

THE LOST SWORD OF JEANNE D'ARC

Chapter 1 Maid in France

(The scene: the luxurious town house of Sir Richard Malory. Max and Jo are at the ornate front door, atop gracious stone steps.)

‘Max, is this really your place?’ said Jo, her eyes wide with admiration.

‘Of course,’ said Max, leaping up the steps. ‘While Dad has his posting in Paris. It’s belonged to the Malorys for generations. Come on, Peabrain. Hurry up!’

‘Oh, don’t call him that!’ said Jo. ‘Here, Clive, let me help you.’ She took one of his bags.

Clive, Max’s school friend, was standing by the taxi, his mouth open.

‘Max, you told me it was a summer house. This is a p-p-palace.’

At that moment, the vast front door opened before them. A tall man, dressed immaculately in a morning suit, stepped out and bowed gently.

‘I am so pleased to see you, Sir,’ said the tall man. ‘Welcome. And to Miss Sami-Jo and Mr Clive.’

‘Hello, Charles,’ said Max. He handed the butler his coat, and rushed inside.

‘Thank you, sir,’ replied Charles. ‘Your father is awaiting you in the library.’

Max rushed through the entrance hall, a grand affair complete with chandelier, spectacular staircase, galleries and historic wall tapestries. Jo and Clive followed, awed by the splendour.

‘Max, wait!’ called Jo.

Max had disappeared into the library.

They entered the library, a vast room with floor to ceiling bookshelves. At a massive desk by the window, a handsome man sat at the phone. He was attended by an aide and a secretary, who turned as Max rushed to him.

‘Dad!’ said Max, throwing himself at the man.

‘Max!’ He had barely time to slam down the phone before embracing his only son. ‘And Sami-Jo. Sweetheart!’ he said, kissing her fondly. ‘How are your parents?’

‘Well, Uncle,’ said Jo, returning his kiss. ‘They send their love.’

‘And this must be the famous Clive Peabody,’ he added, shaking Clive’s hand warmly. ‘Welcome to Paris.’

‘Sir Richard, it’s very good of you to...’

‘Nonsense, any friend of Maximilian is a friend of mine.’

‘I understand you are something of a scholar, Clive?’

‘Oh, sir, I don’t k-k-know...’

‘Let me test you ... We are all invited to a special event tonight.

Can you guess what it is? My three clues ... Maid ... Martyr... St Denis.’

With that, Sir Richard went enigmatically back to his desk, a twinkle in his eye.

‘I say, Dad!’ protested Max.

‘Well,’ said Clive, ‘it’s obvious really.’

‘Obvious? How come Jo and I haven’t the faintest what he’s talking about?’

‘Because history b-b-bores you,’ said Clive. ‘Yet it’s full of drama.’

‘Shut up, Peabrain. Just tell us what the clues mean!’ Max was curious, in spite of himself.

‘St Denis is where all the kings of France were crowned,’ said Clive. ‘And isn’t there some sort of exhibition there?’

‘Correct,’ muttered Sir Richard.

‘And it is associated with the “Maid of Orleans”...’

‘Who,’ asked Max and Jo in unison.

‘Subsequently martyred, and eventually declared a saint.’

‘What!’ said Max.

‘Shut up, Max,’ Jo interrupted. ‘I think I know who it is!’

‘I’ll make it easy for you, Max,’ said Clive. ‘Think of someone who wore her hair short – like a man – rode into battle in armour, defeated the English, restored the French king to his throne – and finally was captured, tried as a witch, and sentenced to burn at the...’

‘Joan of Arc!’

‘Jeanne d’Arc,’ said Sir Richard, coming forward again, a broad smile on his face. ‘Exactly! Clive, you really are as smart as Max said. Tonight, St Joan is commemorated with the single most important exhibition ever held in...’

‘The sword!!’ said Jo.

‘Yes,’ replied Sir Richard. ‘Joan’s sword. The real thing – after all these centuries. And tonight, it is unveiled at St Denis – the very church where she prayed before going into battle against the English – to liberate Paris. And we are to be among the invited guests.’

Chapter 2 Blackout

(The scene: St Denis basilica – a breathtaking medieval cathedral on the outskirts of Paris.)

