

# Mangroves and Monsters

**BOOK TWO: The Stolen Nickel Series**



**Sharon Cupp Pennington**



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## Dedication

To Dorothy Swanson. What can I say, dear Dorothy?  
You're a smart, clever, funny woman, and a voracious  
reader without whom this novel wouldn't have been  
nearly as much fun to write.

To my beloved Wayne, who is and always will be my  
Brent St. Cyr.

## Acknowledgements

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And, again, it is my privilege to thank Dorothy Swanson for her endless hours spent reading, researching, and offering valuable insights...and for her unwavering support of this project. Every author should be so lucky. I've got the next plot thickening inside my brain, Dorothy. You ready for another go?

The creative recipes mentioned in this novel, and many others, can be found at <http://www.campbellkitchen.com/>. Or, as Charlie Cooper would be quick to point out, on the backs of Campbell's Soup can labels.

Mark Thomas Beck's musical mentoring muppet, Oscar the Grouch, can be seen on the award-winning PBS program *Sesame Street*.

# Chapter One

**W**ounds heal in stages. Numb one day, ants crawling under your skin the next. Itchy in the sweltering heat; achy in the cold.

*Weird.*

Charlie Cooper scratched the three-inch scar on his shoulder where he took a knife's blade during the botched kidnapping of a student nine years ago. Despite a Herculean effort by police, the poor boy died anyway—a few months shy of his eighth birthday.

“Sorry, kid.” Cooper yanked off his New Orleans Zephyrs cap and tossed it on the bistro chair next to him. Sorry for what? *Christ*. That he survived three days in an abandoned well, and his student didn't? That he carried this damn scar as a constant reminder he failed to save the boy?

That only a few years after the abduction, still blinded by revenge, he couldn't see the jewel he'd found in Angeline St. Cyr? Almost five years had passed since the auto-pedestrian accident that reportedly killed the supermodel—*reportedly* being the operative word. Which brought him to the only reason he had journeyed to Jacqueme Dominique, an island the size of Vermont,

located east of the Lesser Antilles.

Call him fanatical or foolish, delusional even, but he had never bought into the hype regarding Angeline's sudden death and subsequent cremation her boss had fed to the press.

If Cooper saw her again, he knew he would recognize Angeline no matter how horrendous her scars. Hell, they'd lingered in his bed the entire weekend before the accident, and he had memorized every delectable inch of her.

Charmed by Angeline's quirks, Cooper had both cursed her annoying habits and admired her tenacity. He had loved the supermodel, and loathed her. Now he only wanted the truth, even if it left him twice devastated.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. Sea breezes popped the restaurant's green- and white-striped awnings but offered little respite from the heat and humidity that accompanied incessant June showers.

Cooper mopped his face with a navy bandana, then tied the damp kerchief around his neck and slumped back in his chair at the sidewalk table that allowed a pigeon's-eye view of the small souvenir shop he had left forty-five minutes ago. While awaiting the shop proprietor's return, he refueled on the Cross-Eyed Pelican's legendary conch chowder, cassava bread, and steamed vegetables with mango chutney. Rumor had it tourists flocked to Jacqueme Dominique to sample the Pelican's peppery fare.

He took a long draw of water, squeezed his eyes shut, and chased it with a couple aspirin, chewing slowly until the tablets dissolved to grit. Garlic and ginger assailed his senses, and he opened his eyes to a smiling waitress.

She placed a second bowl of steamy chowder in front of him, her drawl as far a cry from this exquisite paradise as Cooper's home in Louisiana. "You stayin' long, sugar?"

He stared at the shop across the street. "Don't know yet."

The waitress refilled his water glass and moved to the next table where an attractive woman, raven hair braided to her waist, told a joke involving a naked spinster, red knee-high socks, and a ping-pong table with one short leg. Deeply tanned, she was dressed for the bush in an olive shirt with wide flap pockets, belted khaki shorts, and suede half boots with thick, cuffed socks. The



fedora on the table in front of her could have been a prop from an Indiana Jones movie.

A burley construction hand laughed so hard at her joke he almost knocked her off his lap, while his co-workers slurred drink orders for a concoction called a Bloated Bag of Monkey Spunk. Barely noon, and the rained-out hardhats already felt no pain.

