. Usually he and Ernest would be interacting with each other while they ate. Flossie picked up on it and decided she would talk to Ernest in private and find out what was going on.

Miss Adams slipped Malcolm a note and wanted to follow up on their conversation about her retirement when they could talk privately. He nodded to her that he would.

Catherine was as effervescent as ever, going on about how the girls were getting things put away and that their rooms were sparkling. She was going to take them to the park after dinner as a reward.

Malcolm found Miss Adams in her usual spot on the side porch.

He pulled up a chair and said, "Talk to me, Miss Adams. Tell me you're going to stay."

She looked at him and said, "I wish I could, sir. I'm still going to retire when you get back from your honeymoon. The reason I wanted to talk to you is my concern for the children. You and I have always been straight with each other. You've let me talk and go on about things when most employers would say, 'Put a lid on it'. So I have to shoot straight with you one more time."

Malcolm was very gracious and said, "Please go on, Miss Adams."

She continued, "Miss Catherine is a handful. She's not just assertive. She's very controlling; with me, with your children, and

with her own children. When you're around, everything is fine. When it's just her and me, she's very demeaning to me."

Malcolm said, "Please tell me how so."

She gave him the example of the guest list for the wedding dinner, and her reaction when she found out it would be catered by the inn; how she had said, "You're going to have it catered?"

"I told her we always have the inn handle things when we have a houseful."

Malcolm asked, "What did she say?"

She turned away and said, "That's a bit lavish!"

She recounted what she and Flossie heard when Catherine got on Charles' case; that she wasn't correcting him; that she was being mean to him. And she also noticed her coming out of Ernest's room when he was in there. Malcolm was trying to make reason of this conversation. He knew Catherine could take charge in a hurry but didn't think she would go as far as looking for control. He would talk to her when she got back from the park. He wanted to check on Ernest now.

Ernest was looking at some old coins he had brought back the previous week. Malcolm tapped his signal on the door frame.

Ernest said, "Hello, Dad" without looking up.

"Do you have a minute? I want to talk to you."

"Sure. Come on in."

Malcolm sat beside him on the bed.

"I understand Catherine came to see you today."

"Yes. She did. She thinks my room looks cluttered and that I would find out she likes things nice and neat. My soldiers, my bull, all the stuff you got me should be put in a box."

"What did you tell her?" Malcolm asked.

"I told her you like to bring me things to collect and that we look at them together. She wouldn't even look at the bull you got me for my birthday."

Malcolm said, “I will talk to her and find out what’s going on.”

“Tell me something, Ernest. Do you like her?”

Ernest wanted to protect his dad from her and he answered, “I’m trying to like her for you, Dad.”

Malcolm hugged him good night and said, “This will all work out, Ernest. You’ll see.”

His little pal said, “I’ll help you, Dad.”

Malcolm sat in his big chair in the study waiting for Catherine and the girls to get back from the park — dusk was setting in.

He heard them going up the stairs and poured himself a drink.

Soon Catherine came in and asked, “Can I have one of those?”

Malcolm poured her a glass.

“Well, we’re getting there,” Catherine said. “The girls are taking pride in their rooms and I’m working on Ernest to get him to be more proud of his room.”

Malcolm held up his hand and said, “Honey, let’s set up some parameters. You handle your children and I’ll handle mine. Then we can meet somewhere in the middle with our expectations of the household.”

Catherine took offense of this at first.

Malcolm held steady and continued, “Ernest loves his soldiers and his collection of artifacts I bring him from time to time. You can’t just expect him to pack it all away in a box. These things helped him fill a void from losing his mother. Let’s give our children a little freedom to be children through this transition. We’re all a little edgy with changing people and environments. It will work out easier if we don’t fight it.”

Catherine asked for another drink. Malcolm poured two.

“You’re right, Malcolm,” she said. “I get excited and just take over. I’ve been told that since I was young. I’ll keep it in check. I want this to work too.”

He was sure this would all settle down after the wedding.



# The wedding

Despite the stumbling blocks that surfaced from time to time, the planning for the event came together. Dresses for all the girls had been finished and the two young men had nice new suits to wear. Malcolm and Catherine were going to be elegant in their wedding attire.

They all did well at the rehearsal. Even though it wasn't going to be a large formal wedding, it was going to be a beautiful ceremony in the setting of this two hundred year old church.

The wedding day was sunny and the family and guests were ushered into the church. The architecture was very formal with high arches and ornate furnishings. Beautiful candelabras were lit on both sides of the podium. The organist played a selection from Bach.

The close friends were seated behind the immediate family in the center pews.

Flossie was watching the mood of the family and friends. It seemed to be somewhat apprehensive as they waited for the ceremony to start. She wondered what the future would hold for the children. She would be going away to school in another year and a half, and she worried about her little brother adjusting to sharing his house with five other children. And with what they had seen so far from Catherine's demeanor, would he be able to sustain his position in the house? He had been 'master of the house' for a long time.

The children from both sides had their best social faces on. Malcolm turned around and smiled at the boys behind him. He winked at the girls and they smiled and wiggled a little bit. His closest friend, Grisham, who had been his attorney for many years, gave him a thumbs-up.

The ceremony was proper and everyone got into the spirit of the event. After the ceremony, the bride and groom stood at the door and thanked everyone for coming. Their children were lined up beside them and were very gracious to all the guests. The livery stable had provided four carriages to ferry them all to the house for the wedding dinner.

Miss Adams greeted everyone as they came in. The caterers were busy finishing up details and the dining room took on a new look. A tall bartender was mixing drinks and the children had their own soda fountain with chocolate ice cream on the side.

The owner of the inn had furnished their pianist and he was playing softly in the background. Each of the children was enjoying the excitement and a unity could be felt amongst them.

Catherine was fitting the part, looking elegant and mixing with the guests. Malcolm was proud of what they brought to the table as a couple. They each had their good looks to be thankful for and they represented the seven beautiful children in the dining room that were acting so proper.

Malcolm sidled up to Miss Adams and thanked her for her efforts at managing things for this dinner. He told her he wanted to talk to her when they got back from their honeymoon and that he wanted to give her a retirement bonus for her loyalty to the family. She gave him a big hug and whispered to him. "She better appreciate you or I'll be back." He had a big smile on his face and knew they had been fortunate to have her. He didn't know how he was going to tell Flossie and Ernest about this, but it would have to wait until he got back.

## A letter from Ireland

Things had calmed down after the wedding. The staff from the Inn had outdone themselves setting up everything and then taking care of the massive clean-up afterwards. Malcolm settled up with the owner and gave envelopes to each of the staff with nice tips for their efforts.

Miss Adams appreciated the help cleaning up. She was starting to feel her age and couldn't spend all day putting things away. She thought it really was time to stand down from the rigors of running the house. She had written to her brother about her plans and he was excited she was going to join him. She thought, "Maybe things will work out here for all of them. I've done all I could do."

Flossie was hoping for the best as well. The wedding was a pivotal point for all of them. Since then, it was onward and upward; there was no turning back. Ernest had gone to her room the previous night and needed his big sister. The reality of the situation was sinking in for him. This neat and orderly woman was just down the hall from him.

