

chapter 1

THE INVITATION



Princess Adela laced her fingers under a clump of creeping Charlie and pulled, enjoying the satisfying crackle of roots ripping free of soil. She tossed the weed onto a heap of similarly vanquished garden invaders and pulled out another clump.

She had been up since dawn weeding this particular flower bed, only one of the many beds the palace gardener had given over to her care and planning. She was getting this one ready for the bulbs she wanted to plant — red tulips, yellow daffodils, and grape hyacinths. The tulips would not be the tall, stately ones that graced the more formal beds of the palace gardens but a shorter variety with curving petals and patterned

leaves. In spring, the tulips, daffodils, and hyacinths would give the illusion of having come up by chance, like wildflowers. Adela loved having a wild look to her garden.

She also loved mornings. Even a chill October morning like this one was preferable to the rest of the day, which would be spent doing what other people wanted of her. At nine o'clock, Adela would have lessons with her tutor, Dr. Sophus. After lessons would come lunch with her father, King Adalbert; her stepmother, Cecile; and her half-brother, Henry. Adela adored her father and four-year-old Henry, but Cecile never stopped talking. She tended to say whatever popped into her mind, and most of the time it had to do with Adela: *Now, dear, you really mustn't stuff yourself so — it isn't at all attractive. . . . Adela dear, I do wish you would remember to wear a hat outdoors. Your face is quite pink with sunburn.*

After lunch, Adela would have to suffer through two or three hours of embroidery instruction supervised by her stepmother, a torturous afternoon tea with the queen and her ladies-in-waiting, and then a dancing lesson. Cecile was determined to make a lady

of Adela, and it did no good to complain about it, for Cecile was sure to mention the complaining at supper. At which point Adela's father would say, "You must listen to your stepmother. She knows what she's talking about."

This early in the morning, no one was ever about except for the palace servants and Adela. Her mother had died when she was born, and when she was small, Adela had done her best to escape from the various nannies and governesses her father had hired to care for her. Down to the kitchen for breakfast and then out into the garden. "Morning, my lass," the cook used to say when Adela was a girl. Now that Adela was seventeen, she still ate breakfast in the kitchen, but the cook's greeting had shifted to a more respectful, "Morning, Your Highness." Worse, she scolded the other servants when they forgot to curtsy to Adela.

This new deference was Cecile's doing. The queen had put a stop to what she called "lax and overly familiar behavior" from the servants when she had married King Adalbert five years ago. Cecile most certainly would have put a stop to Adela having breakfast in the kitchen had she known about it, but fortunately she

didn't, and Adela trusted that the servants wouldn't say a word. She did wish the cook wouldn't scold the others, and she would have preferred that none of them curtsy, because, except for those formalities, she felt like she belonged with them, sitting quietly at the long wooden table, eating porridge and drinking coffee and listening to the kitchen gossip, which was always more interesting than the gossip at Cecile's afternoon tea.

The last weed was a dandelion, and Adela used her trowel to pry out the long root. She added the dandelion to the pile of weeds and stood up. She brushed off her smock and trousers and surveyed the result of her morning's work. Except for several patches of late-blooming daisies and black-eyed Susans, which she counted as wildflowers rather than weeds, this bed was cleared and ready for planting. Of course, the other flower beds still needed her attention, but that work would have to wait. It was nearly time for lessons.

“Miss Adela!”

Looking up, she saw Garth, the nineteen-year-old son of the head gardener, hurrying toward her. He was waving a piece of pink paper in the air and — what

was that behind him? Of all things, a large magpie was hopping across the lawn! Adela stifled a laugh. “You’re being followed,” she called.

Garth glanced over his shoulder. “Stupid bird’s been after me all morning,” he said.

The magpie was greenish black with a white breast and a sharp black beak. Stark white stripes across the tops of its wings made Adela think of the epaulets on her father’s military uniform. “He’s rather handsome, isn’t he?” she remarked.

“I never heard anybody call magpies handsome,” said Garth. “Thieves is what they are. They’ll steal just about anything.”

“Look how he’s watching us!”

“Miss Adela, I’ve received a letter!”

Garth was the only person outside her family who didn’t say *Your Highness*. He had tried once not long after Cecile had married the king, and Adela had at first thought he was joking. “We’ve been friends all our lives! You’ve always called me Adela,” she had told him.

“My father says I’ve got to be more respectful” had been his reply.