The raven-haired woman winked, and Cooper noticed what the men apparently hadn't: she wasn't drinking. He figured one—maybe all four—of the hardhats would get rolled for their recently-cashed paychecks before midnight.

*And they say women are the weaker sex.*

Cooper slugged more water and patted his shorts pocket, feeling for the aspirin bottle again.

A bell jingled across the street as the shop's door opened. The man crossing the threshold tipped the scales at two-eighty easy. Dressed in baggy cargo shorts and a shirt sporting yellow hibiscus blossoms, he backed the door open and a skinny woman in oversized sunglasses exited. She stopped long enough to add another bag to the four he already balanced, this one red to match his ruddy complexion.

The man waddled after the woman, hitching up bags every other step. The door fell closed.

No Angeline St. Cyr.

Cooper shoved his meal away with a shaky hand when the shop's bell jangled again. The brunette clerk he'd spoken with earlier held the door so a tall, slender woman could enter. She wrestled an armload of packages wrapped in brown paper, a wooden cane hooked over her arm. A wide-brimmed straw hat obscured her face, but Cooper's gut screamed "Angeline!" so loud he thought he'd called her name.

No one around him stirred.

The woman disappeared inside the store.

He stood and dug in his pockets, scattering bills and change amongst the plates and cutlery. A nickel dropped to the sidewalk; he let it spin. He raced into the street and collided with a teenager on a rusty blue bicycle.

"Watch it, mister!" the boy said as he jammed his foot down

Cooper shouted over his shoulder, “Sorry.” He skirted rain-filled dips in the cobblestone avenue and stopped short of reaching for the door’s brass handle. His stomach churned. Never too late to turn and run. He considered the option—for about half a second. He’d come too far, followed too many dead-end leads to retreat because of nerves or the prospect of disappointment.

Cooper needed answers, and he’d be damned if he left this island without them. Hell, he had been damned to sleepless nights and all-consuming misery for the last five years.

Yep, he needed answers—and answers he’d get.

His reflection in the glass made Cooper wish he’d showered and shaved, and at least ran a brush through his hair. Though he was visibly fit, his thick brown mop now kissed the top of his collar. “You look like a bum,” he said, tugging off the cap and finger-combing his hair.

He yanked open the door, and the blessed cool of air-conditioning washed over him. A pair of creaky ceiling fans with blades shaped like palm leaves rotated lazily. The shop smelled of ink and plastic, cocoa butter and suntan lotion. Behind the counter, the brunette assisted a customer selecting earrings.

The tall woman had disappeared.

A young couple entered, four laughing children in tow, and further distracted the clerk.

Cooper made his way undetected through a rainbow collage of t-shirts and postcard racks to a narrow door in the back marked PERSONNEL ONLY. He knocked on the door and eased it open. Inside, he spotted another door to the right. From behind it came the sound of water splashing; a feminine voice hummed a soft, familiar tune.

Funny, he didn’t recall ever hearing Angeline hum.

A battered wooden desk faced the office entrance; its left side butted the wall below a partially opened window. A light shower pebbled the glass pane, and the smell of fresh rain wafted in through a two-inch gap.

To the left stood an upright tan file cabinet. He tugged on the handle. Locked. Dumped on the terracotta tile floor beside the cabinet were the string-tied parcels, along with her silver-handled cane and wide-brimmed straw hat.

Cooper reached through the mini-blind and slid the window shut. Turning back to the desk, he thumbed through the rain-spattered mail, most of it addressed to A.C. Dubois.

The name cinched it.

His mind leaped back to New Orleans five years ago, to the old St. Louis Cemetery and a cursed nickel lifted from the grave of a hoodoo woman named Simone Dubois. Lord, the lousy-ass luck that had followed: a mugging, and then the horrific accident. How fitting Angeline should adopt Dubois' name. Guess she figured the old gypsy owed her.

An envelope slipped from Cooper's fingers and parachuted under the desk. He crouched to get it, and rising up, struck his head on an open drawer. His elbow slammed the wall when he fell against the chair behind the desk.

"Can I help you?"

