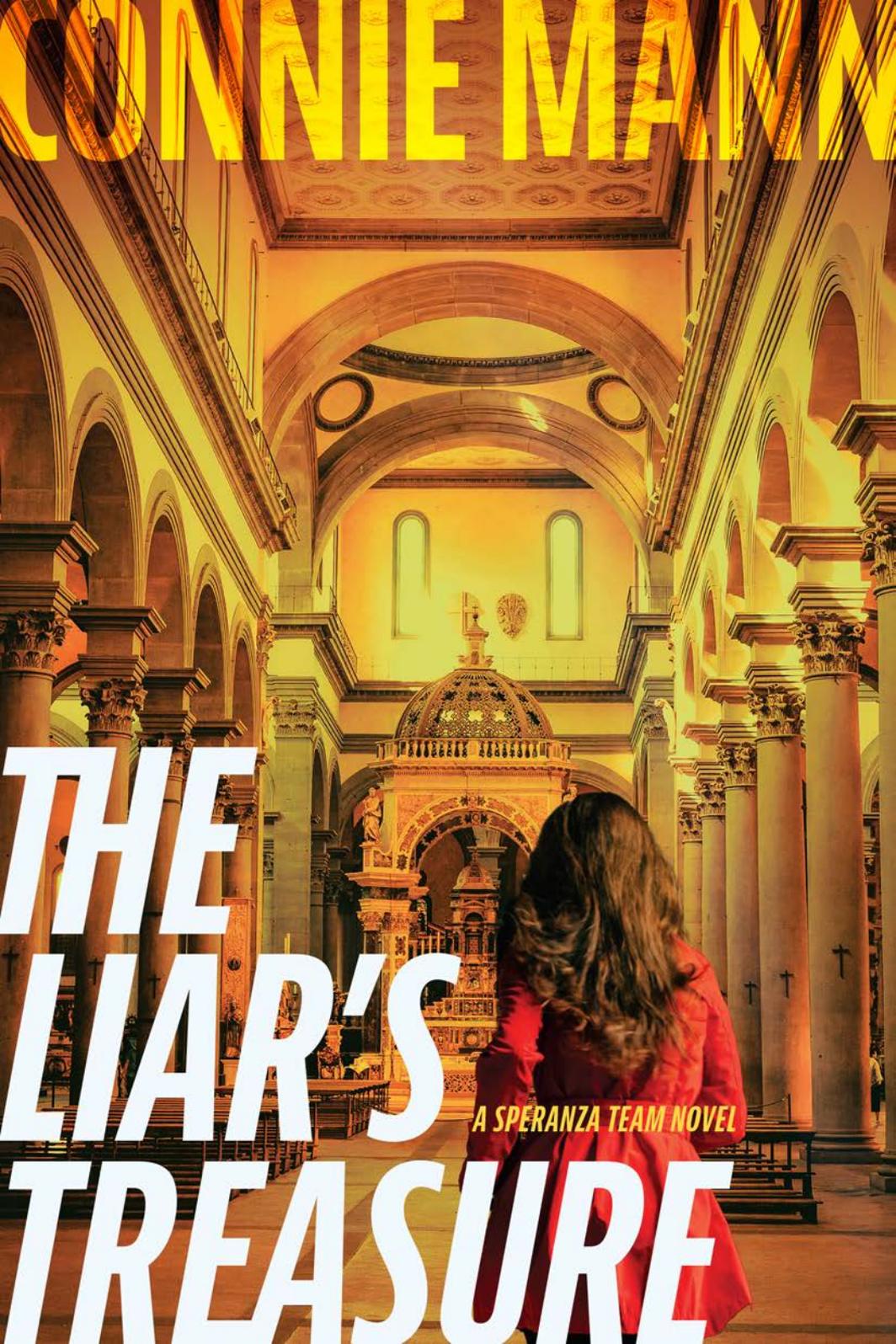


CONNIE MANN

THE
LIAR'S
TREASURE

A SPERANZA TEAM NOVEL



Praise for the Speranza Team Series

Buckle up for a page-turning novel reminiscent of *National Treasure* and Indiana Jones. This story has it all: mystery, layers of suspense, and the lightest touch of romance. I enjoyed every page and wanted time and responsibilities to pause so I could get lost in the story. Highly recommended!

