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***BRITFIELD & THE RISE OF THE LION***

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C. R. Stewart

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*Britfield & the Rise of the Lion*

# BRITFIELD

&

## THE RISE OF THE LION

BOOK II

C. R. Stewart



**Devonfield Publishing**  
*"A Home for Exceptional Writers"*  
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This book is dedicated to  
**Dawn Michelle Dingwall**  
*Primus amor. Sine fine mihi love*



*Arte et Marte*  
**By skill and valor**

*Consilio et animis*  
**By wisdom and courage**

*Fide et Amore*  
**By Faith and Love**

# PROLOGUE

## BRITFIELD & THE LOST CROWN

### BOOK I

Escaping from Weatherly Orphanage, a place where learning is suppressed and children are treated as free labor, best friends Tom and Sarah outsmart the nasty owners, Mr. and Mrs. Grievous; the seedy caretaker, Mr. Speckle; and even the legendary watchdog, Wind. Shortly before running away, Tom discovers that his parents might be alive, a revelation that haunts him. Relentlessly chased by the illustrious Detective Gowerstone, an expert in apprehending lost children, Tom and Sarah narrowly evade capture by commandeering a hot air balloon and flying over central England.

Crashing at Oxford University, they met Oliver Horningbrook, a kind student, and receive the sympathy of Dr. Hainsworth, an esteemed professor, who decides to help them safely get to London. As the facts unravel, Tom learns that he was believed to have been kidnapped and killed as an infant and discovers that he might be the last surviving Britfield and the true heir to the British throne. Forced to land the balloon at Windsor Castle, Hainsworth seeks the patronage of a former student and head butler, Philip, only to learn that Philip is a conspirator involved in Tom's kidnapping.

With the help of Professor Hainsworth, Dr. Beagleswick, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, the facts come together in a compelling chase through St. Paul's Cathedral and the London Underground, with Detective Gowerstone in hot pursuit. As the story concludes, it is revealed that Gowerstone has been trying to help protect Tom, the kidnapped child he was assigned to locate ten years earlier. The despicable caretaker, Speckle, is actually an undercover agent working for Gowerstone, who is investigating the corruption of Weatherly and a ring of dishonest orphanages across England. And finally, the prime minister, Gowerstone's closest friend, is revealed to be part of the plot to eliminate Tom to protect the British crown.

After receiving vital information from Alexander, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who is a close friend of the Britfields, Tom, Sarah, and Professor Hainsworth board a ferry from Dover, England, to Calais, France, in search of the truth and the last surviving Britfields, hoping to confirm Tom's true identity. Their destination is Castle Chambord in the Loire River Valley, where the Britfields are presumably hiding. However, on the way across the English Channel, the ferry capsizes and sinks

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# 1

## ENGULFED BY THE SEA

When the ferry from Dover, England, to Calais, France, sunk in the English Channel, Tom and Sarah, who had become separated from Professor Hainsworth, vigorously rowed a lifeboat toward the French shoreline, its lights barely visible through a thick fog. Enduring days of turbulent weather, they drifted two hundred and fifty miles south until they landed on the shores of Mont-Saint-Michel.

Masked in mist, engulfed by the sea, and soaring above the glistening sands, the island outcrop was about one mile off France's northwestern coast. Linked to the mainland by a causeway, Mont-Saint-Michel had a massive tenth-century Norman monastery perched on top. Below the structure were winding cobblestone streets and a medieval village. The monastery was nicknamed "St. Michael in peril of the sea" by traveling pilgrims because the changing tides posed a constant threat to anyone walking across the wet sand. Founded in AD 529, the Order of Saint Benedict was a strict religious organization of communities that observed the Rules of Saint Benedict: obedience, work, prayer, and charity.

Freezing and half-conscious, Tom and Sarah were found by Brother Gabriel, an elderly, benevolent monk who brought them to the Benedictine Order. After discovering they were orphans, the other monks decided

to raise the children as their own. Not sure where to house a female, the monks moved Sarah to a secluded section on the opposite side of the monastery and tasked her with organizing their enormous library. Although she was told only to categorize the ancient texts, she spent hours reading by candlelight. She discovered all kinds of interesting facts and secrets, including essential clues about the Britfield Dynasty.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Brother Thomas, make sure you thoroughly clean the Refectory tonight. I found crumbs under Brother Michael’s chair this morning, and you forgot to scrub the cupboards after lunch.”

“Yes, Brother Joseph. I’ll be more careful,” Tom replied in a downtrodden tone.

“Don’t be more careful, be more thorough,” the monk scolded with a trace of displeasure.

Brother Joseph, about sixty years old, stern, with red curly hair, gave Tom a solemn gaze and left the room.

Tom, age thirteen, a wiry yet strong boy, stood motionless, his brown hair disheveled and blue eyes glistening. Dressed as he always was in a light brown robe and wearing leather sandals, Tom had heard these words every morning, afternoon, and night. No matter how hard he cleaned, swept, dusted, or mopped, he could not please these Benedictine monks.

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour later, Tom finished his grueling chores and headed toward his tiny dorm room, more a prison cell than a cozy boudoir.

Candle in hand, he ascended an inner staircase toward the Cloister Dormitory, then quietly crept down a back flight of steps to Saint Martin's Quarters, two floors below.

He tiptoed over the pitted cobblestone floor, through an arched hallway, and lightly tapped on an oak-paneled door.

"Sarah, you in there?" he asked softly.

"Where else would I be?" she replied sharply from the other side of the door.

"Well, you don't have to answer like that," Tom countered. "I took a big risk coming down here."

"Sorry, I just hate this place, and I'm all out of candles."

"I have an extra one. I grabbed a few from the workshop when no one was looking."

Tom removed a candle from under his robe and slid it beneath the door.

"Thank you. Now I can see," Sarah said. "Not much to look at, but I don't like the dark."

"Me neither," Tom agreed with a shudder. "This place reminds me of Weatherly: cold, harsh, and depressing. How long do you think we've been here?"

"Over six months," Sarah answered. "I've kept track with a calendar I found in the library."

"It seems like years," Tom remarked, wondering if they would ever escape this miserable imprisonment.