He asked Flossie, "What are we going to do if she gets mean with us? Dad can't be here all of the time. I can tell she doesn't care for me — it's the way she looks at me. I can't say anything to Dad because I told him I would try to like her and that I would help him. I don't think he knows how bad she is. Charles is very scared of his own mama."

Flossie put her arm around him and started weeping. She knew he had a line on Catherine. She also knew her dad was taken by this woman's charming looks. She felt sorry for him and wished she could say something to him but he had blinders on. She was going to try the best she could to watch out for Ernest, and teach him how to stay out of Catherine's way.

Monday came and with it came a letter from Ireland. Flossie could tell by the handwriting it was Tad. The newlyweds had left for their honeymoon and she was to help Miss Adams with all the children. She took a minute and sat on the side porch to read her letter.

Dear Flossie,

I'll be in London next week with my father, and I would like to see you, if that would be all right. We left some things in storage and I have to help pack them for shipping to Ireland.

I haven't stopped thinking about you since that night at the spring formal. Will you be going away to school after next year? My dad is checking some schools in London for me when we get there.

I hope we can stay in touch.

Tad

Flossie hustled upstairs to her desk and wrote back to this young gentleman.

Dear Tad,

I keep thinking about that last dance. Let's try and get together for a whole afternoon when you get here. My aunt has a china shop on the Strand and there is plenty to do in that area.

Looking forward to seeing you.

Flossie

As she mailed the letter, Flossie thought this was the best way to have some privacy. She didn't know what to expect when her father and Catherine got back. If he had to travel, she didn't want to deal with Catherine's scrutiny and she could just say she was helping Aunt Edna at her shop.



## The honeymoon is over

Miss Adams was sorting through some things in her closet that she wanted to throw out. Some of her clothes hadn't been worn in years. It was tough on her even to think of moving to her brother's, but she knew it was time to move on. She very much appreciated Malcolm's parting words that he wanted to talk to her when they got back from their honeymoon. It wasn't necessary for him to offer a retirement bonus for her loyalty to the family, but she liked that he appreciated her effort all these years.

She had a pendant from her grandmother that Flossie liked and it was going to be her parting gift to this wonderful child that just wanted to matter. And the little man, Ernest, was going to get her father's pocket knife. She had told Ernest how her father could peel a whole apple without stopping. Then he would dangle the entire skin on the fence by their goats and they would chew on it until it was all gone. Ernest was forever trying to master that, but he always ended up eating the rest of the skin with the apple.

Ernest and Charles were developing a friendship by hanging out during the day. They would play cricket with the girls, and Flossie would take them all to the park in the afternoons. Flossie liked the girls. The twins were always wanting to help, but usually helped make a mess for the most part. Kate and Sylvia were going to be pretty young ladies very soon and were no trouble at all. Kate was getting good at cricket (she was the older of the two).

The few days that the boys spent around the house were good for both of them. Ernest now had a friend that lived down the corridor and they would eat hotcakes with Flossie and Miss Adams in the morning and the younger girls would eat a little later.

One morning, Ernest asked Charles about his dad. It seemed like Charles had missed out on something. He liked to look at Ernest's stuff his father would bring him and ask questions about each piece and he loved to look at the soldiers on his window sill.

So he said to Charles, "Was your dad sick before he died like my mama?"

Charles said, "No. He killed himself."

This was over Ernest's head. He had never heard of someone taking his own life. "How could he do that?"

Charles opened up about it and Ernest got a look at the real world. Charles was the one that found him. He said his mum and dad fought a lot and his dad just checked out; he couldn't take it anymore.

Ernest thought about his dad and felt how lucky he was to have him. He hoped he hadn't made a mistake marrying Catherine. He talked to Flossie that night in her room and told her about his conversation with Charles. She was aghast. Her reaction made him more apprehensive and protective of the three of them. He wanted to talk to his dad about it, but was afraid he would have to deal with Catherine in the end. He knew if his dad said something to her, she would know where it came from and just make matters worse.

Miss Adams was packed with an old trunk and three big boxes. She left her door open and Ernest could see she was ready to move when he walked past her room next to the laundry room. He walked onto the side porch and there she was in her favorite spot watching the twins kick an old ball. He couldn't help but smile. How many times when he was just a little guy did he look up on the porch and she would wave to him?



He sat by her and said, “Miss Adams, what are all those boxes for in your room?”

She said, “I’m going to move to my brother’s house in Gloucester. I told your dad I would wait until they got back to leave. I didn’t want to leave you and Flossie alone.”

Ernest was just going through too many changes.

“Why are you moving? I thought you were always going to live with us.”

“It’s time for me to go, honey. There’s not enough room in the house for me and your father’s new wife.”

Ernest said, “I don’t think there’s enough room for anybody in this house but her, Miss Adams. She doesn’t like me — I know that much.”

Miss Adams tapped him on the arm and said, “Stay out of her way, my lad. She’ll come gunning for you.”

He asked would he see her again and she let him know she wasn’t going to disappear; that she was just going to her brother’s house.

He found his sister and told her what Miss Adams had said.

Flossie said, “I figured as much. I saw her bedroom door open with all her boxes packed and knew why she was moving too.”

The honeymooners returned with less pomp and circumstance than they had left with. Everyone came to the door to greet them and give them a hug. They looked tired and a little edgy. Malcolm carried a couple of things upstairs and moved their trunk to the laundry room. He saw Miss Adams’ door was open and knew she was moving on. He would spend some time with her later. He went to his office safe and got the envelope he had prepared for Miss Adams and put it in his pocket. He headed upstairs to check on his bride and found her looking out the window at the children playing.

Malcolm came over and hugged her around the shoulders and looked out the window with her.

“Is everything all right, honey?” he asked.

She answered, “Oh, yes. I was just thinking of all the things I have to do to get the children registered for school.”

He said, “I’ve got to stop by the office. I know things are piling up for me. I’m going to spend a little time with Miss Adams before I go.”

Catherine turned around and looked at him and asked, “Why do you need to spend time with her? She’s going to retire now and live with her brother.”

“I want to give her a little retirement bonus because she has been loyal to our family for 15 years.”

Catherine asked him, “Well, how much are you going to give her, Malcolm?”

He answered, “It’s customary to give a loyal housekeeper with a long tenure a tenth of her annual salary for each year of service.”

“My God, Malcolm! That is ridiculous! She is just a maid.”

He stepped back and gazed at her for a second. This was the third or fourth outburst this past week and it was getting old.

“Honey, she was anything but a maid. She helped me raise the children after Ruby died. Anyhow, I’m sorry I brought it up. I should be back about 6. Why don’t you lie down for a while?”

As he left, she let him know she was shutting the door.

Malcolm thought he would ask Dr Simmons if he could give her something to calm her down when she got like this.

He found Miss Adams and poured them both a spot of brandy. This had been their little treat together for years.

“I noticed you’re packed and ready to go, my friend. I trust the children and I will get to see you now and again.”

Miss Adams teared up a little and squeezed his hand. He called to Flossie and asked her to get Ernest and come in for a minute. They sat at his table and he formally announced to them that Miss Adams was retiring and going to share a house with her brother.

It was an emotional time for each of them. Malcolm gave her the envelope and said it was from the children, and from Ruby and him, for all her hard work.

“We love you.”

With that, the hugging started. Two of his men would be back from the warehouse with him to load up for Gloucester.