CARA PUTMAN, award-winning and bestselling author of *The Vanished* and *Flight Risk*, on *The Liar's Treasure*

A pulse-pounding mix of danger, secrets, and globe-trotting fun. *The Liar's Treasure* is pure storytelling gold. Connie Mann's books always move to the top of my to-read list.

CHRISTY BARRITT, award-winning author of *Pressure Point*

Get ready for a wild ride with Sophie, Mac, and the Speranza team. One can hope there is more to come from this dynamic group. Mann's latest is perfect for readers of Susan May Warren and those who love a good conspiracy read.

LIBRARY JOURNAL starred review of *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*, on *The Crown Conspiracy*

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!

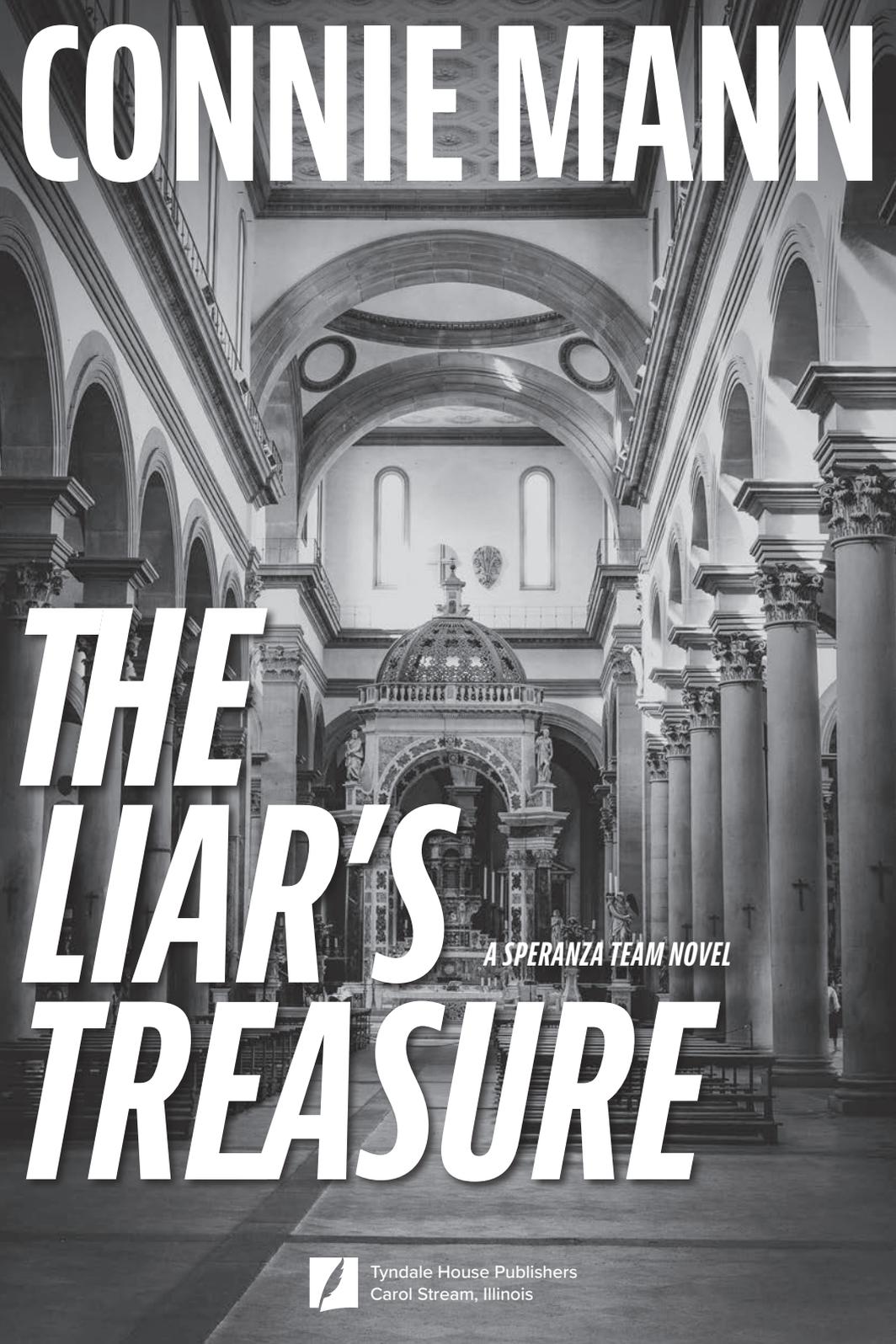
DIANN MILLS, bestselling author of *Facing the Enemy*, on *The Crown Conspiracy*

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, on *The Crown Conspiracy*

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.