'For centuries,' said the guide, 'the famous sword was thought lost. Jeanne is known to have had it when she and the French army launched her famous siege against Paris – then held by the English - but after her capture, it vanished. However, rumours persisted that it in fact had survived. If so, it would be the most fabulous relic of all - a symbol of France herself. And now, here it is! We can tell it to be the true sword, which had five distinctive crosses on the blade.'

'Dad,' said Max in a whisper, 'if this is Joan's sword, it must be worth a fortune.'

'My French sources say \$100,000,000. Hence the security.'

'What security...?'

'Do you see the guards? France's finest, and armed to the teeth - 24 hours a day while the exhibition lasts. The sword itself rests, as you see, on a bed of velvet. I am told that a sensor detects the weight of the sword. If it is lifted, a signal triggers the alarm. And that's assuming the lasers surrounding the display case have not themselves already triggered the alarm - should anyone approach the case.'

'So it's completely safe?'

'Absolutely. But look, Max, the French President has just come in. I need to go. Could you occupy yourself with Sami-Jo and Clive, till after the ceremony?'

Max joined the others. He immediately detected a strained look on Peabody's face.

'What's up, Brain?'

'I've just heard something disturbing.'

'Yes?'

'Two monks - speaking Italian.'

'You understand Italian?'

'A little. My nanny was Italian. But the problem wasn't the language, it was *what* they were saying...'

'Come on, Clive, tell us.'

'"Night at 1800. Number 1 to the star. Number 2 the pyramid. Botzaris – the little belt at bald mountain. North at 2300."'"

'That's it?'

'Monks don't talk like that. Something's wrong.'

'Yeah. You're becoming paranoid. Cut out the nonsense. It's nearly time for the opening ceremony.'

'Max, we've got to tell someone. It's nearly six o'clock.'

'Who cares what time it is? And tell them *what?* That there are Italian monks in the church? That it'll be night soon? Actually, it's already night. Who cares? Come on...'

They were interrupted by a fanfare of music. Lights came up on the exhibit. A distinguished looking man stepped onto a low dais nearby.

'Monsieur le President. Mesdames et Messieurs. Bienvenue! To all our international guests, welcome! (*Applause*) This is a proud day for France. The immortal sword of our national heroine, Jeanne d'Arc, is now restored to the people. (*Huge applause*) At this most historic place, where la Pucelle d'Orleans attempted to defeat our enemies, we gather to celebrate...'

'WHAT? Pourquoi? HELP!'

The cathedral had been plunged into darkness. Outside the winter night shed no light. Inside was like a tomb, except for the cries of outrage and distress echoing through the chapel.

'Alluminez les feus! ATTENTION!!! Au secours!'

And just as suddenly the lights came on again. All was the same as before, except for...

The alarms were screaming. Everyone looked.

'THE SWORD!!!'

'Mon dieu, 'l'epee de Jeanne est disparu!'

'Police!'

'There he is!' It was Max. He was pointing at a man who was pushing his way through the crowd. He had something long and shiny in his hands. 'That guy's got the sword!' Come on, Jo, Brain. They haven't spotted him yet. Let's go after him.'

'You go,' said Peabody.

'What's the matter? Scared?'

'No. I'm not certain he's the culprit. I'll stay - and investigate further. I'll call you if I discover anything.'

'Oh, Max. Here we go again.'

Chapter 3 To the star

(The scene: the heart of Paris. Max and Jo are in a car driven by Charles.)

'He's getting away...!' wailed Max.

In front of them was a man on a Vespa. He was ducking and weaving through the traffic. On his back was a long black bag, the sort you put a fishing rod in.

'It's Clive on the phone,' interrupted Jo. 'He wants to know if we've still got him in sight.'

'No,' yelled Max, 'we're losing him. Can he give us any hint about where he might be going?'

'To the star, he says.'

'What?'

'Etoile – star in French. The monks mentioned it.'

'Yes, but where is the star?'

'He says: The Arc de Triomphe is also called Etoile – because twelve avenues radiate from it like a star.'

'Right, you stay with Charles in the car, and get there as fast as you can. And get Peabrain to tell Father and the police. They should have arrived at the scene of the crime by now. Tell them the rendez-vous is at Etoile. I'll take another route.'

'What?'

But Max was out the door and gone.

'Charles, what's he doing?' Max had raced across the road and grabbed a bicycle. 'Charles, he's just grabbed someone's bike. Oh no.'

