

CHAPTER ONE



SPRING THAW

THE DROP OF WATER quivering at the tip of the icicle sparkled in the sun like a polished diamond. Wally Knight, heir to King Arthur, Companion to the Lady of the Lake of Arthurian legend, the doughty youth who had fought and defeated men twice his size, the intrepid lad who had journeyed all over the world on a dangerous quest to reunite the scattered shards of the great sword Excalibur, watched it with bated breath.

It fell, splashing to the gray-painted wood of the old farmhouse porch.

“Nine seconds!” Ariane announced. “I win! Again!”

“Well, you *are* the fricking Lady of the Lake, with magical power over fresh water,” Wally grumbled.

“I assure you, Sir Knight, I need no magic to outsmart the likes of you.” But Ariane smiled as she said it, and Wally grinned back.

They were sitting on the porch swing of the Barringer Farm Historic Bed and Breakfast in Cypress Hills, watching the snow melt and betting each other how many seconds would pass between one drop and the next falling from the slowly shrinking icicle above the steps.

Watching the snow melt was more exciting than it sounded, because melting snow meant the slough would soon thaw, and that would give them a body of water big enough for both of them to be submerged in. Not to go swimming – *ugh*, Wally thought, knowing what he knew of algae growth in stagnant ponds in summer in Saskatchewan – but because they needed that much water to materialize in after Ariane had used her magical power to transport them around the world via fresh water and clouds.

The snow melted faster than the ice thawed, especially in a pond small enough to have frozen solid, so there could be no using the slough yet. But the snowdrifts shrank daily and water dripped constantly from the icicles along the edge of the porch roof. It wouldn't be long.

And that meant soon they could travel anywhere they wanted.

Even though watching the snow melt *was* more exciting than it sounded, it still wasn't all *that* exciting, and Wally had actually had an ulterior motive in asking Ariane to sit out on the porch with him, and not the usual ulterior motive a boy might have for asking a girl to sit next to him on a porch swing. The fact was, he'd had an idea. A really great idea. But to make it happen, he had to get Ariane to agree it was a great idea, and sometimes Ariane wasn't convinced his great ideas were nearly as great as he thought they were. *And sometimes*, he thought, *to be perfectly honest, she's right.*

But not this time.

Time to take the plunge. "Man, I can't wait to get out of here," he said, trying to sound casual, as yet another glittering drop fell from the icicle. That much, at least, he knew Ariane agreed with. The two of them had been cooped up in the farmhouse all winter, afraid to even venture into Maple Creek or Elkwater. The sorcerer Merlin – known to the general world as Rex Major, billionaire computer magnate – knew they had been using Medicine Hat as a staging

area for trips around the country. That meant he must suspect they were in the area, and that meant they dared not show their faces, for fear of word somehow getting back to him. It wouldn't have to be from some gossiping busybody either; all it would take would be for someone to snap a photo of them with a phone connected to the Internet. Merlin's magic was a spider lurking on the Web, alert to any tiny vibration caused by Ariane's or Wally's presence.

Actually, being cooped up with Ariane, whom Wally could now officially, and rather unbelievably, call his girlfriend, might have been fun if not for the fact they were also cooped up with Ariane's mother, Emily Forsythe; Emily's sister, Ariane's Aunt Phyllis; and Phyllis's long-time friend, Emma McPhail, whose ideas of boy-girl propriety seemed to date back to Victorian England. But they *were* cooped up with that formidable female trio, and Wally had been feeling increasingly antsy. Spring feverish, even.

And, also rather unbelievably, he missed his family, dysfunctional and disjointed though it had become in recent months. He missed his dad, who was who-knew-where on business, no doubt accompanied by his recently acquired and much younger girlfriend. He missed his mom, also who-knew-where, most likely shooting a movie or a documentary. He even, God help him, missed his sister Felicia, though at least he knew where *she* was – living it up in Rex Major's Toronto penthouse condominium. Since she was also an heir of Arthur, and since Wally had rather thoroughly rejected Major's overtures to him – escaping that same condo, knocking one of Major's guards on the head, hacking Major's email, and stealing several thousand dollars from one of Major's bank accounts – Major had her tucked away for future use.

Like Ariane, Major/Merlin had two of the shards of Excalibur. Whoever was first to find the final piece, the hilt, would be able to claim the whole sword. And if that were

Merlin, Flish would – although Wally had a really, really hard time picturing it – wield Excalibur at the head of his armies. *Probably while wearing a designer dress and carrying a really expensive handbag in her free hand*, he thought.

