

CINDY LYNN
SPEER

Unbalanced

LEIF WARD





UNBALANCED



CINDY LYNN SPEER

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

UNBALANCED

© 2011 by Cindy Lynn Speer

ISBN 978-1-934841-90-7

Cover art © Jeff Ward

Cover Design © April Martinez

All rights reserved. Except for use in review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means now known or hereafter invented, is prohibited without the written permission of the author or publisher.
“Zumaya Embraces” and the dove colophon are trademarks of Zumaya Publications LLC, Austin TX.

Look for us online at

<http://www.zumayapublications.com/embraces.php>

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Speer, Cindy Lynn, 1974-

Unbalanced / Cindy Lynn Speer.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-934841-90-7 (trade paper : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-934841-91-4 (electronic)

1. Spies--Fiction. 2. Werewolves--Fiction. 3. Vampires--Fiction. 4. Magic--Fiction. I. Title.

PS3619.P4425U53 2010

813'.6--dc22

2010019481

DEDICATION

All the races of creatures in this book are, somehow, about family. So, I dedicate this to the family you chose... particularly those who call themselves my ducklings, and especially to the original flock: Erica, Emily, Laura, Josh, Tony, Adam and Jeremy. I look forward to seeing how far you fly.

And to Joel, because I don't know Ivan.



Everything you have ever read, everything you have ever dreamed, exists. Knowing this and keeping this constantly in mind is the only way you'll ever survive the world.

— Grigori Temkov, in a letter to Andromeda

IT'LL BE SNOWING SOON, ANDROMEDA THOUGHT AS SHE PULLED HER black cloak tighter. It was an impractical thing, fastening only at the throat, the wind parting it at will, but she liked it. Her usual winter coat lacked the elegance needed at these sorts of parties.

The noise from that too-loud, too-glittery party faded as she walked up the path, her feet crunching on pale gravel. She sighed with relief at her temporary escape. The people here were not the kind she felt comfortable with. The food was elegant, the music was good, and everyone was nice enough, but she couldn't seem to relax. She kept fighting the feeling that, any minute, she was going to do something awful and embarrassing, exposing her to the world as the classless slob she was.

Then there was Alaister.

She looked up at the night sky and watched the clouds pass across the waning moon. She was mad at herself for coming, for trying to wedge herself into a place where she fit about as well as an egg in a sack of marbles. *I guess I'm just lonely*, she admitted with a bit of asperity, her eyes panning the treetops, noticing how the branches met and interlaced.

She continued along the path, the woods surrounding her. For a few minutes, until the cold chased her back to the party, she was free. She paused and picked up one of the pale water-smoothed pebbles. How expensive, she wondered, would a path of all white river stones be?

A twig snapped, and she jumped. For a second, her fancy made the sound into a gunshot. She clutched the stone to her chest, peering into the woods on either side of the path. Thick brambles and bushes obscured her view. She tilted her head, listening.

Nothing, she decided, considering going back. But she wasn't ready to face the crowd yet, and she remembered there was an old greenhouse farther down the path. Being out alone in the dark didn't bother her—she'd gotten over that fear long ago.

There was a bend in the path, and when she turned along it, the moon removed its mask. The trees were suddenly outlined in light, their shadows so crisp they seemed tangible. The path glowed, trailing like a satin ribbon to the greenhouse that glittered, dark and jewel-like, in the middle of a tiny clearing.

A breeze began to rise, causing leaves to skitter and branches to rub. At times, they sounded like an old creaking bedstead, and sometimes they sounded more pained—deep and sorrowful. She shivered, and realized she was beginning to feel unpleasantly chilled.

She reached out and tested the doorknob. The door opened with barely a whisper, and she was in, leaves somersaulting after her, cloak swirling as she turned and closed it. She wrapped the cloak around her, attempting to make it airtight.

It was slightly warmer out of the wind, and the moon silvered everything, turning even the most mundane things magical. There was frost on some of the panes, and the light picked out gem colors in it, the glass seeming to be held by frames of ice, not metal.

“I could run away. I can fake a headache with the best of them.” Her voice sounded oddly hollow, so she swallowed and ran a finger along the water-stained table that dominated the room. She could cut through the woods, get to the road, walk to town and the nearest gas station, call a cab.

That would be easier than facing Alaister MacDuff again.

It had been one of those oddly idyllic relationships, where everything seemed to snap into place as if guided by magic. Seeing him again while she still cared for him made her feel awkward and foolish. The relationship had turned too serious too quickly; they were both talking about the future like it was inevitable. She'd enjoyed it, enjoyed him.