'Fear not, young Missy. He is hiring a device called a "Velib" – or "liberty bike". By using a credit card, anyone can take one, and return it later. You need not worry about the bike. However, I must say that I fear for the young master's safety.'

'Oh gosh, Charles. You're right.'

For now Max was flying off through the hectic Paris traffic. His feet were a blur on the pedals as he raced up the boulevard, in hot pursuit of the man on the motor scooter. In the distance, outlined against the sky was the famous Arch of Triumph. The traffic had slowed to a crawl, but the Vespa rider was weaving in and out of the traffic. So too was Max, and against all odds, he seemed to be gaining. When the traffic lights turned red, he mounted the footpath and kept going. It was neck and neck.

'Jo, Jo!' Sami-Jo was startled out of her reverie by Clive's voice. She had forgotten he was still on the line. 'Yes?'

'Tell Max to abandon the plan to go to Etoile. It was a trick - a red herring.'

'What?'

'A diversion. To throw us off the scent. The sword you and Max are chasing is a fake.'

'You're kidding me... How do you know?'

'Because I'm now following one of the monks - or should I say fake monks - and he's got something under his cassock - something long and thin. He's got the real sword!'

'But Brain. Max is gone. He's going to be at Etoile within minutes, following the guy on the scooter.'

At that very moments sirens wailed. Three police cars rushed past them in the emergency lane, lights flashing - on their way too, Jo realized, to the rendez-vous.

'Well I'll ring him. In the meantime, meet me at the Louvre. That's where the real sword is headed.'

'How do you know?'

'The pyramid - the famous glass pyramid. Number 2 is the real rendez-vous - at the Louvre. Meet you there!'

Chapter 4 The missing monk

(The scene: the Louvre, Paris. Jo and Peabody are standing by the glass pyramid. Charles has parked the car in rue Rivoli, nearby.)

'What do you mean, you lost him?'

'I'd trailed him all the way in the Metro,' said Clive, wiping his glasses nervously. 'I was only ever 50 metros away - in the same carriage - just behind him as he changed lines. Then, in the station at the Louvre, he stopped at a public toilet. He went in - and never came out...'

'Eh?'

'I watched for 10 minutes. Finally, I went in, at the risk of being spotted. It was absolutely empty.'

'Hey - here's Max!'

At that moment, a red faced boy on a bike appeared. Max dropped the bike and ran across the pavement towards them.

'You were right!' he gasped. 'No crosses.'

'Max. You idiot,' growled Jo. 'That was incredibly dangerous. You could have been killed.'

Max took no notice.

'The police grabbed him just as I arrived at the Arch. They surrounded him, put handcuffs on him and bundled him into a van. But as he went past I got a good look at the sword.'

'And?'

'Completely without markings.'

'A clever fake - meant to look like the real thing - but a dummy nonetheless,' said Brain wistfully. 'They'll know within an hour or so, by which time it will be too late. Meanwhile, unfortunately...'

'Brain lost the real thing!' blurted Jo. 'Oops, sorry...'

'It's true. Damn it. He got away. I lost him right here.' Clive pointed at the Metro.

There was silence.

'So it's gone for good?' wailed Jo.

'No.'

'How "No" when you just lost the guy?'

'Because of the other clues...'

'Pardon?'

'Bald mountain'. Botzaris. 'Belt'. I thought Botzaris was his name, but I think it's a place – somewhere they're all going to meet.'

'This is crazy!' said Jo. 'Let's go back to Max's place, and get in touch with the police. We probably know more than they do, and there may still be time.'

Minutes later they were back in the car, driven by Charles. The traffic had thinned a little after rush hour. They were making good speed.

'Botzaris is the name of a Metro station,' said Jo, showing Clive and Max the screen of her iPhone. 'But there are no mountains in Paris at all.'

'What park is that?' asked Brain, staring at the map. He was pointing at the green area beside the Metro station.

'Buttes Chaumont,' said Jo, zooming out. 'So?'

'Charles?' said Clive.

'Sir?'

'Do you speak French?'

'A smattering, sir.'

'What are the French words for 'bald', 'mountain', 'little' and 'belt'?''

'Why, 'bald' is 'chauve', I believe, and 'mountain' is 'montagne. The word for 'little' is 'petite' and 'belt' would be 'ceinture'.