"Speaking of years," Sarah hinted, her tone shifting.

"My thirteenth birthday is in three days, on Monday, July eighth."

"I know. You have told me ten times."

"Just reminding you," she added nonchalantly. Sarah continued in a distressed voice. "I'm worried about Professor Hainsworth. I hope he made it safely to the French shore."

"Me too," Tom sighed, disheartened. "He was such a good friend."

"He was—" Sarah stopped in mid-sentence and quickly corrected herself. "He *is* the best of friends. There must be some way to find out if he survived."

"The only way to do that is to get out of here," Tom whispered guardedly, glancing over his shoulder, always wondering who might be listening.

"Agreed," she said eagerly. "Any ideas?"

"Not yet, but I'm working on it."

"Well, work harder," Sarah pleaded, a sense of desperation in her voice. "I can't imagine staying here another day."

Tom edged closer to the door. "Have you discovered anything else in the library?"

"Lots of interesting things," Sarah replied, her voice rising. "I've found all kinds of ancient manuscripts written in Old English, Latin, and French."

"You read French?"

"Of course," she replied. "Remember, I attended the best girl's prep school in Scotland."

"Yes, you've told me many times."

"But I'm having a problem with the Latin."

"Have you read anything more about the Britfields?"

"Their name is mentioned in some of the older books, but those manuscripts are kept in a private room, and I'm not allowed in there."

A door creaked open, followed by swift footsteps.

"Someone's coming," Tom warned her as he backed away from her door.

"Who's down here?" someone bellowed in a bloodcurdling tone.

Tom cringed, instantly recognizing the voice. "It's just me, Brother Jasper."

Brother Jasper came closer, revealing his ghastly face etched with pockmarks and a scar across his left cheek.

Tall, slender, and pale, Brother Jasper had devoted his life to the Benedictine Brotherhood and its tyrannical Code of Ethics, and he held the second highest position next to Abbot Chevalier. He always wore a dark brown robe and a silver cross around his neck.

"Brother Thomas, you don't belong down here—especially on this side of the monastery."

"I . . . I got lost again coming up the back way."

"Sure you did. Now go to your room," he ordered, his eyes fierce and his lower lip quivering.

"Yes, Brother Jasper," Tom replied obediently and turned to the door. "Good night, Sister Sarah."

"Good night, Brother Thomas."

Defeated, Tom marched back to his room and collapsed on his thin mattress. The confining space reeked of old wood and damp stone. A chill ran through his body from the nighttime air and the lack of heating. All the

doors were always locked at eight o'clock, making any nocturnal escape impossible.

As Tom blew out his candle, he was consumed by the same stillness that overtook the monastery each night. Drifting off to sleep, he remembered the horrible incident that had brought them to Mont-Saint-Michel.

It happened after midnight over six months ago, when the ferry from Dover to Calais was chugging across the English Channel on Christmas. Tom and Sarah stood by the back rail watching the lights of the British coast fade into darkness. Professor Hainsworth sat nearby, pondering their journey ahead.

When the ferry was about halfway to Calais, an enormous explosion rocked the boat. Tom and Sarah were slammed against the railing and fell to the wooden deck. Black smoke poured from the center of the ship. The passengers panicked, running about and screaming wildly. The ocean pounded the vessel, freezing seawater shooting into the sky and crashing down on the terrified passengers. The ferry swayed from side to side, tossing people across the deck, pitching others overboard into the icy water.

Rushing to Tom and Sarah, Hainsworth guided them to a small lifeboat. As Tom and Sarah climbed in, the ferry shifted, throwing Hainsworth to the deck. Tom reached out his hand, calling to the professor. Hainsworth crawled over and grabbed Tom's arm, but the ferry lurched again, rapidly filling with water. Hainsworth lost his grip as the lifeboat broke free and crashed into the fog-covered ocean. That was the last time they saw Professor Hainsworth.



Breathing hard and covered in sweat, Tom jerked awake. This nightmare had haunted him for months. While he longed to see the professor again, Tom knew that Hainsworth would want him to escape from the monastery, get to Castle Chambord, and find the Britfields.

\* \* \* \* \*

At six the next morning, the monks were finishing their sparse breakfast of fresh bread and raw vegetables in the Refectory, a vaulted room with rows of smoke-streaked granite columns. Colored light from stained glass windows brightened the grim space.

Sarah, her long, sandy blond hair tucked under a bonnet and wearing a light blue robe, sat alone in a corner.

Born into an affluent family, Sarah Wallace had led a privileged life in Edinburgh, Scotland, before her parents died in a suspicious automobile accident five years ago. She eventually ended up at Weatherly Orphanage and had become best friends with Tom. Smart and athletic, Sarah had hypnotic hazel eyes and an infectious laugh.

Tom also sat by himself, punishment for a long list of infractions that included talking, missing choir, and coming late to prayer.

Tom glanced at Sarah and gave her a nod. They both rose from the wooden benches and slipped into a dimly lit corridor, trying to steal a private moment.

As they began to whisper, Brother Gabriel approached from the far end. "Good morning, Brother Thomas and Sister Sarah," he said cheerfully.

"Brother Gabriel, where have you been?" Tom asked, shocked to see their rescuer, whom they hadn't laid eyes on since the day they had come to the monastery. "No one would tell us anything."

"I've been in solitude."

"For over six months?"

"Yes, it was ordered by Abbot Chevalier," Gabriel replied evenly.

"Why?" Sarah inquired, perplexed.

"The abbot wanted to remind me of our rules."

"Which ones?" Tom murmured under his breath.

"I wasn't supposed to leave the monastery the morning I found you on the shores of Mont-Saint-Michel."

"You saved our lives, Brother Gabriel," Sarah acknowledged tenderly. "We're grateful."

"So am I, and it was worth it." Gabriel smiled. Noticing their distraught faces, he asked, "What's troubling you?"

"We hate it here. Why won't they let us leave?" Tom asked bitterly.

"I don't know," Gabriel replied. "I thought you would've been on your way by now."

"We would like to go," Tom continued. "I need to find my family, or at least I hope they're my family."

"You know where they are?"

