

The Hunt for Winter

Chapter One

"It's a boy, Your Majesty – a fine, healthy boy!" Tillie the midwife said as she examined the baby Queen Irene of Cabbage pushed from her body with one last, mighty effort. Irene lay back, exhausted, but smiling.

A boy, Irene thought, a wizard.

Aloud she said, "Let Seever know at once, and let the bells in the palace tower ring to announce the arrival of the Crown Prince of Cabbage. Let me see my son."

Irene stretched her arms out to take the small bundle Tillie had swaddled in warmed blankets. She gently pulled back the cloth to look at his face. He had her dark looks, she noted, not his father Anton's fair features.

"What is the time?" she asked.

"Why, 'tis just an hour or so 'till the Spring Equinox, Your Majesty," the old woman replied, smiling. "I had thought you might deliver a spring baby, but your son was born in wintertime, still."

The midwife bustled about the royal bedroom, tidying up and removing the soiled linens. She placed more linens and towels underneath Irene, in preparation for the after-birth. But some time went by and still Irene had not passed it. Then Irene began to moan, softly at first and then with more urgency.

"Should the after-birth be so painful, Tillie?" she asked. "I feel much as I did when I brought my son into the world."

Perspiration broke out on Irene's brow. Another wave of painful contractions hit

her and she clutched her stomach and cried out. Tillie was immediately by Irene's side, gently feeling her belly. She spread the queen's legs apart to take a look. Irene caught the look of surprise on the midwife's face.

"Bless me, it's another baby!" Tillie cried. She quickly took the first child from Irene's arms and handed him off to a lady-in-waiting. She instructed the chambermaid to get more towels and a basin of fresh, hot water.

Through her pain, Irene murmured, "No, no, it mustn't be twins! Not that! 'Twill be Anton and Anthony all over again! No, no, no!" Her voice rose both in pain and fear as she felt the baby coming. Tillie held her hand and coaxed her to ride out each contraction. At long last, when the midwife knew the time was right, she went down to the edge of the bed to help bring forth the unexpected child. With another great effort, Irene bore down one last time and the baby came out.

"A girl, Your Majesty – and quite the prettiest newborn I've ever seen!" said Tillie, holding the baby up for Irene to see. "Let me clean her up a bit for ye. Twins! My word, I never would have guessed it!"

Two hours later, Irene was sitting up in bed holding both her children. The girl was as fair as the boy was dark, and looked a good deal like her father. Irene smiled, happy that she had now a living reminder of her late husband, Anton.

"What will you name them, Your Majesty?" asked Charlotte, Irene's favorite lady-in-waiting.

"I shall name my son for his father, but since he was born while it was still winter, that shall also be his name: Winter Anton of Cabbage. And because my daughter came after the equinox, she shall be called Spring Evangeline, as Evangeline means "messenger of good news."

Almost Five Years Later

"Mama! Make Winter stop! He keeps making my dolls fly up in the air where I can't reach them – it isn't fair!" The petite blonde girl burst into her mother's

reception room, where at that moment, Queen Irene was meeting with her councilors. Spring ran up and buried her face in her mother's lap, crying. Irene's advisors smiled indulgently. It was not the first time they had witnessed teasing by Spring's brother.

The child's nanny came rushing in. "Forgive me, Your Majesty," she said, curtsying quickly. "The child got away from me before I could stop her." She came to take Spring away, but Irene waved her off.

"I shall keep her with me, Magdala," she said. She lifted her daughter onto her lap. "We are nearly done." She kissed Spring and said, "Now, my sweet, I shall get your dolls back for you, never fear. Would you like to sit here with my council and me? Only a *very* grown up young lady would be allowed to be here. Can you be very grown up and stop crying?"

"Yes, Mama," Spring said, with a slight hiccup. She wiped her face with her chubby hands and lay her head back against her mother's shoulder, content to watch and listen from her mother's arms. She would tell her brother Winter that *she* was allowed in the meeting, and he wasn't! *That will make him jealous*, she thought, smugly.

Irene kissed the top of Spring's blonde head and continued her discussion.

"Now, where was I? Oh, yes. In two day's time, we are hosting another trade delegation from the Secret Valley," she said. "Among those expected are my dear friends, Kay of the Crystal Seas, Ken of Craig Manor, and Sir and Lady Fitzgerald. And since their visit coincides so closely with my children's natal anniversary, we shall have a ball to celebrate."

