

The Mason Wright Series

THE
BONES
OF
SAINT PIERRE

Steven Knapp



Can't Put It Down Books

The Bones of Saint Pierre
The Mason Wright Series Book 1
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*To the “Greatest Generation.”
Ordinary people who did the
extraordinary.*

Chapter 1

*January 1940
Metropolitan Museum of Art
New York City*

BREAKING INTO A RESTRICTED ROOM in the Metropolitan Museum of Art is serious, especially for someone who works there. Mason Wright felt his pulse quicken as he stared blankly at the open drawer in the cabinet. The room was cold, but beads of sweat formed on his forehead. He rifled through the drawer once more: nothing. He opened the other three drawers and achieved the same result: nothing. Where was it? How could it be gone? He had seen it just yesterday, and now twenty-four hours later, it had disappeared. His perfectly executed plan had just shattered. He decided to put everything back and get out as fast as possible. He had planned for a quick in and out, never thinking the map would be missing. This old map with very little value to anyone had apparently just become quite popular; someone else was looking for the same thing, and Mason had to find out who. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Then he heard the voice.

“Mason? Is that you? What are you doing in here?” The strident voice rang out across the room, startling him. He knew the voice very well; it belonged to Dr. Margaret Heckler, a highly respected art curator who had been recruited by the Metropolitan Museum five years before as the assistant director of antiquities acquisitions for the museum. She had worked here ever since. Mason did not know much about her, other than that she was extremely gifted in her knowledge of art and Museum

valuables, cared for an elderly mother at home, and sorely lacked social skills. Mason had known her for a little over a year, and during that time, if it was not work related, she kept to herself. She was very private about her personal life, brilliant at her job, and right now she was growing more impatient with every passing second. Mason didn't work "with her," at the museum, he worked for her: She was his boss, and he now needed to explain why he was in a restricted rare documents room in the bowels of one of the most famous museums in the world.

Mason Wright was twenty-eight years old, an assistant to the director of art curation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The title sounded more prestigious than it actually was; he was really just a low-level paid intern, but his experience in archaeology and rare artifacts far exceeded most people his age. He came from a famous and wealthy treasure-hunting family; his father, Aldon Wright, was well known in the art and antiquities world.

Growing up all over the world while his parents searched for rare artifacts, he had met some of the most famous names in the art world before his sixteenth birthday. His parents had slowed down a few years ago when his mother became ill. He returned home from studying at the Sorbonne in France after his mother passed away, to spend more time with his father, who was also now dealing with health problems. Many of the artifacts attributed to his family could be found exhibited in this very museum.

After Mason returned to New York his father reached out to a family friend, a director at the museum, and was able to get him an entry level position in the curation department. Mason and the museum were a natural fit, and he had enjoyed the experience up until now; at this moment, Mason wished he were somewhere—anywhere—else.

Room RD 3 was filled with rare maps; the room was restricted to a short list of Museum employees, and Mason was not one of them. He quickly began concocting reasons for why he was standing over a table containing old maps and charts

from 1800s Europe.

“Mason?” Dr. Heckler again called out. Her voice echoed against the walls of the cold cement room. She was becoming more concerned with each passing second, and Mason was trying quickly to formulate an explanation.

Dr. Heckler held an undergraduate degree from Princeton University, a master’s degree from Fordham, and a Ph.D. from the International Art School in Berlin. She was forty-six years old, and quite attractive compared to many of the women Mason had met who spent their lives researching ancient artifacts. She was easy to work for, but a stickler for protocol, and the rules of the museum. She kept a very precise schedule, so Mason was shocked that she was even in the building at this time. She always left at 8:30 p.m. sharp.

Mason finally turned around and acknowledged his boss, “Oh, Dr. Heckler, good evening.” Dr. Heckler’s serious look told Mason she meant business and was waiting impatiently for an explanation.

“I was walking by the room and saw the door slightly ajar. I thought someone might be in here, so I peeked in to have a look. I found these papers on the table and was in the process of putting them back. They seem to have been left out. Someone must have left in a hurry and forgot to put them away.”

Dr. Heckler started across the room. “Mason, you know this is a restricted room. You are not even allowed to be in here, let alone handle documents.” Her serious gaze never left Mason’s eyes as she approached. “What do you mean the door was ajar? It is always locked. Only a few people have access to this room, and as far as I know, except for Director Montgomery, they have all left for the evening.”