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



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PROLOGUE

OFF THE COAST OF AVILÉS, SPAIN—1728

Cira tried to keep her balance on the rocking wooden deck of the *Bartholomew*, head down in seeming defeat, watching through hanks of her wet hair as the pirates pawed through the passengers' trunks, flinging belongings overboard. They were getting closer, ever closer, to the one thing she prayed they'd never find.

Rain poured down in sheets and plastered her silk gown to her skin. The way the sailors' eyes flicked over her had her heart pounding from a new kind of fear.

They were going to kill her if they found it.

Worse, they'd enjoy it.

She shivered, despite the balmy air, then took a deep breath so she could focus on the knots binding her hands behind her back. She didn't dare glance Maura's way again. She'd seen her fifteen-year-old sister peek from the companionway several minutes ago, still in her cabin-boy disguise.

Barely an hour ago, there had been a loud thump, followed by the sound of running feet. Before anyone had time to whisper the

word *pirates*, the door to the captain's dining room had burst open and several sailors had stormed into the room, all well armed.

Cira had frozen, a spoonful of turtle soup halfway to her mouth.

A tall man wearing a finely tailored crimson coat with bold brass buttons entered behind his men. When Captain Arnaud muttered, "You!" the pirate captain shot him point-blank.

Cira managed to bite back her scream, though the matron beside her let loose a deafening shriek. The woman paid dearly for her lack of self-control as the pirates hauled her and the other five passengers up on deck. Cira would forever cringe at the memory of the two bodies being tossed overboard as though they had no more worth than their belongings.

Her wet fingers slipped off the knot—again—as she struggled to free her hands.

The *Maria Claire* had left the port at Avilés mere hours ago. How had no one noticed their vessel being chased, then boarded by this gang of thieves? She blinked rainwater out of her eyes and felt another trail of water slide down the neck of her sodden gown. Thunder cracked overhead. *How indeed?*

At least their feet weren't bound. The pirates had forced the passengers across the planks they'd placed between the two vessels. Now they stood, huddled in the rain, as the pirates looted the *Maria Claire*, carting supplies, belongings, and provisions onto their own ship.

The *Bartholomew* flew no flag, so Cira was uncertain whether the dark-eyed captain was a pirate or a privateer, though she supposed the distinction didn't matter at this point.

She yanked her wayward thoughts sharply under control. If she didn't find a way to escape, she'd be dead in minutes. She had to save Maura. And the box their parents died protecting.

They were only four hours from shore. She wouldn't fail in her sworn duty to protect their heritage, at least not without a fight.

One of the pirates, who wore a large gold hoop in one ear, used his machete to slide another trunk to the center of the deck.

"Who owns this?" The pirate captain nodded at the trunk. He

leaned against the mast, arms folded across a solid chest, watching from under his hat brim as though the rain meant nothing.

Beside Cira, an older man lifted his chin. "That belongs to me." He sent a reassuring nod to his wife, then eased in front of her, effectively blocking her from view. She cried silent tears.

The sailor pried the latch off the trunk with his machete and rooted around inside, cackling when he came up with a small sack that clinked as he picked it up. He hefted the weight. "Bit of gold in there, I'm thinking, Captain."

The captain caught the bag in one hand, then bowed to the passenger. "Thank you for your contribution to our cause." He raised his flintlock pistol.

Cira squeezed her eyes closed, but she couldn't block out the horror. Or the wife's screams.

Head down, she focused on her bindings.

Another sailor slid her trunk to the center of the deck, and Cira froze as his comrade pried off the lock, then plunged his hands inside. *Dear God in heaven, help us.*

He pulled out the oilskin case and grinned, showing off his three remaining teeth. "Oh, ho, what have we here?"

Her heart sprinted like a jackrabbit as she waited, choosing her moment.

"Don't open that bag in the rain, you fool." Cira shouted to be heard above the downpour. "It's a book. You'll ruin it."

The captain straightened away from the mast and approached, eyes narrowed. He waved the sailor under an overhang, out of the rain.

This was her one and only chance to save the book.

And possibly herself and her sister.

She risked a sideways glance. Maura had vanished. Cira could only hope and pray she was safely hidden until Cira could find her.

Eyes locked on the sailor glaring at her, she worked faster, almost sagging with relief when the knot finally gave.