Catherine didn't bother coming downstairs when Malcolm came back with his men. They loaded Miss Adams' belongings and everyone said “Goodbye”.



## A beacon of light

Flossie was going through some big adult-like changes in her life at 17. Her mother had been replaced by this shrew. Their housekeeper since she was three years old was moving out today because of this shrew. Her dad was going through his second childhood by meeting this shrew. Her little brother was just 12, but smart enough to know this new regime could demote him in a hurry. Things were not good. All she had to look forward to was Tad's coming into town that week. She knew she liked him and he was a good dancer, and that was about it; not a lot to hang onto.

Flossie stopped at Aunt Edna's shop to talk to her about the goings on at the house. Edna was always glad to see her. She had no children of her own and Flossie was her pride and joy. Flossie explained that she needed an alibi when Tad came into town and promised she would bring him in and introduce him. She went on to explain the gradual decline in excitement over Catherine coming into their lives, and her concerns for her father and for Ernest. Edna was not surprised. Flossie was amazed how older people seemed to know personalities before they knew someone. Aunt Edna told her that some people can't hide who they are no matter how hard they try. She encouraged Flossie to come by more often and let her know what was going on, because maybe, between them, they could make some sense of it. Flossie left feeling a hundred times better about things. She would let Ernest know.

Tad had told his father all about Flossie Woodward the night of the spring formal. He knew his son was taken with this young lady and wanted to meet her as well. When they got to London, Tad sent a note to Flossie to say where they would be. She let him know where her aunt's china shop was located and when she would be there. That's all it took.

He came into the shop with his dad, and Aunt Edna got to meet them both. Tad looked just like his father with sandy, curly hair and dark blue eyes. Tad and Flossie were almost in a trance with each other. One couldn't stop looking at the other one. Aunt Edna offered them tea in her sitting area and it seemed Tad's father was as excited to be there as Tad was. They exchanged niceties and finally, his father had to leave for an appointment and said, "Goodbye".

Aunt Edna knew Flossie and Tad wanted to spend some time together and told them of a new restaurant nearby that a lot of young people liked to frequent, and maybe they could try it. They were out the door and Edna couldn't stop laughing. She was thinking, "You talk about love at first sight; this was the definition of it." She was going to talk to this girl and give her the 'sensible young lady's guide to restraint' routine.

Tad took Flossie's hand once they turned the corner and asked her did she mind.

"Of course, I don't mind, Tad. I couldn't wait to see you today. How long do we have?"

He said, "I'm supposed to meet my dad for dinner at the hotel around 6, so we've got about four hours."

They found the restaurant and Aunt Edna was right — there were many young people there. They found a table by the window and just started talking. He told her about his younger brother who was 15 and that they played sport and did a lot of fishing together. His dad was in the construction business and often traveled. Flossie was amazed at how much they had in common. She told him about

Ernest and her dad's business. Then she got onto the new situation at the house. She couldn't help it. Tad was so easy to talk to and very interested in her. She wondered if that was what her dad first saw in Catherine and that he just hadn't paid attention to her faults until after they were married. She looked at Tad again and giggled. He had no faults.

They walked along the Thames, holding hands and talking about nothing. Whatever the connection was, it was magnetic for both of them. They would find themselves hugging and Flossie kissed him on the cheek. She asked him what he wanted to do when he was on his own.

He said, "I like the business side of life. I'd like to get into a small company that wants to grow. My dad works for a large company and he's locked into a position. There are no openings for advancement because everyone has been there for so long."

Flossie thought about her dad's company. He was always looking to grow, but worked extra to manage his growth. He needed a young guy to hand over to and mentor.

As their time together was nearing an end, Flossie walked him back to his hotel. They were early and sat in the lobby together. Tad said he would write to her once a week and Flossie agreed to answer each letter. She got up to leave and Tad kissed her gently. They hugged for a while and then said, "Goodbye".

Aunt Edna was waiting for her and wanted to get the scoop.

When she entered the shop, Edna laughed and said, "You have a crush on him, don't you?"

Flossie said, "How can you tell?"

Aunt Edna kept laughing and said, "It's all over your face, honey. You're smitten."

Flossie told her how much fun they had at the new restaurant and that they were going to stay in touch by writing to each other. Edna was happy for her niece. She had something to look forward to while going through this trying time at the house.





## On the road again

Malcolm was right. Things were piling up at the office for him. He had about two weeks' worth of travel in front of him just to start. Dimitri's whisky venture was off the ground and needed his guiding hand in Central Europe. He tried to get things in order at the house before he left. Miss Adams was going to leave a large void where she had once been so efficient and his right hand. He spent some time with his children and tried to steady the ship before he left. The children seemed all right. They just didn't seem to say much. He talked to Catherine to try and keep her steady while he was away. She softened up a bit and told him everybody was just getting used to each other; that all would be well. Her girls hugged him Goodbye and showed him where they had planted flowers that Miss Adams had given them. Charles and Ernest walked with him out to the driveway and shook hands. He told them he would bring them something back from Bohemia and got a big smile out of both of them.

When he got to the office, he asked Bea to check with Catherine every few days to ask if they needed anything. Flossie was still coming in a couple of days a week as summer was coming to an end. He had tried to get Catherine to let Charles go to the warehouse with Ernest to work on his one day a week there and she decided against it for now. Ernest was glad to get away that one day. He would go everyday if the men could use him that much.

Malcolm boarded the train for Bohemia and settled back for a long trip. He knew this was a big step in getting Dimitri's whisky products moving in that area.

His reception in Prague was tentative at first because he could not speak their language and his contact spoke broken English. Soon they got into a rhythm and the visit paid big dividends. This distributor had agreed to handle Poland as well.

He took their group of four out to dinner for a small celebration in the old town. What a beautiful city! Malcolm always enjoyed observing the architecture of the many historic cities he did business in. Prague was exceptional. Its building designs were breathtaking. He bought a book of photographs of different parts of the city.

The Czechs were a happy group. He helped them with some English words they weren't sure of. While they were in the old town, he asked his contact if he could point out a place to buy some small mementos to take back for the family. The shop he took him to was filled with all sorts of artifacts and merchandise that would make nice gifts for the family. He bought earrings for Catherine and Flossie, bracelets for the twins, and rings for Kate and Sylvia. The boys' gifts took a little more time. He was looking for something mechanical that young boys would like. He found two replicas of the first locomotive that pulled a train between Prague and Vienna. One was made out of copper and the other one was made out of zinc. He had loot to take home.

He had a briefcase full of papers to take back to Dimitri to get signed and got his train schedule to get to Edinburgh. This was a long trip but one of the most important ones he had made in a long time. This was the kind of business he needed. One that wouldn't require a lot of travel once it was set up. He had learned his lesson from being on the road so much that he missed out on his family. He was going to make the most of this marriage and knew it was going to take some work.

He met Dimitri for drinks at the hotel and was all ready to celebrate the successful trip. Dimitri was in the mood to find out how Catherine was working out. After all, he'd lost his assistant to Malcolm and hadn't found a replacement as yet.

Malcolm gave him an updated progress report on how things were working out. He was getting closer to the children. The girls were adapting to the house and played outside a lot and liked to plant flowers. Charles and Ernest did a lot of things together and were signing up for a local boys' cricket team. Catherine was taking a little longer to adjust to the move, but she was more set in her ways than the children were — it would take a little more time.