Unfortunately, she couldn't tell him she was an agent of Balance. Outside of the fact she wasn't allowed to discuss her job in the first place, how did a girl tell a perfectly sweet, normal man she made her living keeping the peace between werewolves and vampires? That she belonged to one of those secret government agencies people loved to make up conspiracy theories about? She had too many secrets, and he was perceptive, and asked too many questions.

There was a gust of wind as someone opened the door. She turned and saw him.

"Hello, Alaister." Part of her panicked. Of course he would follow her. That's the way her life worked.

He smiled at her slightly, saying nothing. He looked at the long tables with their high sides and mesh bottoms, empty save for an occasional dried leaf or twig.

"A magical place," he said softly, his deep voice resonating. He was taller than she was, strongly built. He looked wonderful in his black suit; and the attraction she felt for him, normally a niggling, smothered bit of annoyance in the back of her head, came forward with full force.

"What makes you say that?"

He surveyed the tables, the hutch with its stack of broken pottery. He had the look of a man whose bluff had been called.

"There's still a lingering smell of growing things, plentiful work space, a mysterious location. I think it easily could have been an alchemist's laboratory."

She was playing with a split on the edge of one of the tables, running her fingernail up and down the crack.

"I thought alchemists usually work in basements."

He came closer. "Maybe this one wanted to be different."

"You never know."

He was almost touching her now, his warmth like a bonfire. Her fingernail scraped up some splinters, one of which went deep into her finger. She winced.

"You know, this whole avoiding-you thing and not-wanting-to-discuss-things thing works ever so much better without you here."

"Well, that explains why I've not been doing a good job of getting to talk to you so far tonight," he said, taking her hand. He must have noticed she'd hurt herself picking at the table, because he peered closely at

it. She could see the bit of wood clearly, dark against the pale of her skin, but knew he wouldn't.

"See, that means the plan was working." She extricated herself gently, squeezing at the injury with a forefinger and thumb.

He leaned his forearms on the table.

"You would have done better sticking with the crowds."

"Maybe I thought you could take the hint." She gave him a half-smile. "Stalker boy."

"Sadly enough, mind reading has never been one of my talents." He paused at her soft *brumph* to add, "No, really, it *is* sad, because it would completely improve my stalking abilities. But I just have to rely on being lucky."

She wiped her hands on her skirt.

"So, what did you want to talk to me about?"

He straightened so he could turn and lean against the table next to her.

"You'll think it's lame, considering the effort I went to, but I just wanted to see how you were doing."

She tried to find something to say.

"Alaister..."

She let it trail off, and they stood together in an awkward silence neither one of them could seem to fill. He gave her another smile then stepped away, as if getting ready to go.

Andromeda was the first to hear the scream.

"Where did that come from?"

"The house."

She pulled the door open, and they went out into the cold again, running up the path. Sometimes, only the paleness of the stones led them when the moon hid behind fast-moving clouds. She couldn't hear music, even when they got closer to the house. A blanket of absolute silence settled around them, as if the world were holding its breath.

They slowed, picking their way carefully. As they rounded the bend, the white gravel disappeared, and she thought for a second the path had ended.

No, she realized, something was lying across it. She bent, eyes straining, as she tried to make sense of the shape.

Then the cloud passed, and Andromeda saw a face, eyes dark and vacant, the shadows of the branches crisscrossing the woman's pale skin,

giving it the look of crazed china. That and a hand, palm up and out of place, were the only recognizable pieces.

Something cold touched her face. It was like a clammy hand closed over her nose and mouth, and she couldn't breathe until it slid over her cheek and off. She jumped and tried to pull away. She looked around, shivering, knowing that, shrouded by the woods and uncertain light, something was watching her.

Alaister muttered under shaking breath and grasped Andromeda's elbow. As one they stepped back.

"What could do a thing like that?" he whispered.

The body had been ripped apart, scattered. She shuddered, feeling ill, but the spell was broken; and she turned her thoughts back to the tragedy at hand.

"This just isn't one of those things you get used to, is it?"

"No," he answered. "I don't see how you could. Let's get to the house, and see if anyone's called the police."

They backed down the path, neither one quite able to stop looking at the corpse, as if it might come to life. They found a gap through the trees and weeds and got off the path.

"I think we can agree she's not the one who screamed." Andromeda said, since the killer had obviously spent some time with his victim.

"Then there'll be others coming soon."

She tripped, cursing the heels on her shoes, but the ground was too cold for her to just take them off.

"Take my arm," Alaister offered. "I don't bite."

"Thanks," she whispered. He was nice and warm, and she could feel comfort flowing from him.

She heard sirens in the distance. Good. Hopefully, the police would detain everyone to ask questions, which would make her job easier.