“Yes, I know, I was surprised as well,” Mason said in a very agreeable voice. He tried to sound as surprised as Dr. Heckler, hoping that they could align their concerns, and she might forget about him. “That’s why I thought someone was in here. When I found no one, I thought it strange that the room was open with documents out on the table. Someone must have left the maps out and forgotten about them. I was going to

phone the director as soon as everything was back in order.” Mason tried to shed the aura of a guilty man.

Dr. Heckler did not look as if she was buying his story, and truth be told, neither was he; her serious stare had turned suspicious. He knew who had opened the room; he knew what they were looking for, because it was him. Mason was looking for an old map of the Paris catacombs, which was supposed to be in these drawers, but was not. The map was split into two pieces due to the size and detail. While rare, the map was not considered to be of a high monetary value. Its importance came from its age, and he really needed to locate it; people were counting on him. Someone had been in this room and got to it first; he was not sure who, but unfortunately, if Dr. Heckler found the map missing, it would not matter because he was going to be blamed.

“Mason, I am not sure you understand the severity of your actions. These are extremely rare and fragile documents that if mishandled may be gone forever. The museum’s benefactors would be astonished to find an intern handling old maps and documents.” Mason’s title of assistant to the director of museum curation had just officially been lowered to intern.

“This is very serious; I like you Mason, but I will have to notify Director Montgomery of what I have witnessed here. As a world-renowned museum we have certain rules that need to be followed. That is the reputation we have built, and it is extremely important we take every measure to maintain top standards.”

“I understand,” Mason said, trying to sound somber and apologetic. “I was just trying to help.” But he knew she did not believe him; she was not the least bit concerned that he had told her someone had entered the room and left it open. She was not fazed at all over a possible breach of security.

He shifted uncomfortably while trying to appear calm. The key to the room was tucked away in his sock; he had swiped the key from her office weeks ago while she was away for a few days on a curating trip. He’d made a copy and returned it to her office. Now, as it rubbed against his leg, it felt more and more

like a shackle.

Dr. Heckler put away the last of the documents and motioned Mason toward the door. He walked around the table and headed to the exit. She did not believe him, and he knew Director Montgomery would absolutely not believe him; this was starting to become a long night.

Mason exited the room first, followed by Dr. Heckler. She locked the door and started to lead him upstairs to the Director's office. Mason was in trouble. If they found out what was missing, they would pin this whole thing on him. He was starting to feel very uneasy. He needed to get out of this building as soon as possible.

Who had gotten to the room before him? He had successfully located both pieces of the map, but due to the size of it, and the fact that he needed to conceal it, he had been able to only take one piece at a time. He had taken the first half of the map last night and had come back for the second tonight. But when he got back to the room, it was gone.

He had his piece taped to the underside of his desk in his office, but someone had the other half of the map. He needed the other piece as much as that someone needed his. The map was not well known; most people, even the experts who worked at the museum, were not aware it even existed. It couldn't be a coincidence that it was missing.

If the second half of the map was gone, Mason mused as he followed Dr. Heckler up the stairs to the main floor, someone was on to him. They headed down the hallway and cut through a room in the European Arts section of the museum. They entered the large room filled with Greek sculptures, most of which were missing limbs, an irony not lost on Mason as he thought of his possible fate. Luckily, these days a breach of protocol at the museum did not call for a maiming. Dr. Heckler walked a few steps ahead of him, saying nothing. The only sound heard was that of her heels on the famous black and white mosaic-tiled floor.

Mason noted the Andrea Solario painting, "Solome with the Head of John the Baptist," as he passed it and hoped it

wasn't a premonition of his fate. It depicted a hand holding the head of John the Baptist over a tray as it was presented to Solome. Mason pictured the hand of Dr. Heckler delivering his head on a silver platter to Director Montgomery. He managed a smile and a chuckle to himself as they continued.

They exited the European Arts wing and entered the Medieval wing. They passed the Medieval armor display where four life-sized soldiers on their horses in full armor, readied themselves for battle. Another cruel irony. Maybe she was purposely leading him past all the signs of his apocalypse. They turned left and walked through the corridor of 18th century stained glass, arrived at the stairs, proceeded up, and came to the office of the director of the antiquities department.