"A ball?" squealed Spring in delight, "Will we be allowed to stay up for it, Mama?"

Irene smiled. "Yes, my love, but only for a short time, for the ball will go on much later than you and your brother's bedtime."

"Well then, why can't we have the ball start at noon so we can be a part of all of it?" she persisted. "Then I wouldn't have to miss any of the dancing!"

The men of Queen Irene's council chuckled to themselves. While Spring was not quite five, she had already shown herself to be an intelligent and crafty child who could out-talk anyone and debate an issue until, like as not, she got her way. Yet, she was as sweet as could be and no one thought her spoiled or demanding. She just had an innate ability to see a solution to any problem, especially if it meant there was something in it for her.

Queen Irene suppressed a laugh. "Because a proper ball does not start until at least eight o'clock, and all young princes and princesses need their sleep. You shall dine early with Magdala, and then be presented to those attending the ball when the dancing begins." Irene turned to her council. "Now, gentlemen, I believe that is all I have on my agenda. Is there anything else we must discuss?"

The members shook their heads and gathered their papers to leave. After they departed, Irene continued to sit at the long table with her daughter in her lap. She was so looking forward to seeing her friends from the Secret Valley; it had been more than a year since they had last been able to get away for a visit. Irene had especially missed her childhood friend, Nan. She smiled as she remembered the effort it took for Nan to finally confess to her parents that she and Fitzgerald had exchanged marriage vows. They had done it while they were in Cabbage, consoling Irene after the Queen's husband had passed away. Nan's parents had forbidden her to have anything to do with Fitzgerald, because he had come from the Secret Valley, which had attacked the Valley of William Etté and led to their imprisonment in the Black Lord's realm. It did not matter to Nan's father that her "Fitzy" had helped defeat not only the Black Lord, but Sir William, as well. Fitzgerald was the enemy as far as Nan's father was concerned.

Nan had been determined, however, and when Kay and Ken came to the Valley of William Etté on a peace mission from the Secret Valley, Nan took every opportunity to have her friends over to their home. At first, her father wanted nothing to do with Kay and Ken, but soon he saw that they brought goods and

craftsmen to help rebuild their community. He saw how intelligent and kind they were and how much her daughter loved them. His heart slowly began to change and finally, he seemed so friendly towards Kay and Ken that when his daughter brought up the subject of Sir Fitzgerald again, he nodded and said she could marry him. It was then that Nan hesitantly told her parents that she was, in fact, already his wife!

Although they had exchanged vows once before in Cabbage, Nan's parents insisted on throwing a grand wedding for the happy couple in the traditional style of the Valley of William Etté. Her six brothers had all been attendants, as had Irene and Kay, and Nan was finally able to be Fitzgerald's wife in more than just name. Nan moved back to the Secret Valley with her husband and was happily teaching the art of dance to the young children of the kingdom.

Sir Fitzgerald had kept his place as a senior knight in the realm, but no longer had any heart for battles and war. Though he still was in charge of training those who wished to join the Secret Valley's army, it was a much smaller army than when Lord William and Sir Richard were in charge. The goal of the army now was only for possible protection, not aggression. Fitzgerald found plenty of time to indulge in his new passion of writing poetry and songs.

He was not alone. Many of the residents of the Secret Valley were now enjoying music, dance and art. Lady Ruth, the Queen Regent, had brought the arts back to prominence as she guided her young son, Alex, to become ruler. She sent Kay and Ken as emissaries to the neighboring communities her homeland had once vanquished, and spent a goodly portion of the treasury to help restore that which had been looted and destroyed by her husband's rule. She liked to tell herself that her husband had only been a pawn in the hands of the Black Lord, and was not truly responsible for his actions. She preferred to remember William as the sweet man he had been when they first met and courted, and only spoke of him to Alex as a good man who took a bad turn.

Irene's thoughts shifted to Kay and Ken, who would soon arrive as well. Since declaring their love for each other, theirs had been a loving, but volatile

relationship. Both of them were such strong characters they both wanted to be in control, and often butted heads and exchanged heated words. But then the rift would be over and the two would be as loving as before.

Until the next time, thought Irene, smiling. To everyone's surprise, Kay and Ken had not married yet, despite their dedication to each other. Irene knew an attempted rape had scarred her friend emotionally, and she was now skittish about having a physical relationship. Still, Kay and Ken were well matched in intelligence and had found a good career as ambassadors for the Secret Valley. They traveled extensively and Kay wrote chatty letters to Irene of their adventures far and wide.