Malcolm could tell Dimitri was concerned that it would work out. He wanted to know if she had any outbursts. This hit home with Malcolm.

He said, "Yes. She has, my friend. I'm going to ask our doctor if he has anything he could give her for that. It came to a head with my housekeeper. She decided to retire now, so I'm minus my right hand at the house. Flossie is a big help but she'll be going away to school in another year."

Dimitri sat back and felt horrible about this. He knew early on that Malcolm would have blinders on if Catherine had anything to do with it. It was too late for Malcolm to turn back now — there were too many people entrenched in this drama and he had to make it work. He hadn't been able to give his friend any background on this situation because it moved so quickly, not that he would have listened anyhow. Dimitri and his sister had helped Catherine's family out when she first started working for him. His sister would watch the children while she worked. Catherine had a good work ethic, but she was even better at working people to her advantage. After her husband committed suicide, life changed for her and the children. He had moved her into a better position with the company to be able to pay her more, and she was worth it. It was the people around her that

were on edge. She actually made the staff work harder because she set the example.

Dimitri could tell Malcolm was very anxious about making this work. He knew him well enough to see what was going on under that calm exterior. He decided not to elaborate on her entire background as he knew it, because that would be borderline meddling. Malcolm had made his bed.

## Trying to fit the mold

Ernest watched his dad leave with heavy heart. He felt an awful lot like he was going to be alone for a long time. Flossie was scarcely there, spending more time at Aunt Edna's shop. He knew his dad was going to keep on taking trips — that was his business. He tried to stay away from his stepmother's scrutiny but she seemed to search him out. She had now forbidden Charles from being on the cricket team and told him and Charles they needed to help out with the chores around the house, as Miss Adams had left them high and dry. If he tried to get Charles to play cricket in the yard, he would reply, "I'm not allowed." Ernest would be 13 soon and wondered how old he would have to be before he could leave and find a job. Then he realized that after next year, when Flossie would go away to school, there would be no one to watch out for his dad. After hearing what happened to Charles' father, he wanted to watch out for his dad with his new wife.

School was getting ready to start and Ernest was looking forward to getting away from the house and having some breathing room. Charles would be a year behind him because of his birthday. He thought it might be better that they had their own space.

Flossie and Ernest got to have some time together when Catherine took her children to register for school. They sat out on the porch and just looked at each other, and wondered what in the world had happened to them. They felt like they were the only

ones left. Their dad was gone again. Now they were aware of how often he travelled because Miss Adams wasn't there anymore. She'd always held things together after their mother died. Neither had any answers. It was almost like it was every man for himself. Flossie couldn't wait to go away to school and Ernest couldn't wait to be old enough to leave and get a job. She told him that when she got older she and Tad would get married and have their own family. The more he looked around him the more that desperation tried to set in.

His dad was due back next week and he hoped things would get better.

Catherine got home with the children and things were noisy again. Flossie went to her room and Ernest waited around to see if Charles wanted to do something.

Charles went upstairs and shut his door. Ernest couldn't tell if Charles didn't like him, or his mother sent him to his room — so he went to his own room.

The next few days were fairly quiet. Catherine prepared dinner nightly, but the rest of the meals were “Make it yourself” and “Don't make a mess”. Flossie made hotcakes one morning and everyone came to breakfast but Catherine. The children helped clean up and Flossie thought there might be hope to have some semblance of family in the big house — at least with the children.

Ernest saw Charles in the hall at school going to lunch.

He stopped him and said, “Charles, why can't we be friends at the house?”

Charles looked down and said, “You don't get it, do you, Ernest? My mother doesn't want us to be friends. I would like to be friends, but I just can't.”

Ernest said, “We could be friends here at school. She doesn't have to know about it.”

Charles said, “She would know, believe me and when she found out, it would be harder for both of us. Please, forget about it.”

Ernest became more determined than ever to leave as soon as he was old enough. He figured that was what Charles was thinking for himself. Play her game her way for now and when the time was right, follow your star.

He talked with Flossie again that night and told her what was going on. She agreed with what Ernest got out of it; play her game until it's time to leave so as not to give her the opportunity to come down hard on them. They agreed not to say anything to their dad. It would just make matters worse.

Malcolm got back with gifts for everyone. Catherine was on form. She had a big dinner ready with candles on the table, the girls were all prettied up and Malcolm got a warm reception. He clearly appreciated it by the look on his face. Ernest gave him a big hug and Flossie was his little girl again. Ernest even felt like he and Charles were friends again under the circumstances. They all waited until each one opened their gift and then started dinner.

Malcolm thought it was just great. Everyone was getting along. That's all he wanted. Flossie and Ernest looked at each other and knew without saying a word that this was the way to handle Catherine.

That night was like what the first night of their honeymoon should have been for Malcolm. He didn't know what happened to change her back from this nasty woman at the cottage, but he was glad it had.

Catherine had candles in their room and the phonograph playing some dance music. She came out of their dressing room in a long black gown and did some little steps for him. He felt like he was at one of those houses in France. This was a great way to come home after a trip. He knew this was a good thing. He just had to let it work out. What a night!

The next morning, Flossie had hotcakes and bacon going on in the kitchen. Malcolm was the first one in the kitchen and she said, "Well, how was your long trip?"

He said “Very good. I had to stop back at Dimitri’s. That’s why it took so long. It seems like everything is good here, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, I think everyone has settled in,” she answered.

Ernest came into the kitchen, following the aroma of bacon and hotcakes.

“Good morning. I’m hungry,” he said.

Malcolm grabbed hold of him and hugged him. He had his family back.

“So, how’s school going for you two? Are you learning anything?”

Flossie answered, “We have some new children in our class. One of the new girls is from America. Her dad works at the Trade Commission. She’s very nice. And we have a brother and sister from Ireland also.”

Malcolm asked Ernest, “How about you, pal? Any new people in your class?”

“No, but we have a new teacher,” he replied. “He’s rather tall like you and was a keen sportsman in college.”

Malcolm told them about the new account and what it would mean by reducing the amount of travel for him. He wanted to set up similar accounts that he could manage from his office. He would like to spend more time at home with the family.

Flossie felt like he was apologizing to her and Ernest; that he had made a mistake with them, but wanted to do right by Catherine’s children. It was like the final nail in the coffin. Ernest felt insignificant after breakfast. Charles and the girls came to eat and his dad was asking Charles how he liked the locomotive he brought him. Ernest got one too. Of course, Charles had his survival hat on and was very talkative with his new stepdad.



# Blackballed

As time moved on for Ernest, it was obvious to everyone that he was being singled out by his new stepmother. Everyone saw it but Flossie. She was spending more and more time with Aunt Edna at her shop. A lot of the time she ate dinner with her and escaped the games that had to be played with Catherine. Malcolm seemed to be traveling more than ever and Catherine had complete run of the place. Ernest would stay in his room most of the time in an effort to stay out of the line of fire. It didn't matter. Soon his list of chores grew. While Charles stayed in his room, he was directed to pulling weeds, washing pillows on the porch furniture and lots of raking.