Mason followed Dr. Heckler into the director's outer office where they found his secretary, a lovely woman named Rita, seated at a large oak desk.

"Is Director Montgomery available? It is quite urgent," Dr. Heckler said in a serious tone. Rita looked at Dr. Heckler and then at Mason, who managed a slight smile.

Rita rang the director informing him that Dr. Heckler was there to see him. "Yes. Okay, I will send her in." She nodded, hung up, and told Dr. Heckler to go ahead.

Director Montgomery was a bear of a man, he had a booming voice, and his handshake would fell lesser men. He had studied all over the world and had come back to New York City to run the antiquities department at the museum. He was brilliant when it came to artifacts, had a photographic memory, and could discuss almost any period in history. He had directed countless excavations in Italy and Greece. He had helped discover the Valley of the Kings in Egypt and had helped museums track down their art after World War I. The director also happened to be a close friend of Mason's father, Aldon Wright. They had worked together on digs, remaining close over the years. When Mason's father had taken ill two years ago, he was the one who had offered Mason a position in the department so he could be closer to his father. Montgomery used to joke that only death would take Aldon out of the field,

and sadly that was looking more and more likely to be the case.

Dr. Heckler went into the office and closed the large oak-paneled door behind her. Mason remained in the waiting area next to Rita as she typed away. She gave him a sympathetic smile as if she, too, knew his fate was sealed. Mason looked around at the wood-paneled walls and the sculptures that adorned the tables as the tap of the typewriter keys filled the room.

Several minutes later the director opened the door and asked Mason to come in. Dr. Heckler nodded at Mason and left. Mason sat in the firm, brown leather chair in front of the large wooden desk and took a deep breath. He felt as if he was in the principal's office back at school. He sat silently as the director closed the door, came back around his desk, and sat down. He looked at Mason for what seemed like an eternity before he spoke up, "You know Dr. Heckler is right, the room you were in is a restricted room. Only a few people are allowed access, and that does not include you. How did you get in there, Mason?"

Mason shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He had known Montgomery for many years through his father, and the last thing he wanted to do was put him in an awkward position.

"I was walking down the hallway and noticed the door was open so I went in to have a look. There was nobody inside and I started poking around; I noticed a drawer not fully shut so I opened it to see the contents. The drawer had some old maps from Europe. There were a few maps on the table so I put them back in the drawer. I thought someone had left in a hurry and forgot to put them back."

Director Montgomery sat stoically looking at Mason with his eyebrows raised over his glasses. "Mason, I have known you a long time, and I am inclined to overlook this incident, but Dr. Heckler is adamant that your job here be terminated. I know you enjoy your work here, but I think your real calling is out in the field, like your father. I hate to see you behind a desk when you should be leading a dig or tracking down some lost artifact or lost piece of art. I know your father has a long list of things he could not find, and if he was in better health, he would have

you out there looking for them.”

Mason nodded. Montgomery was right; it was his intention to get back into the field. He just needed some time with his father to figure out what came next. Mason’s father was not well, but he would never hold Mason back from going off into the world exploring. Mason had enjoyed his time in the city and had no plans to leave anytime soon until he received the letter from Jacques Moulié, which changed everything.

The letter asked Mason to find the old map of the catacombs. Moulié was not only an old family friend, he was a legend in the art world. Mason agreed to look for the map. Such a random old map, ordinary when compared to the rest of the museum’s collection, surely would not be missed for a few weeks, but apparently there was more to this ordinary 1800s Paris underground map. Mason did not know why Moulié had requested it, but someone else clearly wanted it as well.

“Mason, can I ask you something?”

“Anything, sir,” Mason replied.

Montgomery stood up and came around to the front of the desk. He leaned back on it, facing Mason, and crossed his arms. “Why are you still interested in working here? You have more experience than people twice your age, you have been on digs, and traveled the world with your father. Isn’t it about time you started to burn your own path through history? There are a lot of things still out there waiting to be found. Lord knows your father is still obsessed with finding lost treasures. Something tells me this little incident is more than just an open door. Come on, Mason, what were you really doing in that room?”

Mason stared at Montgomery. He was not sure how to respond so he decided to come clean...well almost.

