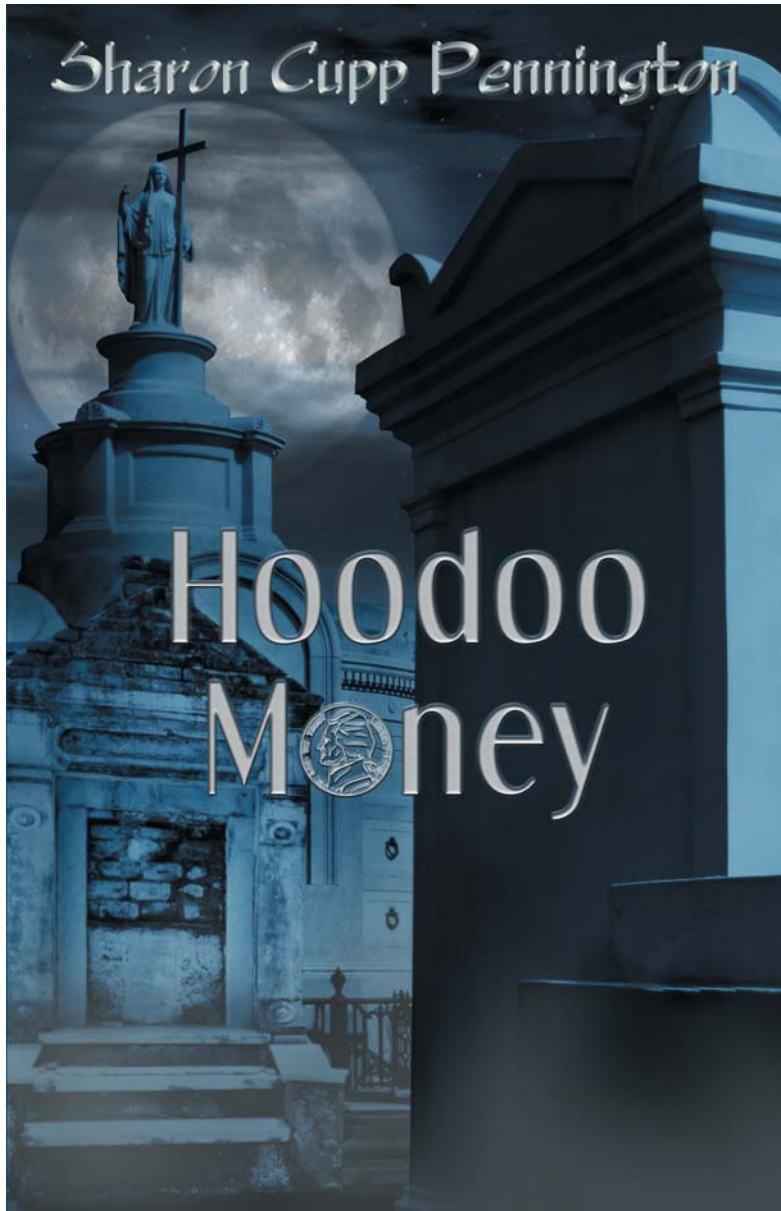


Sharon Cupp Pennington



# Hoodoo Money

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Sharon Cupp Pennington

Draumr Publishing, LLC  
Maryland

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Cover art by SkyeWolf Images.

There is no ISBN associated with the electronic version of this book.

**PUBLISHED BY DRAUMR PUBLISHING, LLC**

[www.draumrpublishing.com](http://www.draumrpublishing.com)

Columbia, Maryland

Printed in the United States of America

## Dedication

To Shelley, who inspired the story behind Hoodoo Money.

To Jennifer, who made me believe I could write it. To Shawn, who has always been a loud voice in my cheering section. To my beloved Wayne, who worked long hours, kept this project solvent and never begrudged me yet another inker.

To my sister, Linda, who would have been so proud.

## Acknowledgements

I owe boundless gratitude to those members of the good ship Writing Well, past and present, who read and reread these chapters: Sue Acuña, Cliff Ashpaugh, Sidney Blake, Barbara Campbell, Mark Chorna, Hope Clark, Marie Davis, Anne Jeantoux, Jeff Jewett, Jack Johnson, Brian Kenyon, B.J. Kibble, Brian Lieske, Rebecca Macintyre, Charles “Mack” McKinstry, Annette Millet, Robin Pimentel, Rhonda Richardson, Patrick Riley, Rachel Rinehart, Donna Rogers, Mardi Sands and Jake Steele—especially to the late and exquisitely great Dick Ross, who bestowed upon me the secret decoder ring for entering The Well. Your generosity is unmatched.