'Jo, put 'chauve mont' and 'petite ceinture' into a search engine. I think we're making progress.'

'Ha!' said Max sarcastically. 'How did you lose the monk?'

Clive repeated what he had told Jo. Max frowned.

'What did he have on when he went into the loo?'

'A cassock, sandals,' said Clive, seeing what Max was thinking. 'His hair was long and dark. He had glasses.'

'And who came out, in the time you were watching?'

'A father and his little boy. The cleaning lady. And a guy in a tracksuit.'

'Description?'

'Bald. Sunglasses. Wearing joggers. Carrying a long sports bag.'

‘That was him!’ yelled Max. ‘Someone planted the clothes. He switched, and came out disguised. ‘And *you* let him go!’

‘Stop it, Max,’ said Jo. ‘He didn’t know. Anyway, I’ve got something to show you. I’ve found Bald Mountain!’

Chapter 5 Into the dark

(Max and Peabody have just come out of the Metro Botzaris. It is a cold, windy night. They are heavily dressed, with scarves, and carrying a bag with torches and snacks.)

‘What was that business about the bald mountain?’ said Max, as they trudged along rue de Crimee. Opposite them was the vast expanse of the deserted Buttes Chaumont park. The trees were tossing in the wind.

‘Buttes means high peak,’ replied Clive. ‘And Chaumont is a compressed version of the French words ‘chauve’ – *bald* - and ‘montagne’ - *mountain*. So ‘Bald Mountain’ – a park right in the centre of the city. I looked at it on the net, with Jo. It’s actually got a mini-peak right in the middle – and on top a temple.’

‘And the belt?’

‘In the nineteenth century, the French built ‘la Petite Ceinture’ – *the little belt*. It was a railway line that went right round the city – part of it above ground – part underground. However, when the Metro was built, it took away all the traffic meant for the ‘belt’ – which became a 17 kilometre long white elephant. But it’s historical, so it’s still there, though completely disused.’

‘Brain, enough with the history lessons... Why is it important, to us, tonight?’

‘Because that’s where they’re meeting. The line goes under the park – under ‘bald mountain’.’

‘Why would they meet somewhere like that?’

‘It’s central. It’s deserted – at night. And....’

At that very moment, Max’s phone rang.

‘Jo? What have you found out?’ He switched the phone to Speaker. Jo’s voice came through the chilly air.

‘It took a while, but I found something interesting.’

‘Well?’

‘When the Nazis occupied France during the Second World War, they dug bunkers all over the place.’

‘So?’

‘One of the most famous ones was at Buttes Chaumont. It led out of the railway tunnel and then up into the hill itself. And according to one blog I read, it’s perfectly preserved.’

‘That’s where they are,’ said Clive quietly.

‘Max,’ said Jo, a slightly shrill note in her voice, ‘Stay where you are. Don’t go into the park. I’ll get Charles to call the police. Now we have something really concrete to tell them. Max? ... Max?’

‘Sorry, Brain. Jo just dropped out.’

‘She’s right, Max. It’s too dangerous. We need to wait.’

‘Fine,’ said Max. ‘You wait. I’m going to have a quick look.’ He grabbed the rails of the park and vaulted over.

‘MAX! Don’t!’

‘Look, if I find something, I’ll ring you. Don’t worry. I’m OK.’

And without another word, Max disappeared down the slope of the hill – in the direction of the tunnel.

Clive looked at his watch. It was 8.30.

The tunnel had two lines. They were rusty, but otherwise in good condition. Max stepped carefully along the track, moving further into the dark. The smell was overpowering. Mould, dead animals, urine. In the light of his torch the walls shone and dripped steadily into the gutters on either side.

The further he advanced, the quieter it became. Soon the sounds of the city had practically disappeared, leaving only the sound of his breath and the drip of water.

Suddenly, he stopped. Something was sitting on the track in front of him. He shone his torch. It was a hand trolley – the sort workmen use to travel along the rails to repair things. Max reached out and tested it. The rocker arm gave under the pressure of his hands. The trolley rolled forward a metre, then stopped again.

‘It’s in good condition,’ thought Max. ‘They’ve used it. But for what? And where are they?’

The walls of the tunnel were still unbroken on either side. He was by now right under the hill. Still no sign of anything unusual.