“Ok, the maps were not out on the table when I entered the room, I took them out. I was looking for a map of France from World War I. I have decided to write a book on the toll the war had taken on the art world, and the people of France, and I thought a map was a good place to start my research. My plan is to travel to several towns to interview people about their experiences during the Great War, before things in France get

worse. I think it can be an interesting story someday, a unique perspective on the horrors of war.”

Montgomery nodded as he walked over to the seventeenth century cabinet in the corner. He poured two glasses of scotch and walked back to Mason, both glasses in hand. He handed one to Mason and said, “Mason, I am happy that you are pursuing a career as an author. I also am thrilled that you are so interested in the experiences of the people of France during their dark days. I believe their stories should be shared; but the one thing that bothers me is that I do not believe a word you just told me. You inherited many things from your father, and unfortunately for you, one of those things is your father’s blinking eyes when you are being less than truthful. He would always blink excessively while bending the truth; believe me, I have often stood right next to him as he did it—one of the qualities only those closest to him know. I don’t know what you are up to...I almost don’t want to know...but please tell me you have not stolen something valuable from my museum.”

Mason stood up and reached out his hand. “Thanks for the scotch. I appreciate the words of encouragement. My father is a great man, and there are many qualities of his that I am proud to bear. I always knew that with all the good he has taught me there were bound to be some flaws. I will keep that blinking thing in mind...and no, I have not stolen anything from your museum. I would not stoop to that level to dishonor your friendship with my father. I have too much respect for you, and this museum. I also have too much respect for history and would prefer to pave a path through it with dignity. I would not dream of taking anything from your museum without your consent, though...” Mason paused, “I do need to borrow something for a short while. The less you know, the better, and I promise to bring it back in one piece.”

Montgomery took the glass from Mason and shook his head. “I am going to pretend I did not hear that. You and your father better not get me in hot water. If Dr. Heckler finds out she will string me up as well. I have always thought she secretly wants this job and would find a way to get it. I plan on working

out my days in this office. I don't need the Wrights ruining my plans. Give my best to your father, and Mason, be careful out there; the winds of war are blowing in Europe, and the world you are about to enter is filled with legions of the most unsavory characters."

They shook hands and Mason exited the office. He said goodbye to Rita and headed off to his office to collect his things. He would stop by Dr. Heckler's office on the way to apologize again and thank her for this opportunity. He was still wondering what she was doing in the building at this late hour. For two years she had left at 8:30 p.m., and the night he made his final move, she turns up at the door. *I guess it is just as well; it gave me a reason to end this internship.* It was not exactly the exit strategy he had planned, but it would do.

Mason decided to take one more walk through the museum for a last look at some of his favorite pieces. He did not know if he would be returning, or if he would even be allowed entry if he did. He had spent many years in and out of this museum and had seen almost everything, but always seemed to return to the same works that moved him.

He started down the hall toward the stairwell, took the stairs down to the first floor, and entered the Medieval wing. One of his favorite pieces was a recreation of a French Church from the 1500s. This small room off the main corridor was often missed by visitors, who were unaware of its existence. Mason entered the room and took one final look at the beautiful, inlaid wood panels. The detail of the panels on all four walls amazed him every time he sat here. He paused and said a small prayer for his father and a slightly bigger one for himself, and then continued down the hallway back to the stairs. He was not a very religious man, but it seemed to work for everyone else.

Mason took the stairs down to the main floor where the American exhibit resided. He turned left and continued down the hallway through the large wooden doorway where he entered the room to his right. The wall directly in front of him was dominated by the Emanuel Luetze painting, "Washington Crossing the Delaware." This very large painting measured

about ten feet high by twenty feet long and was one of the anchors of the American wing. Possibly the largest painting in the museum, Leutze's was one of the most popular. The oil on canvas was a magnificent sight, with General George Washington in the center of the boat commanding the Delaware crossing on Christmas Day 1776. Mason would come and sit in front of this piece at least once a week to reflect. He would sit in silence and try to envision what that day was like, crossing the cold and icy Delaware River on the way to fight the Hessians. He sat for the last time staring at the majestic look on General Washington's face; confident and regal, it was the look of a great man fighting incredible odds. It always made him wonder how great men became great. Were they born with something that made greatness inevitable or did they have to work hard for it?

