

A dramatic sunset over a Venetian canal. The sky is filled with vibrant orange and red clouds, with the sun low on the horizon. The water reflects the intense colors. On the left, a grand, ornate building with a tall spire stands prominently. In the distance, a large domed church is visible. A speedboat is moving across the water in the lower right, leaving a white wake.

CONNIE MANN

A SPERANZA TEAM NOVEL

**THE
CROWN
CONSPIRACY**

Praise for The Crown Conspiracy

The Crown Conspiracy took me on a breath-stealing, heart-stopping adventure through castles, Venice, and the Alps. Connie Mann's terrific novel is chock-full of fascinating layers of romance and intrigue amid a backdrop of art forgery that segues into a treasure hunt. Highly recommended!

COLLEEN COBLE, *USA Today* bestselling author

The story grips you with the first words and doesn't let go until the last page. I highly recommend this exciting thriller!

CARRIE STUART PARKS, Christy Award-winning author of *Fallout*

This novel will take you deep into a world of dangerous deception and a high-stakes conspiracy, where one woman must decide how far she will go to protect those she loves. The fast-paced action left me breathless!

DIANN MILLS, bestselling author of *Facing the Enemy*

Mann spins an intriguing action adventure with the kind of twists and turns that take the reader on an exciting ride. A delightful read.

RACHEL HAUCK, *New York Times* bestselling author

Consider me officially hooked! Connie Mann had me on the edge of my seat with her latest heart-pounding romantic suspense, *The Crown Conspiracy*! From page one, her clever blend of intrigue and action kept me glued to the page. I fell in love with Robin Hood art thief Sophie and investigator Mac (swoon!), watching the sparks fly between these two as they unearthed decades-old secrets while trying to stay alive. A riveting, rich story—I can't wait for their next adventure.

SUSAN MAY WARREN, *USA Today* bestselling and RITA Award-winning author

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Tyndale House Publishers
Carol Stream, Illinois



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THE CROWN CONSPIRACY

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The Crown Conspiracy

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Designed by Sarah Susan Richardson

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*For every woman who has dreamed of being part
of a team that could change the world.
May we be brave enough to build a Speranza Team of our own—
and have the courage to step out together and make a difference.*



Hope is an anchor for the soul.

PROLOGUE

ALONG THE WESTERN COAST OF ITALY—1750

She ran down the quiet streets, her fine leather slippers making no sound on the worn cobblestones. She skidded past another alley and risked a quick look over her shoulder. At this time of night, most everyone in the coastal village would be safely tucked into their beds. No footsteps fell behind her, but the unmistakable certainty she was being followed forced her to make haste. Her breath rasped in the frosty air as she hurried on, feeling time tick away with every heartbeat. The darkness of the new moon helped to hide her, but it also meant she was out of time.

The ship would sail with the tide.

A block away from the smithy, she stopped and pulled the heavy boots she'd been carrying over her slippers. She tugged her cap lower and secured the square of rough fabric hiding her face, then wiped a sweaty palm over the trousers and shirt she'd taken from one of the young stable hands.

When she reached the blacksmith's forge, she swung the heavy wooden door open, cringing at the squeak of rusty hinges. The

smithy glanced up as she slipped into the courtyard, his work-weary eyes narrowed, swarthy skin glistening with sweat, then stuck the metal rod back into the glowing coals.

“Come back tomorrow.” He pulled the metal out and set it on the anvil, where it pulsed with heat and light. His hammer rang against the glowing iron circle at the end, flattening it.

She kept her voice pitched low, raspy. “My master needs them now. I can’t return without them.”

He held the glowing round emblem up with tongs, the two-inch circle displaying an anchor with a feather superimposed across its center. Her breath caught. It was exactly right.

“I need time to finish the others.”

“There is no more time,” she hissed. As if to underscore her words, running footsteps and clanking weapons sounded outside. They made no attempt at stealth or silence.

The smithy’s face paled in the light of the forge. “Go. Now.”

He plunged the emblem into a bucket of water, where the iron hissed and sputtered. Quickly, he grabbed another metal rod and stuck it into the fire, eyes darting from it to the door and back again as he pretended he was hard at work.

Her heart pounded, eyes focused on the bucket. She couldn’t leave without the emblem. Too many lives depended on it.

The footsteps stopped outside the gate. “Open up!”

She leaped toward the bucket and plunged her hand inside, closing her fist around the metal. The searing pain dropped her to her knees, but she bit back an agonized cry and struggled to her feet.

She had to get to the ship.