The sailor opened the case's strap and reached in for the Book of Days.

"Don't you dare touch that with your filthy hands!" Cira kept her hands behind her back and straightened her spine. "Put the gloves on. They're in the case."

Both men turned to glare at her, but she didn't flinch.

The captain nodded at the sailor, who reached for the gloves and pulled them on.

"You won't get away with stealing it, you know. That book is powerful."

"How so?"

Cira almost smiled at the captain's intrigued expression. "The book judges motives. If you try to steal it or use it for selfish reasons, you'll die."

The captain's laughter rang out. "And how, pray tell, does it know anyone's intentions?"

Cira shrugged. "I'm not sure, exactly. But I know it does."

The captain nodded at the sailor again. "Show me."

The crewman's eyes went round as saucers. "B-but—" He bit back the protest when the captain reached a hand toward his pistol.

As carefully as if he were handling a keg of lit powder, the crewman slid the book out of the case and showed the captain. He slowly turned the pages, waiting while the captain studied each one. Even in the gloom, the gilt edging and exquisitely rendered paintings fairly glowed from within.

Cira bided her time, internally counting off the minutes.

"Return the book to me at once. It does not belong to you. If you do not, you will suffer the consequences."

The captain chuckled, then his eyes went hard. "You, mademoiselle, have a lively imagination, but I grow weary of the game."

A sudden crash sounded as a nearby sailor dropped his machete and rushed toward them. "Captain! Toothless don't look so good."

Even as he said the words, Toothless slumped to the deck, motionless, the book beside him. His friend dropped to his knees and tossed the book aside as he patted the man's cheeks, trying to rouse him.

Cira didn't hesitate. She snatched the gloves from Toothless's hands, then scooped up the case and book as she ran to the side of

the ship. She shoved the book and gloves into the case and hoped the oilskin could survive a dip in the ocean.

She had one leg over the side of the vessel when she heard the telltale click of a pistol being cocked behind her.

“There is nowhere to go.” The captain’s weapon was pointed straight at her, never wavering as the ship rode the swells.

Cira glanced down, way down, and grinned. Maura motioned from a small rowboat far below.

“I don’t take kindly to anyone killing my crew.”

She turned back to the captain. “I didn’t kill him. The book did. You should have listened to me.”

Cira tossed the case over the side and launched herself after it.

She hit the water with a mighty splash, then fought with all her strength to reach the surface. Her waterlogged dress kept trying to drag her under.

Cira was frantically dodging the captain’s bullets when a strong arm wrapped around her waist and hauled her into the rowboat. She thumped her elbow as she landed in the bottom. Her rescuer tossed the oilskin case at her, then grabbed the oars and rowed around the stern toward the *Maria Claire* while lead balls hit the water all around them.

One explosion rang out, then another as flames shot out of the *Maria Claire*. They hid behind the hull, out of sight. It wouldn’t buy them much time, but they had no other options.

She glanced at Maura, who slumped beside her, equally soaked, blood oozing from a gash on her forehead. Maura’s hand lay atop the wooden box next to her.

“Maura!”

Her sister opened her eyes, grimaced in pain, then closed them again.

The book clutched to her chest, Cira grabbed her sister’s hand and sobbed with relief.

Until she spotted the pistol tucked into their rescuer’s waistband.

1

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA—PRESENT DAY

Octavia Tucker Benoit was not a woman smart people crossed. Not even if you were the formidable New Orleans society matron's granddaughter. Which was how Camille Abernathy found herself in an upstairs bedroom of an ornate mansion-turned-private-library in the French Quarter, trussed up like a beauty-pageant queen yet again this year, arguing with her almost-eighteen-year-old daughter. She'd so much rather be home with a good book on this blustery December evening.

She kept her tone light. "Come on, Cass, really? Combat boots? You know Gran will have kittens if you go downstairs wearing those."

"Yes, but she'll be mad at you, not me, so it all works out." Cassandra winked, her cheeky grin an exact replica of Camille's cousin Marcel, the inveterate charmer who was Cass's favorite grown-up and the source of her newly acquired sass.

Despite her exasperation, Camille smiled and shook her head. She'd deal with Cass's cheekiness and Marcel's influence another day. A quick check of her watch made her wince. The fundraiser

had officially begun five minutes ago. “Time to go, baby girl. You know your gran.”

