

Prologue

Irene ran swiftly, blindly, and more frightened than she'd ever been in her life. Tree branches slapped into her face. She tried to keep from stumbling on the narrow, rough path as the daylight faded. From behind, she could hear her best friend, Nan, panting as she struggled to keep up.

Hatred echoed in the distance. Eerie war chants of the mysterious army that had attacked their town without warning called through the valley.

Irene had no idea who the soldiers were, or why they had chosen to wage war on her peaceful community.

She only knew she and Nan had to get to safety.

I can't believe this is happening!

My day started out so...

Normal!

Part One: Attack of the Secret Valley

Chapter 1

Irene, Princess of Cabbage, pulled the thread tight in the tapestry, set her needle down, and studied her work with a critical eye.

It was far from ready to hang with the many other tapestries in her suite. However, she didn't want to continue working on the scene, which depicted mountains and meadow flowers.

She moved across the sunny room to make herself a cup of tea. After putting the kettle on the fire, Irene looked around and considered her options for the afternoon.

She could practice her harpsichord. She could finish the dress she was sewing. Or, perhaps, she could take a walk in the village outside the castle.

None of these possibilities seemed appealing at the moment.

Irene sighed, wishing Nan was here.

But her friend was studying with the famed dance instructor, Gene the Ewe (so called because with her pale, pink skin and tall bouffant of white hair she rather resembled a sheep). After moving to a new school, many miles south of the Valley, Nan's visits home had been rare.

Irene reached up and twirled a lock of her long, brown hair. As she did so, her eyes fell on the most recent letter from her brother, King Jeo II. She picked it up and read it for what felt like the hundredth time.

It is time you came back to Cabbage, my dearest sister, and take up your royal duties. When I sent you to live in the Valley of William Etté with the family of our father's former servant, I never intended that you reside there for so long. Now that you are sixteen, it is high time you accept the responsibilities of your position and come home to prepare for marriage. I have several appropriate prospects in mind.

Irene dropped the letter on the table.

The thought of an arranged marriage filled her with despair. She well remembered the first match her parents had agreed to when she was but eight. When that man had arrived, a year ago, the match had proven to be disastrous. Fortunately, Irene had managed to find a way out of the wedding.

Now, she poured her tea and sat by the window, leaning on the cool stone ledge and gazing out at the lush, green valley and the range of snow-capped mountains that lay beyond.

Even the warm spring day didn't lighten her mood.

I want to marry someone I love. Not someone my brother chooses for me.

If only Michael and I could have married.

Of course, Jeo would never permit a match so far below my station...

She glared at the letter, contemplating her brother's demands. A surge of panic washed over her.

I can't do it. I can't go back.

I...

I don't even want to be a princess any longer!

Irene rushed over to her desk, pulled out a fresh sheet of paper, a sharp quill and her inkstand. Once she had her tools in hand, she took a deep breath and began to write.

My dear brother, my heart is heavy as I write to tell you I will not be returning to Cabbage...

Lost in the composition of her letter, the knock at the door made Irene jump. When she opened the door, she was stunned to find Nan on the other side, smiling. She rushed forward to wrap the girl in a warm embrace.

"Surprise!" Nan cried.

Irene gave a startled laugh and returned the hug before pulling back. "Nan! I can't believe you're here! Why? Is the dance school closed for some reason?"

"No, but I'm home for good. I've learned all I can at the school, so I left. I just left!" Nan bounced up and down on her toes in excitement, making her curly, red hair bounce as well. Her green eyes sparkled within her sweet face, which was sprinkled with freckles. "I've been riding since before daylight," she added, as she entered. She twirled around the room. "I didn't even take time to flirt with the cute soldiers I passed along the way." She giggled.

Irene smiled at her friend's enthusiasm. "But, Nan, are you sure you want to leave? You might become a famous dancer if you continue your studies."

Nan stopped twirling and shrugged. “Maybe. But I missed everyone too much. I care more about being with my family and friends than about becoming famous.”

She resumed her dancing, twirling her way over to the kitchen area.

“May I?” she asked, pointing to the tea. At Irene’s nod, she poured herself a cup.

“Are you hungry?” Irene asked, smiling. “Sit down and I’ll fix you something to eat.”

“Oh, no. I really would love a walk. It’s such a long ride to here on horseback, you know. Why don’t we go up to the forest like we used to? We can take supper....?” Nan broke off, a stricken expression on her face. “That is...if you don’t mind...or have other plans. Oh, dear, I should have sent a message ahead—I’m so sorry!”

Irene shook her head. “Nan, you always worry too much about other people’s feelings. A picnic sounds perfect,” she assured her friend. “I’m so glad you’ve come home.”

Nan looked relieved. “I’m glad to *be* home.”

