

Britfield



&
THE
LOST
CROWN

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I WEATHERLY

“Number forty-seven! Stop chattering to thirty-four and get back to work, immediately!” Speckle shouted from across the room.

“Yes sir . . . back to work . . . right away,” replied Tom instinctively, pretending to be a dutiful servant.

He knew too well that talking violated the sacred Weatherly Rule Book, a seventy-five-page document of laws and regulations all orphans had to memorize when they arrived. Any violation of these rules resulted in punishment, the penalties varying in length and severity. However, some rules were made to be broken; it was the orphans’ only way to survive here. They did what they were told and got away with what they could.

Just then Speckle closed his laptop, walked over to Tom, and slammed his stick on the table. Everyone froze at the loud crack; the room went silent.

“One more word out of you, and I’ll send you outside!” hollered Speckle, looking around for other violators. No one moved an inch.

Speckle, the new supervisor, had arrived nine months ago. Over six feet tall with wavy grey hair, he had a deep, scratchy voice and a grip like a vice. He also managed Brewster and Sludge, two henchmen who helped keep order and discipline.

These burly yet feeble-minded bullies followed his every command.

Tom grabbed a large piece of lumber, walked over to a table saw and ran it through the blade with ease. He then placed the wood on a workbench and started sanding the rough edges.

Every morning at 6:00, each orphan marched straight to this work area, referred to as “The Factory” because it was managed like an industrial plant. Their jobs consisted of putting together an assortment of handcrafted items: the girls made wicker baskets, and the boys built wooden chairs and tables. All these objects were hauled off in a large truck and sold by Brewster and Sludge in the local villages.

Glancing around the room, Tom quickly made eye contact with Sarah, who smiled and made a silly face. He began to laugh but stopped when Speckle trudged over.

“Is something funny, Tom?” he snapped, ready to strike with his stick.

“Ah . . . no sir, nothing at —”

“Perhaps you’d like to stand outside in the cold for five or six hours! Would that be funny?” he thundered in a threatening manner.

“N-no, it wouldn’t.”

Speckle lowered his gaze, closely examining Tom for any insincerity. Once again, the entire room went quiet.

Unconvinced by his answer, Speckle grabbed Tom’s arm, yanked him from his bench and dragged him outside. The door slammed behind them. The weather was frigid, a strong Yorkshire wind chilling the barren landscape. December was always a deadly time of the year.

“Don’t move!” ordered Speckle, his tone displaying a combination of contempt and indifference.

Tom nodded resentfully, his wiry twelve-year-old body shivering in the cold.

Speckle angrily marched back inside, glaring at the other children as he hovered around their workstations. He randomly picked up an item, inspected it and tossed it back down. Every day he would find some flaw, tearing up a basket or smashing a chair. Speckle observed everything and missed nothing. No one dared to question him or make direct eye contact. But even Speckle could be outfoxed. The orphans feared his strengths and did whatever they could to exploit his weaknesses.

Peering in from the window, his blue eyes glistening, and brown hair dampened by frost, Tom stood motionless. He’d been locked up at Weatherly for six miserable years, and this was the year he planned to escape.

* * * *

Located in Aysgarth, Yorkshire, in Northern England, Weatherly was about three hundred miles northwest of London. Although it was the 21st century, the orphanage looked medieval. The main building was an enormous sixteenth-century Elizabethan castle constructed from bluestone. Towering seven stories high, it had four massive turrets, one in each corner. The entire estate was enclosed by a twelve-foot high granite wall, with a massive wrought iron gate at the entrance. About fifteen years ago, the property was purchased

by the Grievouses and turned into an orphanage, which the British government helped pay for as long as it was run privately. Although the Grievouses were supposed to provide each child with new clothing, healthy food, heated rooms, and schooling, they kept the money for themselves.

Like many of the other orphans, Tom didn't know anything about his parents, who they were or what had happened to them. But he hoped to find out someday.

* * * *

After missing lunch, Tom was let back inside. He cautiously walked over to a workbench and sat down by Patrick, number thirty-four.

Known as *the teacher*, Patrick, at sixteen, was the oldest and wisest orphan, with nine hard Weatherly years behind him. If anyone needed to know something, he was the best resource.

