



The
SPICE
KING

HOPE AND GLORY
BOOK ONE

Christy and RITA Award-Winning Author

ELIZABETH
CAMDEN

HOPE ^{AND} GLORY
BOOK ONE

The
SPICE
KING

ELIZABETH
CAMDEN



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2019 by Dorothy Mays

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Camden, Elizabeth, author.

Title: The spice king / Elizabeth Camden.

Description: Bloomington, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, [2019] | Series: Hope and Glory ; 1

Identifiers: LCCN 2019016254 | ISBN 9780764232114 (trade paper) | ISBN 9780764234873 (cloth) | ISBN 9781493420278 (e-book)

Subjects: | GSAFD: Historical fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3553.A429 S65 2019 | DDC 813/.54—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019016254>

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.

Cover design by Jennifer Parker

Cover photography by Mike Habermann Photography, LLC

Author is represented by the Steve Laube Agency.

19 20 21 22 23 24 25 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

One



MAY 1900

WASHINGTON, DC

Annabelle Larkin hadn't meant to offend the world's leading spice tycoon with her bold request, yet it seemed she had. The letter he'd written in reply made that clear, but she read it a second time, searching for a shred of hope in its prickly text.

Dear Miss Larkin,

I am in receipt of your letter asking me to donate my plant collection to the Smithsonian Institution. I spent two decades searching the world to gather those rare specimens, during which I sacrificed, sweat, and nearly died. Please be assured I have a better track record of nurturing plants than the feeble assortment I've seen at the Smithsonian, most of which are dead and mounted for display. I must therefore decline your offer to take the collection off my hands.

*Gray Delacroix
Owner, Delacroix Global
Spice*

She dropped the letter onto her laboratory worktable with a sigh. Winning the donation of the Delacroixs' plant collection had always been a long shot, but desperation gave her few options.

"Dare I ask?" Mr. Bittles inquired from the opposite side of the table.

Mr. Bittles was her supervisor and had had nothing but contempt for her since the day she began working at the Smithsonian only two months earlier. Fresh from Kansas and needing a tourist's map to find the famous research museum, Annabelle didn't really belong in Washington, where she felt as green as a newly sprouted hayseed. While everyone else at the Smithsonian had studied at places like Harvard and Princeton, Annabelle's diploma came from Kansas State Agricultural College. She was not the most glittering ornament among the scientists at the Smithsonian.

"Mr. Delacroix declined our offer, but I still have hope," she said, refusing to take his blunt refusal as a personal insult. She was merely the latest in a long line of botanists who'd tried and failed to make headway with Gray Delacroix.

The lab where she worked with Mr. Bittles was tiny, and she needed to nudge her way around him to reach the office typewriter. She pecked out a brisk response.

Dear Mr. Delacroix,

I meant no disrespect in my previous letter. Everyone at the Smithsonian is impressed by your remarkable collection, especially given the challenge of transporting exotic plants to America while they are still alive and fruitful. The rarity of your accomplishment is why we hope you will share the plants with world-class scientists who might build upon your success for the betterment of the nation.

Should you donate your collection to us, the Smithsonian would be prepared to name a wing in your honor.

*Sincerely,
Miss Annabelle Larkin
Botanical Specialist,
The Smithsonian
Institution*

The promise of a wing was genuine, for the director of the Smithsonian had already authorized it, and everyone knew that Dr. Norwood would barter his own grandchildren to get his hands on Gray Delacroix's plants. Dr. Norwood's main interest was the orchids, but he'd asked her to go after the entire collection. She didn't understand his zeal, but she would do her best to get it for him.

This task was especially important, for her job here was only temporary. She'd been hired for a six-month position to preserve and catalog a large shipment of plants from Africa and Australia, but in a few months she would be out of work. Dr. Norwood had dangled the prize of a permanent position if she could persuade the famously reclusive Gray Delacroix to donate his extraordinary plant collection.

As she set her letter to him in the outgoing mailbox, she silently prayed for success. It was an honor to work at the Smithsonian with scientists who sought to explore and understand the world around them, and she desperately needed to keep this position. Even if it meant cooperating with people like Mr. Bittles. Her supervisor didn't like any woman unless she was bringing him coffee or ironing his shirts. He'd been appalled when Dr. Norwood appointed her to be his assistant, but Annabelle was merely happy to have the job.

"Come, get back to work," Mr. Bittles ordered, setting a new crate from Australia before her. The box was filled with

grasses, moss, and seedpods, and it was her job to catalog them for posterity. Each plant would be dried and preserved on a sheet of parchment, its seeds packaged in an accompanying envelope, and then stored in oversized metal filing drawers. She liked to imagine that hundreds of years from now, scientists would consult these specimens, fascinated by this glimpse into the botanical treasures of the past.

“Why do you suppose Dr. Norwood is so anxious to get inside the Delacroix collection?” she asked.

“It’s all about the vanilla orchid,” Mr. Bittles replied. “He doesn’t give a fig about the other plants, only that original vanilla orchid. I don’t think it even exists anymore.”