To the citizens of New Orleans, I wish to express my sincere appreciation for the use of your amazing city as the backdrop for this novel. God bless your infinite strength and unwavering spirit. May you come back stronger than ever.

# Prologue



*Chicago, Illinois...*

Sweating profusely, Lee Allen Dalrymple carted his 280 pounds up a second flight of stairs. “Damn elevator,” he huffed. “Been on the fritz more times than not since I moved into this overpriced apartment.” But a broke-down elevator was the least of his aggravation. Braeden McKay had flat refused to give him the crime scene photos from the Dodding murder. “Bitch.”

New shoes pinched Dalrymple’s swollen feet. His head ached. Perspiration stung his eyes and plastered his white shirt to his back under a suit jacket that cut into his shoulders.

“McKay’s the cause of all my misery.” He lumbered through the door of his darkened apartment juggling mail, his laptop, and battered valise.

During this most recent trip to Texas, he had called forth every ruse concocted in nineteen years of free-lance journalism. Three days of impromptu meetings, deep-fried meals, and all-out groveling, and he hadn’t worn her down a lick.

He kicked the door shut, and the vibration skewed the signed

lithograph on the wall next to the framed dust jacket of *The Stoning of Renzo De Benedictis*, his one and only bestseller. “Integrity’s for Boy Scouts,” he grumbled. People had lewd appetites, and satiating those appetites had made him a lot of money.

He couldn’t recall any other time a woman had looked him straight in the eyes and told him her conscience wasn’t for sale. But McKay had leaned across a glass of expensive merlot, shook his hand, and said in that irritating drawl of hers, “My decision is final, Mr. Dalrymple. Herbert Dodding is dead. I can’t change that. But neither will I contribute to a tell-all book that will follow those boys for the rest of their lives. You understand, sir, I’m sure.”

*Like hell, he understood.*

Why did she hold onto the photographs if she didn’t plan to use them, or any of the research she’d done into the old pervert’s murder? Her genre was children’s books, and the “Platypus Pearl” mystery series had made her the newest darling of the preteen set.

Not that she bragged about it. McKay was too refined, too genteel. Too damn Southern.

He dropped the mail in the wastebasket—nothing but bills from his accountant—placed the laptop on his cluttered desk, and valise on the floor. Lamp on, he shrugged out of the torturous jacket and headed for the bottle of Johnnie Walker Black in his kitchen cabinet. Frustration mothered an awful thirst, and Dalrymple was the thirstiest he’d been in forty-seven years of scandalous living.

He carried the bottle to the living room, grabbed the remote, and switched on the television. He switched it off just as quick. Today the news depressed him. Braeden McKay and her unwavering morality depressed him.

Anger surfaced in his shaking hands when he unscrewed Johnnie’s cap, splashed two fingers in a glass, and threw back the amber liquid.

The muffled pop never registered as a gunshot, but an explosion of white light inside his temple dropped Dalrymple to his knees. The last image his brain recorded as blood filled his mouth was a shadow lifting the laptop from his desk.

# Chapter One



*St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, New Orleans, sixteen months later...*

“**W**hat do you get when you bite a ghost?” Braeden McKay managed a weak smile and whispered, “A mouthful of sheet.”

The joke wasn’t any funnier now than it had been the first time her neighbor’s nine-year old nephew had told it. Neither was spending an entire morning of her vacation in a cemetery. But she had promised Angeline she’d be her guest during the Fournier Cosmetics photo shoot. With the lure of a decadent lunch and antique shopping afterward, she could hold out a bit longer.

Four hours spent in the merciless Gulf Coast humidity, and Braeden’s natural curls resembled coppery cotton candy. She twisted her hair into a haphazard roll, fastened it with a large plastic clip, then fanned the back of her neck with the brochure from her pocket. Not that either helped.

Heading down the stone path dividing two rows of staggered sepulchers and patchwork grass, she was struck by the contrast between a century-old mausoleum and the camera crew packing

their high-tech gear. She supposed it was no more odd than looking at a panoramic view of the cemetery with the city's modern skyline behind it, or the honking of car horns carried through the old iron gates on a July breeze. It was one of the things she loved about New Orleans: the blending of past and present, with ample deference given both.

