



THE GREGORY SISTERS, BOOK 3

AS LOVE BLOOMS

A N O V E L

L O R N A S E I L S T A D



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To Parker, Caroline, and Emma.
If I had a flower for every time you've each
 made me laugh or smile,
 I'd have a garden to walk in forever.
Watching the three of you grow to love the Lord
 has been my greatest joy.

As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus
the Lord, so walk ye in him: rooted and
built up in him, and stablished in the faith.

Colossians 2:6–7

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MAY 12, 1913

SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA

“Flowers have an expression of countenance.” Tessa Gregory whispered the words she’d once read. She studied the blooms in the Como Park planter and shook her head. If the author was correct, then these pansies were suffering from a severe case of melancholy.

Why hadn’t a gardener tended the velvety flowers after the frost the other night? If the shriveled, damaged blooms weren’t removed, fungus might grow on them and spread to the rest of the healthy flowers. Should she help the poor things or simply keep going?

They seemed to cry out to her, but it wasn’t her job to take care of the pansies.

Not yet anyway.

She read the sign posted with large block letters. PICKING FLOWERS IS AGAINST THE LAW. Excellent! Perhaps the staff did care about their plants.

The colorful faces of the pansies—violet, yellow, orange, magenta, and white—winked at her, daring her to risk a few moments with them.

She sighed, sat down on the edge of the planter, and removed her gloves. Deadheading the plants wouldn’t take long, and then she could be on her way to meeting the park superintendent.

Humming to herself, she plucked the withered blossoms, leaned back, and examined her handiwork. How much better the array looked already!

A shrill whistle startled her.

“Miss! Put down the flower!”

She whirled. Was the policeman speaking to her?

“Now, miss.” The park officer rode his bicycle nearer, dismounted, and leaned the bicycle against the planter. He approached Tessa with a stern scowl on his face. “Miss, it’s against the law to pick flowers.” He pointed to the sign. “Do you know I can arrest you?”

Tessa stood and held out the frazzled bloom. “For picking this? I’ll have you know I was helping the plant, not hurting it.”

“Helping it by picking its flowers?”

“I’m telling you the truth. I’m a horticulturist and—”

“You might be the queen of England, but you still can’t pick the flowers. Now, move along and I’ll ignore your ordinance breach.”

“But I’m almost finished.” She swept her arm toward the beautified planter. “See? There are only a few of the ugly blooms left.”

His glower spoke volumes. “Keep your hands off the flowers. Understand?”

Tessa didn’t flinch.

The officer remained until she turned to leave. As soon as she heard the bicycle’s clatter against the planter, she spun around. Hurrying back to the flower bed, she grabbed the remaining spongy blooms as fast as her fingers could pluck them. Hands still full of the withered blooms, she stood and surveyed the tidy planter as satisfaction warmed her.

Someone with a deep voice cleared his throat behind her.

Slowly, she turned.

The policeman took hold of her upper arm. “Miss, you’ll be coming with me now.”



Inhaling, Reese King drew in the familiar scent of the freshly turned earth. He plunged the shovel back into the ground and heaved yet another load of rich dirt beside the hole. Planting this shrub was taking far too much time. He had a long list of things to do today, and if he wanted to continue to impress the Saint Paul park superintendent, Fred Nussbaumer, he'd need to finish every item.

His father might not see Reese's future as a gardener, but Mr. Nussbaumer seemed to. He'd even given him an area in the park in which to develop a new garden. Now if he could get done with his list, he could start designing it.

At least he wouldn't have to deadhead the pansies. He'd spotted a pretty young lady, with hair the color of poppies, taking on that task a few minutes ago.

Once the hole was deep enough, he leaned against the shovel's handle and noticed a group gathering around one of the nearby planters. What was all the commotion about?

"Unhand me this instant!"

Uh-oh. The pretty young lady he'd been watching deadhead his pansies attempted to pull her arm free from the police officer's hold. This couldn't be good.

He dropped the shovel and rushed over. "Officer, what's the problem?"

"Caught this young lady picking your posies, Mr. King."

The fiery-haired girl fought against the officer's grasp. "I was not picking them. Not the live ones anyway. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

"Settle down, Little Miss Polecat." He gave her a little shake. "I'll take care of her, Mr. King. She won't be bothering us here again."

"Wait." Reese barred his way with an outstretched arm. He glanced at the onlookers and leaned in close. "Officer, I believe we can sort this out without arresting the young lady." He turned to the girl. "I was watching you. You were deadheading the pansies, right?"

Her eyes widened, and for a fleeting second relief washed over her face, only to be replaced with indignation. “That’s what I’ve been trying to explain to this lout.”

“Why, you little—” the policeman growled.

“Officer, clearly the young woman is beside herself with fear. Perhaps she’s had too much sun.”

“Too much sun?” she squeaked. “More like—”

Reese silenced her with a stern look. “Why don’t you allow me to show her to the shade, and we can forget this whole unfortunate matter?”

The officer moved his gaze from the young lady to Reese as if he were considering a life-altering decision. The girl kept her chin high, clearly unwilling to back down. After a long moment, the policeman sighed. “Are you sure you want her, Mr. King? She’s a handful.”

“We’ll be fine. How much trouble could one young lady be?”

The park officer released her. “All right. She’s all yours.”

Reese met her gaze, and her eyebrows arched over twinkling hazel eyes. Was she daring him?

Good grief. What had he gotten himself into?