



A  
GILDED  
LADY

HOPE AND GLORY

*Book Two*

Christy and RITA Award-Winning Author

ELIZABETH  
CAMDEN

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BOOK TWO

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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This novel is dedicated to my mother,  
Jane, the inspiration for Caroline.  
Like Caroline, my mom is smart, classy,  
and a lot tougher than she looks.  
That's always been a lot for me to live up to,  
but I am forever grateful.  
Thanks for everything, Mom!

# One



JULY 30, 1900

There was no such thing as a typical day at the White House, but Caroline Delacroix's morning took a particularly difficult turn the moment she walked into her crowded office.

"The king of Italy was assassinated last night," George said from his desk. George Cortelyou was President McKinley's personal secretary, while Caroline served in the same capacity for the first lady.

"What happened?" she asked in stunned disbelief.

George relayed the appalling details in his typically efficient manner. After awarding medals at a sporting event near the Italian city of Milan, King Umberto had boarded an open carriage. An anarchist rushed the carriage and fired four shots directly at the king, who died on the spot.

"He was the target of assassins for years, but they finally got him," George said, his expression grim. With his graying hair, trim mustache, and flawless suit, George projected implacable confidence, but it was obvious the morning's news had rattled him.

"I'll arrange for the first lady to make a condolence call to the Italian embassy this morning," Caroline said.

George sent her a grateful nod, for few people liked dealing with Mrs. McKinley. Ida McKinley was short-tempered, judgmental, and blunt to the point of rudeness. It was Caroline's job to soften the first lady's reputation. It hadn't been easy, but Caroline was good at it. Her day began before breakfast and ended only after Mrs. McKinley turned in for the night. She worked seven days a week alongside George to coordinate schedules and manage the official business of the White House. The work was exhausting, but it was also an honor and a privilege.

Today her main task would be to orchestrate the condolence call to the Italian ambassador's wife, the Baroness Vittozzi. Caroline would help Mrs. McKinley navigate the minutiae of diplomatic protocol with grace, for any misstep would reflect badly on both the president and the United States. Unfortunately, Mrs. McKinley was prone to veering off on ill-advised tangents, so Caroline needed to be on guard.

Two hours later, she boarded a carriage with Mrs. McKinley and set off for the Italian embassy.

"The baroness is addressed as Lady Vittozzi," Caroline advised Mrs. McKinley. "She doesn't speak English, so I will translate for you. Given the number of people calling on her today, our visit should last no longer than ten minutes."

"Excellent," the first lady said with a brief nod of her regal head. Mrs. McKinley's steel-gray hair was woven like a coronet around her head. She'd once been a beautiful woman, but illness had marred her face into a permanently sour look.

Carriages lined the street for blocks near the ornate Italian embassy, where every window was already covered in black mourning crepe. A dozen visitors filled the lavish drawing room, all waiting their turn to offer their condolences to the baroness in her private receiving room. Caroline guided Mrs. McKinley to a padded sofa to await their turn. It wouldn't be long, for protocol would move the first lady to the front of the line.

The gilt-encrusted door at the far end of the drawing room opened, and the archbishop of Washington left the baroness's parlor, his audience concluded. He walked slowly, his black and scarlet robes swaying majestically as he moved through the crowd of mourners. The usher nodded to Caroline, and she leaned over to help Mrs. McKinley rise. Ida McKinley was only fifty-three, but her prematurely gray hair and the cane she used to compensate for a nerve-damaged leg made her seem older.

The baroness was dressed in full mourning, her black silk gown spread artfully across a bench and her face covered with a transparent black veil. She nodded in greeting.

*“Avete le nostre più sentite condoglianze,”* Caroline said with a deep curtsy as she entered.

The baroness murmured a response, and Caroline provided the translation for Mrs. McKinley.

“Lady Vittozzi appreciates your sympathy. All the people of the city have been so kind since the terrible news arrived last night.”

Mrs. McKinley nodded and took a seat. “Tell her that if there is anything our nation can do to assist during Italy’s time of need, she need only ask.”

Caroline translated as the first lady continued to offer perfectly appropriate generalities about the mysteries of God’s ways and praise for the fallen King Umberto. All was proceeding smoothly, something that could never be taken for granted with Mrs. McKinley.