She spun and raced across the courtyard, then grabbed the handle of a small door set in the opposite wall with her uninjured hand.

Locked.

The gate burst open and armed men charged in.

Frantic, she looked up and spotted a window high on the wall. She clambered up several storage crates, flung the shutter open, and swung a leg over the sill.

“There!” someone shouted, pointing upward.

She was too high, but she had no choice, so she swung her other leg over and dropped to the ground. She lost her footing as she fell and slid on her palms. A groan escaped as her burned flesh was torn away and the emblem rolled into the filthy gutter.

One of the soldiers poked his gun through the opening above. She scrambled to her feet and scooped the metal circle into her mangled palm as the ground exploded with gunfire around her.

Blood pounded in her ears and kept pace in her palm as she raced toward the docks. She yanked the square of cloth off her face and wrapped her hand, trying to stanch the flow of blood. She wouldn't leave such an easy trail for them to follow.

She turned down a dark alley and skidded to a halt. Dead end. She'd turned too soon. The voices behind her got louder, so she flattened herself into a shadowed doorway until they ran past. Breath heaving, she peeked out the alley and circled around a different way, cursing her own foolishness. She didn't have time for mistakes.

Once she reached the waterfront, the lanterns along the gangplank tempted her to run headlong in that direction. But that way lay certain death.

Instead, she took a sharp left and hurried to the very last row of slips, where the young stable hand whose clothes she'd borrowed waited at the oars of a rowboat. “Ready, mistress?” he whispered.

“No titles, no names,” she reminded him. He nodded, Adam's apple bobbing as he glanced behind him.

She followed his gaze, saw the men rounding the corner toward the docks. “Hurry.”

He leaned on the oars and she moved in front of him, grabbing the second set. When she put her injured hand on the oar, she swayed as another wave of dizziness hit, but she couldn't give up now. Too many lives were at stake.

“I can do it,” he whispered, when a whimper escaped her throat.

She nodded but set her hands on the oars anyway, pulling with all her strength. They had to move fast.

They slipped through the water, hidden in the shadows of the

other vessels, and made their way to the port side of the cargo ship, which faced the open water and wasn't visible from shore.

A stiff breeze blew off the water tonight, and it smacked the rowboat into the wooden side of the ship with a loud thump. They glanced at each other, frozen, then let out a little sigh of relief as a rope ladder descended from the darkness above.

Seconds later, someone started climbing down toward them. The stable boy kept the rowboat steady while she helped the trembling teenage girl aboard. "Crouch down and don't make a sound," she hissed when gratitude and fear tumbled from the girl's lips.

After what was probably less than ten minutes, but felt like four days, all six young women were aboard. The rope ladder disappeared back aboard ship, and she and the boy pushed off from the side and rowed back the way they had come. They moved as fast as they dared, as quietly as they could.

Sweat ran down her neck and her hand kept slipping off the oar, blood soaking through the makeshift bandage. The pain made her eyes tear and stomach roil. She gritted her teeth. She could pass out later.

A quick look over her shoulder at the ship they just left showed the armed men marching up the gangplank, lanterns and weapons held aloft. The wind carried the sound of raised voices. The captain stood at the rail trying to placate them, making calming gestures, voice firm and unruffled. Seconds later, a muffled scream rang out, then more cries of pain and an ominous splash. One of the girls in the rowboat let out a terrified squeak, and another quickly silenced her with a palm over her mouth.

Her uncle had discovered her plan. Retribution would be swift and deadly.

She and the boy rowed with all their might, the extra weight adding precious minutes to the return trip. Minutes they didn't have.

As they neared the last row of slips, she whispered, "Keep going." The boy nodded, young face pale with terror and determination.

They pulled up in the shallow water just past the dock, and she

scrambled over the side into frigid, waist-deep water. He joined her and they helped the girls to shore. They shivered in the cold air, their breath making puffy clouds in front of them.

She moved to the oldest of the girls, slipped the emblem from her trouser pocket, and wiped the blood off with her shirt. She handed it over, folding the girl's hands around it. "Stick to the woods and go up into the hills. You will see the monastery. Wait until dark tomorrow and make your way there. Show this to the sisters. They will help you."

The girl looked at the emblem, then back up. "What does it mean?"

"Speranza." Hope.

The girl threw her arms around her and sobbed.

She pulled the arms away, turned to the group. "You must hurry. Go. And don't look back."

The oldest girl kissed the emblem and closed her fist around it, then took off running, the other girls hurrying to keep up.

"We must go, mistress," her stable hand whispered, shivering.

She turned, looked behind her. The ship was on fire, flames shooting into the sky. "You must flee as well, before they find you."