‘Brain,’ said Jo, ‘they won’t listen. They admit that they chased the wrong man – the guy with the fake sword. They’ve now let him go. But they refused to listen when I told them about the Buttes Chaumont.’

‘It *does* seem highly implausible,’ said Clive. ‘Jo, there’s something I need to tell you.’

‘Which is...?’

‘Max has been in there for ages. I’m w-w-worried.’

‘Where?’
‘In the tunnel, under the park.’
‘What?!’
‘I think I should g-g-go in and see if he’s all right.’
‘Clive. Don’t move. I’ll be there in ten minutes.’

Chapter 6 The bunker

(Max is deep under the Bald Mountain. In his hands is a torch.)

‘I shouldn’t be doing this,’ whispered Max to himself. ‘Brain and Jo were right.’

But he kept going. He was 200 metres down a sloping tunnel that ran at right angles to the railway. He had finally found a door in the side of the railway tunnel, and had clambered in. By now he must be approaching a point directly under the peak. The walls dripped. The air was foul with mould and it was pitch black. And still nothing. He gingerly walked on.

Suddenly, he heard a noise. And it was behind him.

Quickly he scrambled into a recess in the wall of the shaft, and switched off his light.

The footsteps came closer. They were light and hesitant. Max shrunk back against the slippery wall. He pulled the hood of his coat over his head, and turned sideways. As the noises approached, he stood stock still.

The footsteps stopped. He held his breath and played dead. The light played over the tunnel and then stopped.

He could hear heavy breathing and something like a grunt. Did he dare look?

‘Max! You f-f-fool. You’ll get us both k-k-killed!’

Max almost embraced his friend. The relief was overwhelming.

‘Brain, what kept you?’ he yelled.

‘You’re a m-m-moron. Come out before something happens!’

‘I will. But first let’s see if we can find the bunker. It’s the key to the whole thing.’

‘If I show you, will you come out?’

‘Of course.’

‘It’s about 50 metres further in.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I mapped the park in my head,’ said Brain. ‘And then I stepped out the length of both tunnels – one metre per step. I was nearly there when I spotted an idiot hiding from me.’

‘I didn’t know it was *you!*’

‘You’re lucky it was *only me* – and *not* one of the bad guys. Speaking of which, we better keep our voices down. If the bunker is directly below the peak,’ whispered Brain, ‘it’s just ahead.’

They stepped on in silence.

‘STOP!’ yelled a voice.

Unseen hands came out of the dark and grabbed both of them. The boys felt something wrapped around their wrists. It felt like duct tape. At the same time, a blinding light came on. Two men, dressed all in black, were binding their hands. A bald man was standing by, giving orders. The false monk – thought Brain – the guy I let go.

‘Portarli di sopra!’

They were bundled up a steep flight of stairs. The bald monk led the way. Soon they were panting with the effort.

‘Max,’ whispered Clive.

‘Silencio!’ barked one of the men, and he slapped Brain lightly across the head. ‘Continuare!’

Eventually they emerged into an open space. It was the bunker. A low red light illuminated the scene. Narrow slits in the rock walls looked out on the city. But the room was not empty. It was absolutely crowded with boxes of all kinds. And there were at least six men there – the ‘monk’, another man that Brain recognized from St Denis, the man on the Vespa, the two body guards in black, and a tall man with a little beard. It was the last who was in charge.

‘Signor Caruso,’ said the ‘monk’ to the bearded man, ‘Intrusi! Inglesi,’ he added, and handing over the boys’ phones, ‘e loro telefoni.’

‘So,’ said the bearded man, smiling. ‘I don’t know how you found us. But welcome. Does anyone else know you’re here?’

‘Not yet,’ said Max. Clive was speechless with terror.

‘Good. And that’s the way, unfortunately, it’s going to stay. Portarli al cave! Subito!’ The men in black advanced towards them.

‘Do you have the sword?’ said Max.

‘Joan’s sword? How did you know that? Very well. Since you won’t live out the night, you might as well know. Show them, Carlo.’

The ‘monk’ picked up a golf bag. He plucked out the irons and the grid at the top of the bag. Then he reached inside. Out came a sword. It glittered in the light. Max and Clive just had time to see the famous crosses on its blade.

‘The sword of Jeanne d’Arc!’

‘And all the other treasures you see around you, lovingly accumulated over several months. There will be private sales to eager collectors in the next few days, before *we* go on a much needed holiday.’