Then the first lady began recounting the one time she had visited Italy during a grand tour of Europe several years earlier. “We enjoyed Rome, especially the ancient ruins and the opera house. Sicily, on the other hand, was terrible. No electricity, leaky roofs, and the only plumbing dated all the way back to the Renaissance. It was mind-boggling.”

Caroline froze, praying the baroness truly didn’t understand English, for the ambassador’s family came from Sicily. Behind

her veil, the baroness swiveled to look at Caroline, her face perfectly blank as she awaited the translation. Caroline couldn't tell an outright lie, but neither could she translate what Mrs. McKinley had just said. Both women looked at her with expectation, and Caroline chose her words carefully.

"Mrs. McKinley admired the architecture of Italy," she said in Italian. "How clever the Italians are to have had modern conveniences like plumbing all the way back to the Renaissance. It was truly astounding."

The baroness smiled and nodded, and the remaining few minutes proceeded without incident. Beneath her skirts, Caroline gently tapped Mrs. McKinley's foot, signaling it was time to rise and end the call.

"That went quite well, didn't it?" Mrs. McKinley pronounced once they were aboard the carriage and heading back to the White House. She didn't wait for a reply before continuing her monologue. "Terrible tragedy about the king. Simply terrible. Nothing like that would ever happen to the Major, of course."

Mrs. McKinley always referred to her husband as the Major, for they had met shortly after the Civil War, when Major William McKinley was still in uniform. Over the years he'd served as a congressman, a governor, and now the president, but his wife still called him the Major. Caroline thought it rather charming.

"The Major is too popular to ever arouse that sort of ire," Mrs. McKinley continued. "Everyone likes him."

"While it's true that everyone likes him, that doesn't mean they will vote for him," Caroline said. She was veering into dangerous waters, but it had to be done. The presidential election was in four months, and despite William McKinley's popularity, nothing could be taken for granted. He had been too busy with the duties of his office to campaign, and his wife never offered to help. She was the least popular first lady in history, and Caroline had been hired to help correct that image.

Working for Mrs. McKinley was like walking a tightrope. At any moment it could snap, but so far, Caroline had been able to support the infamously difficult first lady without allowing Ida to trample her. When in public, Caroline was the epitome of deferential respect, but in private their relationship shifted. They bickered, gossiped, laughed, and fought. The first lady even insisted Caroline call her Ida in private.

“I want to wear your sapphire earrings tonight,” Ida said.

“Why?” Caroline challenged. She and Ida regularly borrowed each other’s accessories, for they were both shamelessly vain when it came to fashion. Still, if Ida wanted a favor, she ought to ask nicely.

“Because the last time I wore them, the Major said they lit up my eyes.”

“Then buy your own sapphire earrings.”

Ida let out a bark of laughter. “You have no respect for your elders.”

“Why should I?” Caroline tossed out. “I’m the one with the sapphire earrings you want so badly.”

If she gave Ida an inch, the woman would take fifty miles. Still, Caroline had a grudging respect for the first lady because she saw a side of her few people did. Ida’s health was brutalized by epileptic seizures, a crippled leg, migraine headaches, and periodic spells of melancholy that robbed her of the ability to rise from bed. Mrs. McKinley was in danger of becoming a recluse due to her infirmities and often stayed locked in her bedroom, where she obsessively knitted baby booties.

Both the president and Mrs. McKinley’s doctor recommended more interaction with the world, so Caroline had begun arranging regular tea parties with charitable groups and the wives of government officials. If loaning Ida a pair of sparkly earrings made her feel better, Caroline would happily do so.

Especially after the kindness both McKinleys had shown her. Last month Caroline’s brother had been arrested for treason in

Cuba. Caroline had immediately offered her resignation, but the president refused to take it. Luke hadn't been found guilty yet, and the military was keeping the scandal quiet until his fate could be decided.

Luke had always been a reckless daredevil who tempted fate and got into one scrape after another. But a traitor? Caroline couldn't believe it of him. Somehow Luke had stepped into a dangerous mystery down in Cuba, and she would do her best to unravel it.

But if that failed, she needed to nurture her connections in the White House in the hope of someday winning a presidential pardon for Luke. Treason was a hanging offense, and if Luke was found guilty, her connection to the McKinleys might be her only chance to save her brother's life.