

# A Matter of Chance

## Aims

- To give students reading comprehension practice.
- To help students understand the techniques used in thriller writing.

1 *A Matter of Chance* is a thriller. Put students into groups of four to discuss what elements they expect from a thriller. Discuss group answers as a class; if you wish, list suggestions on the board.

**Possible answers:** excitement, tension, fear, danger, chases, escapes, people being caught, crime, things happening at night, difficult situations, making decisions

2 Ask students to read the Blurb (next page) and say what it tells them about the story. Ask them to answer the questions Who? What? Where?

**Suggested answers:** Who? Paul Morris, dead wife, Sandra (colleague); What? international crime, car chase; Where? Italy, across Europe

3 Read and Order. Pair the students. Ask them to read the passages about the car journey and chase through France (next page) and put them in the order in which they happened. They may not get this exact order, as it is possible to vary from the book order and still make sense.

**Answers:** 1 c, 2 a, 3 f, 4 d, 5 b, 6 e

4 Give the students this information: Paul Morris and Sandra Rovello are driving from Italy across France to England in Paul's Metro. At first they are followed and later chased by Andrea Carta in a silver Mercedes and a man in a yellow Fiat sports car. The Blurb says the story is to do with international crime.

Put the students into pairs to note down their ideas about the following:

- Why are Paul and Sandra driving to England?
- What might be in Paul's car which is illegal?
- Why are Andrea and the guard following them?
- Why do Paul and Sandra try to escape?
- What happens when they do escape?

Allow the students to work out their answers. If you wish, pair the pairs to discuss their suggestions, then discuss with the whole class – you may wish to list them on the board. You can then compare them with the answers below.

**Answers according to the story:** a Sandra wants Paul to show her England on holiday, but also has to make him go there to carry something illegal; b Actually it is 'three internationally important paintings', as we find out at the end; c To make sure they do what they are supposed to do; d Because they decide to return to Italy and tell the police; e They are chased back across France.

5 Ask the students to read Extracts 1 and 2. Tell them that they come from the part of the story where Paul and Sandra are trying to escape from the farmhouse in France where they are being held prisoner by Andrea and the guard. Ask how the author makes them more exciting for the reader.

**Suggested answer:** The excitement is increased in both scenes by Paul having to stop what he is doing to escape, because one of his captors (the guard in the first extract) interrupts him. In the first extract tension is further increased by the fact that Paul is unable to close the ceiling door completely, and there are dirty fingermarks around it, so that we know that if the guard looks up, Paul's plan will be discovered.

6 Tell the students that tension in a thriller is also often increased by little mysteries which are not solved immediately. Ask them to read Extract 3 and, in pairs, decide what Sandra did and why. Call for suggestions from the whole class.

**Answer in the book:** She went back to Andrea's Mercedes and the guard's Fiat and cut the tyres on each car with a knife the guard had given her to eat with. This would buy them time as they escaped.

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## Blurb

Paul Morris's happy life in Italy changes when his wife dies suddenly. He develops an exciting relationship with Sandra, a friend at work. But all is not as it seems and Paul finds himself involved in a world of international crime and a car chase across Europe.

## Read and Order

- a** As I drove I thought about everything that had happened on the journey so far. Sandra's nervousness at the French border, the two cars that seemed to be following us, the way that Sandra went out of the hotel room several times, the phone-calls she kept receiving . . .
- b** A light went on and a window opened in one of the front bedrooms. A head appeared shouting something in Italian. I tried to start the car again.  
'Come on!' I whispered to the car, trying a fourth time. This time it started. Just then there was a loud bang from the house and a noise at the back of the car.  
'Quick!' shouted Sandra. 'They're shooting at us!'
- c** By ten o'clock the next morning we were already driving along the motorway west of Genoa, nearing the French border.
- d** At about six thirty the next morning we were woken by loud knocking on the bedroom door. Sandra got out of bed with difficulty and went across to the door. 'Wait, Sandra . . .' I shouted, waking up a bit, 'Find out who . . .'  
It was too late. At that moment she turned the key and the door opened. Sandra was pushed across the room onto the bed by Andrea. One of the guards I'd seen in Portofino followed him in, locking the door behind him. They were both holding guns.
- e** We were doing 180 kph now. The engine was making a terrible noise and the whole car was shaking. At the next junction, Sandra saw two more police cars join in the chase. She looked at Andrea, who was no more than twenty metres behind us, and said some terrible things about him in Italian.
- f** I could see no more than fifty metres ahead. As we got closer to the crossroads I suddenly turned the steering wheel and drove quickly across the road and down a country lane. There was a loud sound of a horn and flashing of lights as a big lorry went past just behind us, but I'd done it.

## Extract 1

[Paul has found a door in the ceiling of the room where he is being held, and he has climbed up to see what is in the roof.]

I looked around carefully. Above the window of my room I could see three lines of light in the wall. They were in the shape of a double door. I was just going to get up into the roof, when I heard a noise from below. Quickly, I put the door back over the opening, but I couldn't make it fall back into place! There was no time now, as the footsteps were at the top of the stairs. I climbed down from the chair and off the table, then put the chair back onto the floor.

I heard a knock on Sandra's door, and the guard's voice asking in Italian if she wanted anything. Sandra said something, the lock was turned and she was allowed to go to the bathroom again.

While this was happening I replaced the table and chair in their positions. As I lay down on the bed, the key was turned in the lock of the door and the big guard walked in. I looked across at him, hoping he wouldn't look up at the ceiling where there were dirty marks by the door.

## Extract 2

I took a deep breath and walked to the back door of the house. To my surprise it was open. I walked in, leaving the door open behind me for a quick escape if necessary. I stood and listened. But I couldn't hear anything. I took my trainers off, putting them round my neck again. It was very dark in the house, and I wondered if I could turn on the light to look for the keys.

Suddenly there was a noise upstairs. A door opened, and I heard footsteps go along the corridor. I stood very still. The bathroom door opened and shut. I moved quickly out from the hall and into the living room where the moonlight through the windows showed me a large sofa. I got down behind it. I heard the toilet, then a light was turned on, and footsteps came down the stairs. I felt cold sweat running down my back as they came closer. The light in the living room was switched on, and someone walked across and went into the kitchen. I heard the outside door shut.

## Extract 3

[Paul and Sandra are escaping from the farmhouse in France where Andrea and the guard – their captors – are still sleeping inside.]

'We'll push the car down to the road,' I said to Sandra, as I opened the doors, 'so that when I start the engine it won't be so close to the house.'

Sandra agreed. We pushed the car out from between the other two cars.

'Thank goodness it's such a small car!' whispered Sandra across the roof. Gently we pushed the car out onto the road. Suddenly Sandra turned and ran back down the path and disappeared. I was alone in the dark. What was she doing? Had she decided to return to Andrea? Was she going to give me up? I was suddenly suspicious of her again. Any minute I thought a light would go on and someone would start shooting at me. I was about to get into the car when I saw Sandra coming back.

'What did you do? Where did you . . .?' I asked.

'Quickly,' she said. 'Get into the car.'