‘But you can’t...’ blurted Max.

‘Oh but we can.’

‘Capo, e nove,’ said the monk. ‘Ricordare. Il rendez vous a ventitre. Signor Krump attende...’

‘You’re right,’ said Caruso. ‘Enough talk. Imballare. Porterò la spade alla stazione del nord.’

‘Ed i ragazzi?’ said the monk.

‘Al cave, e sotto il livello dell'acqua!’

The men in black, followed by the monk, instantly bundled the boys down the stairs again.

As they went, Max was making a mental note of the route – down the stairs inside the mountain, another descent, and deep into the bowels of the earth. In the flickering light, he noted skulls lined up along the side of the passage. The catacombs? They descended further and stopped. The walls were wet. An iron ring protruded from the wall. The monk slid a rope through their taped handcuffs and tied it to the ring.

‘Buona fortuna,’ he said, smiling grimly. ‘Spero che lei possa nuotare,’ he added, and laid Brain’s torch on the wet ground before them. ‘Arrivederci, idioti.’

And then they were gone.

‘What’s that noise?’ said Max. The silence was profound, except for a low burbling sound.

‘W-w-water,’ said Clive. ‘We’re below water level. And I think you’ll find they’ve opened a valve somewhere.’

‘Why?’

‘We know too much. *Spero che lei possa nuotare* means “I hope you can swim...”’

‘Oh no...’

Chapter 7 Against the clock

(Jo is standing in the tunnel of la Petite Ceinture.)

‘Thank goodness,’ she whispered to herself. ‘They’ve gone.’

The last of the criminals – for she knew that’s what they were – had just disappeared into the faint light at the end of the tunnel. She had covered herself with a rotten old tarpaulin the minute she heard people coming, and had crouched there, as still as a statue.

‘Yuk!’ she gasped, throwing the tarpaulin aside. ‘Gross. Still, they didn’t see me. Now where *are* those two idiots?’

She tried to remember the map of the park. She knew that she was now well under the hill. She knew that the bad guys had come out of a

low door in the tunnel wall, not far from where she was standing. But where were the boys? Surely they had not gone in to the bunker? But if they had, and those men had caught them, then they could be in real trouble. Jo had been debating what she should do, but her instincts told her something bad was afoot. Not the sword. She really didn't care about that. But her friend and her crazy, risk-taking cousin. What on earth was she to do?

Down in the quarry, the water was up to their chests already. In half an hour, the level had risen over a metre.

'Brain, I'm freezing,' said Max, through chattering teeth. 'Do something!'

'You got us into this,' said Clive. 'I'm going as fast as I can.' Brain was sawing away at his bonds with a pocket knife. 'Nearly there.'

'Give it to me!' said Max, grabbing for the knife.

'MAX ... NO... STOP IT! NOOOOOOOO!'

Too late. The knife slipped from Clive's hands and dropped like a stone into the water.

'You numbskull! In another few minutes, the water will be up to our faces. We'll either drown, or freeze to death. And all because you couldn't act responsibly. I try to act rationally all the time, but right now ... I HATE YOU! ... I NEVER WANT TO SPEAK TO YOU AGAIN!'

'BRAIN? MAX?'

'JO?'

'There you are! Max, you're a complete knucklehead. And Clive, even though you have a brain the size of a planet, you're an incorrigible dummy too. How could you let him suck you into this mess?'

'Jo,' said Max in his sweetest voice, 'give us the lecture *after* you've untied us. Please.'

'How did you find us?' said Max.

'I knew that Clive had gone to look for you. I saw the criminals come out. I reasoned that since they didn't have you with them, they'd left you inside. I followed the shaft in, and, after a few false starts, I found you ... using Brain's stones.'

'What?'

'Hansel and Gretel,' said Clive. 'Horrible story, but one good trick in it. They dropped white stones at intervals, to find their way back.'

'I followed them,' added Jo. 'And then I heard your voices.'

Then emerged into the railway tunnel.

'So what do we do now?'

'Have you got a phone on you?' asked Max.

'No.'

'Pity. And we're short of time. What is it now?'

‘Nine forty,’ said Brain. ‘They’re going to make the ‘sale’ at 11 o’clock. Carlo said: “Remember. The rendez vous is at twenty three hundred. Mr Krump is waiting.” And Caruso said: “Pack up. I’m taking the sword to the North Station.”’