Adela suspected Cecile’s influence, but Garth’s

sense of duty to his father was so strong that they had settled on the compromise of *Miss Adela*.

“The letter was right outside our door this morning, on the front step,” said Garth, who lived with his parents in a cottage at the edge of the palace grounds. “The handwriting’s all fancy, and I couldn’t make any sense of it.”

Adela took the paper from him. “It smells like roses.” She wrinkled her nose. “Too many of them!”

“Fairly makes my head swim,” Garth agreed. “What’s it say?”

Adela glanced at the signature, and her eyes widened in surprise. Then she read aloud, stumbling a bit because the handwriting was indeed difficult to decipher—lacy and overly elegant, and yet careless, with unexpected loops and tangles:

Dearest Garth,

You must come to see my garden. The roses are in bloom. All my flowers are in bloom: hyacinth, tulip, daffodil, chrysanthemum, calendula, bougainvillea, forget-me-not, lily, heliotrope, moonflower, columbine — I cannot name them all, there are so

many. The scent is heavenly. I hope I shall see you at my garden party this coming Saturday at three o'clock in the afternoon.

Hortensia

Adela looked up to see her own astonishment reflected in Garth's face.

"Is that the lady with the garden everybody talks about?" he asked.

Lady Hortensia was said to be a person of high rank—fabulously beautiful and fabulously wealthy. Her garden was rumored to be almost as beautiful as she was, with flowers of every kind and color, flowers that were constantly in bloom, flowers that never faded or died, as if winter never blighted their growth. Adela had never believed a word of it. The place sounded like something out of a fairy tale.

And yet here was a letter inviting Garth to come see it. . . .

"People say her garden's magic," he said, sounding as if he believed what people said. Which was ridiculous, seeing as there was no such thing as magic. Still, not that many generations back—before Adela's

great-great-great-grandfather, King Adalbert IV, had officially banned all belief in magic — most people had believed in it.

But during the reign of King Adalbert IV, the kingdom had been struck by a terrible earthquake that had killed hundreds of people, destroyed thousands of homes, and nearly shaken the royal palace from its foundation. In its aftermath, the king had summoned his royal magician to the throne room, demanding to know why the man had not been able to prevent or even predict the disaster. The magician had offered feeble excuses, and the king denounced him as a charlatan and declared an end to the ridiculous and useless practice of magic.

In these modern times, there was still a royal magician at court. The person occupying this honorary position had but one duty: setting off fireworks at a midsummer event that commemorated the banning of magic and celebrated the triumph of science and reason over ignorance and superstition. The fireworks were supposed to represent false magic. At the end of the display, the royal philosopher would come forward, seize the royal magician's fake magic wand, and break it in two while shouting, "Only gunpowder!"

Only gunpowder!” Adela’s great-uncle Emeric had held the title of royal magician (along with several far more important ones) for years, and he was so old now that he had servants set off the fireworks. There was nothing magical about any of it.

All the same, you could still find people who clung to old beliefs — people willing to pay out a few pennies for a good-luck charm, people who believed in witches, love potions, and curses. Such gullible souls — Garth among them, apparently — might well believe some bizarre tale about a magic garden.

Feeling slightly embarrassed for her friend, Adela said only, “I imagine people must exaggerate a little, though I expect the garden is pretty enough. . . .”

And yet, even as she said it, Adela wondered how that could be true. How pretty could any garden be at this time of year? And, more to the point, where *was* Hortensia’s garden? Adela felt she knew the location of every important garden in the kingdom. And she had visited all the ones close to home.

Or at least she thought she had. “Lady Hortensia doesn’t tell you how to get to her garden,” she said, looking at the letter again.

“There was a return address on the envelope,” said

Garth. "It said Flower Mountain. I did manage to puzzle that much out."

"I've never heard of it," said Adela. "Do you suppose it's in the Southern Mountains? It can't be much warmer there than it is here. How can all these flowers be blooming? Do you suppose she has a greenhouse?"

As of this summer, the royal palace had a new greenhouse. Adela, who had read extensively about these newfangled glass buildings, had advised Garth's father on its design. She had even helped build it, ignoring Cecile's objection that carpentry wasn't a suitable occupation for a princess. There was still plenty of room in the greenhouse for new plants. Perhaps Hortensia would let Garth bring some home.

"Why do you suppose she's asking me?" he wondered.