It soon affected his school work and he was getting to the point of not caring. He got into a scuffle at school with an older boy that tried to lord it over him. The master talked to him about it and sent him home. That did not go well with his dad when he got back from a trip. He took Ernest into his office and had a stern talk with him. He told him how hard he was having to work in the business and needed to count on Ernest to do his part on the home front and not get into trouble. Then he brought up Catherine's report on his response when she tried to get him to help out with chores; that she had to twist his arm to get him to do anything.

Ernest just boiled inside. Here he was trying to be supportive of his dad by staying out of her watchful eye, and she always got him, not Charles, to do the dirty work; and then acting like he didn't

want to help. She lied to his dad about him, and his dad believed *her*, not him.

One morning, she came into his room without knocking and told him to find a box and clean off his dresser; that she was not going to have his room look like the only rubbish heap in her house.

He always had his collection of artifacts displayed neatly on his dresser and his soldiers in a ready position on his window sills. She told him if he didn't clean things up, she would throw them out. He stood up and bristled. Enough was enough.

"No, you can't tell me what to do in my room. My dad gave me these things and he likes to see them here."

Catherine lost her composure and started screaming at him. "I have already talked to your father about this and he agrees. Your room is a mess. I meant what I said!"

Ernest was furious. He knew she was lying about talking to his dad. He also knew it would just cause more trouble if he said anything to his dad.

He boxed up all of his treasures and stored them on the top shelf of his closet. "Just don't argue with her," he told himself. "She's crazy."

The following year came and went for Ernest. The situation between him and Catherine remained the same. Flossie was away at her new school in Northampton. She was busy with her new life and the gap between them widened. He was still seen to be locking horns with Catherine even though he wasn't at all. That was the report she would give to his dad. The new stepmother was dividing father and son on her crusade to drive him away.

She threatened to send him to the constable to straighten him out and then tell his dad she couldn't do anything with him.

Ernest's grades were taking a dip, but that was the last thing on his mind. His survival mode didn't include good grades. He had enough on his plate trying to outlast this tyrannical woman until he could find a way to leave.

His relationship with the other children deteriorated to barely speaking to each other. Their mother had laid down the parameters surrounding the stepbrother and they had to buy into it.

One morning, Ernest saw Catherine cleaning out Miss Adams' bedroom and had a sneaking hunch what she was up to.

When his dad got home, he got an earful of what depths this woman would go to to ruin his relationship with his father.

His dad came and got him in his bedroom and said he wanted to talk to him downstairs in his office. When he got there, the door was closed. He knocked gently as he always did and his dad said, "Come in."

Malcolm was sitting on the corner of his desk with a very serious look on his face, holding a paper.

He said, "Sit down, Ernest. I understand you're not only having problems at school but you're bringing them home — especially upstairs around the other children."

Ernest started to answer and Malcolm held up his hand.

"Your stepmother is concerned about your behavior, particularly around your stepsisters. We've made the decision to move you to Miss Adams' bedroom so Catherine can keep an eye on you when I'm away. You have brought this on yourself by acting like the house rules don't apply to you. The other children are keeping up with their homework and getting better than decent grades to show for it. I have a letter in my hand from the school master recommending that you be put in another school for students that require stricter guidelines. I don't want to hear any more bad reports about you. Is that understood?"

Charles replied, "Yes, sir."

The former 'master of the house' went to his room and buried his head in his pillow and wept for a long time. Finally, he had been cut off completely from the father he grew up with. His dad had abandoned him in favor of this witch and her children. Catherine

was so powerful, even his father, who he had considered to be the smartest man in the world, had been duped by this crazy woman.

“Where did she come from?” he asked in his lonely despair.

His wheels were turning but he was going nowhere. No matter which direction he turned, he ran into a brick wall. It seemed like the only thing that settled him down was getting into a fight. He knew this wasn't right; he had certainly not done it before the house changed hands. But now he couldn't help himself. He had to change schools, he had been asked not to come back to the cricket team and he had lost his position as ‘master of the house’ and the room at the top of the stairs that went with it. The fact that he had now been sent to the constable three times didn't do him any good. He felt bad about it.

Since Flossie had left, the pecking order in the house had changed, and he had no voice. All he had was the hope that when the time was right, he would be off to new horizons. If there was anything in the world he hoped to have, it would be to have his own family. He definitely would not treat his children anything like this. Losing the trust of his father crippled his spirit. He hoped that someday he would get it back.

Ernest took his medicine and moved to Miss Adams' old room. He had pleasant memories of it though. It was where he came when he was little and needed a treat from the kitchen. Miss Adams was his best friend. It was strange to him that both of them had slept in this room on their way out.

He settled in and got ready to spend this next year in solitude. He would be 17 then and able to get a job somewhere.

He knew from hanging around the shipyards close to his father's warehouse that you could get a job on a freighter and work your way to America. That was where he needed to be. You could make money in America. There were jobs everywhere, according to all the scuttlebutt. He started asking around when he saw a ship come

into port, if they were headed for America. Once in a while, he would get to talk with someone. He still had his school haircut and would hear all too often, “You’re too young, kid.”

He started going to the park and running laps like some of the older guys. He learned to do chin-ups at his new school and when he got to the park he would do ten chin-ups after he ran laps. He knew if he put on some muscle and got a little sun, it would make him look older, like a young seaman.

He kept a low profile at the house. Catherine had backed off since she got him moved downstairs. One morning, he was headed out the door when he noticed Sylvia knocking on his old bedroom door and calling Charles’ name. He almost went into a rage. That’s what this thing was all about — giving Charles his room at the top of the stairs. He ran out the door and kept running until he eased into his new school. It calmed him down. It was something about getting physical that calmed him down. He vowed to himself never to let that woman’s twisted mind control his actions. There’d be no more fighting and getting into trouble and definitely no more feeling bad about himself. He put a smile on his face and walked into class.

That year was a good year for Ernest. His grades went up and his attitude was one of looking ahead instead of looking behind him. He got so he could do two dozen chin-ups and was running twice the laps from when he started a year earlier.

Ernest was 17 and figured he could pass for 18 or 19. He started asking questions and looking around the docks for people who might know of an opportunity to get a job on a ship. He met the cook for a Norwegian freighter and the fellow sat down and talked to him. He was looking for a cook’s helper in the kitchen. They were sailing for New York the next morning and he needed someone right away. After some convincing, Ernest got hired on the spot. He needed to be at the ship’s ramp by 6 a.m., ready to go.

He hustled back to the house to pack a few things. The cook told him they traveled light. As he passed his father's business, he couldn't help but grin, knowing he was about to be free from all things that had gone wrong in his young life. When he got to the house, the girls told him his dad would be home a little later. Ernest packed a small satchel and stuck it under the bed. He was glad his dad would be there for dinner. He wanted to see him one more time. That past year had helped him mature a lot. He didn't hate his dad now but he knew he wouldn't let him board a ship for America if he found out about it. He kept a quiet profile like he had been doing and took a seat at the table when Catherine called them to eat.

His dad came in and said "Hello" to everyone and they dug in. The conversation was light and the children were chattering about school. Kate and Sylvia were showing off their good manners from their finishing class. The twins were trying to emulate them and Ernest couldn't help but smile. These weren't bad children; they were just thrust into a situation just like he was. He looked at Charles and he looked away. Ernest figured he felt guilty about having his former room. So what. He was about to gain his freedom.