“On time is late,” Cass said, mimicking her grandmother’s firm tone. Before Camille could get her moving toward the door, Cass propped her fists on her hips and scowled into the cheval mirror. “I hate this stupid dress. I look like a freaking twelve-year-old playing Disney Princess.” She slapped her hands against the blue satin gown that belled out over several petticoats and flipped an indignant hand toward the tiara perched atop her dark hair.

Camille met her daughter’s eyes in the mirror, shocked anew by the beautiful young woman scowling back at her. She ignored the flicker of panic and sorrow Cass’s upcoming graduation inspired and kept her tone light.

“I understand. I do. I didn’t get to pick my outfit, either.” Camille quirked an eyebrow and indicated her own poufy dress, also complete with tiara. “But you know the literacy fundraiser is Gran’s favorite charity event of the year. She wants us here as a show of solidarity.”

Cass rolled her eyes. “I get why she wants *you* here. But why me? Only old people come to these things.”

“Hey! Who you callin’ old?” Camille grinned.

Cass’s cell phone buzzed. She read the text, then plopped on the couch, crossing her arms. “I’m not going.”

And just like that, her daughter was twelve again. Camille pinched the bridge of her nose. Let out a sigh. “Take it up with Gran—some other time. Right now, it’s time to suck it up, buttercup. You know the drill. We smile, talk to all those old people about supporting literacy. I’ll take a bunch of pictures for the sponsors of tonight’s event, then we’ll grab pizza on the way home.”

“I’m never doing this again.” Cass stood and flounced toward the door. Camille stopped her with a hand on her arm and held the blue satin ballet slippers aloft. “Just be glad they don’t have spike heels like mine.”

One corner of Cass’s mouth quirked up as she took the ballet flats from Camille. “True.”

As they approached the sweeping staircase that led downstairs, Camille straightened her spine, pulled out her best pageant smile, and took her daughter's hand, holding her camera in the other. "The things we do for family—and pepperoni pizza."

Cass rolled her eyes and met her grin, then adopted the same serene demeanor as they descended the stairs together, ready to perform their duty.

Camille smiled. *That's my girl.*

Lucien Broussard strode into the stately French Quarter residence as though he belonged there, despite the jet lag still fogging his brain and the slightly too-tight fit of his hastily rented tux. But Pops had been insistent, and Lucien didn't have the heart to deny him.

He paused to scan the elegantly dressed crowd, saw a few people glance his way and whisper. How long would it take before somebody came to kick him out? Most likely Octavia Benoit herself. Like she had when he had the temerity to show up at her Garden District mansion years ago to offer Camille his condolences after J. T.'s death. Octavia had coldly dismissed him as one of those "no-good Broussards."

He wandered the luxurious room, then plucked a glass of champagne from a passing waiter's tray. He had just taken a sip when he glanced up and sucked in a breath. Coughed into his fist. He stepped behind a potted palm to avoid drawing attention to himself while he tried to catch his breath.

Camille Abernathy and her daughter, Cassandra, had just started down the stairs, and the sight hit him like a mule kick to the chest. Camille was even more beautiful than she'd been the last time he laid eyes on her two years ago. And Cass, wow. All grown up. She was the spitting image of Camille when she was in high school. No wonder his best friend J. T. had instantly fallen madly, hopelessly in love with Camille. Both women had the same tall, willowy build. Same striking dark eyes, same shoulder-length, coal-black hair. He'd

assumed they'd be here tonight, but he hadn't been prepared. Not really.

Certainly not for the guilt that reared up and slapped him, hard. *I'm sorry, J. T.*

"What do you think you're doing here?" an imperious voice inquired from behind him.

Right on cue. Lucien turned slowly, grinning as he reached for her gloved hand and pressed a quick kiss to the back before releasing her. Octavia delivered an icy glare, clearly annoyed that a mere stable boy had breached her castle. Lucien widened his smile. He wasn't so easily cowed these days.

"You look positively regal tonight, Mrs. Benoit, as always," he drawled. "Lovely shindig." He indicated the mansion with his champagne glass.

Irritation pinched her mouth. "I asked what you're doing here."

"Attending the fundraiser, of course. Pops asked me to deliver his donation. In person."

A flicker of . . . something passed through her eyes at the mention of his grandfather, then instantly disappeared. "There was no need for you to travel *all* this way across town, as donations can be made electronically these days."

He raised an eyebrow at her implied reference to the poorer side of town. "No trouble. He also asked me to deliver this." He pulled the white envelope from his breast pocket and held it out.