"Got the book?" whispered Tom, scanning the room for Speckle.

"Yeah . . . you ready for the mission?" asked Patrick assertively, his eyes intense and focused.

Tom gave him a confident nod. "Of course. I've been planning for it all week."

"Good. See if you can find anything by Dickens or Hardy — and no more Shakespeare," he said adamantly, leaning in closer. "Now remember, be extra careful. They've moved Wind to the east side of the house."

"Got it," replied Tom, ready to carry out his perilous assignment.

Patrick carefully removed *The Count of Monte Cristo* from behind his jacket and skillfully handed it to Tom under the table. It was a flawless transition, and Tom hastily stuffed the book in his shirt.

Speckle turned, mumbled something under his breath and continued to pace the room, searching for any sign of disobedience.

Tom returned to his work and started building another chair, his heart racing with nervous excitement.

If the orphans ever had a spare moment, they loved to read — it was their only way of escaping into another world. They had a total of eight books in their library, which consisted of a small dusty storage closet in the cellar. They had read each one probably twenty times, including a dictionary, an encyclopedia, and the history of the British Empire. But with so few books, they needed to come up with a strategy to get more, so they invented an exchange system. Each month, one orphan sneaked out at night, ran across the field, outmaneuvered a vicious dog named Wind and climbed in a small window at the Grievouses' beautiful Victorian mansion located close by. They borrowed one of the books from a well-stocked shelf in the study and exchanged it for one of their own.

When the clock finally struck 7:00 p.m., the orphans diligently put away their tools and cleaned up their workstations.

They filed out of The Factory two-by-two and down a long dark corridor. This was one of the brief moments they weren't monitored or supervised by any Deviants, a codeword the orphans used when describing authority figures.

Sarah ran up behind Tom and gave his shirt a swift tug. “So are you going tonight?” she whispered enthusiastically.

“I’ll head out in a few hours,” he replied nonchalantly, trying to mask his anxiety.

“You scared?” she inquired. “I’d be scared . . . especially of Wind.”

“A little bit . . . but it’s got to be done, right?”

“Right,” she acknowledged, then hesitated for a second. “I wish I was going with you.”

“It’s always been a one-person mission — too risky for more.”

“Fine,” she said with a hint of disappointment.

“Although I wish you were coming,” he added earnestly.

Sarah smiled, then reached in her pocket and handed Tom a small golden locket.

“What’s this for?” he wondered, examining the delicate object.

“It’s for good luck. You’ll need it tonight.”

“I can’t take this.”

“Sure you can,” she said graciously. “Just keep it on you at all times.”

“But it’s the only valuable thing you have.”

“There’s more to life than just objects, Tom,” she added philosophically.

Sarah Wallace, age twelve, had arrived two years earlier from Edinburgh, Scotland. Coming from a wealthy family, she had led a privileged life before her parents died in a suspicious automobile accident. She didn’t have any relatives, except for a

greedy uncle who only wanted the money, so she was shipped around to a few places and finally ended up at Weatherly. She had long, sandy-blond hair, hypnotic hazel eyes and an infectious laugh.

Just as they reached the stairwell, Mrs. Grievous appeared from behind a wall and advanced toward Tom. A cold chill suddenly came over him.

“What — do — you — have — there?” she snapped, her dark sinister eyes honing in for the kill.

Tom quickly switched the locket to his other hand and slid it into his pocket. Sarah faded back and watched intently, hoping her prized possession wouldn't be confiscated.

“Nothing. Nothing at all,” he replied in mock puzzlement. “By the way,” he interjected, quickly changing the subject, “I made two chairs in the workshop —”

“Open your fingers!” she demanded, grabbing his hands and yanking them forward.

They were empty.

“See . . . nothing,” he retorted, playing innocent like a seasoned actor.

“Hmm, well they're filthy.” She gave his hands a slap and pushed him aside. “I've got my eye on you, forty-seven. One misstep and you've had it. Now get to bed!”

“Yes, Mrs. Grievous,” he muttered coldly, wondering why this awful woman was ever born.

Mrs. Grievous always seemed to appear whenever an orphan did something wrong. She had ghostly pale skin, kept her bright red hair compressed into a bun, and always wore

grey flannel suits. Continually on edge, she had an explosive temper and made an unsettling clicking noise with her jaw. It was best to avoid her at all costs.

