

Chapter 10 Mathilde Plots Her Revenge

It was the next morning at Castle Court Manteau. Excitedly, the six children emerged from their rooms and raced down the grand staircase for breakfast.

“What is the hurry?” laughed Sophie’s Aunt Francine as she surveyed their eager faces.

“We’re going on a treasure hunt!” sang Meldy.

“Madame, thank you very much for inviting us,” added Nicky while Daniel’s eyes bulged as he looked at all the food.

“Oh yes, thank you very much,” chorused the others.

“You are all welcome,” she replied.

“Madame,” asked Paul, “where do you think they hid the treasure?”

“Master Paul, I do not know. Most people think it was removed but you are welcome to have a look around.”

“But Madame,” added Raoul, “could there not be other treasure if that treasure is not here?”

“Master Raoul,” laughed Madame, “I am sure there is. Many years ago Sophie’s cousin Alain found a gold coin on the other side of the moat.”

“Can we see it? Please?” begged Meldy.

“Of course you can. Have your breakfast and I will get it.”

The children grabbed some food from the buffet and sat down. For a few minutes, the only audible sounds were munching and chomping. Madame Court Manteau soon returned clutching a large coin. The children stared.

“Wow!” sighed Nicky. “It must be worth millions!”

“It is valuable, yes. But I do not think it is worth that much.”

“But if we found hundreds and hundreds of them...” said Daniel.

“Well then maybe. All together they would be extremely valuable.”

“Who is that man on the back?” asked Paul.

“That is a Spanish king from many years ago.”

“Is it a Doubloon?” asked Meldy.

“Doubloon? I do not know this word,” replied Madame.

Sophie had not said anything, she was sitting with a mouth half full of food. She swallowed, paused, then said, “I think it is part of the treasure. Someone dropped it when they were burying it.”

“Sophie, you may be right but it could also have been dropped when they took the treasure away.”

While pondering this, the children finished their breakfast. Sophie’s Aunt could well be right. There might be no treasure except for this one coin.

One hour later, they had run, skipped and walked across the park to the trees on top of the hill. “Well if there’s no treasure we can still explore,” sighed Nicky.

“But if there is,” asked Meldy, “and you were hiding it, where would you put it?”

“I would dig a hole in the trees and bury it,” said Paul.

“But you can see when people have just dug a hole and filled it in,” said Raoul.

“Or you can watch them dig then run off with their treasure when they’re not looking,” added Nicky, “squirrels do that.”

“Do they?” asked Sophie.

“Yes they do,” said Meldy, “and they can remember where they hid all their nuts.”

Daniel hadn’t taken part in the squirrel debate but he was kicking at some foliage and twigs under the trees.

“But if you dug here, you could hide it under all this stuff,” he concluded.

“You are right Daniel,” said Sophie.

“I wish I had my metal detector,” he sighed.

“Why didn’t you bring it?” asked Meldy.

“I forgot.”

They ambled through the trees, kicking at the ground as they went.

“Bonjour Mademoiselle Sophie and also bonjour to all your friends,” said a woman’s voice behind them.

“Bonjour Madame Audran,” she replied. “This is Meldy, Nicky, Daniel, Paul and Raoul.”

“Meldy is an unusual name,” she replied after greeting them all.

“Well Madame it is really Esmerelda but my friends all call me Meldy. Oh, here I am called Esmeralda.”

“I like Esmerelda. Why do they call you Esmeralda?”

“Madame, Esmerelda is not an approved name.”

“Of course, I forgot. Are you looking for something?”

The six children exchanged glances. Should they say anything? Daniel decided to ask a question.

“Madame, if you were hiding something in the wood, where would you put it?”

“Well Master Daniel, that would depend on what it was. If it was small and I wanted to pick it up in a few days or weeks, I would put it in a hole in a tree. If it was large, I would bury it somewhere then draw a map.

“You could lose the map Madame,” mused Nicky.

“Yes Master Nicky, you are right. That is why one should choose a good location such as near a big tree.”

“Are there any really big trees here?” asked Raoul.

Madame Audran paused while she studied their eager questioning faces.

“Now I know you are looking for something. So, what could it be I wonder?”

The six upturned faces all as one changed from questioning to denial and finally homed in on something close to inscrutability. But it was the furtive glances that eventually gave the game away.

“There is the legend of the lost treasury,” said Madame, “could that be it?”

“Lost treasury,” asked Nicky in all innocence, “what lost treasury?”

“Master Nicky, I think you know of that which I speak.”

There was a brief silence before Sophie spoke. “But Madame, was it not taken away?”

“Mademoiselle Sophie, do you want my honest opinion?”

“Yes please!” came an eager chorus of replies.

“It is here somewhere. I have always felt it in my bones. My grandmother told me stories when I was a little girl...”

“What stories Madame?” interjected Raoul.

“Ah, Master Raoul. What stories indeed. I wish I could remember them.”

“But were they about the lost treasure?” asked Paul.