"Yes, but I'm not supposed to talk about it."

"Then don't. I'll speak with Abbot Chevalier today and see what I can do," Gabriel promised. "For now, you better get to your chores."

Brother Gabriel gave them a comforting smile and walked into the Refectory.

"We need to figure out what to do," Tom whispered, his determination renewed. "Let's meet tonight when everyone else is at evening prayer."

"It's too risky," Sarah cautioned him. "They're watching our every move."

"Since when have you been afraid of risk?"

Sarah paused, reflecting on his comment. "Where do you have in mind?"

"The Knights' Tomb."

"The Knights' Tomb," Sarah repeated, uneasy.

"It's the safest place to meet," Tom assured her. "No one goes down there."

"And for good reason—all those bodies."

"They're in marble caskets. I don't think they'll be bothering anyone."

The image gave her a chill. Nevertheless, Tom was right—it was safe.

"Fine," she agreed hesitantly. "I'll see what else I can uncover about the Britfields and meet you later."

As Sarah headed to the library, Tom hurried to the workshop where he helped make candles and leather sandals the monks sold in coastal towns and villages.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shortly after Tom and Sarah left Dover, England, Detective Gowerstone had gathered a police force and headed to Weatherly orphanage, in Yorkshire, Northern England. He arrested the owners, Mr. and Mrs. Grievous, who were sentenced to thirty years in prison for fraud,

abuse, and other sinister activities. Although they showed little remorse, their despicable enterprise was shut down forever. Afterward, Gowerstone worked relentlessly to find each child a safe home and a loving family. The orphans were indebted to Tom and Sarah, knowing that after their escape, they had helped the authorities bring an end to Weatherly.

For months Gowerstone was hailed as a national hero, besieged with awards and interviews, but he wasn't interested in the attention or the accolades. The detective knew that he had only scratched the surface of a corruption that went far deeper: it involved the prime minister of Great Britain, members of the British Parliament, and a clandestine organization that was behind many nefarious activities hidden from the public.

Although Gowerstone was determined to expose the truth, *he* was also exposed—with his ongoing investigation, he had become a threat to the secret organization he wanted to destroy. They knew who he was and wanted him eliminated.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three hours later, Sarah was still busy in the monastery library, a stone labyrinth of interconnecting rooms housing centuries of ancient documents.

After dusting and organizing the main sitting area, she snuck into a private room crammed with old manuscripts. Reading by candlelight, she became engrossed in a nineteenth-century English text written

on vellum. Folded between the delicate pages was a royal decree signed by Queen Victoria of England—it was a revelation. While Sarah was reading, she heard a sound in the adjoining room.

She swiftly stuffed the royal decree into her robe and stood. The chamber door swung open so hard it slammed against the wall.

“What are you doing in here?” Brother Jasper demanded, the candlelight revealing his face, contorted with anger.

“I, um, was organizing the books,” Sarah stammered.

“This area is forbidden.”

“Is it? I just thought—”

“You thought wrong.”

Jasper aggressively approached Sarah, backing her against the shelves. “I don’t like you snooping around in here,” he stated, eyeing her suspiciously.

He grabbed her arm and yanked her forward, tossing her toward the doorway. Stunned and shaken, Sarah scurried into the other room, closely followed by Jasper, who locked the door behind him.

“Don’t ever let me catch you in there again,” he thundered with an undercurrent of malicious intentions.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that night, Tom and Sarah met in the Knights’ Tomb, a medieval crypt crammed with burial vaults of noble families and the Knights Templar. Rows of alabaster columns supported a domed ceiling painted with biblical

frescoes showing the great flood and Noah's ark. The colorful images shimmered in the candlelight.

Sarah stood by one of the pillars, shivering in the damp.

"Did you discover anything else about the Britfields?" Tom asked, eager for more information.

"I did," Sarah responded enthusiastically. "Everything Professor Hainsworth and Dr. Beagleswick told us about the Britfields is in the manuscripts I've read. There's information about the Britfields' true claim to the British throne, documents indicating their property was stolen and that they were murdered."

"So it's written down somewhere, which means that not all the evidence was destroyed," Tom realized.

"Exactly," Sarah said, her eyes aglow.

"Somebody has worked very hard to keep all this hidden."

"I don't think it's just one person or even a royal family," Sarah said, not sure where to begin. "I've discovered clues about an organization, a secret group that seems to control everything: royal dynasties, governments, even world events—"

"That's crazy," Tom dismissed. "No one has that kind of influence."

"They do when they have money," Sarah countered. "They can buy anything or anyone."

"Why? What do they want?"

"From what I can gather, power."

"What does this have to do with the Britfields?"

Sarah lowered her voice. "It's why they were

murdered. They couldn't be bought or bribed, so they were eliminated."

"You don't just mean physically, but from history altogether?"

"Yes," she replied, pulling the document from her robe. "I found a royal decree to execute the Britfields, signed by Queen Victoria."

"Really?" Tom questioned, then looked around nervously. "You shouldn't have taken that from the library."

"I'm just borrowing it," she said defensively. "Anyway, if you're the last Britfield, technically it belongs to you."

"I suppose there's a certain logic to that," he agreed. "What's it doing in France?"

"I think the Britfields shipped some of their documents to Europe to protect them," Sarah speculated, pondering the question. "I doubt if anyone knows they're here."

"What does the decree say?"

"It's mostly in Latin."

"And you don't read Latin."

"Not really," she admitted grudgingly. "But there are sections that list specific names and dates."

Holding it next to a candle, Tom examined the decree.

"If it's real, this is actual proof," he concluded, realizing just how important this piece of paper was.

Tom gave it back to Sarah and paced around the crypt, wondering what to do next. "We must get to Castle Chambord and find the Britfields," he stated with resolve.

"Agreed, but what's the plan?"

Tom removed a small business card from his robe and examined it.

"You have a pocket inside your robe?" Sarah asked, intrigued by the secret compartment.

"I stitched it there so I could hide things."

"Clever," she said, impressed by his ingenuity.

Tom showed Sarah the card. "Detective Gowerstone told us to call Inspector Rousseau if we needed help."