The children marched up the stairs and hastily retreated to their rooms. Speckle followed closely behind, making sure everyone was locked in and the lights were turned off. Standing by each door, he listened for any talking or movement. The orphans knew this, so they would wait about twenty minutes before they started exchanging stories and discussing the day.

There were fifty-six children at Weatherly, thirty boys and twenty-six girls, ages ranging from six to sixteen. If the number ever dropped below fifty-six, the facilities would be taken over by the government. The orphans essentially hoped this would happen, because they couldn't imagine anyone else allowing what went on there. As far as they were concerned, anything was better than the Grievouses.

The boys and girls were kept in separate rooms with the bunk beds spaced two feet apart. These cramped quarters had water-stained walls and plaster crumbling from the ceilings. When it rained, the roof leaked and flooded most of the castle. The summers were hot and humid. The winters were chilly and bleak, with the cold creeping in through loose stones and broken windows.

Their garments were tattered and sparse: the girls wore dark brown dresses, with their hair usually pulled back; the boys wore brown trousers, long sleeved shirts and at times, overalls. Their shabby attire felt more like prison uniforms than normal clothing. Most orphans hated these outfits more

than the dilapidated rooms or horrible food.

After everyone was asleep, Tom patiently rested on his bottom bunk bed watching the clock on the wall. The minutes slowly ticked away until it finally read 11:00 p.m., the perfect time to leave, for the Deviants were usually asleep by then.

Tom quietly slid off his wafer-thin mattress, got dressed, and snatched the book from under his pillow. As he tucked it in his shirt, the bedroom door slammed open. It was Speckle shining a flashlight directly in Tom's face.

2

THE BOOK EXCHANGE

Tom hastily ducked under his sheets, strategically placing the book in his pillow. He knew that if he was caught, especially with an illegal item, he was finished. Thoughts flashed through his head about the different forms of punishment: no food; standing in the freezing rain for hours; twice the workload for a couple of months; banished to The Dungeon, a musky and decrepit room in the cellar; the dreaded kitchen duty; solitude in the attic; or worst of all, something he could never mention or think about.

Just as Speckle approached, his stick tightly clenched in his fist, Richie, ten years old, knocked over a chair on the other side of the room.

Speckle stopped and shined the flashlight in the opposite direction.

This was a typical diversion tactic that the orphans had mastered. Whenever another child was in trouble, they would do anything to distract the attention of the Deviant. Dropping an object, knocking something over, or even yelling out usually did the trick. Although they risked retribution, it defused the situation and helped the other in need.

“What’s that ridiculous racket over there?” Speckle yelled, his temper flaring.

“N-nothing, sir. I’m s-sorry,” Richie stammered. “I was just g-getting up to ah . . . get my b-blanket and —”

“Stop that muttering and shut your mouth,” he grumbled in an icy tone. “Now pick up that chair and get back to sleep!”

Flustered, Speckle pulled out the “dreaded notepad” and noisily flipped through the pages. This little book listed every mistake made and incident caused by an orphan. Speckle recorded everything and forgot nothing.

“Twenty-seven, Molly, thirty-one, Nickolas, thirty-four, Patrick, there it is, number thirty-nine, Richie. Yes, the stutterer. Another infraction for thirty-nine,” he sneered, scribbling a few notes in his book. “I’ll deal with you in the morning.”

He suspiciously scanned the room again, then hastily left, slamming the door behind him.

Distressed, Tom knew that the mission was even more dangerous than before, but he had to go through with it. Everyone counted on a new book each month. It was the only way to be inspired and learn at Weatherly.

He waited until 11:30 p.m. and got up, throwing on his tattered jacket and gathering what he needed. He stuffed the book in his shirt and tiptoed toward the door, taking every step with caution.

“Good luck, Tom,” whispered Richie, suddenly awakened and wiping sleep from his eyes. “Be careful.”

“Thanks. I owe you one.”

Tom pulled out a safety pin tucked beneath his collar and jiggled the lock. After a few moments, it clicked open. Unfortunately, these bedroom doors were the only place this technique worked. It was a valuable trade secret passed on by Patrick.