"Because she knows you like gardening," said Adela.

Garth looked worried. "But won't it be a fancy kind of party? Why, I won't know what to do or say!"

Poor Garth! He had always been shy, apt to get tongue-tied around other people. He was especially uncomfortable around women, which was surprising, given that he was more than uncommonly handsome. His sun-blond hair, bright-blue eyes, and strong arms

were the talk of every servant girl in the palace. Even Adela, who very much thought of him as a friend and nothing more, lately found herself blushing when he smiled at her.

“You’ll be fine,” she told him. “We’ll just have to dress you up a bit. You can borrow some clothes. I’m sure one of the footmen would be glad to lend you something.”

Garth looked aghast. “You mean I’d have to dress up like that? Satin and lace and . . . and silk stockings and all?”

“You can’t very well wear a gardener’s smock and trousers.”

He gave a groan. “I’m sure to look like an ass! And act like one, too!”

“You will not! Besides, most of the time you’ll be wandering around, looking at beautiful flowers. That’s what I would do if I were going!”

“I wish you *were* going. Say, Miss Adela, do you think maybe you could? I’d feel better if you were there.”

Adela hesitated. It was of course rude to show up uninvited to a party. On the other hand, she was aware that certain rules of etiquette didn’t fully apply to the

nobility. People were generally flattered to have royalty attend their parties, and Hortensia would doubtless feel the same way. Oh, but Adela hated that sort of thing! She hated parties . . . people fawning all over her because she was a princess. . . .

But the prospect of visiting a greenhouse full of exotic new plants was enticing. “All right, I’ll go,” she said.

Garth rewarded her with a smile, which, not unexpectedly, made her blush and look away. It was then that she saw the magpie staring up at her with its head cocked to one side. “Look at him!” Adela said with a laugh. “It’s as if he’s listening to us!”

Garth stomped his foot. “Get away, you!”

The bird screeched and took off into the air.

“Good riddance,” said Garth. He took the invitation from Adela’s hand and sniffed it tentatively. “People say Lady Hortensia’s very beautiful,” he commented, and then sniffed it again, this time breathing deeply.

“I hope she’ll let us take some plants home,” said Adela.

“Are you sure she won’t think I’m an idiot?” asked Garth.

“Just some seedlings and cuttings — surely she can’t mind. Oh, no! What time is it?”

“Quarter past —”

But Adela was already running toward the palace. “I’m late for lessons!” she called back. “And no! She won’t think you’re an idiot!”

chapter 2

DR. SOPHUS



Adela found her tutor, Dr. Sophus, in the library, sitting near the end of a long table covered with neat piles of books. He was middle-aged, thin, and wiry. His gray hair was clipped close, as was his beard. His eyebrows were thick and bristly above his dark eyes. He glanced up as she hurried into the room. “I see that you have spent your morning studying botany again.”

Adela looked down at herself, relieved that her gardening clothes were relatively clean. “I didn’t have time to change,” she explained. “But I have scrubbed my hands.”

She held them up for his scrutiny, and Dr. Sophus nodded. In addition to being Adela's tutor, he was also the royal librarian. He was fiercely protective of his books and disapproved of dirty hands.

"We'll pick up where we left off yesterday." He motioned toward the chair opposite his own. "Algebra, wasn't it?"

"I was wondering if we might start with geography," Adela suggested. She enjoyed algebra, but the puzzle of Hortensia's garden was on her mind. She told her tutor about the garden-party invitation. "Have you ever heard of Flower Mountain?" she asked.

Dr. Sophus, who loved maps almost as much as he loved books, was only too happy to deviate from the day's lesson plan. He crossed the room to a cabinet with deep shelves, each one only two inches high. He pulled out from one of these a map of the kingdom. "Not detailed enough," he decided after a moment's perusal. He put it back and pulled out another. The second map was larger and older, with yellowed edges, faded colors, and old-fashioned handwritten labels. Dr. Sophus traced his finger across the jagged range of mountains lying just to the south of the royal city: Fire Mountain, Evergreen Mountain, Mount Adamantine.

Adela leaned over her tutor's arm and spotted Flower Mountain at the same moment he did.

"Not quite in the kingdom, not quite out of it," said Dr. Sophus. "Right on the border."

"I'd never heard of it before today," said Adela.

"Nor I." Dr. Sophus looked somewhat bothered by this admission. It was rare that he came across something he didn't know. "What did you say this woman's name is?"