‘North station?’

‘Gare du Nord. The Eurostar leaves from there to go to England. Mr Krump, the buyer, is about to take it out of the country.’

‘Right,’ said Max, ‘Jo, go back as fast as you can to the house. Get Charles to call the police. And then go straight to the Gare du Nord.’

‘Why me? And why aren’t you coming?’

‘Because Brain and I are going our own way. We haven’t got any money for the Metro, but we have our own transport...’

‘Which is?’

‘This little beauty.’

And with that, he leapt onto the railway trolley in the tunnel.

‘The line goes all the way round to the Gare du Nord. We’ll meet you there, and with any luck, be just in time to stop Caruso giving the sword to Mr Krump.’

‘No, Max, no...’

But Max didn’t hear any more. He and Brain were pumping the trolley for all they were worth, up and out of the tunnel.

Chapter 8 Rendez vous at 2300

(The scene is the international concourse of the Gare du Nord station, north Paris. The time: 2245.)

‘Charles,’ said Jo. ‘There are police everywhere. But there’s no sign of Max or Clive. And without them, we can’t identify the crooks.’

‘Patience, Missy. He’ll come. It’s 15 minutes before the Eurostar departs.’

‘Charles, can you talk to the police, please...’

‘What shall I say the felons will be carrying?’ asked Charles. ‘How will they hide the sword?’

‘Oh, Charles, I have no idea. The boys may know, but I’ve no clue whatsoever.’

‘Very well, Miss Jo. But it will be a trifle difficult to convince them.’ He bowed and moved gracefully down the steps towards the nearest officer.

Left to her own devices, Jo paced up and down. Why had she let Max have his head, again? If only she could talk to him. Down below,

perhaps a hundred people milled about. Any of them could be the people she was looking for.

Out in the street, Max and Clive were running flat out.

‘You said Gare du Nord,’ yelled Brain. ‘It was la Chapelle. Almost a kilometre to the north.’

‘Shut up and run,’ said Max. ‘I see it in the distance – all those lights up ahead. If only they hadn’t taken our phones...’

‘How will we know Mr Krump?’ called Brain.

‘We won’t. Our only clue is the bag. We have to get there before the exchange. Run, Brain...’

At eight minutes to eleven, a small group of men emerged from the station café. All of them had hand luggage. One had a golf bag. They moved quickly to the passport control area.

A large American in an expensive coat turned and looked at them. He took off his sunglasses and smiled.

‘Mr Caruso?’ he said.

‘Yes sir.’ The tall bearded man came forward and shook his hand. ‘We have what you ordered. But first, we want to know that we have been paid for all our hard work. Please indulge me.’

‘Certainly.’ The American took out his phone, opened up an email, and punched SEND. He held up the device to the other. ‘\$100,000,000 is now going into the Swiss bank account you specified. Satisfied?’

‘It’s a pleasure doing business with you,’ said Caruso. He motioned the man with golf bag forward. ‘I hope you enjoy your golf in England. And particularly that special iron we added in for you.’

‘The pleasure is all mine,’ said Krump, with a chuckle.

‘Andiamo!’ said Caruso. ‘Tempo di vacanza!’

‘POLICE! PUT UP YOUR HANDS!’ Out of thin air, a dozen officers had appeared, guns raised. ‘And you, Monsieur.’

Krump stopped in his tracks, and turned around. He dropped the golf bag to the floor, as if it had been given to him by mistake.

‘There’s some mistake,’ he whined. ‘I have a train to catch, sir.’

‘I think not. You will be coming with us, to help us with our investigations, Monsieur.’

‘But who...what...?’

‘These little boys. These little wet boys have a history to recount. We need to listen them. It is a history most interesting, Monsieur. It involves something very precious to la belle France.’

'Max,' said Sir Richard. They were sitting in Sir Richard's limousine. Charles had wrapped blankets round Max and Clive and given them a warm drink. They were heading for home. 'This is the last straw. Running all over Paris at night. Nearly getting killed. Endangering your friends, and your cousin. What am I to do with you?'

'Sorry, Dad. But think of it this way. I know so much more about history now. Not to mention the geography of Paris. And the police were very grateful, don't you think?'

'You're incorrigible. But...'

'Yes?'

'I must say how proud of you all I am. However, never again.'