"How do we contact her?"

"I don't know, but she's our only hope."

\* \* \* \* \*

When Tom and Sarah failed to arrive at the port of Calais over six months earlier, French inspector Fontaine Rousseau was frantic. She had promised Detective Gowerstone that she would protect the children and get them to Chambord, but she didn't know where they were.

The youngest inspector at Interpol, Fontaine had to work twice as hard to earn the respect of her elders. Born in Nice, France, Fontaine had three older brothers, all in prominent corporate positions across Europe. She excelled in school, graduating early from the Sorbonne and earning a master's degree in criminal psychology from Cambridge University.

An exceptional investigator, Fontaine had a warm heart but a tough exterior, the result of once being in love with a man who had put his work before their relationship. In her mid-thirties, she was a natural beauty with shoulder-length auburn hair, green eyes, and a petite figure from years of classical ballet as a child. She trained in martial arts, enjoyed playing the piano, and ate only organic food.



Learning that the ferry from Dover had sunk, Fontaine and her partner, Agent Gustave Devereux, spent months scouring the shoreline from Dunkirk to Brittany, hoping to find Tom and Sarah. They had searched neighboring villages, questioned local authorities, and monitored police radios. Not knowing if Tom and Sarah were alive, Fontaine continued to search for any news of their whereabouts.

\* \* \* \* \*

Conflicted about what to do, Brother Gabriel humbly stood before Abbot Chevalier in his private quarters. The abbot was an imposing figure who towered over the other monks. Stern and arrogant, late sixties, he had a deep, menacing voice.

“Sir, may I speak with you?”

“Of course, Brother Gabriel,” Chevalier responded. “What’s on your mind?”

“It’s about Tom and Sarah,” Gabriel initiated. “They’d like to leave the monastery.”

The abbot let out a throaty chuckle with a trace of agitation. “They’re orphans,” he said dismissingly. “Their desire will pass.”

“I understand, but if we could find them a family or a more suitable place to live . . . This is no place for children to grow up. They need to have a normal childhood.”

“No, they don’t. The children belong to us.”

Gabriel was taken aback by the abbot’s statement. “How long do you plan to keep them?” Gabriel inquired, deeply concerned.

"We'll raise Tom as one of our own and send Sarah to a convent."

"Abbot Chevalier, with all due respect, we're here because of our own commitment. Tom and Sarah deserve to have that same choice."

"The world is a harsh place, Brother Gabriel, filled with wickedness and deceit. They are much safer in our care."

"You mean locked behind our walls."

"That's enough," the abbot declared, angered. "Didn't you learn anything from your time in solitude? Why are you arguing with me?"

"Because someone needs to look out for their future."

"And we're not? We took them in, clothed them, fed them, and gave them a place to live."

"That's charity, which is what we're called to do," Gabriel retorted. "But to dictate the rest of their lives—"

"That's my final answer," the abbot stated decisively. "Tom will become a monk, and this Friday we will relocate Sarah to the Eglise Convent in Strasbourg."

## 2

# A MIRACULOUS ESCAPE

The next morning as Tom and Sarah finished their meager breakfast, Brother Gabriel entered the refectory and motioned them to a back stairwell. They followed, unnoticed by the other monks.

"I spoke with Abbot Chevalier," Gabriel began, his voice distraught.

"W-what did he say?" Tom inquired anxiously.

Gabriel paused, trying to gather his words. "He's not going to let you leave the monastery."

Tom's eyes opened wide. "Ever?"

"I'm afraid not," Gabriel sighed deeply. "It seems the Brotherhood has its own plans for your future."

"What plans?" Tom griped, flustered.

"They want to raise you as one of their own and send Sarah to a convent."

"Raised as a monk?" Tom exclaimed.

"A convent?" Sarah questioned, bewildered. "I'm not going to be a nun."

"What can we do, Brother Gabriel?" Tom asked urgently, their future hanging in the balance.

"We must act fast," Gabriel replied with conviction. "It's not good for either of you to stay here any longer."

"What do you suggest?" Tom asked, intrigued.

"At exactly eight thirty tonight, I will help you escape."

\* \* \* \* \*

That evening Brother Gabriel snuck a rope from the workshop and unlocked Tom's and Sarah's doors. He promptly handed them donated clothing and shoes from a local thrift shop.

After quickly changing, Tom grabbed the documents Archbishop Alexander had given him at Canterbury, a map of France he had "borrowed" from the library, and the locket Sarah had given him at Weatherly.

Sarah hastily dressed, then wrapped the royal decree in plastic she found in the kitchen, tucked it under her shirt, and tied her hair in a ponytail.

"We must be quiet," Gabriel whispered as he escorted them down a shadowy hallway and around a corner.

They both nodded as they tiptoed through a maze of corridors and down a spiral staircase that ended at a large iron gate. Gabriel removed a set of keys attached to his robe and unlocked it.

"We can't use the monastery entrance," Gabriel cautioned them. "It's watched too closely."

Stealthily guiding them to the monastery wall, Gabriel fastened the rope around an ancient cannon and tossed it over the side. Thirty feet below was the quaint village of Mont-Saint-Michel, its terra-cotta rooftops glistening in the moonlight, smoke curling upward from the chimneys.

"You'll need to climb down and head to the west gate," Gabriel instructed, gesturing toward the village entrance. "It leads to the only road off the island."

"We don't know how to thank you," Sarah whispered, her heart warmed by his kindness.

"It's an honor to serve," Gabriel stated with a slight bow, then handed Tom a one-hundred-euro note. "This will help you on your journey. With a little blessing, it will get you to where you need to be."

Tom was stunned by his generosity. "Thank you—for everything."

"What will happen to you?" Sarah wondered aloud, mindful of the grave risk he was taking.

"Don't worry. You have enough to deal with," Gabriel replied evenly. "But you must hurry. Once you're safely on the mainland, head north about four miles until you reach the town of Avranches. It's Tuesday, so the trains stop running at 1:00 a.m."

"We'll get to the train station," Tom assured him.

"And remember," his voice rose, "the tide is coming in. Make sure you stay on the causeway until you reach the other side. We've lost many visitors who were swept out to the sea by the rising tides."