Wally never would have believed almost five months could pass without some new development in the quest he and Ariane had been given last fall by the Lady of the Lake, but every day he asked her, “Any sense of where the hilt is?”

And every day she said...

Well, no, he hadn’t asked her today. So now he did.

She sighed. “No, nothing. I keep hoping, with spring arriving, that maybe water will start running and come in contact with it, wherever it is, but...”

“It could be in the southern hemisphere again, anyway,” Wally pointed out. “Antarctica, even.”

“Yes, I know.” She shook her head. “At least we know Merlin doesn’t have it yet, either. My shards are still safe.” She touched her side. She’d taken to wearing both of the shards against her skin, instead of just one, so they were always ready if she needed them. Even though she couldn’t use the power of both of them together unless Wally was also touching them. Apparently, the sword liked him. Or liked the fact he was an heir of Arthur anyway.

Which was kind of cool, except, since Felicia was also an heir of Arthur, she could make the same connection for Merlin. And Merlin had his own powers, the extent of which they had only an inkling. Which had made it even more dangerous for them to venture into public anywhere close to their winter hideout.

But as the winter wound to its close, Wally had begun to think about the freedom they would gain with the melting of the ice. And that, combined with missing his family, and his general stir-craziness, had given him the great – well, seemingly great – idea he was about to bring up.

Another drop of water fell from the icicle.

“By Mother’s Day, the pond will have melted,” he said tentatively.

“By long before that, I hope,” Ariane said.

“But by then for sure.”

Ariane shrugged. “Probably.”

“So...” Wally reached out and caught the next drop, cold against his palm. “Have you thought about what you might do for Mother’s Day?”

“Um...no. Why?”

Wally could hear the confusion in her voice, but rather than look at her, he gazed out over the still-snowy fields into the blue distance. “I’m...thinking about my mom.”

A pause. “You miss her?”

Wally nodded, but still didn’t look around because he seemed to have something in his eye. He blinked to clear his suddenly blurry vision. “Weird, huh? She’s been away more than she’s been around the last few years, and she wasn’t all that...involved, even when she *was* around. But I’ve watched you and your mom and...well, I keep thinking if you two can work things out, after everything she put you through, maybe...I should try to work things out with my mom, too.”

“You could call her...” Ariane began, then stopped. “No, I guess that wouldn’t be safe, would it?”

Wally sighed. “Not with Rex Major probably keeping tabs on all her calls. What if he traced it back here?”

“I could take you somewhere else and then you could call her – somewhere back east, or even in another country,” Ariane offered.

“Yeah, I thought of that,” Wally said. He turned to look at her at last; he’d blinked away whatever was making his eyes water. “But I really want to see her in person, and I couldn’t arrange anything with her over the phone anyway. Even if Major wasn’t actually listening in, he’s probably Commanded her and Dad to tell him everything

they hear from me. He'd set a trap, or use her as a hostage. You know how he loves hostages."

Ariane chewed on her lip. "So...any ideas?"

"One. If we can get somewhere where it's safe to use a computer, a library like we used when we were looking for your mom, I could check out her production company website. Sometimes she lists her current project and where she's going to be filming. Then we could go there and I could surprise her."

"On Mother's Day."

Wally shrugged. "If it worked out that way."

Ariane leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. He grinned, and touched the spot. "What was that for?"

"For being an incurable romantic," she said. "All right, let's do it. As soon as the pond is ice-free."

Wow, he thought. *I guess it really is a great idea!*

The pond took two more weeks to melt, during which time they discussed with the grown-ups where they might safely go. Emma suggested Weyburn. "Fine public library there," she said. "And there are any number of hotel pools to choose from, plus a public pool."

"Weyburn it is," said Ariane.

On a fine sunny day a few days later they stood in their swimsuits in the upstairs bathroom of the bed and breakfast, Ariane carrying a waterproof backpack with their clothes inside it. "Ready?"