She regarded it like she would a coiled rattler. "What is it?"

"A request."

Her sudden hesitation surprised him. Though Mrs. Benoit had to be in her seventies, like Pops, she'd always been a remarkably confident woman, elegant and self-possessed. Her gaze bounced from him to the envelope and back before she snatched it from his hand and tore it open.

All the color drained from her face as she read, and he reached out to catch her in case she fell. She shook off his hand and stepped away, then tucked the letter into a pocket in her skirt with a hand that trembled just the slightest bit. When she spoke, her

voice dripped ice. "Kindly remind Claude that the diary has *never* belonged to his family, despite his delusions, nor will it ever. It is Benoit property and so it will remain. It is not for sale. At any price. Please show yourself out."

She spun on her heel and strode away.

He smiled as he lifted his glass in toast to her retreating back.

That went pretty much exactly as Lucien had expected.

Let the games begin.

"Who is that?" Cass murmured as they descended the stairs. "He reminds me of Chris Hemsworth in *Thor*, well, without the shaggy blond hair." She jutted her chin toward the back of the room.

Camille followed her daughter's gaze and stumbled on the thickly carpeted runner. She gripped the banister to steady herself and called upon her years of unwanted pageant participation to remain calm and unruffled. Never mind the urge to bolt from the room.

"More like Pirate Jack Sparrow," she muttered.

What was Lucien Broussard doing here? She'd seen him watching her from the fringes at Gramp's funeral two years ago, but he hadn't approached. Beyond that, she hadn't laid eyes on him since before J. T.'s death. She'd heard he'd gone to Africa or someplace after he left the Army, doing heaven only knew what. Local rumors ranged from mercenary to private security to outright piracy. Given his family's long history of pirate ancestors, anything was possible. Not that she followed the gossip.

Camille steered them toward the opposite side of the room, but they hadn't gone far before Lucien stepped into their path. He bowed formally. "Good evening, Camille." He raised her hand to his lips and brushed a kiss over her knuckles, a familiar hint of mischief in his deep-blue eyes. "You're as lovely as ever. A veritable fairy-tale princess come to life."

She stiffened at his veiled reference to the hated moniker he'd given her in high school. But it was his husky drawl and unmistakable

cologne that sent a remembered—and most unwelcome—shiver of awareness down her back. She snatched her hand back, annoyed that after nearly two decades, the man could still throw her off balance. Before her flustered brain could come up with anything coherent to say, he turned to Cass.

“You must be Cassandra.” He reached a hand toward her ear and withdrew a lovely white paper flower, which he presented to her with a flourish. “I’m Lucien Broussard.”

“How did you do that?” Cass asked, smiling.

“A bit of magic.” He smiled and pointed to her hair. “May I?” At her nod, he tucked the bloom behind her ear.

Irritation spiked at how easily he charmed her daughter with the same ridiculous trick that had captured her attention so long ago. “What are you doing here, Lucien? I thought you were . . . somewhere far away.”

He cocked his head and those piercing blue eyes dared her to run away. “Did you now? You know better than to believe everything you hear.”

“You guys know each other?” Cass’s eyes bounced from one to the other.

“A long time ago,” Camille said, just as Lucien said, “We went to high school together. Your dad and I were tight.”

Curiosity bubbled out of Cass. “Really? Why haven’t I met you before? Were you in the Army with my dad?”

When Camille saw Lucien’s subtle flinch at Cass’s question about the military, she relaxed slightly. He wasn’t as unaffected as he pretended to be.

“I was. Your dad was one of the good guys. The best, actually.” He turned to Camille. “I’m just in town to take care of some family business.”

“Will you tell me more about him?”

Cass’s eagerness pierced Camille. She’d always told her daughter all she could about the father who’d died before she was born, but somehow, hearing about him from Lucien had hit her daughter differently.

The smile he sent Cass was tender, gentle. “Anytime.” His eyes darted over Camille’s shoulder and he stiffened. “But for now, if you ladies will excuse me.” He sent them a blinding smile before he turned and strode away.

“Wow.” Cass pulled out her phone, no doubt texting her best friend Lindsey as she wandered over to the refreshment table, her annoyance over the dress forgotten in the wake of Lucien’s smile.

Or maybe that was just Camille. *Wow, indeed.* How could the man still affect her so? She took slow breaths to calm her speeding pulse as she raised her camera and scanned the room, relieved when she confirmed that Lucien had disappeared. Thankfully.