He shook his head to silence exploding bottle-rockets, then stared at the woman standing over him. He wanted to laugh, cry, swear, shout; he couldn't breathe. "It *is* you." Cooper scrambled to his knees, latching onto the chair's arms for leverage.

She placed her hands on the back of the chair as he heaved himself up. "You don't belong here," she said, but the desire in her pale green eyes spoke differently.

For someone who went to great lengths for anonymity, Angeline St. Cyr didn't seem surprised to see him. He straightened and wiped his palms on his denim shorts. She looked different—but the same. Same slender nose, tip turned up ever so slightly, same almond-shaped eyes, and same full, pouting lips; her sultry voice as much Texas as any long-horned steer.

In his fatigued brain, it made a kind of bizarre sense.

She wore her blonde hair cropped short, boyish. He swallowed hard. A discolored scar snaked from under her left eye, down her cheek to the delicate curve of her chin. His gaze moved to her gold starfish earring, and then back to the scar.

"There's a magnifying glass on my desk if you need a better look," she snapped as she closed her eyes, her spiked lashes like spiders against pale skin. "When you're done, you can tell me

Angeline stiffened as Cooper came around the desk to stand in front of her. She couldn't read his expression, not that she'd ever been able to decipher his moods. That, oddly enough, had been part of his appeal.

A wave of nausea slid through her like ink blackening every nerve and cell.

"I can't do this." Her stomach heaved, and she covered her mouth with her hand. *Oh, God.* She pivoted, then rounded the desk and stumbled into the bathroom. Slamming the door, she flipped the lock, lurched for the toilet, and threw up until there was nothing left inside but confusion and overwhelming fear.

Their reunion wasn't supposed to happen like this.

She almost laughed. What reunion? These past few years, she'd run from Cooper, as far and fast as she could.

Angeline grabbed a rolled washcloth from the basket over the toilet and soaked it under the faucet. Who was she kidding? Even at her darkest point in rehab, when every step, every stretched muscle meant blinding pain, she'd held onto the dream of this moment. It was only a matter of time before a man with Cooper's money, resources, and confounded stubbornness figured out the truth about her death.

Secretly, she'd counted on it.

Three and a half years ago her former boss and mentor, cosmetics mogul Mathieu Fournier, had warned her Cooper had been asking around, doling out cash for clues from as far away as Paris and Milan. It was Mathieu who convinced her in the wisdom of closing her shop on the Bahamian island of Mayaguana and moving to the lesser known Jacqueme Dominique.

Still she went about her life with the renewed hope that Cooper would continue his pursuit. Her heart stalled every time the bell rang on her shop's door. She searched the faces of men in the crowded town square and in restaurants during peak tourist seasons. Throughout every season.

Well, he had found her. Now what?

Angeline held the damp cloth over her face and drank in the coolness. Her thumb brushed the indented scar. She straightened, dropping the cloth in the sink, and forced herself to look in the mirror. Her flushed face heightened the scar's blanched skin,

forming a hideous river of white in the face of a woman the world had deemed perfect.

Cooper knocked on the door. “You okay in there?”

Hell, no, she wasn’t okay. She was falling apart.

“You might as well come out, Angeline. I’m not going anywhere.” The man wore stubbornness like a tailored jacket. He always had.

“Give me a minute,” she said.

“Take as long as you need.”

The cushions on her chair whooshed. Casters creaked. It sounded as though he’d sat behind her desk.

Angeline lowered the lid to the toilet and sat, folding her arms across her stomach. Rocking forward, she drew deep, steadying breaths. Silence magnified the tick of the small clock on the wicker *étagère*. Two minutes passed, then five. Finally, she stood, filled a glass with water and rinsed her mouth. She straightened her blouse and skirt, then unlocked the door.

Cooper had stood by the time the door opened. He came around the desk and stopped no more than a foot in front of her. The heat from his body, mixed with the smell of his sweat, rolled toward her like an invitation. The look in his widened eyes spoke of concern.

She would’ve preferred the wise-cracking arrogance she remembered, anger and shouting. Then she could shout back and release this stifling emotion.

His gaze traveled from her head to her toes. She shifted her slight weight from one leg to the other as he circled her.