Irene began to pack bread, cheese, fruit, and a bottle of cider in a wicker basket. “Why don’t you move in with me here at the castle? King Neil won’t mind. There’s plenty of room. And we’ll have so much fun. It will be like when I lived with your family.”

“I was hoping you would ask me! In fact,” Nan paused, looking a bit sheepish, “I already ordered my things be sent here. They should arrive tomorrow. I’ve been envious of your living on your own since King Neil let you take a room in the castle after I left for dance academy. Quite a change from our little home. I’ll tell my parents, later, that I’m not moving back in with them. After all, I am sixteen now! Papa might be upset, but mother will be fine—one less mouth to feed.”

The two exited the castle and walked through the courtyard to the main gate and onto the cobblestone street leading through town. They swung their basket of food between them as they passed village shops and homes.

“Princess Irene,” a shopkeeper called, coming out of his store. “The new sheet of music you requested is here.”

“Oh, thank you, Ephraim. I will pick it up on our way back.”

A plump woman sweeping the stoop of her shop glanced up and smiled broadly at the two girls. “Nan, bless my soul! How lovely to see you! Have you come home, then?”

“Yes, I...”

“Tell your mother I’ve got fresh strawberries today—first of the season.”

“Oh, I’m sure she...”

“You won’t find fresher anywhere in the village!”

“Of course, but I...”

“Wait until I tell my Jeffrey you’ve come home. You can expect him to call on you very soon, I’m certain!”

“Oh, uh...that is...” Nan stammered.

“Yes, thank you, Madame Bouchette,” Irene called as she dragged Nan away. The girls exchanged amused glances. When they reached the end of the town, they turned to climb a hill and hike through the forest to a favorite clearing. They set up their supper in the field near a solitary apple tree filled with pink blossoms.

“So what do you think you’ll do now you’re home?” Irene asked, between bites.

“I suppose I will dance at King Neil’s court. He’s as much as told me I have a standing invitation,” Nan mused. “Beyond that, I don’t know.”

“You could accept the marriage proposal from Jeffrey,” Irene teased. “After all, Madame Bouchette already has you engaged in her mind.”

Nan rolled her eyes. “I can’t imagine why she would think that! I never did the least little thing to encourage him. At least, I don’t think I did. Besides...I’m not...well...I don’t really *feel* anything for Jeffrey beyond affection. We played together as children and I like him well enough. But that’s no reason to wed. I want a real romance.”

“I understand. Only the truest love would ever make me happy.”

Nan reached over and took her hand. “You still miss him, don’t you?” she asked softly.

“I think I always will. Although I am *determined* to put my love for Michael behind me. There’s no point continuing to pine for him. Someday I may meet someone who will make me feel the same way he did. But if not, I would be content to never marry at all. Though, I fear my brother will have something to say about that.”

Nan nodded. “Yes, I noticed a letter from him on the table.”

Irene sighed. "Jeo insists I return to Cabbage."

"Well, we knew this day would come. But imagine if my father had never worked for your father. Jeo wouldn't have thought to send you here after your parents died. We might never have met. And with *six* brothers, I needed you for a sister!" She threw her arms around Irene. "I can't imagine my life without you nearby!"

Irene returned the hug. "Me either. I was only meant to stay with your family for a year or two until Jeo felt more comfortable as the new king. But I was happy, so he let me be. And now I feel like the Valley of William Etté is my real home. I know I should go back, but I don't want Jeo picking out my husband. What if he finds someone like my first fiancé, Jean de la Grande Pomme?"

"I'm sure Jeo would choose better. Still, I'd hate for you to move away." She leaned back onto the grass. "When I marry, I hope I have a half dozen children and live a quiet, happy life right here in the Valley."

"You have no idea how much I envy you, Nan. You will never worry about always being on your best behavior at stuffy royal events or making a marriage to improve relations between kingdoms. You can do as you please." She shook her head with determination. "No. I can't face it. I've decided I won't go back. In fact, I was writing my brother a letter telling him so when you arrived."

Nan sat up, her eyes wide. "But what will you do? Can you truly just...give up being a princess?"

"I honestly don't know. But I can't live the life my brother has planned for me. I need to make my own choices and decisions. I won't be anyone's puppet!"

"But don't you have a duty? I mean, isn't that what being a princess is all about?"

"A duty to do what? It's not like I'll ever rule on my own. Even if I do marry some prince and he becomes king, there's no guarantee he'll ever let me do anything except look pretty at balls and give him lots of sons."

"It might not be...*quite* so awful," Nan said hesitantly.

"Oh, Nan, you don't know what a royal marriage can be like! My parents had a true love match, but sometimes a king and queen can't abide each other. Then the king takes mistresses and ignores his wife and she has nothing to do all day but drink wine and play cards with sycophants from the court. I'd go mad!"