Taking a deep breath, Sarah trembled at the thought.

"We understand—stay on the road," Tom acknowledged, mentally preparing for the task ahead.

They both hugged him and walked toward the wall.

"God bless you, Sarah," Gabriel said tenderly. "May the Lord protect you and keep you safe."

Sarah smiled, comforted by his kind words.

"And you too, Lord Britfield," Gabriel added reverently. "Godspeed to Chambord."

Sarah and Tom froze, looking at each other. When they turned, Gabriel was gone.

"Did he just say what I think he said?" Tom mumbled under his breath.

"I think so."

"How did he—?"

"Know about Britfield?" Sarah inquired, a blank expression on her face.

"Yeah."

"And Chambord?"

"Yep."

"No idea," she replied. "Perhaps someone is looking out for us."

They both glanced toward the sky.

"Maybe so," Tom shrugged, encouraged by the notion. He grabbed the coarse rope and prepared himself. "You ready?"

Sarah peered at the village below. Although it was a daunting task, climbing around rooftops and scaling obstacles were essential skills they had mastered at Weatherly Orphanage.

"I'm ready," she said confidently.

Tom mounted the stone wall, its rough surface chafing his skin as he eased over the edge. Sarah waited for a moment and followed behind.

Dangling from the medieval structure, they skillfully scaled down hand under hand as they tried to find footing along the wall. The wind was brisk, throwing them off balance.

While Sarah advanced, her feet kept knocking into Tom's head. "Do you mind?" he grumbled, glancing up with a frown.

"You're moving too slow," she whispered loudly.

"We can switch."

"It's too late," Sarah said dismissingly. "Just move faster."

"Easier said than done."

They swung from side to side, taking each step with caution until they finally reached the bottom, their hands and arms aching.

Tom caught his breath and scanned the area. The town was relatively quiet, just a few locals wandering the streets: a nearby pub echoed with laughter, and a restaurant bustled with activity as the waiters glided back and forth serving their patrons. The summer breeze carried the scent of the ocean.

Tom unfolded his map and pointed to a dot. "We're right here on this tiny island. Once we get across the causeway, we'll walk along this main road until we reach Avranches."

"And from there we'll take a train to the Loire Valley and find Chambord," Sarah added, using her finger to skim the map's surface to their destination.

"That's if we can find the town and the train station."

"One thing at a time," Sarah advised. "Let's get off this island first."

Tom folded his map, and they hurried toward the village entrance, periodically asking locals for directions. Hastening along the cobblestone streets, they worked their way through the sleepy village and finally reached the main gate.

The waves pounded the fortified walls as the tide rose rapidly. The sea air smelled like freedom.

"We should hurry. The water seems to be rising," Tom urged.

"How far across?" Sarah wondered, her heart pounding.

"It looks like about a mile to the mainland."

Sarah stood motionless, glaring at the untamed ocean smashing against the causeway. She was petrified, recalling her recent experience.

"You okay?" Tom asked, noticing her anguish.

"Y-yep," she muttered, feeling rather timid.

"We should get moving."

Sarah nodded, accepting the inevitable. She closed her eyes, calmed her breathing, and focused on getting to the other side.

They edged onto the sandy causeway and headed for the mainland, its distant lights scarcely visible as fog draped across the damp surface. Marching forward, their feet sloshed through the seawater lapping the sides.

"Brother Gabriel wasn't kidding about the tide," Tom said, unnerved, the frigid water squishing inside his sodden shoes.

"I can barely see," Sarah murmured.

"Here, grab hold." Tom clasped her hand as he led the way, each step becoming more difficult.

Waves rolled in, crashing against the rocks and spraying icy saltwater into the air. Within seconds, they were drenched.

"So much for staying dry," Tom complained, his hair dripping.

"And w-warm," Sarah stammered, her teeth chattering and hands shaking.

Sarah stopped and stared hard at Tom, her eyes wide with terror. "I can't swim," she reminded him.



"Trust me, I remember," Tom mumbled to himself.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Hyde Park, London . . . the balloon crashing into the lake . . . desperately trying to find you."

"As I recall," she countered, her hands now on her waist, "you were the one steering the balloon."

"Details," he scoffed, dismissing the comment.

"Really?"

"All right. Point taken," Tom conceded with a grumble.

Sarah nodded, taking a firm hold of his hand again. "Now let's get to dry land."

Quickening their pace, they soon became disoriented in the fog. The thundering waves added to the confusion as water flooded their path, making it difficult to navigate.

"I can't see a bloody thing," Tom griped, searching back and forth.

"Me neither," Sarah added tensely.

"Just hold on to me."

"I am."

"But not quite so tight."

"Sorry, I'm just nervous."

"I know, it's all right," Tom reassured her. "I think we're at least halfway across."

They glanced back. Displayed in a kaleidoscope of lights, Mont-Saint-Michel looked like a Christmas tree floating on the ocean. It was beautiful, yet surreal.

Unable to see the road, they kept drifting toward the shoulder, slipping by the edge before veering back toward the middle.

"Let's try to stay in the center of the road," Tom

suggested, whipping his head from side to side. "That's if we can find the center."

They traveled another fifty yards, shifting from the right to the left until they walked too close to the edge. In one swift flash, their footing gave way and they skated down the side, sinking into the freezing Atlantic.

Caught by surprise, they frantically attempted to climb toward the road, but the tide rushed in and snatched Sarah, ripping her from Tom's grip and carrying her away. She was now at the mercy of the sea.

"Tom, help me," Sarah screamed, right before she slipped under the waves.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thirty minutes after he returned to the monastery, Brother Gabriel was summoned from his room and taken to Abbot Chevalier's quarters. Jasper stood by, seething with fury.

"Why aren't Tom and Sarah in their rooms?" Chevalier asked, suspicious.

Gabriel remained silent, concerned his voice would betray him.

"What have you done?" the abbot continued, his calm demeanor shifting into contempt.

"What is right and just," Gabriel responded.

The abbot motioned to Brother Jasper. "Notify the local police that two children have escaped from our monastery."

"Yes, Abbot Chevalier."