"Now what are you doing?" She found her supermodel friend standing before a small tomb they'd discovered on a break earlier in the day.

"I'm gettin' myself a souvenir." Angeline leaned over the rusted iron fence marking Simone Dubois' grave and plucked a coin off the mutilated brick. "You want me to get you one?"

Braeden eyed the coin with wariness. It was small, silver, round, and dull-edged. "You lifted that nickel from the grave of a witch." She suppressed her shudder. "No, I don't want you to get me one."

Angeline straightened her five foot ten inch frame. "A gypsy, Braeg. Simone Dubois was a Black Gypsy, a hoodoo woman."

"Same difference."

"Hardly, and don't make it sound so sinister." She buffed the coin against her blouse before holding it up to the light for closer inspection. "It's not like I'm snatchin' bodies, or pryin' gold from their teeth. There must be fifty coins here, nickels and dimes, pennies. People are expected to take a few."

"If you want a souvenir, I'll buy you some beads or a feathered Mardi Gras mask like the ones we saw in the hotel lobby." Appealing to her friend's flamboyant side wasn't working; Braeden tried the practical approach. "Okay, okay." She raised her arms in exaggerated surrender. "I'll buy the postcards this trip, for pity's sake, and stamps to mail them. Just put the nickel back, Angie, before somebody sees you."

Angeline's laugh dissipated into the fissures of the tomb. She rested her boxy sunglasses atop her blonde head and met Braeden's gaze beneath the black crystal frames. "No thanks," she said. "I think I'll keep my nickel. Besides, who's gonna see me? Cooper? We hired the man to drive, nothing more. The hoodoo woman supposedly buried beneath all this...*finery*?" She reached through the rusted iron bars, tapped the base of Dubois' tomb with the toe

of her strappy sandal and added matter-of-factly, "I think not."

Visions of campfires and burning effigies tumbled through Braeden's brain. "What if it's bad luck to take it, Angie. I mean, sacrilegious or something." The *or something* worried her. "What if there's some kind of..."

It seemed ridiculous to even say the word out loud.

Angeline whirled, clapping her hands. "I can't believe it, Brag! You were gonna say 'curse,' weren't you?"

"S-Something like that."

The supermodel edged through the small gate hanging lopsided from the rusted iron enclosure. An elusive breeze caught the hem of her silk crepe skirt, and a dance of yellow designer daisies swirled about her ankles as she planted her outrageously insured derriere on the tomb's narrow foundation ledge.

She motioned for Charlie Cooper, and the driver ambled over with a pucker on his face that reminded Braeden of tasting tart lemonade.

"Here, Cooper. Take a picture of us for posterity." Angeline shoved her camera at him, then patted the space next to her indicating Braeden should also sit. "Just me and Brag and little ol' Simone Dubois," she teased. "Black Gypsy."

Braeden stepped out of range of the shot. "Thanks, but no thanks."

The camera whirred and clicked, clicked and whirred. "Come on, Brag." Angeline struck another silly pose. "I mean, a curse. For heaven's sake, you don't really believe in such things. Do you?"

Braeden wanted to say no, but hesitated. She was three-quarters Irish after all. Wasn't she obligated to believe in leprechauns and cluricauns, and the kissin' of the Blarney? She even had the woven cross of Saint Brigid attached to the wall above her bed.

"Love potions, spells cast under a full moon, that ol' black magic?" Angeline tossed the coin one-handed and snatched it back in mid-air. "The walkin' dead?" She giggled.

She waved off the driver, stood, then shook gritty brick dust from the crisp folds of her skirt. Then she leaned over the decrepit little fence, smiled engagingly at the group of fans clustered around the tomb, and signed a few more autographs.

Angeline St. Cyr, Braeden thought with unbound affection, the quintessential PR package. Fournier Cosmetics was lucky to have her.

“It’s only a nickel, Brag.” Angeline threw her head back, laughing out loud as she caressed the coin between her thumb and forefinger. “A plain old, honest to God, made in America nickel. And it’s mine. Finders keepers you know. Anyway, look at the date.” She turned the coin, heads up this time, and thrust it within inches of Braeden’s freckle-dusted nose. “How can there be a curse on the damn thing, sweetie? It’s not even old enough to have collected a coat of tarnish. Now,” she tapped the folded pamphlet in Braeden’s hand a couple times with one bejeweled finger, “read that to me one more time, Brag. What the brochure says about this mean ol’ gypsy who’s gonna put the whammy on me for takin’ her nickel.”