Mason stood up and left the room, saving his last goodbye for a woman who had mesmerized him since the first day he laid eyes on her. Her name was Madame Pierre Gatreau, and she was known as Madame X, an American expatriate who married a French banker. John Singer Sargent painted her likeness in 1883. She was wearing an elegant black dress as if she was attending an upscale cocktail party. Sargent painted her with the strap of her dress falling down her shoulder, a scandal at the time, and the painting became a source of ridicule. People were outraged at the sight of an elegant French woman with her dress strap falling off. Sargent bowed to public pressure and repainted the strap back up on her shoulder. He eventually sold the painting to the museum and asked that her true identity not be revealed in his lifetime, for he did not want any scandal to descend on her memory. Mason always sympathized with her. She was incredibly beautiful and did not deserve the ridicule the painting had received. Mason sat in Gallery A11, The Hearn Gallery, and gazed at her face and said farewell to the woman he had adored from the time he first saw her here at the museum. This was not goodbye; she would forever wander the corridors of his mind.

Mason took the stairs all the way down to the Main Floor

Minus 3—it was how they referred to the lower floors of the museum. The front entrance was the Main Floor. The five floors below were called Main Minus 1, Main Minus 2, and so forth. Dr. Heckler’s office was just down the hall on the left. Mason was always amazed at how secluded some parts of the museum were. For such a prestigious museum, the lower floors were dreary, and dark. The cinder block walls were painted gray, the plain wooden doors had small signs on them, the endless rows of caged lights hung down casting harsh shadows. Sometimes Mason felt as though he were working in an asylum rather than one of the most respected art museums in the world. After museum hours ended you would not know there were any people around for miles. The museum sat on Fifth Avenue in the heart of Manhattan overlooking Central Park, but sometimes he felt as though he was completely alone.

As he approached Dr. Heckler’s office, he heard the phone ringing inside. The sound echoed down the hallway like thunder rolling in before a storm. He slowed down to see if she would answer. One ring, two rings..., and finally he heard her pick up the phone and say, “This is Dr. Heckler.”

Mason stopped in his tracks: He did not want to interrupt her, though he did want to listen to the conversation as he was sure it was Montgomery calling.

“Oh, I am sorry to hear that,” the doctor said. “Yes, I completely understand. He was aware of the rules, and he should not have been in there in the first place. Yes, I agree. He will be missed but I am sure we will see him from time to time. Thank you, Director, good night.”

Dr. Heckler hung up the phone. Mason waited a minute and then knocked on the frame of her outer office. She looked up, “Mason, please come in. I just spoke to the director and I understand you will be leaving us.”

“Yes, it is time for me to move on,” Mason replied.

“We will be sorry to lose you, but I do hope you understand we are charged with preserving history, and if we are not vigilant about security, our benefactors will pull all the funding from our department, and we will cease to exist.”

“I completely understand. I never wanted to jeopardize the museum or its people. I just came by to thank you for everything. It has been an honor to work for you, and at this museum. I will always remember my time here fondly. I wish I was departing on better terms, but it is time for me to pursue new challenges.”

Dr. Heckler stood up and reached out her hand. “May your travels take you to places beyond your dreams. I know you will be successful in whatever you choose. Do come by to see us from time to time.”

Mason shook her hand and thanked her again. Dr. Heckler managed a smile for him, possibly the first he had ever seen from her.

He turned and left her office. He believed she had been sincere in her well wishes, and he appreciated that. He did not like deceiving her, but there was no other way. The fact that she was here late tonight still did not sit well with him. In two years, he had seen her stay late only twice, and both times the museum was preparing for an exhibit. She never gave more than was needed. There was always something about Dr. Heckler that made Mason want to know the rest of her story.

He headed down the hall, made a left, and continued down the dreary hallway to his office. He arrived at his door and stopped suddenly. Before he even entered, he knew something was wrong. He always closed his door when he left. Now it was open, and a light was on. Mason didn't know if someone was in his office right now, but someone had definitely been there. He came around the corner, slowly pushed the door open, and looked in. Everything looked the same as when he left, but someone had come in and turned on the light. He went over to his desk and sat down. When he leaned down to take a look at his drawer, he noticed something missing. Mason's father had long ago taught him to never take anything for granted. Always assume the guy next to you wants what you have. In the shady world of art and antiques, he was usually right.