Perhaps that is why they do not wish to marry and be tied down.

Looking down at her daughter, who was nodding off, Irene was reminded of how lucky she had been. She had known the love of an exceptional man, and had two delightful children as a result.

Irene sighed. Time to go see her son and get him to release Spring's dolls from whatever spell Seever had taught him that had sent them out of the girl's reach.

"But, Mama!" Winter said to his mother, who was trying very hard to keep a serious expression of displeasure on her face. "I must practice as much as I can if I am to be a good wizard and help people! Seever says one never knows when a levitation spell will come in handy."

"My darling son, you know I am in favor of your lessons with dear Seever, but you also know that you are *not* to practice on your twin! We have had this discussion many times before, Winter, and because you have disobeyed me, you may not see Seever for five whole days."

"Mama! That's not fair! I have so much to learn!" Then he added slyly, knowing it was a soft spot of his mother's, "Seever's getting older and when he dies, who will teach me? There are no other wizards, you said. I have to get as much practice as I can."

Irene sighed. What her son said was true. Seever had agreed not to go back to Wizards' Keep when Irene learned she was carrying Anton's child. He had promised to teach Winter as much as he could before his own magic began to dwindle, a sign that his end was coming.

"Very well, Winter," she said. "Three days then, not five. And bring Spring's dolls down from the ceiling at once."

Winter, who loved to show off, raised his hands and muttered an incantation, then slowly lowered the dolls from the ceiling into the arms of his nanny, Magdala. When he was done, he smiled brightly.

"See, Mama? I am getting so good at that one!" he said proudly.

"Yes, darling. Now, be a good boy and apologize to your sister for sending her dolls up there. And promise her you won't do it again."

Winter pouted a bit, but did as he was told. Then he kissed his little sister on the cheek and suggested they go out in the garden to play. Along with Magdala, the twins left the nursery.

Irene knew she needed to oversee the preparations for her guests, but decided to go visit Seever first. She found him in his rooms in the palace, which he had decorated much the same as she remembered the Wizards' Keep. He had used a spell to create crystals of every hue to cover the walls and ceiling. The sunlight spilling in from the windows created a dazzling effect of reflected color. As often as she had been in Seever's room, Irene still marveled at its beauty and serenity.

"How are you, my dear Seever?" Irene said as she crossed the room. The old wizard lay on a couch in a corner of the room, quietly reading.

"I am fine, Your Majesty. How kind of you to come visit an old wizard," he said with a twinkle in his eyes. He put down the book and reached out with both hands and Irene took them in her own as she sat down next to him. Although Seever appeared no different from when she first met him at Wizards' Keep

more than five years ago, she could see he tired more easily now.

"Am I interrupting your solitary rest?" she asked. "I know that my son takes up a lot of your time and energy. You must tell me if the effort becomes too much for you."

"Not at all, my dear, not at all. I enjoy teaching Winter and he is a very fast learner. And, although I know you do not like to hear me speak of it, I do not know how much more time I will have to shape Winter into the kind of wizard we both want him to be."

Irene nodded her head, solemnly. "And for that reason, I am loath to keep him from his lessons, but he is being punished for sending Spring's dolls up in the air out of her reach, so you will not be seeing him for three days."

"Oh, punishment, indeed!" Seever laughed. "I knew that spell might cause a problem. Well, I shall spend my time working on his next lesson plan." The wizard paused. "He *will* be a good wizard, Irene, have no fear of that," he added softly.

Irene nodded. "You remember how panicked I was when my midwife told me I was giving birth to twins. I so feared that I might have two sons, one as good as Anton and one as evil as Anthony. Thank Mirn I had a mortal girl, instead."

Seever chuckled. "And like the season she is named for, Spring is a delight to behold. I know that she is oft envious of my private lessons with Winter. Tell her *she* may come to see me during what would be Winter's time these next three days. I shall tell her stories."

"She would love that. Oh—I nearly forgot. Some old friends are coming for a visit. Nan, Fitzgerald, Kay and Ken will be here in two days' time. I hope that you will join us at the ball I am throwing in their honor, and I know they all will want to have a good visit with you."

"I look forward to seeing them as well." Seever sighed. "Now, if you don't mind,

my dear, I think I should like to rest a while."

"Of course," Irene said, trying to mask her anxiety with a smile. It seemed Seever needed more and more rest lately. She kissed the wizard on the forehead and left the room.