The broad-shouldered V of Cooper’s six-foot frame narrowed to a lean waist. His perpetual tan came from his French-Acadian heritage, but he wore his dark hair too long now. The length added to an unkempt, almost rough, appearance. His wrinkled shirt hung loose, his piercing hawk-brown eyes bloodshot, beard more than a couple days old. Not at all the *Neat Nancy* she remembered from their time together at Raison-Bell Amandine, the mansion outside New Orleans he’d inherited from his bastard of a grandfather.

This Cooper struck Angeline as dangerous.

His hand touched the nape of her neck, and his fingers’

in and whispered next to her ear, "You've got some explaining to do, Slick."

She cringed at the old nickname that no longer fit. "Not here." She faced him, squared her shoulders. Her gaze met his and held steady, though her insides quivered. "My shop gets busy in the afternoon."

He touched a finger to her chin, lifted in defiance. "You name the place, and I'm there."

"You're staying at the Hotel LeNoir."

He raised a questioning brow.

"There are only two hotels in Port Noel," she explained. "The LeNoir's on the water. I remember how much you loved the sound of the... I'll meet you in the lobby at six-thirty."

The corner of his mouth lifted in a crooked half-smile, at odds with the glare that bore into her. He raised his hand, held it inches from her scarred cheek, then let it drop to his side. "Don't even think about running," he said. With a curt nod, he turned, yanked open the office door, and left.

She followed as far as the first round of t-shirts when the cell phone in her skirt pocket chirped "Anchors Aweigh."

*Brent.*

Her hands shook, and she had trouble freeing the phone from her pocket. She flipped it open. "Hello."

"Hey there, sis."

"Your timing is perfect."

She pictured her brother's laughter deepening the lines around his hazel eyes when he said, "One of my better qualities. What's up, kid? You sound stressed."

Even though she was three years older than him, Brent always called her kid. "Cooper found me," she said.

Her brother's laughter died on a muted swear. "I can be there tomorrow morning. Just say the word."

She smiled. "Thanks, Brent. You don't know how much it helps me knowing that. But I can handle Cooper." At least, she prayed she could.

"How did he react to seeing you?"

Reaching into the garment round, Angeline straightened several yellow t-shirts with the shop's name, Pearls, and a tropical

mermaid motif imprinted on the backs. “Hard to say. Surprised, I guess. But not really. You know he’s been searching for me for a while. We’re meeting later.”

“He gives you any grief...like I said, Angie, say the word and I’m on a plane tonight. Right now I’ve got a union meeting. It should last until four, then I’m in for the evening. ESPN’s encoring the Johnson-Norwood bout. I’ll keep the phone handy.”

She knew he would. “Okay. Thanks.” She also knew he’d watch the boxing match with their ailing father. “Don’t come unless I call, Brent. Mom and Dad need you.”

“You got it, sis.” He disconnected.

Angeline returned the phone to her pocket. Of course Cooper was surprised at seeing her. She remained but a glimmer of the woman who’d left him after their heated argument over her obsession with success and his need for vengeance against a Dutch kidnapper named Willem Voorhees.

They’d argued in his bedroom on a rainy afternoon much like today.

*“You were going to leave, just like that?” he said.*

*“You didn’t think I’d stay, did you?” She raised a fist to her throat and played her best improv hand. “My God, you did. You actually thought I’d be content with quilting bees and bake sales, crying babies and coupons the grocer triples on Thursdays.”*

*His eyes darkened with pain.*

*She summoned another miserable wave of courage and forced a laugh. “My face is known all over the world, Cooper. I’m on magazine covers and billboards. I walk into restaurants without a reservation and get the best table. At the theater, people trample each other for a glimpse of me, and I love it. All of it. It’s who I am. It’s what I am.” She pretended to struggle with zipping her overnight bag. “Don’t look so wounded.”*

*He simply stood there, stunned, disbelieving.*

*“Many men want to bed me and never get the chance,” she said. “You got the carousel ride, and the brass ring. Consider yourself a winner. I do. Now I’ve really got to go. Meetings, you know.” Tears didn’t flow until she was seated safely in her cab.*