His dad was stoic as usual, cutting his meat in deliberate strokes, using his dinner napkin with every bite. Ernest knew there would be none of this on the boat and he didn't care. Breaking away was good enough for him. All the manners he had grown up with weren't going to get him to New York. He was going to get himself to New York with his own grit and determination.

5 a.m. came and Ernest was ready. He had slept in his clothes to make a fast exit. He picked up his satchel and slipped out the door onto Miss Adams' favorite porch, and was down the steps. He headed to the shrubs at the back of their property and disappeared into the brush.

It was a typical London morning with heavy dew and fog. When he got to the port, he ran past his dad's warehouse and turned the

corner and there it was — his ticket to freedom. He hustled down to the ramp and saw the cook.

He said, “Ernest, I hope you’re ready to help in the kitchen because these guys are ready to eat.”

Ernest said without hesitation, “I’m ready, sir.”

The Norwegians were always hungry and Ernest was immediately baptized in the kitchen before they left the port. He was quick to please for obvious reasons and to fit right in with the rest of the crew. As they hit the open sea, he would not let himself look back; he wanted to forget all the misery he had caused and endured.

Malcolm was awake before his clock chimed six times. He had a big day in front of him and was sniffing the air for a food smell out of habit. Then he remembered Miss Adams was gone now, Flossie was gone, and Catherine was still asleep. Well, he could get something at the office. The men’s kitchen was pretty good at the warehouse. His custodian did the cooking as well and it tasted like army food because he had learned to cook in the army.

He grabbed a cup of tea and went into his office, when he heard a loud knock at the front door. He opened the door to see two of his men standing there out of breath.

“Sir, we’ve got bad news. We saw Ernest board a freighter for America about 6 o’clock this morning. We’re pretty sure they have already left the port — we heard their horn blast on the way here.”

“Good God!” Malcolm said.

He ran to Ernest’s room and the bed was empty. By then, Catherine had made it downstairs and demanded to know what all the commotion was about.

Malcolm told her, “They saw Ernest board a ship for America just this morning.”

She went to his room to see for herself, and the boy was gone.

He called the men into his office and told them, “I’m going to put you two on the next ship to America and you’re going to find him, and bring him back.”

They left together and headed for the port. Malcolm would send Bea to Grisham's office and have him draw up some papers to bring him back.

Catherine probably went to the side porch with a cup of tea, sat down in Miss Adams' old wicker chair with a smirk on her face, and said, "Now the house is mine."



# New York, New York

As the tug boats were working away to get their freighter into New York Harbor, the men were busy talking about what they were going to do as soon as they got paid.

The harbor was loud with ships' horns and the smell of diesel fuel in the air. Ernest was very wide-eyed about finally getting to New York and then it hit him. What next? He had no one to visit or any idea of where to go from the docks.

The first mate paid them and told Ernest, "Good luck." He was on his own.

Well, the cook that gave him the job caught up with him and asked, "Where are you going?"

Ernest mumbled something about how he needed to find somebody and the cook said, "Listen, we're going to be here for about a week. Why don't you sleep on the boat until you figure it out?"

Kinder words were never spoken to Ernest. He was happy to hang around.

He bought a copy of the *New York Times* and spent the whole afternoon looking at classified ads for employment. There were several ads for dockworkers on the wharf. The scuttlebutt in London was right — there were jobs everywhere. He didn't have papers, so he needed to get a work permit. Two of the guys on his ship were Americans and showed him where to go.

After a couple of days, he was getting the hang of the place and strayed off to find an English restaurant. As he walked up to the front door, he saw two familiar faces... and they both worked for his father. They started to get up the minute they saw him and he felt his father's reach that he knew all too well growing up. Ernest ran for his life while putting two and two together and understood if he was caught, it was "Bye, bye, New York." He knew he couldn't go back to the ship because they had to know that was the boat he came over on and would be waiting for him. With youth on his side, he soon outdistanced his pursuers and found a YMCA with a sign that said "Boarders welcome". This looked good enough to be home to him.

The next morning one of the boarders told him he could get a bowl of cereal downstairs, so off he went. As he approached the tables, his heart stopped beating... there were his father's men with a constable and they meant business. The constable took them to the police station and the men had paperwork from his father for them to return Ernest to England forthwith. Why couldn't everyone just leave him alone? He hadn't stolen anything. The constable gave him a lecture and the men took him back to the harbor. They left for England the next morning. Ernest knew his London reception was going to be anything but good. It was a long ride back to merry old England for Ernest.

# Home, sweet home

London port didn't look nearly as good to him as it did when he left. He felt about two inches high. The men took him straight to his dad's office and detailed the entire experience in New York. His dad was angry. Ernest had made him look bad to his wife, their friends and his own company. He made Ernest stay at the warehouse under the watchful eye of the custodian. He had no privileges and he knew full well the only way to get things right was to work hard and behave. He also knew he would be old enough to join the army on his upcoming birthday. That gave him the hope he would finally be on his own.

Well, life didn't get any easier during the next few months. Not only did he have to do all the dirty work at the warehouse, he had to spend his Saturdays working at the house under the supervision of Catherine and her son Charles. They both seemed to enjoy lording it over him and finding the worst possible chores for him to do and were never satisfied with his effort.

Ernest was desperate to get some fresh air and to get a better plan than waiting on his birthday. One morning at the warehouse, he was carrying out buckets of mud from a wet area the custodian had found for him to clean up. A young man of about 20 approached him and asked if they needed any help. He had a job coming up in a couple of weeks and needed something to carry him over. Ernest told him they didn't need help, that his father owned the business

and he was being punished for something. He was sure his dad wasn't going to hire somebody to make his punishment easier.

The chap said Ernest must have done something pretty bad. Ernest responded, "It was bad for him, good for me. I got to America working on a freighter and my father had his men bring me back, so here I am. I'm just waiting on my birthday so I can join the army."

The boys talked on and struck up a note of accord. The chap's name was Ethan. He was from a farming community in Kent and had a connection to get work on a freighter as a deckhand. He was seeking his fortune in America while he was still young enough to find a trade to support himself. Ernest was all ears about how Ethan connected with a job on a freighter that was two weeks away from sailing. It turned out that Ethan's uncle worked on that ship and had connections in America as well. Ernest didn't waste any time letting him know he would gladly work on a freighter again as opposed to waiting on his birthday to join the army. Ethan was sure his uncle could find something for Ernest to do because he was the ship's overseer. Ethan was more concerned with how he was going to survive the next two weeks.

The boys concocted a plan to keep Ethan under wraps at the warehouse, upstairs in the storage area. Ernest would feed him from the men's kitchen. As the days passed, Ernest tried to talk to his father here and there to get to know him a little better. He knew that if their plan worked, he probably would never see him again. He was sorry he had been a problem but had no answers. What he realized was that his father was a loner and all about business. His driving force was to get more business and it never was enough. Ernest learned an important lesson during this time. He wanted to have a family of his own someday and most of all to have a son that knew he was proud of him. That changed his grasp of what the future could hold for him. He had a direction.

# New beginnings

The big day came and the boys left the warehouse early. They wanted to board quickly so Ernest could remain undiscovered. Their plan went off without a hitch and they finally hit the open sea. Ernest liked working outside better than being confined to the kitchen like on the other freighter. Ethan's uncle was a jolly sort and made them both feel like they were part of the crew. Ernest worked right alongside Ethan as a deckhand and learned rigging, cleaning, tying down and where the mess kitchen was.