Do your job. Then you can get out of here.

She strolled around the room snapping pictures of the well-heeled guests while mentally shoring up her defenses for when she had to face Lucien again. It would be too much to hope his presence was a one-time thing.

Several hours later, the last guests had finally departed, leaving large donations behind. Gran thanked Camille and Cass for doing their part, and Cass graciously claimed she’d been glad to help. Camille gave herself points for not snorting at that. Now, bundled against the cold in heavy coats and scarves, they headed toward Camille’s car, parked much farther away than she wanted to walk in heels, but such was parking in the Quarter.

“How come you’ve never told me about Lucien? Does he live around here?” Cass shifted her backpack more comfortably as they walked.

So many possible answers. Camille settled for, “We knew each other a long time ago. Like he said, he and your dad were close friends. I’m not sure where he lives these days.”

Cass kept her head buried in her phone as they walked. “Have you talked to Uncle Marcel lately?”

“Not since I got back from my last job, why?” Though not for

lack of trying. Marcel had been dodging her calls, well aware that she was angry that he'd taken Cass to some pirate museum he'd just discovered—on a school day—without checking with her. To make matters worse, some idiot had run them off the road!

“Just wondering.”

Camille waited until Cass finally peered up from her phone before she asked, “Is there something wrong? You can talk to me, you know. About whatever it is.”

Cass snorted, then rolled her eyes again, a gesture Camille had come to hate. “Sure, Mom. 'Cause you always listen and take my needs into account. Like when you moved us out of Gran's house to the back of beyond without giving me any choice.”

“I thought you love Gramps's farm!”

Cass didn't respond.

“Okay, maybe we should have talked about it. But I know you, Cass. And hopefully you know me well enough to know I can help. Whatever it is.”

“Stop hounding me, Mom, geez. You do this after every trip.”

Because you're sneaking around and spending too much time with Marcel. I'm afraid for you. But she bit her tongue, searched for words her daughter would hear.

Someday she wanted to tell Cass about her work with Speranza, the centuries-old secret society and the amazing team of women Camille worked with. She wanted to give Cass a Speranza medalion, invite her to join the network and pledge her loyalty to helping women in trouble around the world, the same way Gran, and then Willa, had invited Camille. But her daughter had some growing up to do first.

“Cass, I—”

Cass stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, hands on her hips. “I'm not involved with the wrong crowd, I'm not doing drugs, I'm not pregnant. Just stop already. I can't breathe when you get like this.”

With that, Cass spun on her heel, grabbed her skirts, and took off, darting across the street and down an alley.

Momentarily stunned, Camille blinked as she gripped her camera bag in one hand, her skirts in the other, and raced after her daughter, stumbling in her ridiculous heels. “Cass!”

A cold wind whipped down the narrow street. Lucien picked up his pace as he hurried toward his rental car. He'd forgotten how cold and damp it got in New Orleans in December.

He'd left the fundraiser and its prissy appetizers and headed to an old friend's bar for a thick burger and fries. The lively conversation had been almost enough to distract him from the gut punch any encounter with Camille Abernathy produced.

He blinked gritty eyes, rubbed a hand over his face. He could have used a few hours of shut-eye before embarking on tonight's fool's errand. The endless delays during the trip from Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, to NOLA had taken almost forty-eight hours and gnawed at what little patience he had left.

Which was why he'd gone straight from the airport to the hospital to lay eyes on Pops, confirm what the doctors had said about his grandfather's injury—and his recovery.

Pops was also the reason he'd shown up at the fundraiser tonight. Pops had insisted this couldn't wait, and Lucien didn't have it in him to disappoint him. Again.

He rounded a corner and spotted Cass Abernathy darting out of an alley and running across the street, still in her ball gown. She glanced over her shoulder, eyes wide with fear, as a man raced out of another alley and followed her, a determined expression on his face. He was gaining on her.

Where was Camille?

Lucien was halfway across the street before he decided to move. He intercepted the guy like he was still playing high school football, bodychecking him just as the guy reached out to grab the backpack Cass was wearing.

Dressed in black from head to toe, including the hoodie hiding

his face, the guy stumbled but didn't fall. He spun and made another lunge for Cass.

Lucien stepped between them, grabbed Cass by the shoulders, and shoved her toward Camille, who had followed Cass from the alley and raced toward them, poufy skirts clutched in her hand, panic etched in her face.

“Run!”