He straightened his narrow shoulders, jaw set. "I stay with you."

"No! If you want to help me, run! As fast and as far as you can." She gave him a shove in the same direction as the girls.

The sounds of pursuit grew louder, the night growing brighter from the raging fire. He glanced past her shoulder, finally gave a reluctant nod, and disappeared into the cover of the trees.

She took off in the opposite direction, toward town, the only way she knew to save them.

They caught her as she tried to slip into the shadows of the cathedral on the square.

Arms grabbed her roughly from behind, spun her around, and shoved her against the stone walls of the church. "Where are the girls?" The voice was a deep, menacing growl. His grip tightened until she feared her bones would break. "Where are they?" he shouted.

THE CROWN CONSPIRACY

She raised her chin and held her silence. First fists, then clubs beat her until she collapsed on the hallowed ground, looking up at the inky blackness above. As her vision dimmed and her life-blood slipped away, she glanced over at the emblem burned into her palm, and the whisper of a smile spread on her lips. The girls would be safe.

Speranza.

1

MUNICH, GERMANY—PRESENT DAY

Sophie Williams paced the darkened living room of her third-floor Munich apartment, listening to an icy December rain pounding on the slate roof, the swish of water as the occasional car drove by, the irregular beat of her heart. In the hour before dawn, the last of the tourists had finally staggered off to nearby hotels. Most locals hadn't started the new day yet.

But not everyone slept.

With the tip of one finger, she parted the aged curtains again, slowly, just far enough to study the quiet street below.

She waited. Watched.

There.

The glowing tip of a cigarette flickered in the doorway of the apartment building across the street, two doors down.

She'd spotted him earlier, farther down the block. Dismissed him as someone stepping outside for a late-night smoke.

She'd been wrong.

The realization that she'd been followed jolted her, like the unexpected blaring of a security alarm whose trigger she'd missed.

He was getting closer. Braver.

She calculated how much time she had. Would he act before she had a chance to herself?

Not if she could help it. She stepped back, sifting through possibilities. Whatever his agenda, she knew her next play. She had to protect the painting. For Lise's sake.

She hurried to her studio.

The portrait lay face up on the desk, exactly as she'd left it.

A sound from the street had her heart beating triple time, but no bullet shattered the antique glass window. No one forced their way in at gunpoint.

Yet.

She grabbed the roll of brown paper and expertly wrapped the painting with the speed of long practice, the swish of paper the only noise.

Within ten minutes, she'd stepped into the Boho artist persona she used when she came and went from her apartment. Shoulder-length curly red wig, ripped jeans and a flowing blouse, cowboy boots, and a battered beret. *Ensure people only see what you want them to see* was one of her mantras.

She slipped a lined raincoat on, grabbed her favorite leather tote, and tucked several disguises and toiletries inside, then secreted her best tools of the trade in the false bottom. She opened her wallet and sighed. She'd spent the last of her cash at the coffee shop yesterday. She raided the emergency stash inside her hollowed-out copy of *Robin Hood*, giving it a pat before she tucked it back on the shelf. If she had a patron saint, it was Robin.

She slid her knife into her boot and tucked her umbrella under one arm.

"Come on, Lise. Where are you?" Sophie muttered when another call to her friend's phone went straight to voice mail.

Was she too late?

On her way out the door, she kissed her fingers and pressed them to the small portrait hanging there, as always.

She whispered a prayer for courage, grabbed the wrapped

painting, then strolled toward her favorite café as if she didn't have a care in the world.

The rain had let up, so she heard his footsteps behind her, keeping pace but not getting too close. She began to sweat in her rain jacket.

Would they try to grab her right off the street?

She'd find out soon enough. She kept walking.

A quick peek in a shop window confirmed he was gaining on her. She quickened her pace, then gave up all pretense of stealth and darted through an alley and sprinted across two lanes of traffic on the always-busy main thoroughfare.

Breaks squealed. Drivers honked, but she didn't slow, zigzagging around them. Breath heaving, she hurried three more blocks before she chanced a glance over her shoulder and allowed herself a quick sigh of relief when she didn't see him.

She turned back around and collided with a man who stepped from a darkened doorway wearing a 5:00 shadow at 7:00 a.m. He grabbed her arm and jabbed a gun against her side, his body hiding her from passersby.

Hired thug, no doubt. She clutched the painting in one hand, trying to maneuver her umbrella into position with the other. Perhaps she had one last surprise in store for him.

A ball cap hid his face, but his low growl was clear as day.

"Scream and you die right here."