New York Harbor was old hat to Ernest this time. He was able to show Ethan around and felt quite independent. They met Ethan's uncle one last time and he introduced them to a riverboat captain that talked to them about crewing for him down the Ohio River. They could live on the boat which had a large galley and decent quarters for the men. At night, the favorite pastime was to play poker in the kitchen. The captain's business was to offload cargo at the major river ports with goods gathered from three distribution centers. The boys couldn't wait to get started. They took a train to Pittsburgh where they met up with the crew.



# The city left behind

Malcolm Woodward was a proud man. He had worked hard to build his shipping business and finally, reached the point where he could manage it from his office instead of continually traveling and living out of a suitcase. As he returned home from the office this day, he took a good look at his house. A lot of things had changed since he bought the place for Ruby, his first wife. She needed to have a house of means and it had served them well — always a great place to invite people and to come home to. He noticed that soon repairs would be in order and realized he had been on the road a long time. Things had just been let go.

Malcolm reflected on the events that had happened that day and just shook his head in disbelief. His workers had run into his office early with the news of Ernest having gone again. He knew that his son had not had a fair shake in life with his mother dying so early, and the events that stacked up since then seemed all a blur. Flossie had filled him in on the turmoil that became ordinary life for her and Ernest when he brought Catherine into their lives. If only Ruby hadn't died. She was a strong woman that handled everything when he was away and never complained and the children loved their mother.

Catherine, on the other hand, had her hands full with her children and didn't hesitate to let him know her dilemma. She had been a pretty lady in her day, but life and five children had taken

its toll. He walked into Ernest's room and it was a far cry from his master suite at the top of the stairs. He noticed his old cricket bat standing in the corner. Ernest had been so proud when he showed him how he could whack the ball in the front yard.

Malcolm felt lost all of a sudden. He had lost his grip on things far more important than letting his business run him. He knew that morning he had said to his men the only thing he could have under the circumstances — “Let him go. I can't do anything with him.” He also knew he had another bridge to cross yet — Flossie. She had just visited from school and found out Ernest was quarantined to the warehouse for running away. He had promised her things would change. He was going to try and find something Ernest could be good at in the company so he could mentor him. Time had beaten him.

Flossie knew why he ran away. It was Catherine. She resented them and made life miserable for her and Ernest. They didn't want to bother their dad with it and had kept quiet out of respect for him. He thought it was working. It was working against them. Flossie was torn between school and Ernest. She knew there was nothing she could do for her dad. He had made his own bed. When her dad told her Ernest had left for America again, she realized there was nothing she could do for Ernest either. His bed had been made for him. She vowed then only to worry about herself. There was nothing she could do for anyone else.



## The river life

Life on the river was much better than traveling on the open seas. You could see land and people, and some days deliver to as many as three ports. The boys liked to talk to the people at each stop. The people liked to hear their accents and were in awe of them for getting to travel on the boat for a job. They felt like real sailors and liked the recognition. One of the ports they delivered to was Marietta, Ohio. It was a little farming community that not only accepted deliveries but were able to ship their farm products on down the river to Cincinnati. It usually took the better part of a day to service that stop.

On one such day, a young lady had ridden on her father's buckboard to buy goods for their farm and Ernest spotted her right away. He made sure of their order and wheeled it to their buckboard to help them load. He spoke to her father about their horses and he was impressed that Ernest knew about horses and of course, liked his accent. His daughter's name was Frances and she was a bit shy but had an easy smile. Ernest was taken with her and couldn't wait to deliver there again. Here he was old enough to be in the army, he had a good job, had money in his pocket and had just spotted a young lady that had smiled at him. Only in America!

As Ernest's world opened up, he became a student of life. He was interested in almost anything he could learn to better himself. His presence with the crew was respected because he always held

up his end and was ready to help the others with anything. He was witty and could easily find something to laugh about.

On one delivery to Marietta, the crew had to spend the night because the boat's engine needed attention. Ethan and Ernest had filled all the orders except the one for Frances' dad. He had a very large order that included many fence posts and wire. Ernest saw an opportunity to spend some time around Frances and asked her father if he might need some help unloading back at their farm.

Well, Mack, Frances' father, stepped back and looked Ernest up and down. He liked his spunk. He was tall, obviously had a lot of determination and he could tell Frances liked him.

He said, "Okay, Ernest. We could use some help."

Ernest ran to tell the captain he was going to help one of their customers unload.

The captain cracked a smile and said, "I figured that. Help them out but watch your step."

## Meeting the family

Ernest had to work at containing his exuberance. He got to sit behind them on the way to their farm and was on his best behavior. Frances smelled good and her hair blew in the breeze as they rode to her farm. He couldn't help but wonder if his father would be proud of him.

Mack's farm was big. There were fields of oats and corn, as well as pastures with cows and a few horses. The driveway was lined with white board fences. There were two big barns, painted white, with peaks jutting into the sky. He wondered how they got up that high to paint them. The house was a large two-story with a swing on their porch. What a nice place for Frances to grow up in!

Ernest unloaded the entire buckboard by himself. Mack watched him from a distance. The boy knew how to work. He was organized and had a stature about him. He asked Ernest if he would like to eat with them before they headed back to the river. Ernest looked down at his clothes to make sure he didn't look too dirty to go inside. He wanted to look decent when he met Frances' mother but Mack said, "Come on in."

Ernest had not been in an American home before and was taken by the furniture, the pictures on the walls and the cupboards in the kitchen. This wasn't much different from the house he grew up in. The smell of food in the house was overpowering. He hadn't had a home-cooked meal in a long time and was a bit overwhelmed.

Frances had a pretty dress on and was helping set the table. Ernest looked to say “Hello” to her mother and Frances broke the silence.

“Ernest, this is my Aunt Grace.”

Ernest was a bit confused.

Mack took over and said, “We lost Frances’ mother several years ago. Grace moved in to help us out and make it a home again.”

All of a sudden, he felt very close to these people. He was drawn to their openness and simplicity of life. Ernest was able to tell them about his childhood and losing his mother. He explained how his sister picked up the slack while his dad travelled but that she was away at school now. His dad had married again and didn’t travel much anymore. The mood loosened up at the dinner table; it was unspoken but felt by all. Mack had sat back in his chair. Aunt Grace gave Ernest an endearing look and Frances had tears in her eyes. Ernest felt close to each of them and very welcome.

Mack drove Ernest back to the boat.

They didn’t talk much but when they approached the boat, Mack asked him, “Does your father know you’re here in the States?”

Ernest said, “No. We weren’t on the best of terms. Everything changed when he married again and I had to leave.”

Mack was very understanding and left Ernest with “The next time you deliver, come and talk to me. I have an idea.” Ernest felt like he had just grown five years older. He felt like he meant something to the people he just had dinner with, and knew they sure meant a lot to him.

## Growing pains

Ernest and Ethan got to spend a couple of days in Cincinnati while unloading at the port. Their captain treated the crew to lunch at his favorite restaurant near the docks called Coney Island. The specialty there was chili and hot dogs with a special flare. Their chili was famous for hot peppers and seasonings. The boys had never experienced such heat. After all, English food was rather bland in comparison. Of course, they were being watched by the crew to see if they could take it. They both stood up to the challenge and after a bit, began to like it. The crew was impressed and Ernest could tell how he and Ethan had made it all the way down the Ohio River and had graduated. They were officially river crewmen.