Jasper glared at Gabriel as he left the room.

"I'm very disappointed in your actions tonight," the abbot fumed.

"You have no right to hold two children against their will," Gabriel said bravely.

"I'm the abbot of this monastery. I have every right."

"And separating them, sending Sarah away to a convent, it's just cruel."

"These are my decisions, not yours."

"I'm only looking out for their futures," Gabriel asserted.

"Your actions tonight are deplorable," the abbot continued, shaking his head furiously.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you."

"You've done more than that," he said, taking a document from his desk. "You've given me no choice but to remove you from Mont-Saint-Michel and the Brotherhood. We can no longer trust you."

This comment wounded Gabriel, now distressed that his character was being brought into question. "Where will you send me?"

"The Abbey at St-Jean in Lyon."

"But that's where I began forty-three years ago," Gabriel stressed, saddened.

"And that's where you'll start again."

\* \* \* \* \*

Now engulfed by the Atlantic Ocean, Tom and Sarah were fighting for their lives. Pushed up and down by

the turbulent swells, they were helpless against this powerful adversary.

Desperately trying to save Sarah, Tom grappled for her arms, straining for a grip. He'd get within a finger's length, only to be knocked back by a wave and forced under the water. It was a tug-of-war between his determination and the relentless ocean wanting to claim another victim.

Sarah thrashed hopelessly as she tried to keep her head above water. She would catch the tip of a rock beneath her foot and balance for a second before being pulled away again. Why her parents never taught her to swim was beyond her comprehension, but now was not the time to think about it.

Tom swam after her, struggling against the undercurrent and gagging on seawater.

"Tom!" she hollered.

"I'm here!" he shouted back.

"Where?"

"Over here!" he called, waving his arms.

"I-I can't get to you," she gasped, feeling her last bits of strength slip away, thinking this might be the end and not wanting to die.

Tom dove under the freezing water and swam blindly toward her, fighting against the swirling current. After coming up twice for air, he finally surfaced next to her and grabbed her arm.

"Take hold," he yelled, stabilizing himself on a rock below.

Sarah clamped on to his shoulders and balanced next him, disoriented and desperate to catch her breath.

"T-thank you," she wheezed.

"Let's get back to the road."

Sarah nodded, her cheeks white and her eyes stinging from the saltwater.

Using the submerged rocks as leverage, they carefully maneuvered back to the causeway and climbed up the side.

Sarah plopped down, shivering. Tom knelt beside her, frozen and exhausted.

"Are you all right?" he asked, his hand resting lightly on her shoulder.

"J-just give me minute," she coughed, struggling to breathe.

"This whole thing's going to be underwater soon," Tom warned. "We should hurry."

"Okay," she sighed heavily, trying to slow her panicked breathing. Sarah looked at him affectionately. "Thank you for saving me."

"Of course, although I had no choice."

"W-why's that?" she wondered.

"I don't speak French."

Sarah rolled her eyes as Tom grinned. "I knew there was a reason," she half chuckled.

Tom gently lifted her up and they continued to trek across the causeway. The wind roared violently as the tide kept rising. It was all they could do to remain upright and stay on course.

"We're almost there," Tom encouraged her, pointing at the brightening lights on the distant shore.

After a grueling march over the last hundred yards, they reached the mainland and collapsed on the soft

sand, their clothing soaked and their teeth chattering uncontrollably.

"I thought we'd never make it," Sarah admitted.

"I was beginning to wonder myself."

"You were scared?"

"A little," he confessed reluctantly. "I've never wrestled against the ocean before."

Sarah leaned back and tried to relax, her heart racing and hands still trembling. She then delicately pulled out the plastic-wrapped royal decree.

"It's still dry," she uttered, astonished.

"That's good—that document may come in handy."

Sarah tucked it away, then lifted her head, suddenly hearing voices. The entire coast was lit by flashing red and blue lights.

"The police," Sarah motioned, grabbing his shoulder.

"They know we escaped," Tom exclaimed. "I thought we'd have more time."

They jumped to their feet and ran toward an area camouflaged by shrubbery. Flashlights danced across the sand as officers searched the beach.

"We definitely can't take the main road," Sarah reckoned, peering out from the bushes.

Contemplating a strategy, Tom tried to read his drenched map by the hazy moonlight.

"Avranches is north of us," he began, developing his thoughts. "If we hike along the shore, maybe we can make our way up the coast."

"That'll take longer. We might miss our train."

"I know, but it's our only choice."

\* \* \* \* \*

After hours of scurrying along the coast and avoiding the local authorities, Tom and Sarah found Avranches.

Its ancient streets were lined with half-timbered buildings and quaint shops, offering a variety of goods: a cheese shop, grocer, fishmonger, shoe cobbler, hardware store, a few cafés, and a bar, mostly deserted.

They wandered the town in search of the train station. The summer air had slightly dried their clothing, but they still felt damp and sticky with salt.

"Where is everyone?" Sarah asked, an uneasy feeling in her stomach.

"I guess they're in bed," Tom speculated.

"We need to find the train station."

Looking around, Sarah noticed an elderly woman walking her poodle on the opposite side of the street and briskly approached. "*Bonsoir, madame,*" Sarah said, her accent perfect.

"*Bonsoir.*"

"*Où est la gare situé?*"

"*C'est plus par le palais de justice, à environ trois rues.*"

The woman indicated a large classical structure composed of ashen stone and rose-colored brick.

"*Merci beaucoup.*" Sarah waved as the woman passed by.

Tom walked over, somewhat intimidated. "You need to translate for me when you do that," he reminded her.

"Right, I forgot." She laughed. "I asked her where the train station is."

"And?"

"About three blocks from here, over by the courthouse."

"Gotcha," he responded. "You know, it's going to be handy having you in France."

"Then it was a good idea that you saved me."

"We'll see," he jested with a playful smirk.

As they continued along Rue du Dr Gilbert Street, a local police car crept around the corner, its spotlight skimming the storefronts.

Tom and Sarah immediately ducked into an alley and dove behind a hodgepodge of trash cans and empty boxes.

"I don't think they saw us," Tom whispered, his breathing rapid.

