

THE PURSUIT OF ELENA BRADFORD

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CHAPTER 1

June 1842

Elena Bradford had yet to meet the man to make her consider marriage.

She would, her mother assured her when Elena was younger.

She should, her mother insisted when Elena turned twenty.

She must, her mother demanded when Elena's father died.

By then Elena was twenty-two. All but relegated to the spinster corner in the minds of most of her acquaintances. She even had the requisite cat. Fortunately for Elena, such a corner didn't seem so terrible when she watched some of her friends chase after a child or two while ballooning out with yet another on the way. They hardly had a moment to themselves that wasn't dominated by a child's whims or a husband's demands.

Elena had no desire to be in their shoes. She rather liked the freedom to go out into her father's rose garden whenever she wanted. Sitting in the first rays of sunshine with her cat twirling around her legs while she sketched a lovely flower seemed a perfect morning.

Now sadness jolted through her as she walked among the rosebushes exploding with blooms and pulled in a breath of their sweet aromas. Perhaps for the last time. Her cat trailed along behind her.

Her father had a special touch with roses. With any flower, really. That was something the two of them had shared. She loved helping him change a bare spot of ground into a place of beauty. And now, the last rosebushes she had planted were on her father's grave. With the help of their gardener, of course. Jamison promised to keep the bushes watered if the summer turned dry. She imagined those white and pink roses blooming on her father's grave. Best to let that thought push aside the memory of dropping dirt onto her father's coffin five months ago. How quickly a life could turn. His life ceased in one terrible moment when he clutched his chest and fell. Not here in his garden, where he might have known peace in passing, but at the bank, where he decided who could be trusted to borrow money.

It turned out he wasn't one to be trusted. The dreadful truth of his debts threatened to plunge their family into poverty. She glanced across the wide lawn toward their comfortable brick home on one of the best streets in Lexington, Kentucky. Her mother claimed Elena marrying well was their one hope of avoiding the loss of that house and everything about their life here. What a sad hope that seemed to be since Elena had never entertained a serious suitor.

With a sigh, she moved on through her father's garden, admiring each bloom in its turn. After pinching off a yellow rose turning brown, with its beauty fading, she let the petals flutter from her hand. She supposed she was like the rose. Her beauty fading. She might have laughed at the thought if she hadn't been so overcome with sadness.

Her beauty had never been bright enough to fade. Not that she was ugly. That was such a harsh word. Ugly. A worm spoiling the beauty of a flower, that was ugly. An accidental blob of ink ruining a sketch she'd spent hours creating was ugly.

She was not ruined in such a way as with a bulbous nose adorned with a wart. Her features were ordinary enough. When she smiled, she supposed some might even label her pleasant looking.

Nor did she think of herself as plain, although others had said as much when they didn't think she would overhear. Her mother never defended Elena. Instead, she made no secret of how regrettable she considered the fact that Elena had taken after her father in personality and looks. Both, she had mourned, suited a man much better than a lady.

A lady. Elena let out a long breath as she touched her face. She had strong bones and interesting eyes that never seemed quite sure whether to be blue or green. Her thick, dark-brown hair twisted easily into braids or buns without stray hairs making an escape.

Her beautiful younger sister could never contain her curly blonde hair in the latest styles no matter the number of pins she used. But then at sixteen and lacking patience, Ivy still often let their mother fashion her hair.

The girl was very like their mother in looks with eyes of clearest blue and sweet bow-shaped lips. No one whispered behind their hands that she was plain. But she wasn't like their mother in personality. Or their father either, for that matter. She had surely taken back after some sweet, sainted ancestor long forgotten in their family line.

If only you could be more like your sister. Look more like her. Act more like her. Wasn't that what a younger sister generally heard instead of the older one?

Elena sighed again. What good was it to wallow in regret? Things were as they were. Her father was dead. They had no money. Without someone coming to their rescue, they would lose their house. Her twin brothers would have to leave the academy and find jobs at the tender age of thirteen.

No one could expect her mother to ensnare a rich husband so soon after becoming a widow. That would be scandalous. And dear Ivy was too young, too innocent. That left Elena to save them all. At least that was her mother's plan as she had outlined it to Elena days ago after her mother had been informed they would be given only one more extension on the loans. If payment wasn't made by the end of the year, their property would be confiscated by the bank and sold to satisfy the debts.

"What choice do we have, Elena?" Her mother had not waited for her to answer. "It's not as if you are madly in love with anyone."

"I daresay therein lies the problem." Elena glared at her.