"Ready," Wally said, though he wasn't really – the whole dissolving-into-water-and-materializing-somewhere-else thing *still* freaked him out. It was even worse this time, since it had been months since their near-disastrous excursion to Cacibajagua Island in the Caribbean. But he held on tight to Ariane's hand all the same, and a minute later they were in a hotel swimming pool in Weyburn, at the bottom of a waterslide. They surfaced and climbed out as if they'd just been swimming. There was no one else in

the pool, but even if there had been, it wouldn't have mattered much. People were way more willing to believe the two teenagers who had suddenly appeared in the pool had been there all along and had somehow just been overlooked than that they'd materialized out of nowhere.

Go figure.

Ariane ordered the water off their bodies, they went into their respective bathrooms to change, and then they headed off on foot toward the Weyburn Public Library. A bit of a hike, but the weather was nice and at least they were somewhere other than Barringer Farm.

"What's that?" Ariane asked as they crossed a bridge over the Souris River. She pointed to the south, where a round white tower with a steep, conical roof and small windows down its sides rose on a hill.

"It's a hill," Wally said helpfully. "I know we don't have very many of them in Saskatchewan, but –"

She swatted his arm playfully. "I mean, what's that tower thing? It looks like a lighthouse. Or something Rapunzel might have lived in."

"It's an old water tower," Wally said. "There used to be quite a few in Saskatchewan that looked like that. I don't know how many are left – I know there's one like it in Humboldt." He grinned at her. "Looks like one thing, but it's really something very different. Just like you – after all, *you* look like an ordinary teenage girl –"

"Ordinary?" Ariane said, dangerously.

"Um...I mean, *you* look like an incredibly beautiful and talented teenage girl," Wally amended, "and yet in reality you're the heir to the Lady of the Lake."

"Yeah," Ariane said. "Fat lot of good it's done me for the last few months while everything's been frozen." She shook her head. "What if we *never* figure out where the hilt of Excalibur is? It's already been months. Maybe it's lost forever. And if it is...what will that mean? Will we

have to hide from Merlin for the rest of our lives?”

“We can’t,” Wally said. “Sooner or later he’ll find us.”

“So what will we do?”

Wally said nothing. In the middle of the bridge he stopped and stared down at the little river, still swollen from the spring melt. “I don’t know,” he said at last. “Run away, I guess. Hide out wherever we can, for as long as we can.”

“What kind of future is that?” Ariane said.

Wally said nothing, because the answer was obvious – a very grim one.

And it wasn’t just he and Ariane who would have to hide. Rex Major had already taken Aunt Phyllis hostage, and Ariane’s mom, once; he’d do it again in an instant. Wally figured the only reason he hadn’t tried to use Wally’s parents as hostages was because he needed Felicia’s cooperation, and as much as his sister had become...whatever she had become...in the last while, he still believed she would rebel if Merlin threatened her parents.

Of course, he would have hoped she’d have rebelled when Rex Major threatened *him*, but she’d left him possibly dying or dead on the side of a hill on Cacibajagua Island after Merlin had called lightning down on him – well, not *on* him, obviously, but darned *close* to him – in order to claim the fourth shard for himself.

He turned away from the river and gave Ariane his best grin, hoping she couldn’t see how forced it was. He was as tall as – no, make that a little taller than – she was now, his somewhat delayed adolescent growth spurt having set in in earnest about the time all these adventures had started in November. Sometimes he wondered if the sword’s magic had spurred it along. “We’ll do what we have to,” he said. “Whatever it takes. Like we have, time and time again.”

Ariane sighed. “In other words, you don’t have a clue.”

His grin widened, and now it was genuine. “Exactly.”

CHAPTER TWO



MOTHER'S DAY

THE WEYBURN PUBLIC LIBRARY proved to be an interesting building, with a central part flanked by two wings, all three sections' curving roofs held up by pale blue pillars, topped by a crisscrossing network of support beams made of golden wood. Inside it was airy and full of light and, of course, books. But much as Wally liked books – and he *really* liked books – the only things he'd had time for at public libraries recently were the free computer terminals. Here, they stood just inside the door, not far from the main desk. The white-haired lady on duty gave them both a friendly smile as they came in. Wally smiled back, but he made sure he sat down at a terminal that had its back to the desk, so she couldn't see what he was looking up.

He also took a quick look around for security cameras. He knew Rex Major could sometimes access images from them – it was an image from just such a camera, mounted in a convenience store in Carlyle, Saskatchewan, that had revealed to both Major and Wally that Ariane's mother was still alive.

He called up his mother's production company. "Knight Errant Pictures?" Ariane said, reading over his shoulder.