When Tom opened the door, it was pitch black, except for a sliver of moonlight shining through a cracked window. "It's now or never," he murmured to himself, leaving the secluded protection of the bedroom.

The floorboards creaked as Tom walked into the damp hallway and towards the staircase. Half-blinded by the darkness, he used the wall to guide him, running his hand along the rough surface. He slowly maneuvered down the stairs, taking each step with care and avoiding the middle section where it made the most noise. He paused and surveyed the different rooms. No sign of anyone.

He continued through the main foyer and approached the back door. It was locked. This was normal, but the orphans knew that the key was hidden on top of the doorframe, out of their reach, unless of course, you stood on a solid object.

Tom quietly glided across the room, grabbed a chair, and carefully positioned it. He climbed up, snatched the key and unbolted the lock. After meticulously putting the chair back, he opened the door and crept out.

The freezing air caught him off guard: his teeth chattered, and his breath crackled. The moonlight illuminated the ground, silhouetting the landscape; it also made it more dangerous, for the brighter the moon, the easier he could be spotted. Although the Grievouses' mansion was only a hundred yards away, it seemed like miles.

Tom courageously started toward their house, hiding among the dormant bushes and lifeless trees, their branches surrendered to the cruel winter. One of the most important

things to remember was finding the exact location of Wind — the dog's hearing was legendary, and his chain was long.

Tom scampered across the grass towards the mansion and quickly ducked behind a Mulberry tree situated twenty feet from the back of the house. This was always the best entry point, for it was dark and rarely occupied. *But where was Wind?* he wondered. Not knowing this critical information only added to his fear.

Just then he heard a faint growl coming from behind. It started with a subdued rumble, slowly growing deeper and louder. Tom twisted his head. Standing ten feet away was Wind, his white fangs glistening, and eyes focused on his victim.

Nicknamed *Wind* because no one ever saw him coming, this huge, unsightly dog terrorized everyone. If it weren't for the twenty-foot chain that kept him anchored to a metal post, there wouldn't be any children left. Sometimes the Grievouses just let him wander the grounds, barking at anything and chasing everything — those were the best times to stay inside or run for shelter.

Scared but undaunted, Tom steadily reached in his jacket and pulled out a piece of salami. It was a regrettable waste of food, but the only safeguard each orphan carried on these monthly excursions. Instantly Wind's eyes lit up and his mouth closed; he was transfixed by the object.

Tom tossed the salami about thirty feet behind Wind and bolted for the house. While the dog devoured the tasty treat, Tom made it to the Grievouses' back window. *Perhaps Sarah's locket did bring me luck*, he thought fondly.

Standing by the glass, he peered inside. It was unoccupied. He removed a skinny metal ruler from his pocket and slid it between the double-hung windows, unlatching the brass lock. As Tom gently opened the window, it squeaked against the wooden frame. He stopped and looked around. No one heard. Pushing it up, he climbed in and landed softly on the floor.

The room was dark except for a hint of light coming from the hallway. The walls were lined with mahogany cabinets and hundreds of leather-bound books. Everything from Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare to Jane Austen and George Eliot inhabited the neglected shelves.

Tom quietly closed the window and silently walked over to this treasure trove of knowledge, diligently surveying each book.

After searching through the first three rows, he couldn't find any Dickens or Hardy, so he climbed up and checked the fourth level. Tom held on with one hand and looked through the books with the other. After several minutes, he spotted *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* nestled in the middle of the fifth shelf.

"Perfect," he said softly.

As he reached up and grabbed it, the bookshelf tilted forward. He held on tightly as it rocked back and forth. The creaking noise was dreadful, echoing throughout the room. *Perhaps they're not meant to be climbed on*, he quickly surmised. Tom desperately tried to balance himself, visualizing the impending disaster.

A few fretful moments later, the swaying slowed and the shelf settled back into place. Tom's forehead was dripping with

sweat, his shirt soaked. He let out a long sigh of relief.

“Who’s in there?” Mr. Grievous bellowed from another room.

Hanging on by one arm, Tom quickly removed the old book from under his shirt and slid it into the vacant space.

Footsteps approached from the hallway.