Mason always put a small piece of tape between the bottom of the four drawers and the desk. He always checked when he

returned to make sure the tape was still intact. Now, the tape was only attached to the bottom of the drawer and not the desk. The other three drawers were the same. Someone had been in his office, sat in his chair, and gone through his desk. Mason opened his top drawer, pushed in the side clips and removed it completely. He reached into the underside of the desk and removed a large envelope that had been taped there. He put the envelope in his bag along with a few other things. The map inside was protected by a clear plastic sleeve, and the manila exterior blended in with other things in his bag. He thought his best decision right now was to leave the museum as quickly as possible. Someone was following his every move, and it was possible that they were still in the building. He assumed whoever had the other half of the map would eventually come looking for the rest of it, and something told him that, now, they definitely knew he had it.

Mason quickly turned out the lights and exited his office. He knew the quickest way out was up one floor, and then out the employee's exit, but that might be the expected way to go. Mason had to turn in his credentials with security before he left for the evening; he did not plan on coming back. He decided to leave through the main entrance on Fifth Avenue. He would stop at the main desk and drop off his ID with Bruce, the night watchman. He went to the right and headed to the elevator bank. As he arrived at the elevator, he heard a door open down the hall. The door closed, and he heard the sound of footsteps coming his way. He did not want to wait for the elevator so he headed for the stairs. The footsteps were getting closer. Mason ran for the door to the stairs and swung it open. He raced up the stairs like a lunatic, his bag flailing behind him. He stopped on the landing and looked over the edge at the door below. It started to open slowly. He could not see who was there, just someone wearing a long black coat and a hat. Whoever it was did not want to be seen. Mason calmed himself and slowly continued up the stairs, keeping out of sight against the wall, until he reached the next floor. Quietly opening the door to the first floor, he entered the primary wing of the museum.

The museum had closed to the public twenty minutes before; no one was around. Usually security started their rounds at 11 p.m. Mason swung his bag over his shoulder and began to walk briskly toward the main entrance. He stopped briefly to see if the man in the black coat and hat was coming through the door. When he saw nothing, he continued to make his way out. He hopped down the famous main staircase on the sixteen-foot-wide granite steps, glancing back a few times. There were forty-four steps in all. Half down, a small, six-foot wide marble landing divided the staircase.

Mason found Bruce sitting at his desk in the Great Hall as he came running up, slightly out of breath. Bruce looked up, smiled, and said, “Mr. Wright, I am sad to hear the news that you are leaving us. I just heard from the director. I will miss our baseball talks and will still take my Dodgers over your Yankees any day.”

“Bruce, hopefully one day, for your sake, that will happen. I will be back to visit from time to time; I’ll come by and say hello. Here is my ID and my office keys. I told Director Montgomery I would leave them with you. Take care of yourself.” Mason reached out and shook Bruce’s hand.

“Stay out of trouble. I know for you it is not easy,” Bruce said with a laugh.

“I’ll do my best,” Mason said as he headed for the exit with a stolen map in his bag.

Mason nodded to the guard at the front who unlocked the large middle door of the three front glass doors. He let Mason out into the cold January night. The city was bustling as usual with traffic and people. Street vendors sold peanuts and trinkets on the sidewalk in makeshift stands while people wandered about. Mason felt safer now that he was outside. He turned up the lapels on his coat, put on his hat, and started his walk home. Passing through the massive Corinthian columns that framed the front entrance of the museum, he hopped down the marble steps, past the ten-foot tall bronze torchère lamps, and proceeded up Fifth Avenue. He was sad to leave the museum but knew something important was happening that required his

assistance. Since he had received the letter from France, he had known this day would come and he would need to say goodbye. He stopped and turned around for one more look at the museum. He took a deep breath and resumed his walk home.

As Mason passed the first of several street vendors, he was completely unaware of a man who emerged from behind one of the museum columns to the left of the main entrance. The man calmly started down the steps, and with caution began following Mason up Fifth Avenue, pausing behind some trees to remain out of sight. The man fit right into the winter scene in the city, just another New Yorker on his way home in his long black coat and hat.