Slipping on the reading glasses snagged along the neckline at the front of her shirt, Braeden unfolded a brochure procured from the hotel’s concierge. According to the author, hoodoo folk magic blended the beliefs and traditions brought to America by African slaves with the botanical knowledge of Native Americans. It was thought to involve clairvoyance, hexing, conjuring, and the healing of spirit and body using roots, herbs, and other natural elements. The brochure also referred to coins similar to those deposited on Dubois’ grave as hoodoo money: coins left on specific tombs in exchange for favors from the dead.

*Or from the undead.*

Good magic, bad magic, lotions and potions. Braeden shivered, in spite of the sultry Louisiana heat. It sounded more Voodoo than hoodoo. Not that Angeline cared, or would even consider surrendering her prize souvenir on the chance it had been deposited on want and a promise.

Hidden by a uniform row of tombs, he watched and waited, a canvas shopping bag on the ground near his feet. Unaccustomed to contact lenses, he blinked several times, then squinted as he raised his camera.

He smiled. Today his eyes were umber, the color of shadow, how appropriate. Beneath the Orioles baseball cap his thick

sandalwood hair, a new shade and slightly grayed at the temples, added bogus years to his clever disguise.

Through the camera's viewfinder, he studied the somber tableau stretched out before him. A mortician's Valhalla, the rows of tombs seemed endless. Path upon narrow path, they formed a macabre latticework of dead-end streets and snaking avenues, permanent addresses to poets and pirates, paupers and pompous politicians.

He panned his camera left. Many of the burial chambers were large and ostentatious, with friezes sculpted into their deep sides and elaborate statuary embellishing their rooftops. The relentless sun bleached their white marble doors, and half-dead grass breached the stone paths leading up to them.

They reminded him of poorly kept yards and poorly kept lives—of long kept secrets at risk of being unraveled.

He tracked the camera forward, where the crypts appeared as shrunken, windowless replicas of local banks and civic buildings, the Garden District's grand mansions. Others resembled the gallant Bastille, surrounded by garish cast iron grillwork, rust staining their concrete foundations. Still others, low rent efficiencies and walk-ups of handmade brick, crumbled with age, corners jutting out as if to snag the attention of the next passerby.

Panning the camera right, he zoomed in until Simone Dubois' grave and the two women filled the viewfinder. Killing the arrogant journalist, Dalrymple, had been easy, even pleasurable. But he had never killed a woman.

The prospect of doing so left him both excited and nauseous.

Charlie Cooper rested his shoulders against a stark white mausoleum adorned with elaborate Tiffany windows in hopes the relaxed mien might camouflage his mounting frustration. He couldn't keep his eyes, or his mind, off the self-absorbed supermodel. Hell, he was ten yards away and still smelled Angeline's fresh scent.

Yanking a starched handkerchief from his back pocket, he mopped sweat from his brow. His grandfather's words never rang truer in his ears, "Swamp rats the likes of you can look at the pretties all they want, boy, but you sure as hell can't touch 'em."

A slight wind ruffled his short-cropped chestnut hair but did nothing to cool his annoyance at the realization he'd grown hard again. "Damn, Coop," he whispered. "You used to possess a modicum of self control."

He walked a few yards farther down the stone path separating the staggered tombs and mausoleums, concentrating on weeds that fought their way up through cracks only to wither in the unforgiving sun. Angeline's compact camera, suspended from the noose of a strap around his neck, knocked against the buttons of his damp shirt with every step and set a beat to the pounding jackhammer inside his head.

A safe distance away, he dug in his pockets for a couple of aspirin. But all he got was yesterday's sample-sized packet of extra strength Tylenol PM and another of Mylanta antacid lozenges, cherry crème flavor. Terrific. One was guaranteed to remedy pain and sleeplessness, the other to soothe a burning heart.

Apt enough—if his heart was located between his legs.

Cooper ripped open both packets, popped the mix in his mouth. His head throbbed like a son of a bitch now, two jackhammers and a chorus of clinking, clanking cameras.

He fished the box of Marlboro Lights from his shirt pocket, lit up, then tossed the cigarette in disgust after a couple bitter hits. "It's not like you to binge," he said. "On anything."