Their hearts pounded as the vehicle drove into the alley and stopped. The bright spotlight glided across the brick walls until it landed directly on their surprised faces.

"Stay right there. Don't move," one of the officers yelled from his open window.

Tom and Sarah sprang from behind the cans and sprinted toward the train station, the police car racing after them.

In the distance, a long silver train began pulling away from the terminal. Even though they were unaware of its destination, Tom and Sarah ran alongside and leaped on the back platform, yanking themselves up by the exterior guard rail.

The police car screeched to stop. Two officers jumped out and rushed toward the train, but it was too late. The train had picked up speed and hastened into the countryside.



"That was close," Tom gasped, sweat glistening on his forehead.

"Do you think they'll follow us?" Sarah asked nervously.

"Hopefully they have better things to do," he replied. "Although they could radio ahead."

"And have the police waiting for us at the next stop?"

"It's possible. We might have to jump off before we get there."

"At fifty miles an hour?" Sarah exclaimed, giving him frown. "I don't think so."

"The train will slow down as it approaches the next destination."

"Then you can go first, and I'll follow."

"Let's worry about it when we get there." Tom sighed, stretching out his arms and yawning. "I'm too tired to think, and my body aches."

He plopped down on the cold steel decking and stared at the passing countryside, its images streaming by.

"Where do you think we're headed?" he wondered.

"Could be anywhere," Sarah replied, watching Avranches disappear into the darkness.

"I feel all soggy and sticky from the ocean."

"The warm breeze should dry our clothes."

Sarah held out her hands to feel the wind glide between her fingers. It felt good to be free, at least for now. She curled up next to Tom and closed her eyes.

"I'm just glad to be out of the monastery," she said. "That place was creepy."

"It's certainly an odd way to spend your life."

"Like I wanted to live in a convent."

"And raising me as a monk," Tom sneered, shaking his head defiantly. "No way."

"At least you learned how to make leather sandals," Sarah teased. "That'll be useful if you ever want to be a cobbler."

"Yes, it's my life's ambition," he chuckled.

They laughed quietly as the train accelerated, its smooth rhythm offering a brief moment of tranquility.

The train wove its way across the French countryside, moonlight blanketing the lush farmlands and green meadows. The fragrant summer breeze was mixed with the scent of wildflowers and lavender. On the left side was the Atlantic Ocean with its windswept cliffs and beaches. On the right were cedar orchards and rows of blossoming dogwoods.

"It's beautiful," Sarah whispered, mesmerized by the scenery.

"After over six months at the monastery, anything's beautiful."

"I just wish I could have taken some of those books," she thought aloud. "It was a treasure trove of information."

Tom leaned forward. "Tell me about what else you found."

"It's all there," Sarah started. "Centuries of history kept from the world. I've spent months reading about things I've never even heard before."

"Why do the monks have all those books?"

"And the private rooms where they're hidden?"

"Yeah," Tom contemplated.

"I don't know, but they certainly didn't want me in there."

A male voice inside the cabin interrupted their conversation. "*Les billets, les billets s'il vous plait,*" the man called.

"What's he saying?" Tom inquired, his voice dropping to a whisper.

"He's asking for tickets," Sarah answered quietly, peeking in the back window.

"*Prochain arrêt, Rouen, Pontoise et Paris,*" the man continued.

"Paris?" Tom exclaimed, his eyes bulging. "I understood that."

"I've always wanted to see Paris," Sarah said wistfully, her eyes lighting up.

"Now?"

"I'm just saying . . ."

Tom frantically pulled out his map and searched for their location. "That means we're traveling east, not south—nowhere near the Loire Valley."

"Let me see."

As she grabbed the map, the wind whipped it from her hand and carried it into the night.

"Thanks," Tom grumbled, watching it disappear.

"Sorry."

"That's the least of our worries."

"Meaning?"

"What are we going to do in Paris?"

"Have fun, see the monuments, go to the museums, eat fabulous food."

"I'm serious," Tom continued, troubled. "We have no place to stay."

Sarah leaned on the guardrail and pondered their dilemma. "Remember when we were speaking with Alexander at Canterbury Cathedral?"

"Sure, I still have the information he gave us," Tom said, double-checking his pockets.

"Alexander said that if we ever needed help, we should contact Archbishop Filberte at Notre-Dame."

"So?"

"Notre-Dame is in Paris," she informed him, rolling her eyes.

"Right, but what if the archbishop's not there?"

"Then it's going to be a long night."

\* \* \* \* \*

Two hours later, the train pulled into Paris Nord Station, a historic structure modernized with steel and glass. A large four-sided, cast-iron clock hung from the ceiling, displaying 12:43. Although it was late, the station was bustling with people—a synthesis of locals, foreigners, and tourists.

Avoiding detection, Sarah and Tom skillfully jumped from the back platform as the train eased to a stop. They hastened toward the exit when Tom saw a nearby vendor and bought a map of Paris.

"How much do I owe you?" he asked.

"*Ce sera sept euros*," she replied in a crisp, rude tone.

"What?"

"That'll be seven euros," she repeated snappishly.

"Oh, okay," Tom agreed, handing her the damp hundred-euro note.

"Don't you have anything smaller?" she asked, agitated.

"Nope."

"Foreigners," she huffed, then grudgingly gave him his change.

Sarah snatched the map from Tom's hand and studied it, her spirits lifting. "Okay, we're here at Paris Nord Train Station," she began, pointing at a spot on the map, "and Notre-Dame is right there, in the center of Paris. It shouldn't be more than a couple of miles."

"Right now that sounds far."

"We can take the metro, if it's still running."

"I'm tired of trains," Tom protested.

"Then stop complaining and start walking," Sarah goaded in a lighthearted manner.

"I'm also starving," he moaned, rubbing his stomach.

"You're always hungry."

"I can't help it."

"Well, there's nothing we can do about that right now." Sarah folded the map, turned on the spot, and marched away.

"Hey, wait up," Tom clamored, exasperated. "You know I don't speak French."

They left the station and wandered onto Boulevard de Magenta, a sprawling avenue packed with luxury shops and high-rise apartments, their greenish-copper rooftops and spiral chimneys towering overhead. A

passing shower had transformed the pavement into a glimmer of colors.