“Yes Master Paul. I remember well one thing she said, ‘It is here somewhere’. The question is, where?”

Later that day, Madame Audran wrote to her sister. She told her about the birds visible from her cottage window, the cheeky squirrels who stole their food and some gossip she had heard in the village. One particular passage concerned the children she had met in the woods.

‘Mademoiselle Sophie is here with some friends. They are all really nice children, three are from England and two others are from Londres. One girl is called Esmeralda just like you and there is a boy called Nicky who I think must have been very ill at some stage. I would like to give him some of my herbal treatments because I am sure they would help. We talked about the legend of the lost treasury and I think they are looking for it. Others have tried but so far nothing has been found.’

She addressed the envelope then took it to the post office in the village. The postmaster stamped it then put to one side. After she had gone, he noticed the flap was not stuck down.

‘I wonder what she finds to write about,’ he thought, ‘stuck in that cottage in the woods.’ He locked the door and within a matter of minutes had scanned the letter from top to bottom. ‘Sophie and Esmeralda,’ he mused, ‘I know those names. Now where...?’

He picked up a scrapbook full of newspaper articles and flicked through the pages. He soon found what he was looking for.

‘Niece of local woman awarded prestigious medal for bravery,’ it said. There was a picture and below that a couple of paragraphs. There were the names, Sophie and Esmeralda. ‘So they must be looking for the treasure,’ he thought, ‘but I do not think they will find anything.’

One hour later, he was talking to a friend in the local cafe. “You know those children who were awarded medals a few months ago?”

“You mean the ones that rescued Princess Augustine?”

“They are up at the castle now. Guess what, they are looking for the contents of the lost treasury.”

“Who told you that?”

“Well....”

“Have you been reading other people’s mail again?”

“Of course not, I heard talk....”

The conversation moved on to something else. At the next table, two men were listening. After exchanging glances, they got up to leave. Once outside one said, “should we tell her do you think? It could make us rich.”

“But what if there is nothing to it?”

“What if there is and someone else gets it all?”

“I had not thought of that. We must tell her then she can decide what to do.”

Madame Mathilde du Malcontent had been writing a letter when she got the message. Now she was considering her options, options which all involved some form of revenge on the children who had humiliated her sister Myrtille. This sister was now in prison for kidnapping some of those same children and her other sister, who had been caught by Baron von Kühlschrank, was locked away as well. Mathilde had no intention of joining them.

‘Those children have heaped ridicule on the house of du Malcontent,’ she hissed to herself, ‘and they must be made to pay. This treasure, wherever it is, will bring me the respect I deserve. I can bribe a few people and my sisters will then be free. Who will laugh at us then? The state will collapse and I, Mathilde du Malcontent, will offer to become Empress. Myrtille will have to pay her respects to me, it must be that way. She was fool enough to panic when a little brat with a red pen drew fake measles spots on his face but I, their older sister, will have shown them both what I can do! I will have the palace in Londres, Maxine can have the Court Manteau’s house and Myrtille can have Castle Court Manteau. Oh, I must change the law so we can imprison children. I will make the case that they are not as innocent as they seem but nasty vindictive interfering little...’

This was the very woman who had recently escaped from a prison somewhere in Continental Europe. If caught, she would be sent back. She needed this treasure like the rest of us need air, food and water.

‘I will investigate this castle,’ she mused, ‘they might find something. If they do, we must know before the police arrive.’

Soon there was another call. This time she answered in person. “Madame du Malcontent, we are awaiting your orders.”

“Listen carefully. We will need a friend inside the castle who will keep us informed. We must also identify a suitable method of communication. I will come to meet you...”

“Madame, it will be an honour! Your reputation surpasses all other!”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“Madame, we know just the person who will be our spy. Her name is Delphine and she comes to the local cafe. This evening she was moaning about all the bratty children they have staying in the house.”

“Yes,” laughed Madame, “a very good description of those, those....”

“Exactly Madame, we thought so too. Delphine can be bought with a modest payment up front. We will promise her a reward when the treasure is found, if that is your wish.”

“When it is found, I like your optimism. Now, you shared this information with me so you two will be in a very good position to get a substantial reward. In the future, I will need you if you show yourselves worthy.”

“We will not fail you Madame! Who can stop us? They will not suspect a thing.”

“Let us hope not. We will need to give this Delphine some instructions on signalling methods. First when they might have located the treasure and second when they have definitely found it. I will find a place nearby where I can keep an eye on things. She can signal from her room, find out the direction in which it points.”

“How should she signal Madame?”

“At night by torchlight and in daylight closing curtains? You decide but make sure she knows exactly what to do.”

“Thank you Madame, it will be done.”

She put down the phone and relaxed. The fabled contents of the lost treasury would soon be hers, and her sisters would look on her with increased respect. She dozed and dreamt of rooms full of gold, gold and even more gold. There could be some silver as well but not too much, she preferred gold and heaps of it. She would fulfil the family destiny where others had failed. Now it was to be her turn. She would win where others had lost. No bratty children would be allowed to stand in her way.