"Lady Hortensia," said Adela. "And her garden's supposed to be gorgeous. Flowers blooming all year round, never fading, never dying. Some people think it's *magic*."

"Really?" Dr. Sophus looked intrigued.

"I think it's more likely she has a greenhouse."

"Possibly." But Dr. Sophus's tone suggested that he thought otherwise.

Adela laughed. "Don't tell me you believe in magic, too!"

Her tutor gave a shrug. "I don't know whether believing has anything to do with it. After all, history is filled with references to magic. I am thinking, of course, of King Ival."

Adela was surprised. King Ival was one of her more

illustrious ancestors. His ancient sword and shield were on display in the throne room. A complicated family tree on the wall of her father's study showed how he was related to her, but she had never had the patience to count the two dozen or so *greats* that separated them in time.

“Any good history book written before the time of King Adalbert IV will tell you of King Ival's exploits,” said Dr. Sophus. “You know what I mean—killing dragons, knocking the heads off trolls, frustrating the devious plans of evil witches and sorcerers . . .”

“Those stories aren't history,” said Adela. “They're legends people have made up about King Ival because he was so famous.” She had grown up reading those legends. They were highly entertaining, perfect subject matter for the many tapestries adorning the walls of the palace. One such tapestry hung in the library, and she looked up at it now. There was Ival, caught in the act of beheading a seven-headed dragon. Five heads were sliced off already; they lay on the floor of a room in a castle that belonged to a wicked sorcerer. Adela, who was familiar with the story, knew that Ival would cut off the remaining two heads, wrest open

the iron cupboard behind the dragon, and try to drink from a flask he would find inside.

“Those are fairy tales,” she told Dr. Sophus.

“So we have been advised. On the other hand, I have found it useful in my long life to keep an open mind about such things.”

The thoughtful look on her tutor’s face awoke a memory in Adela’s mind. It was years ago; she had just begun having lessons with Dr. Sophus, and she had been so young that the bedtime stories about King Ival she loved so much still seemed real to her. It had been a shock to learn about King Adalbert IV and the banning of magic. “But where did all the magic go?” she had asked Dr. Sophus. “All the dragons and trolls and witches and sorcerers and everything?”

Her tutor had smiled. It was something he rarely did; he had a gentle, serious sort of face that didn’t usually need to smile. “Well, Your Highness, if we are to believe your history book, those things never really existed in the first place. If we are to believe King Adalbert IV, there never was any magic.”

“But what about King Ival?” Adela had asked, thinking of all the stories and the tapestries. “That’s history, isn’t it?”

Dr. Sophus had tilted his head, as if conceding her point. “Perhaps King Ival killed off all the dragons and witches and sorcerers. . . .”

“So there aren’t any left! And there isn’t any magic anymore!” This conclusion had been more satisfying to her young mind than the assertion that magic had never existed in the first place. It was only when Adela was older that she knew Dr. Sophus must have been teasing.

Except, she thought now, Dr. Sophus never teases anyone. Can he really believe in magic?

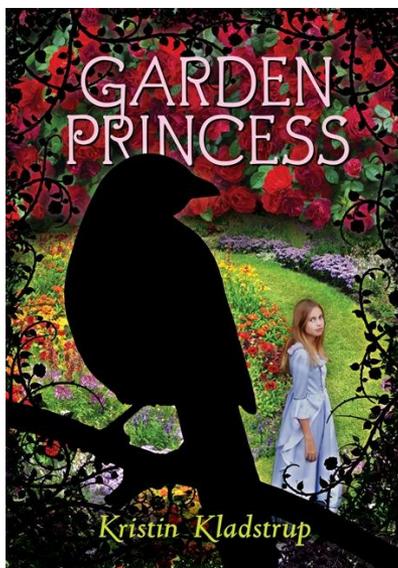
“Do you know what I think, Dr. Sophus?” said Adela. “I think Father ought to make you the royal magician instead of Great-Uncle Emeric.”

Her tutor made a face. “An honor I would most certainly decline, Your Highness, seeing that I have no love for midsummer fireworks. They are far too loud for my ears. Besides, I have never cared for that part of the ceremony when the royal philosopher breaks the royal magician’s wand in two. Perhaps you will agree with me that it is a trifle . . . disappointing somehow?”

I suppose I do, thought Adela.

Garden Princess

Kristin Kladstrup



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