At night, Ernest had time to reflect on his family and started to get a grasp on what had happened as a child that shaped the events that led him to this boat — losing his mother at such an early age and how his big sister had taken her mother's place. He remembered vividly the first time he met his stepmother and her children, and then there was the wedding he had to go to and how Flossie had cried in private with him. It must have been a big adjustment for her too.

He knew that the trouble he began to get into was because he felt all alone when Catherine moved in. Miss Adams moved out, Flossie was soon away at school, and his dad was traveling more than ever. He didn't have to answer to anyone until Catherine moved in.

Flossie had tried to be his mother, his sister and his chum. She taught him how to play cricket, took him to the store with her and helped with his school work. He wondered how she was and whether he'd ever get to see her again. He decided he would somehow write to her and send it to her school because he knew she wouldn't get the letter if their stepmother saw it come to the house.

The captain began to give Ernest more responsibilities on the boat and had him oversee the deliveries. Ernest was happy to take charge and the crew liked his attitude to work with the customers. He answered all their questions and spent time with them going over their paperwork. The captain could see the difference in the crew's attitude. They were enjoying their work. Ernest was adding a spark to everyone.

Soon they were making the rounds again, delivering down the river. Ernest kept remembering Mack's last words to him when he drove him back to the boat in Marietta. The next time to deliver there was only a couple of days away and he wondered what Mack meant when he said to come and talk to him on the next delivery; that he had an idea. Did Frances know, he wondered. He had told Ethan about that conversation and he had said laughingly, "I think he wants you to marry his daughter."

As they pulled into port at Marietta, Ernest was looking for the buckboard. It was easy to spot because it had a small canopy over the bench seat; there was no buckboard in sight. It was an extra-large delivery that day because it was the first of the month and the city of Marietta received their supplies then. As the day wore on, Ernest wondered if they would come at all. Their farm was quite a jaunt from the docks and he had no transportation to get there.

"There they are," said Ethan, coming up behind Ernest.

He had been watching too. Ernest was very nervous but he kept working, trying not to look conspicuous to the captain. He glanced over at the buckboard and Frances' father motioned to him. As he

walked over, he noticed Frances was smiling at him. “This is good,” he said to himself.

He said, “Hello” to them and Mack took him aside and said, “Ernest, I’m a man of few words, so I’ll make it quick. I was impressed with you offering to help us at the house and how you handled yourself. I appreciated your honesty at the table, sharing your background and that you lost your mother. That meant something to the three of us, especially Frances who was close to her mother. She didn’t know anyone her age that had lost their mom. I can tell you’re honest and I know you’re a hard worker. I’d like you to come and work for me and manage my farm. I’m getting older and if something happened to me, I don’t know how Frances and my sister could manage the farm. Would you consider it? You can live in the bunkhouse and eat your meals with us. You can let me know on your next trip. I don’t hold with making a decision and not sleeping on it.”

Well, Ernest was flabbergasted with such a life-changing decision facing him. Boy, was he glad Ethan had happened by the warehouse that day. He waved “Goodbye” to them as they drove off and he could see Ethan had a lot of questions behind his grin.





## The crossroads

The river life was good for Ernest. He was getting stronger and filling out his clothes. He had saved some money and was thinking about what he wanted to do with his life. Going back to England was out of the question. He had burnt that bridge and was glad he did. He realized he was hardly thinking about it anymore. Nonetheless, what was he going to do about Mack's offer?

His boat family was his family now. He hardly knew Frances' family but felt like she belonged with him somehow. He liked her dad. He was a straight shooter and was considerate that he made the right decision and advised him to sleep on it. But what about Ethan? He felt a loyalty to him as well for the history they had beginning at his dad's warehouse. He had about a month to sleep on it.

When Ernest woke up that morning, his mind was made up. He wanted to take Mack's offer but he had butterflies; fear of the unknown. He went above to get a little fresh air and the last person he wanted to see was the captain, but there he was. Ernest felt like he should confide in him and walked over to get some fatherly advice. Somehow the captain seemed to know what was going on. He smiled at Ernest and shook hands.

"Good morning, Ernest. What's on your mind this early?"

Ernest grinned and said, "A girl".

"Well, I figured that... It's that little filly in Marietta, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. It is."

“So, what’s the problem?”

“Well, her dad made me an offer to manage his farm and I’m supposed to tell him today. That’s the problem. You guys are the only people I know in America and I like working on the boat but my heart is with this girl.”

Well, Ernest’s life took a turn for the better in the next five minutes. The captain was a wise man and gave him some challenging advice.

“Ernest, I can tell you how to know if you’re making the right decision. When the preacher looks you in the eye and says, ‘Do you take this woman to be your wedded wife, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health as long as you both shall live?’; when he says that, he’s also saying are you ready for all the crap that’s involved with raising a family, like what if your son runs away from you, what if all there is is sickness and no health. If you can look him in the eye and say, “I do”, then you ought to take her father’s offer... and you have my blessing if you do.”

That did it for Ernest. He was ready to marry her that very day. The captain switched gears from his blessing to his mentoring.

“Son, approach this like the world is watching. Be honest with yourself and the young lady. This can be the best decision you will ever make, or it can be the worst. Put your best foot forward and make it your best decision.”

Ernest got a very serious look on his face and thanked his friend, the captain. He went below and told Ethan what he was going to do. Ethan was a true friend and wished him the best.

He said, “From now on, I want to see you on the buckboard with the little lady picking up supplies.”

Mack went to pick up supplies, and more likely Ernest too, by himself. He didn’t want to put the added pressure of showing up with his daughter on anyone, especially her. She was a young lady, looking more and more like her mother did at that age. If there was

any spark to develop with her and this young man, he wanted it to be after Ernest had worked out as manager of their farm. He could tell Ernest came from good stock and would be a good candidate for Frances' future. She came from a protected upbringing on the farm in a rural area and was not a worldly girl by any means. As her father, he wanted her to have the dignity of getting to know Ernest first as their farm manager. This would be fair to them both. If there was common ground between them, it could develop naturally.

Ernest looked different to him today. This tall young man looked older to him and had an air of confidence as he walked toward the buckboard. Mack asked if he could talk to him before they loaded. They sat on a bench by the docks and talked for several minutes about their joint venture. Mack explained the size of his inventory of cattle, and the acreage that Ernest would be responsible for. And how much harvest was for their consumption and how much went to market. Ernest asked him about hired help to bring in the crops and whether he could have a horse to make his rounds.

They both seemed in the moment and stood up to shake hands.

The entire crew from the boat acted busy while they took all of this in. Ernest was sure Ethan had prepared them for his departure and they all looked proud of him. They loaded Mack's buckboard with his supplies and it was time to say "Goodbye". Ethan brought a box with his friend's belongings and the captain stepped on the dock to offer his blessing.

Ernest felt like he had all the support in the world for this new beginning and waved as they drove off.

The second book of this trilogy tells the story of Ernest's partnership with his new love Frances. How they got into the cattle business in Southern Ohio and built a strong, close-knit family.

It's due to be published in October 2019.

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Many thanks,

Joseph