“So, you’ll run away?”

Irene moaned and put her head on her knees. “I don’t know. I’m afraid to send Jeo that letter, but I’m even more afraid not to.”

The girls were lost in conversation, unaware of the chittering of the birds above them. The birds became excited and chirped more loudly, hopping from branch to branch, flying a short distance away, and returning to the tree.

The girls looked up and watched the birds take to the air, circle and fly away. Once they left, the forest seemed strangely quiet. There was no wind, and no sound from any other birds or animals.

Irene turned to Nan. “We’d better go back to the castle. It’s getting dark.”

“Yes, I hadn’t noticed it was so late.”

They quickly packed the remains of their meal and half ran, half walked, anxious to get out of the silent forest.

Irene pointed to the sky. “Is that smoke? Or clouds?”

Nan shook her head, uncertain, and they hurried on.

“Watch out!” Irene shoved Nan aside as three deer came bounding from the brush, narrowly missing them.

Frightened, the girls began to run.

Near the edge of the woods, they were startled by a flock of blackbirds that flew, cawing loudly, into the woods, as if they were being chased.

The girls exited the woods at the top of a hill and looked down in shock to see the castle prepared for battle. The flags of the army were raised on the twin towers, flanking the main gate, which, now, appeared secured. Glancing to the west, Irene realized the smoke she noticed was coming from hundreds of torches carried by a massive army in the distance.

“Irene, what is all this?” Nan’s voice trembled.

“I don’t know.” Irene said, frowning. “Wait. Didn’t you say you saw some soldiers on the road on your way home?”

“Yes.”

“Were they from the Valley’s regiments?”

“I don’t...no. No, they weren’t. Their leggings were black. Our soldiers wear white. I’m sure they weren’t from the Valley.”

“They must have been enemy scouts. We’re going to be attacked. Come on!”

They raced down the hill and through the now deserted village to the castle. Once there, they stood before the gate, trying to attract someone’s attention.

“Please, let us in! It is Nan and Irene!”

No one responded; the army was inside, listening to their general shout orders for the approaching battle. Nan and Irene grabbed stones and sticks—anything they could get their hands on—and threw them at the gate, hoping someone would hear them. They looked back at the huge army steadily moving closer.

At last, a young lieutenant waved to them from the watchtower.

“Open the gate! It is Nan and Irene,” the girls shouted.

“We can’t. ‘Tis already secured,” he called back. “Even if we let you in, ye’d probably die within the walls. We’re no match for this army. Run for your lives! Go to yer brother in Cabbage, Irene. It’s yer only chance. Warn him about the army!”

“But who are they? Where are they from?”

“We don’t know. They sent a message earlier and all it said was: ‘Be ready this evening at dusk to fight an army larger than any ye have ever seen.’ Go—run! Stick to the back roads!”

“Irene, we can’t leave. My family!”

“We must.” Irene grabbed Nan’s arm. “Look!”

The army was now close enough for Nan and Irene to read the banners they carried. Battle trumpets sounded and the soldiers roared as they charged the castle. A hail of arrows flew through the air, some falling close to Nan and Irene as they ran along the south side of the fortress. They rounded the corner only to find more soldiers moving forward to secure the back.

Nan screamed in terror while Irene frantically looked for an escape route. Spying a narrow, overgrown path to the left, she grabbed Nan’s arm, and pulled her towards it. They fled up the path, tearing their dresses, scratching their hands and faces on undergrowth. The sounds of battle followed them. They finally stopped running at the top of a far hill.

“I can’t run anymore,” Nan gasped, holding her sides.

“Nor can I,” Irene whispered.

From where they stopped, the valley was in full view below them. It was hard to pick out details as the darkness grew, but the army set fire to the village. Flames lit scenes of horror. Irene and Nan heard a low thudding noise from a battering ram being pushed into the main gate again and again. Soldiers placed four tall ladders against the walls of the castle and were rapidly scaling them.

The defenders of the Valley of William Etté did their best, but the attacking army was large and organized. The enormous battering log finally crashed through the castle gate, and the enemy soldiers poured inside. Irene and Nan sank to their knees, holding each other as they listened to the distant clang of steel against steel and the cries of fighting men. The screams! Would they never end? After two hours, the battle seemed over. Nan and Irene, huddled together on the ground, heard only an occasional whoop from a member of the victorious army.

Holding hands, they stood and peered down, trying to see through the gloom. The castle was charred black in places and many fires still burned. Celebratory noises floated up from men breaking into the castle’s store and picking the pockets of the dead. The Valley’s army barely made a dent in the huge number of enemy soldiers. The girls stood in shocked silence, too stunned and angry to even cry. The home they loved so much was gone.