Annabelle had already heard about Dr. Norwood’s quest to hunt down the progenitor of the modern vanilla orchid. The Spaniards came upon it when they encountered the Aztecs in the sixteenth century. They smuggled it into monasteries and overseas to the eastern spice islands, where over the centuries it had been crossbred with other varieties of vanilla and was now believed to have been hybridized out of existence. No one had seen a living example of the original vanilla orchid in over a hundred years.

Despite herself, Annabelle was intrigued. “Do you think Mr. Delacroix has one?”

“Dr. Norwood does. Gray Delacroix collects all types of vanilla orchids, but he keeps them under lock and key, which is stoking Dr. Norwood’s curiosity. You may as well give up. I think that original orchid went extinct long ago. No more dawdling. Get that crate unpacked.”

Annabelle nodded and reached for another cluster of grass from Australia. Most of the grasses she cataloged looked similar to what they had in America, but tiny differences in a plant’s biology could alter its flavor, fragrance, or hardiness. Indeed, those tiny differences were causing her family’s wheat farm to fail after years of drought. Her parents had gone into debt to

buy her train ticket to Washington, and she couldn't afford to lose this job.

Which was why she waited with pained anticipation for Mr. Delacroix's response to her second letter. It arrived the following morning, and Mr. Bittles snatched it out of the delivery boy's hand before she could intercept it.

"That's my letter," she gasped, trying to grab it from Mr. Bittles as he dangled it well above her head. Sometimes it was horrible being short. She made a leap for it, and Mr. Bittles stifled a giggle as he continued waving it just beyond her reach.

"But it's addressed to the Botanical Department, of which I am the supervisor," he said, yanking the single page from the envelope. Frustration nearly choked her as his eyes traveled along the lines of the letter. He shook his head in mock despair. "Such a pity," he murmured.

"What does it say?"

A smile hovered over his face as he read the letter aloud. "Dear Miss Larkin. Under no circumstances will I grant you access to my plant collection. Stop asking. Sincerely, Gray Delacroix." He didn't hide his gloat as he gave her the letter.

She turned away to read it, praying Mr. Bittles was only being cruel, but it was exactly as he had said. She masked her discouragement as she tucked the letter into her satchel, for she wasn't ready to give up yet.

"I'm going downstairs to tell Dr. Norwood of this latest development," she said. "It's time to shift strategy."

"Best of luck," Mr. Bittles said with a sarcastic wink.

That wink renewed her determination as she headed to the director's office. Mr. Bittles had been rude and bad-tempered from the very beginning, but bad tempers didn't frighten her. She had come of age on the plains of Kansas, where she'd battled ice storms, wind storms, crippling droughts, and plagues of locusts that literally darkened the wide prairie skies. There

weren't many things she feared, but losing her job at the Smithsonian was one of them.

Dr. Norwood's office was a reflection of his obsession with orchids. Rows of the exotic flowers lined the windowsill, and their sweet, spicy scent perfumed the air. Maps on the wall documented orchid fields around the world, and fossilized blossoms filled a bookshelf.

Wiry, balding, and bespectacled, Dr. Norwood was pruning a vibrant *Cephalanthera* orchid when she entered. He didn't even look up from his work as she summarized Mr. Delacroix's latest rejection, but he paid fierce attention when she proposed a different approach.

"I have a feeling that as a man of business, Mr. Delacroix will respect forthright dealing," she said. "Perhaps if we directly ask for access only to that single vanilla orchid, he would be more forthcoming."

Dr. Norwood shook his head. "Vanilla is one of the most valuable commodities in the world, and Delacroix only wants that orchid for its monetary value. His father was different. His father could be reasoned with, but ever since the old man died, Gray Delacroix holds the keys to the kingdom. He has no respect for scientific marvels, only monetary profit."

Between the two, Annabelle had more sympathy for monetary profit, but maybe that was her practical farming heritage coming to the fore. Nevertheless, she would do whatever was necessary to please Dr. Norwood.

"Sir, I am painfully aware that the clock is ticking on my temporary appointment. If you want that orchid, I *will* figure out a way to get it. All I need is your permission to approach Mr. Delacroix directly. Face to face. I think I can reason with him."

Dr. Norwood set down the pruning shears and looked her in the eyes. "When your college professor recommended you for this position, he claimed you were one of the sunniest, most optimistic people he'd ever met."

“I am,” she admitted with a pleased smile.

“That’s the kind of person who drives Gray Delacroix insane,” Dr. Norwood said. “He is all business and has no patience, no manners, and is immune to female charm.”

Which was why Annabelle planned a different strategy. Mr. Delacroix might be rude, but everything she knew about him indicated he had a deep and abiding passion for the plant world, and on that level, they could connect. His travels spanned the globe, and wherever he went, he collected a seed, a bulb, a cutting, or a root. She admired a man like that.

“If you want that orchid, I’ll get a cutting,” she told Dr. Norwood confidently. “And Mr. Delacroix will be smiling as he hands it over to me.” She outlined her unconventional plan that would only cost a blow to her pride if it didn’t work.

Dr. Norwood seemed intrigued. “I suspect he’ll laugh you out of his office. It’s likely to be a complete failure.”

“The Smithsonian has had years of failure,” she said. “Nothing else has worked. You might as well let me try.”

Dr. Norwood picked up his pruning shears, trying not to laugh. “You are likely to fall flat on your face, but I wish you luck.”