

Chapter 17 Antoinette is Rescued

Princess Augustine was now free. The four children had been instrumental, together with the twins. Inside the palace there was confusion.

“How did she get away?” asked a guard.

“It must have been a sophisticated operation,” said another. “They entered the palace without being seen and spirited her away without attracting attention. Who on earth has the capability to do that?”

“There are a lot of new people around and it could have been one of them.”

A senior guard appeared. “It was not an inside job. They must have come in from abroad to undertake such a professional operation. Tell the police to search everyone and everything that leaves the Departement.”

“Who do we say we are looking for?” asked a guard.

“Someone without an identity card. We still have her’s so we know she does not have one.”

“What about the other prisoners, is it safe here? They might come back for them later.”

“We will start moving them across the city. I know a place where no one will find them.”

That night, the first prisoner was ordered to prepare for a rapid departure. Ten minutes later she was bundled into a closed carriage and driven away through darkened streets. Two guards sat with her. At first there were no problems but then they were stopped at a police checkpoint.

“Identity cards please,” asked a junior policeman.

“We are transferring a prisoner and I have the authorisation here,” said one of the guards as she went through her pockets. “Wait a minute, I do not seem to have it. You must have taken it,” she said to her companion.

“No I did not. I gave it to you, remember?” The driver sat patiently up front waiting for the signal to depart. The prisoner called out despite being ordered to keep silent. “I do not have my identity card! You must arrest me!”

“Stop your lies!” shouted one of the guards.

The policeman called over his two colleagues. "This lot are acting suspiciously so we should take them to the police station."

The loudly protesting guards and their prisoner were bundled into the back of a blue grey police wagon. A burly policeman joined them to make sure there was no trouble. Once inside the station they were put in two separate rooms.

Captain Duplessis had just started her shift when she was told about the arrests. First, she visited the guards and interviewed them.

"We were transferring a criminal to prison," they insisted, "but we lost the paperwork. There will be trouble if you do not release us!"

"What trouble? First, where is your authorisation. Second, we have checked with the prison authorities but they have no record of this 'so called' criminal."

"We do not need authorisation. We work for the Transitional Council."

"As you must now be fully aware, the police were not informed of any prisoner transfer. If one is permitted to ask, what crime is she supposed to have committed?"

The guards looked at each other. "Well, er," said one as she groped for a suitable crime. "Oh, I remember! Plotting to overthrow the government!"

"Last time I looked, we did not have a proper government, that is it has no legal status. The Transitional Council promised to draw up a new constitution but they have not done so. I do not believe your prisoner has committed any crime. Next, I will interview her."

"There will be trouble...." The Captain ignored this threat, left the room and walked down the corridor. She was stopped by a junior policewoman.

"Captain," she whispered, "you will never guess who she is!"

"Surprise me!"

"Antoinette Court Manteau!"

The Captain glanced through a small porthole in the door and instantly recognised her. She returned to the two guards.

"Think fast," she said, "soon you will be charged with kidnapping. You know the penalty for that is 20 years in prison. We want the names of the other

kidnappers involved also the relevant times, dates and locations. Cooperate and you might get out in 10 years!”

Captain Duplessis, ignoring more threats, went back to see Antoinette.

“Mademoiselle Court Manteau! We were told you were in France. What are you doing here?”

“I never went to France, I was with Princess Augustine in the palace but I do not know where she is now. They became very nervous when she was rescued by, so they said, a sophisticated military operation. One of them dropped his torch, they said it had the name ‘Raoul’ written on it. They were trying to move me somewhere safe when three of your officers apprehended us. I have never been so pleased to see the police!”

The Captain smiled. “We do our best. So, I will get a colleague to take a statement then you will be free to go home. Excuse me, I have some prisoners to charge with kidnapping.”

She went back to see the two guards. They tried another threat or two but soon realised she was not to be swayed. “Do not threaten me,” she said. “I have dealt with a lot worse than you. Anyway, the law on kidnapping is clear. Now tell me those names so we can make some more arrests!”

She went into the corridor and paused. ‘So,’ she thought, ‘it appears the Transitional Council have been lying all along. If the Princess was a prisoner, could the Emperor still be in the palace? Either way, the law is clear. She never left so she is either head of state or next in line. The Transitional Council has no authority.’

Something, however, was not right. ‘No professional would take a torch on an operation with his name written on it. ‘Raoul’. Where did I hear that name?’ Then it hit her. ‘Esmeralda Wagley said he was in the chapel choir and was not now singing. I am sure if he had a torch he would put his name on it but could they have rescued Princess Augustine? Catherine Wagley was researching the palace, did she find out something, such as the existence of a secret passage?’

In the Court Manteau residence, Madame and Stephanie were reviewing the household accounts when the phone rang. Stephanie answered.

“Madame!” she cried, “she is at the police station!”

Madame was overjoyed. “Stephanie, we must go and collect her. Will you come too?”

“Of course Madame!”

“But Stephanie, we must be careful. No one else must know about this. I will speak to Monsieur and Alain myself.”

“Can I tell the sisters Madame?”

“Yes please.”

Up in the attic, the sisters were still hiding Princess Augustine. No one else knew she was up there. Stephanie ran up the stairs two at a time to tell them the good news. The twins were overjoyed and she also noticed the reaction from the Princess, who she still did not recognise. “Veronique, do you know her?” she asked.

“Yes Stephanie, I know her very well.”