Tom hastily maneuvered down and hid behind a leather chair in the far corner of the study.

The door swung open. A desk lamp flicked on. Mr. Grievous entered, looking around and breathing heavily.

“What’s that noise?” he muttered, holding a cigar in one hand and a wineglass in the other.

A heavysset man with blond curly hair, Mr. Grievous wore a bright red riding coat, tall black boots and carried a horse crop he often used for striking orphans. An unscrupulous wretch, he liked to think of himself as an English gentleman; English he was, a gentleman he was not. Puffing like a chimney, he constantly reeked of cigars and waddled more than walked.

Mr. Grievous shuffled around until he stood right over the chair. Tom remained motionless — not a sound escaped from his lips.

Looking puzzled, Mr. Grievous continued to examine the room, making sure everything was in its proper place: the desk was untouched, no chairs moved, windows shut. He then looked at the bookshelves and did a mental count.

“Nothing’s missing,” he mumbled, scratching his head. “I know I heard something.”

Exhausted from his sudden excitement, he plopped down on the leather seat and continued puffing his cigar, a bluish

haze lingering in the air. The smoke drifted over the chair and engulfed Tom, penetrating his eyes and nose. He wanted to cough and sneeze, but silence was crucial. Desperate to breathe, he covered his face; the smell was nauseating and unbearable. His legs began to cramp, and his head felt dizzy.

After enduring twenty agonizing minutes, Tom watched with relief as Mr. Grievous finally extinguished his cigar in a nearby ashtray, took one last sip of wine and fell asleep. The loud snoring vibrated through the room.

Anxiously looking for an exit, Tom silently crawled back to the window, knowing freedom was only inches away. He nudged it open just enough, climbed through, and closed it quietly. Using his ruler, he resecured the brass lock.

Now aware of the exact location of Wind and the length of his chain, Tom kept to the far south side of the estate, outflanking the dog's last position. Strategically dashing from tree to bush, he made it back to the castle door and twisted the knob. It was locked.

"Impossible," he stammered, his hands trembling. "Who could've locked it?"

Remaining calm, Tom remembered the emergency back-up plan: if an orphan was ever locked out, there was a slim chance the kitchen door was unlocked. Mr. Picketers, the cook, often forgot to secure it when he left. But it was directly under Speckle's bedroom.

Tom had no choice. He carefully ran around the building and stopped by the kitchen entrance. He tried the door. The knob turned slowly. Relieved, he pushed his way in and firmly closed it.

The kitchen was pitch-black, creating an obstacle course of rusty stoves and outdated equipment. The smell of stale bread and spoiled soup permeated the congested space.

Tom moved stealthily around, reaching out for unseen objects as he tried to find his way to the other side. He occasionally knocked his head on a copper pot dangling from the ceiling but quickly rubbed away the stinging sensation. Following a few more jabs to his side from sharp corners, he found the exit and stepped softly into the dining hall.

Gingerly walking across the hardwood floor, he entered a corridor and stopped. Passed out by the fireplace were Brewster and Sludge, snoring in unison.

Tom gently tiptoed past and started for the stairs when he heard someone coming. He jumped behind an antique cabinet and knelt.

In staggered a dark figure carrying a candle and reeking of alcohol. It was the groundskeeper, Mr. Crowley, better known as "the Badger," because he was small, but mean and nasty. Although he oversaw maintenance, no one was sure what he fixed or repaired, trimmed or cut, raked or cleaned, but he certainly drank a lot. A short stocky man, Crowley had skin like leather, a few sprouts of hair and a pudgy nose.

Tom remained stationary while Crowley stumbled into the kitchen, probably heading for a late-night snack.

Tom cautiously made his way up the stairs and back to his room. Once the book was securely hidden, he crawled into bed, closed his eyes and instantly drifted off to sleep. The mission was accomplished.

Early the next morning, Tom was violently awakened by the shaking of his bed.

“Get up!” yelled Speckle, towering over him. “You’re coming with me!”



Britfield & The Lost Crown is a fast-paced adventure that transports the reader from the smoldering crags of Yorkshire, through the heart of England, and finally to the magnificent shores of Dover. Creating an interactive world of mystery and adventure, culture and education, Britfield is about family, friendship, loyalty, and courage.

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