Removing the dark aviator glasses, he pressed his palms to his feverish eyes and held them there. His head reeled from last night's junket to Decatur Street with a former colleague. The guy had blown into the city for the day, supposedly to interview a promising faculty candidate for one of the universities in south Florida. More likely he was here as a friend, checking up on Cooper.

The interview went belly up and the two of them joined forces around half past six, feasting on an abundance of barbecued ribs at Miss Jean's and ending up at Jimmy Buffet's Margaritaville around eleven. To the delight of every Parrothead in the joint, Cooper included, the man himself put in an appearance, making the occasion worth a few more rounds of salt-rimmed poison.

What had the two of them done between the ribs and the ritas? Cooper smiled. They chased skirts of course.

He had caught one, too. But damned if he could remember her name. Hell, he might've called her Perfection, but the woman still wouldn't have been Angeline St. Cyr, and the itch he'd suffered since setting eyes on the model at the airport a week ago would still need scratching.

This morning he'd hung around long enough to snap a handful of shots of Angeline while she'd posed on Dubois' tomb. For posterity, she said in that voice of hers, the one that could melt a cold pat of butter off stale toast in less time than it took to spit.

"Yeah. Like you have spit to spare this morning, old man. Shit for brains, that's what you got. Shit for brains and an erection harder than a railroad spike." Cooper squinted at the Timex strapped around his wrist. A quarter past. He glanced back at Angeline. "Five minutes more in this cemetery, dream girl," he said, "and we're leaving."

*No ifs, ands, or what fors.*

He considered untucking the drenched shirt from his belted khaki trousers, but thought better of it and silently cursed his dwindling stamina. Once upon a time, not so awfully long ago, all-nighters like the one he and his buddy had pulled were nothing to him.

"Damn you, Angeline St. Cyr." Why'd she have to be so good looking, smell like hunger and hope; why'd she have to be so confounded stubborn?

He had escorted the model and her pint-sized companion around New Orleans for a week, and generous to a fault he'd been with his time and patience, both short commodities in the customary routine of his day. This was by far the dumbest thing she had done: treating the old Saint Louis like it was the prime location for a photo shoot and appointing herself the delegated diva. Smiling and signing autographs, chatting with every Doting Donald who managed to get close enough, which wasn't all that difficult.

Cooper crushed out another cigarette. If some lunatic wanted at her, he'd have had a field day. "Why does she have to be so damn accommodating?" It wasn't like there weren't already enough fans worldwide, enough posters and placards and in-living-color photographs of her plastered to the edge of the known universe.

“Yeah,” he huffed, “*her* bloody universe.”

He dislodged a week-old issue of the *Wall Street Journal* from his back pocket, searched out a spot in front of the adjacent tomb where the pigeons hadn't roosted, and spread the pages across the narrow stoop. Groaning, he eased his abused body between a fixed concrete vase banking the front of the tomb and a chubby cherub that looked a bit too much like a madam he once knew.

“Five minutes more,” he ground out between clenched teeth, “and we're gone.”

He stretched his legs, crossed them at the ankles, then glared in the direction of Dubois' grave where the Queen of Cosmetics still held court. His gaze moved beyond her to reconnoiter the area. He jerked the crumpled box of Lights from his pocket. Hands cupped, he lit another cigarette and drew deep. Not only was this stroll through *tomb town* dumb, it was dangerous.

Braeden joined him at the tomb's edge. “Angeline's amazing, isn't she?” She sat slightly above the chubby cherub and dangling one leg, stirred the air next to his shoulder with a tiny circular motion. “I know how tired I am,” she said. “She's got to be getting that way, too.”

The breeze her rotating half-boot created felt good, but the idolatry in her voice clamored annoyance up Cooper's spine. Tamping it down would take too much effort, so he let it stew. “Why does she do it then? I mean, besides the money.” He offered the Lights to Braeden, tossing them in the empty vase when she declined. “I've been watching her for days now, and she never stops performing, never steps down from that golden pedestal Fournier's created.”

Braeden stooped to wipe dirt from the toe of the boot with a wadded tissue. “Pedestal?” She laughed in earnest. “Angie would be pissed if she heard you say that.”

“I imagine she would be. Royally pissed.” Cooper tossed his cigarette, took the tissue from her hand, spit on it, and ignoring her gasp, rubbed it across the smudge, smiling as he worked. *Queen of cosmetics, royally pissed. Get it?*

Braeden covered his hand with hers, stopping both in mid-swipe. Cooper grunted. She was right. They were only making matters worse with the boot. “How'd you two hook up anyway?”