Stephanie began to wonder exactly who Veronique was. She walked back down the stairs but could not help thinking she looked familiar. Something about her manner and the way she carried herself. She had come into the house dressed as a servant but, thought Stephanie, she was certainly no servant.

Marcel prepared the carriage in the yard and the twins could hear the clatter of hooves as the horses were brought from the stables.

“We will have to tell them,” said Kick, “that you are here when Madame comes back.”

“You are right of course but how did she escape?” asked the Princess. “I do not think she was released. She is also witness to the falsehoods of the Transitional Council so how will they react now? Will they try to arrest her again?”

“Well, they will know where she is if they want to pick her up,” replied Popster.

“What about putting her up in a safe house?” asked Kick. “Somewhere removed from here, somewhere they would never suspect.”

“Like Madame Delpierre’s,” suggested Popster. “We met her near the library. I know she is against the current regime. She will help us.”

“It would be wise to take precautions,” said the Princess. “It might only be for a few days.”

Thus it was decided. Kick and Popster went out past the guards, exchanged pleasantries then walked off down the road. They knew the carriage would return that way and that is what eventually happened.

Antoinette was overjoyed to see her friends again. “I did wonder if you would still be here,” she said through her tears.

“We certainly are,” said Kick, “we wouldn’t leave without saying goodbye!”

“We think it might be best if you stayed with Madame Delpierre,” said Popster, “because that lot might try and kidnap you again.”

“Someone who knows the situation well thinks it wise,” added Kick, “just for a few days.”

“Who have you been talking to?” asked Antoinette.

“Let us say this person knows a lot more than we do,” replied Popster.

Antoinette’s expression said it all. She had obviously guessed who this person was.

Alain Court Manteau was having lunch on the university campus when he got into conversation with someone from the Physics Department. This person was a researcher who worked on something called the ‘Matter Transportation Machine.’

“What does it do?” asked Alain.

“It is designed to turn something, anything, into a radio beam and transmit it to another location.”

“Does it actually work?”

“We have been conducting trials but as yet we have not managed to send anything. It is probably something to do with the voltage....” The researcher carried on talking but something he said made Alain sit up and take notice. He had been wondering how the Wagley sisters could have arrived and how

Stephanie could have disappeared at the same time, could this machine possibly be responsible?

He knew when the sisters had arrived and also when Stephanie had reappeared so he asked when the machine had been operated. He was invited back to the researcher's office who then checked his records in order to tell Alain when the experiments had taken place. The dates and times matched. Alain then asked to see the professor.

Professor Lecomte was sitting at his desk processing some paperwork when Alain was introduced. He had just started to explain his purpose when some more visitors appeared. Alain then waited outside but could hear the conversation, they were from the new government and were certain to be members of the Transitional Council.

"Professor Lecomte, we have been reviewing the activities of the University and are particularly interested in your Matter Transportation experiments."

"Oh yes, it is very exciting," replied the professor, "We have done a lot of work in the last two years and have achieved some promising results."

"So we have heard. We think this equipment will become very important in the future. We want to be in a position to build at least five more identical machines as soon as possible."

"That is indeed gratifying," replied the Professor. "We are well on our way towards the verification of certain hypotheses and have made improvements..."

Alain was listening intently. 'He is repeating meaningless phrases in the hope they will be satisfied,' he thought. 'Very non committal. He does not think the machine is ready yet. He will be in for a surprise!'

"Yes, yes, of course," continued the senior representative. "Anyway, we have decided that this research is of such importance that it must be overseen by someone very close to us. That is why Albert Camion has been selected. He will be very comfortable in your office so have your personal papers and effects moved out by next Monday. That is all."

Professor Lecomte was left alone. Alain returned. "Professor Lecomte?" he asked, "is this a good time?"

"Well Monsieur Court Manteau. You heard what they said?"

“Yes Monsieur Professor. I know of Monsieur Camion and he is not a physicist.”

“He is an artist. He was very eager to congratulate the new regime when they took over. But I should not be speaking like this. I do not know you well enough.”

“They did kidnap my cousin Monsieur Professor.”

“You mean Antoinette Court Manteau? So she did not go to France. Well, Camion knows nothing about science but he will report back on a regular basis. That is why they picked him. Anyway, how can I help?”

“Monsieur Professor, I have reason to believe that your experiments have transported individuals to and from a parallel world.”

The Professor stared at him. “Are you sure?” he asked. Alain Court Manteau was a respected research fellow at the university so the professor did not expect him to fabricate such a controversial claim. Alain explained the circumstances and told the professor about the individuals concerned.

“So our experiments were responsible for taking these three girls away from their family?”

“I think so Monsieur Professor. The question is, given the current situation, can we send them back?”

That evening, Alain came over to see the twins while Meldy stayed with the Princess upstairs.

“I have news. I talked to Professor Lecomte’s assistant, in the physics department, and I asked about a very interesting machine of theirs. It turns out that it was operated when you came and also when Stephanie returned. I think it highly likely that it was responsible for your arrival.”

“What is this machine called?” asked Kick.

“It is a ‘Matter Transportation Machine.’”

“So you also talked to the Professor?” asked Popster.

“And he can see a way to send us home?” added Kick.

“Well, there is a problem.”

“I thought there might be,” sighed Popster.

“He has been demoted and Albert Camion, who is not a scientist, is now in charge.”

“How does that affect us?” asked Kick.

“He is sure to be watching everything very closely and could ask awkward questions. You might be put in a dangerous position so we cannot take the risk.”

“What can we do about it?” asked Popster.

“Reinstate the Emperor as quickly as possible.”

To be continued