Tom stopped in his tracks, gawking at all the sights. "Wow," he gasped. "This place is amazing."

"Welcome to Paris," Sarah announced. "Come on, let's explore."

She grabbed his hand and yanked him forward, her enthusiasm contagious.

Strolling along the boulevard they passed an array of chic clothing shops, posh cafés, funky art galleries, and trendy coffeehouses. The sidewalks were crammed with small marble tables and wicker chairs, a variety of yellow and blue umbrellas hovering above.

In the distance was Pompidou Center, an avant-garde monstrosity designed with metal pipes, steel cables, and air ducts displayed on the exterior.

"Look at that thing," Tom pointed, aghast.

"That style of architecture is called postmodernism."

"I don't care what it is—it's hideous."

Sarah shook her head. "If only you could appreciate art."

"If that's art, I don't want to appreciate it."

"It's simply a style of art, a type of expression," she tried to explain.

"It's expressing something, that's for sure."

"You need to learn about the finer things in life."

"I do know about plenty of finer things," he argued, annoyed by her preoccupation with art. "Which is why we should find something to eat."

Tom searched the area and noticed a cheese shop across the street, its front light still on. "There's hope," he declared as he ran over.

Sarah reluctantly followed.

Tom tapped on the window, impatiently gazing inside. An interior light from a back room flickered on. A figure moved toward the glass. The door eased opened.

*"Oui, qu'est-ce que vous voulez?"* the man inquired, perturbed.

Tom glanced at Sarah.

*"Nous voudrions acheter du fromage,"* she replied, motioning to enter.

"I speak English, but we're closed. Everything is closed."

"Please, sir, we're starving," Tom pleaded, trying to make his eyes convey innocence.

"You're British," the man perceived.

"Yes, sir."

"Figures," he sighed, hesitating.

"We haven't eaten all day," Tom persisted.

"That's not my fault."

"But we're desperate."

"Watch the *we*," Sarah interjected.

The shopkeeper relented, shaking his head. "Fine, come in, but make it quick," the man told them.

As they walked into this paradise of Parisian delicacies, their senses were overwhelmed by aromas. With hundreds of choices, it was like a candy store, except it was full of cheese: Brie, Cheddar, Gouda, Pipo Crème, Bleu de Bresse, Stilton, raclette, vacherin, and Roquefort. They tasted a bouquet of samples, and both favored the Brie.

The man gave them a hardy selection, including a loaf of bread and two bottles of sparkling water. Tom

happily paid the thirty euros, and they sat outside, enjoying their provisions.

"Maybe I was a bit hungry," Sarah admitted, devouring the delicious treats.

"So it's not just me?"

"No, it's not just you," she agreed.

After the nourishing meal, Tom and Sarah continued toward Norte Dame until they reached Quai de Gesvres, a parkway next to the Seine River, its majestic reflections sparkling with lights.

Now in the heart of Paris, they stood in wonderment. The city was a flurry of sounds and movement: the hum of traffic, flashes of colors, and the lingering fragrance of smoky wood and damp leaves. The vibrant metropolis radiated a sense of excitement and sophistication.

Looking up the Right Bank (north side) and down the Left Bank (south side), they marveled at all the activity: couples walking along, cars rushing by, and boats illuminated with colorful lights cruising the Seine. The poplar-lined avenues were filled with Parisian cafés, bourgeois townhouses, and historic monuments. Modern structures merged with French Renaissance and Baroque architecture. The Eiffel Tower glowed in the distance, dominating the skyline.

"It's like nothing I've ever seen before," Tom admitted, astonished by the carnival of lights.

"It's another world," Sarah declared, her eyes gazing in bewilderment. "I always longed to see Paris, and now I'm standing in the center of it."

"We should find that church," Tom reminded her.



"You mean Notre-Dame? It's a bit more than just a church," Sarah clarified.

They crossed over Pont au Change to Ile de la Cité, a small boat-shaped island. Behind them was the Conciergerie, a sinister-looking building.

In front of them was Notre-Dame, a marvel of medieval engineering and craftsmanship. Started in 1160 by Bishop de Sully, the extraordinary cathedral soared over two hundred feet into the heavens.

Tom stared at the enormous stone structure, its three gigantic arched entryways decorated with biblical figures, life-sized statues supporting an upper rim, and a massive rose window. Flying buttresses reached for the walls, the steep-pitched greenish rooftop pierced the sky, and grotesque gargoyles stared down.

The wind whipped around the courtyard, rattling the stained glass windows and howling through two Gothic towers overhead.

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea." Tom's body tensed.

"We've come this far," Sarah reasoned. "Just knock on one of the doors and see if anyone's there."

Tom timidly approached the massive entryway and hesitantly knocked. No answer. "Well, at least we tried," Tom said feebly.

"Try again," Sarah persisted, motioning him back.

Tom knocked harder. The door vibrated, making a thunderous sound.

After a moment of silence, they heard noises coming from inside.



Born in Newport Beach, California, **C. R. Stewart** has 20 years of experience in writing fiction, non-fiction, and screenplays. He is an award-winning, bestselling author, creativity specialist, international consultant, and prolific writer. Founder of prestigious Britfield Institute, a nonprofit dedicated to creativity and advanced learning, and Devonfield, an innovative company dedicated to the highest quality in publishing, film production, and education, Chad's areas of expertise are global strategy, international marketing, and film and media production. He received a Bachelor of Arts in British literature and European history from Brown University; earned an MBA from Boston College; and is pursuing a Master of Science in advanced management and a PhD in strategy at Peter F. Drucker and Masatoshi Ito Graduate School of Management, Claremont Graduate University. Chad has traveled throughout the world and spent two years in England, furthering his education and conducting research. Now based in San Diego, he is a strong supporter of education and the arts and sits on the board of Horizon University; is an adjunct professor at Fermanian School of Business, Point Loma Nazarene University; and is the past president of the board of directors of the San Diego Ballet. Chad enjoys world travel, reading, riding, swimming, sailing, tennis, and the arts.

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