“We must warn my brother,” Irene said abruptly, turning away. Nan took one last tearful glance at the town before rushing to catch up with Irene. They began walking southeast over the hills towards Cabbage. It was late and they were tired, but they knew they must hurry lest Cabbage be the army’s next victim.

After a while, they came to a stream, where they stopped to quench their thirst and wash the blood off their scratched hands and faces. As they rested, they heard rustling in some nearby bushes.

“We’ve been followed,” Nan cried. “Hide!”

Irene pointed to a dead log. They ran over and ducked behind it. The rustling continued for a few minutes until, finally, someone burst through the bushes. The person (or was it two?) walked towards the stream, each step landing heavily on the ground. The

footsteps stopped and a noisy slurping began. Nan peered over the log and let out a yelp of surprise.

“It’s only a horse!” There was a white stallion. He bore no saddle but wore the coat of arms of the Valley’s regiment.

“Whoa, boy, whoa.” Nan slowly walked towards him. “We won’t hurt you.” She snatched the reins and the horse reared back, his eyes rolling. He whinnied with fear, but Nan held tight. As Irene and Nan talked softly to him, he calmed down.

“He must have run away from the battle after he lost his rider,” Irene said.

“He’s as scared as we are.”

“Do you think he’s calm enough, now, to let us ride him?”

“We’ll find out. Help me up.”

Irene boosted Nan up and then, with Nan’s help, climbed behind.

By late morning, Nan and Irene were almost at the kingdom of Cabbage. The mountains were behind them and her brother’s province was at the river’s bend. As she saw the familiar homes and landscape, Irene had a sudden pang of longing. She realized how much she missed Cabbage.

Once we get to the palace and see my brother, all will be well.

They galloped towards the safety of the village. Suddenly, Nan pulled back on the reins to stop the horse.

“Why did you stop? Is there a problem with the horse?” Irene asked.

“No. I...hope I’m wrong, but...see the house on the right? And the one behind it? They’re burned.”

“No, not Cabbage, too! The army must have come here first. Jeo!”

Nan nudged the horse and they moved into the town square. There was a child’s shoe abandoned in the road. Nearby, a basket of vegetables spilled into the dirt. Then, they began to see bodies in blood-soaked clothing lying in awkward positions, flies buzzing around.

Horried, Nan whispered, “They never had a chance. Irene, let’s leave. There’s nothing we can do.”

“No, there is a chance Jeo is still alive. Let’s go to the palace.”

“But, I don’t think...”

“Please, let’s go.”

Nan kicked the horse and they cantered through the streets, trying not to look at the carnage. When they reached the palace, they came across a brown horse tethered to a post. It was the first living thing they had seen since entering the village. Its coat was rough and uncurried, and every blade of grass within circumference of its tether was gone.

“Perhaps it’s my brother’s horse. In fact, I’m sure it is. He’s probably inside right now.”

“I don’t know, Irene. The horse looks abandoned. He clearly hasn’t been cared for in days.”

“Maybe Jeo is hurt and hasn’t been able to tend to him.” Irene slid off the horse and dashed over the green lawn towards the front doors, which stood open.

“Irene, wait!” Nan dismounted and chased after her friend.

Irene ran from room to room, calling for her brother. Finding no one on the main level, she climbed the stairway to the second floor and went to her brother’s bedchamber, with Nan close behind. The grand stone room, which bore high ceilings, was ransacked and the bed appeared as if it had been slept in.

Irene turned to Nan. “He’s here; I know it. There is a secret room behind the bed. My father showed it to me once. He told me if I were ever in any danger I should hide there. My brother is probably in there now. All I need to do is push a lever under the bed and a panel between the bedposts will slide open.” Irene stooped down and reached for the lever to push. “Help me; it’s stuck.”

Nan crouched on the floor beside Irene and tried the lever, but it was too stiff.

“Get that log,” Irene said. Nan ran over to the fireplace and brought it back. Bracing themselves, the two girls pressed the log with their feet until the lever slowly moved forward. It finally clicked into position, sending the panel sliding freely. A huge bear of a man came from behind it. Before Nan and Irene could react, he grabbed them both.

“Surprised my darlins’? I bet it weren’t me ye was lookin’ fer,” he bellowed in a gruff voice. “Well, whoever it was ye wanted, I’m sure ye’ll agree I’m a much better prize, eh?”

Irene struggled to get away and slapped at the beast’s wrist, but he only held her tighter.

“Did ye think ye’d be leavin’ now?” he laughed. “Naw, I’ll be pleased if ye would consent to stay a while. The colonel might look on me more kindly if I was to bring him two prisoners, especially ones as pretty as ye be. Yeh, I made a grave mistake when I deserted the army, but I might be forgiven if ye two ladies would help me out a bit. I’m really a nice man once ye git to know me, as ye soon will.”

Nan and Irene stared at each other in horror.

What now?

