

The Princess Imposter

BY VIVIAN VANDE VELDE



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❧ Chapter 1 ❧

Welcome to a New World!

PRINCESS GABRIELLA



Princess Gabriella opened her eyes and saw that she was surrounded by about a dozen fairy children, all crouched around where she lay. *Definitely* not in her own bed, she recognized with a certain amount of alarm, which she didn't allow to show. Nor even in her room. Nor—she had a sinking feeling—anyplace else in her father's kingdom.

The children were staring and giggling. By the tenderness in her side, she suspected they had been poking her. Princesses are not generally accustomed to being stared at or giggled at. Certainly not poked at.

Still, despite her original impression that they must have been jabbing at her with pointed sticks, she saw that none of the children held any implements. It was simply that—being of a slighter build than humans—fairies have fingers that seem sharper, just the way a pin seems sharper than a nail.

Though alarmed by her unexpected situation, Gabriella knew that it was not good to show fear. This is especially true for

royalty. In addition, she was gracious and considerate, both by nature and by training, so she decided it would be rude to scream or to weep or to complain or to mention she thought fairies had bony fingers.

She didn't sit up, not yet. Partly this was because taking the time to observe was better done sooner rather than later. But there was another reason she didn't get up: All she was wearing was a nightgown, which—though it covered her adequately—was under no circumstances proper public attire for a princess.

The children wore clothing that brought wildflowers to Gabriella's mind, not only because of the bright colors but even more so because the shapes of the garments suggested blossoms and petals.

Some of the fairies were boys, some girls, some . . . well, with some of them, Gabriella couldn't be sure. The youngest was a toddler with a low-hanging diaper—the source of at least some of the bad smell that the princess had to use all her willpower to pretend not to notice. The eldest was a boy Gabriella judged to be a year or two older than she, though she estimated that if they were standing next to each other, his head would come only to her shoulder.

Another way she could tell immediately that they were fairies was because of the delicate though pinched features of their faces, the slight shimmer of their skin, and the fact that they all had silver-white hair—except for the toddler, who had no hair at all.

Well, and the wings. They had iridescent wings much like those of dragonflies. She had never met a fairy before, but she

knew from her bestiary studies that despite their beauty, fairy wings are, aerodynamically speaking, as almost-useless as those of chickens.

All that taken in, Gabriella deemed that *now* was the time to start the process of arising. So she sat up, which caused most of the fairies to scramble to their feet and step back. Except for the toddler, who'd been standing all along and now swayed and grabbed a fistful of material from the skirt of Gabriella's night-dress to keep his or her balance. And the oldest boy, who grinned impertinently at her.

At home, Gabriella's own bed had a mattress made of the finest goose down, and there were satin sheets delicately scented with lavender, and every night a servant would set a cup of honey-flavored milk on her nightstand. Here, Gabriella saw she'd been laid onto one of several piles of straw strewn on the floor. And the straw did not smell much better than that diaper. She was too well-brought-up to scratch at the itch on her arm (princesses are too refined to have itches), but she did glance down and notice a spider making its way across her skin.

Serenity, she reminded herself. In theory, she appreciated all God's creations, but in practice found it hard to warm up to creatures in excess of four legs. Still, few onlookers could have suspected this, as she calmly observed, "What a fine specimen," and blew gently so that the creature landed, unharmed and fully upright, back down on the straw from which it had no doubt come.

"Hello," she said quietly, so as not to startle the children, because that would have been bad manners, no matter what was going on. "Who are you?"