“It was after my parents died.”

He raised a brow.

“Car accident,” Braeden said. “I was thirteen and moved in with my grandfather. Angeline lived next door. She was pretty and popular, a cheerleader. I was sad and shy, a real mess.”

“She felt sorry for you?”

“Maybe, at first. But friendship is give and take, Charlie. I was sad and shy...and smart. She barely edged out C’s.”

“You were her tutor?”

“Guess you could say we tutored each other.”

“And this is why she calls you Brag?”

Braeden winced. “But not because I bragged about being smart.”

He nodded. “Because you didn’t.”

“That right, just wasn’t me. But the nickname stuck. Whenever my grandfather toured—he’s a concert violinist—I stayed with Angeline’s family. She and I became inseparable. Fifteen years later, and we still are.”

His jaw tightened as he watched the supermodel drape her arm around a teenage boy’s shoulders, then kiss his cheek while another boy snapped their picture. “She seems kind of stuck on herself.”

Braeden smiled. “You’re wrong, Charlie. Angeline shoots as straight as anyone I know. Truth is, she really likes these people.” Her hands did a broad sweep as if encompassing every tourist that remained in the cemetery. “The old ones, young ones, the star-struck ones. She even likes the nerdy ones who trip all over themselves trying to impress her. They’re good to her. She’s good to them. You could call it a trade-off.”

“Her majesty’s way of thanking the little people?” He couldn’t resist the dig, given his ingenious pun and desolate track record with women. Add to that what little he remembered of his own mother and Cooper didn’t feel the least bit charitable toward a woman who made her living off her God-given looks—exquisite though they were.

“Angie wouldn’t say that.” Braeden slipped off her wire-rimmed glasses and wiped the lenses before folding the earpiece over the neck of her white t-shirt.

Cooper had seen her perform the backwards ritual countless times over the past week, wiping her glasses after using them instead of before.

“She works tirelessly for her fans. They buy her posters, calendars, and workout videos. They want to dress like her, walk and talk like her. Hell, Charlie, some of them want to *be* her.” She unfastened the clip from her hair, tucked a loose strand back in, then replaced the clip. “There was this one woman in Minneapolis, she had this extensive redo on her face and breasts so she could enter one of those look alike contests. She won, too. Got a trip to Paris and her picture in the papers, those awful grocery store rags mostly. She even had lunch with Angie at this quaint little bistro. But all that cost her a mint, and a boyfriend. Pretty wiggy, huh?”

Cooper arched his back, shifted positions. “Where do you fit into all of this?”

“I’m merely along for some R and R this trip. Food I shouldn’t eat. Gossip I don’t need to hear, but love anyway. Angie and I try to meet like this once a year. The location usually depends on her work, but I don’t mind. I can write anywhere.” Braeden stood, dusted the seat of her jeans. “Besides, somebody’s got to help carry all that luggage.” She took the soiled tissue from his hand and shoved it in the front pocket of her jeans. “Could I have the keys to your car? Angie’s got a bottle of Evian in her briefcase. If I don’t get the dirt off this boot, she’s going to kill me.” Before Cooper could speak, she answered his question in two words, “Shoe fetish.”

He raised a couple of inches, fished the keys from his pocket, then handed them to her. “Crank her up while you’re there, kid. Turn the AC on. We’ll be right behind you.”

“You sound pretty sure of that.” Laughing, Braeden turned and took several steps toward Basin Street.

Cooper stood and brushed the seat of his trousers with a couple swipes of his now steady hands. If there was anything he was sure of, it was leaving the old St. Louis. “Lock yourself inside,” he called after her. “This isn’t the Garden District, you know.”

He shook his head and laughed at the image his brain projected of the featherweight—all one hundred pounds of her—bowed under a ton of monogrammed Armani. No way could she carry

Angeline St. Cyr's luggage. He should know; his back was still knotted in spasms for the deed.

Before retrieving the box of Lights from the cherub's vase, Cooper took one last glimpse around, searching for the nerdy stranger he'd seen lurking behind a camera. The man was gone.

He shrugged and whispered, "Just another starry-eyed fan hoping to work up enough bluster to ask for an autograph." Sure, it made sense enough.