"That...whatever did that wasn't human," she whispered. "Do you think it was a wild animal?"

"I don't know. There are...things..." He paused. "I just wouldn't wander the woods alone again."

In the silence that followed, she worried the murder over and over in her mind. She had a tricky situation on her hands. Such savagery could easily be blamed on a werewolf. If that were true, she had to discover who was responsible before the vampires got wind of what was

going on. Anything could be used as an excuse to declare war—or at least make things messy.

Vampires and werewolves were, like anyone else, more good than bad. That didn't mean they didn't hate each other enough to use any legal means to decimate the others' populations. Politics and racial hatred, her least favorite combination.

Hearing her sigh, Alaister said, "We're almost there."

Soon, they crossed back into the lighted areas of the front yard and porch. People were milling around, trying to get answers. A slender young man whose shaved head shone in the amber porch light smiled and started towards them, and Alaister steered her around a group of people and away from him.

"Did you see anything?" another asked, but Alaister didn't answer, just gently pushed through and opened the door for her.

"I guess it's time to part ways," he said, smiling. He was hard to resist when he smiled like that, she thought just before it turned rueful. "I know all your likely answers to the questions I want to ask, so I'll save us some time and say goodnight." He came closer to kiss her forehead, and she closed her eyes. He whispered fiercely, "You take care of yourself, okay?"

When she opened them again, he was leaving, and she watched him thread his way through the crowd. It hurt, watching him walk away, and she wanted to say something nice or clever, but it was too late. To be realistic, it'd been too late on their first date.

She balled up the longing and pain and thoughts of how unfair things could be and put them into a box, looking for Vera, the friend who'd brought her here. She saw her at the back of the room, brassy red hair tumbled in Marie Antoinette curls down bare shoulders, her primrose-yellow dress standing out from the crowd of winter colors. Beside her, a balding man in ruffled clothes gestured with a conductor's grace, discussing something with charming cajolery.

Vera shook her head. "I'm not very photogenic—really, I'm not."

"Nonsense. You have the perfect skin for it. Any tiny imperfections, which I doubt you have, can be easily fixed."

"Hello, Vera." Andromeda reached over and adjusted the slim collar that was Vera's simple necklace. It was narrow gold protecting the vulnerable arteries and veins of her throat, molded copper roses dangling

from a fine chain that looped along the lower edge. The roses sometimes got tangled. It told a great deal about the wearer, if one knew how to interpret it.

“There you are! I’ve been worried sick.” She turned back to her companion. “You see, I’m the reason she came, and if a friend died because I brought her along to a party, it would really have sucked.”

She giggled at that, and Andromeda barely kept herself from rolling her eyes. Vera was very young, and for some strange reason, young vampires thought that using the word *suck* as a pun at every opportunity was the funniest thing in the world.

“About the pictures...” the man began.

“I’ll ask my husband,” Vera said.

He looked at her, taken aback. Smiled.

“You do that.” Then he seemed to see someone in the crowd. “You must excuse me. I need to talk to him.” He quickly left their side.

“He was nice,” Vera said. “I always like to flirt with men plainer than Dannin, just in case he’s spying on me.”

“Why flirt at all?”

She tilted her head. “I think it’s latent instinct. Vampires always want to have their possible victims in love with them. It makes the hunt more intense. Oh, don’t look at me like that, Miss Police Woman, you know I don’t feed on you poor humans. It doesn’t mean I don’t like to have fun.”

“I’m just jealous because I’m not good at flirting.”

“No, you’re just grumpy. Talk to Alaister? Did you find out he’s now happily married with five kids?”

“Hardly. It’s only been a year. Tops.”

“So? Maybe he adopted them.”

“It’s not about Alaister. Well, maybe a little, but it’s mostly what happened to that poor woman.”

Vera’s hand was on her shoulder, and it felt like cool porcelain.

“Please tell me it was a mundane crime. A jealous dispute between lovers.”

“No, it wasn’t. Not unless he brought a chainsaw in his pocket.”

Vera’s eyes flicked towards a point over Andromeda’s shoulder. Andromeda turned. A policeman, tall, gawky, and too young-looking for his job, approached them.

"I'm Lieutenant Petroski. Are you Andromeda Pendragon?" She nodded. "We'd like a word with you. This way, please?"

"I'll take your cloak, honey." Vera said, and Andromeda relinquished it with a grateful smile.

He lead her to the library. A young woman sat in one of the stiff black-leather chairs, a laptop on the glossy table in front of her. At the same table, facing the doorway, a plainclothes policeman sat. He stood and smiled when Andromeda entered. There was something easy about him. In other circumstances, talking to him would be pleasant.

"Detective Manuel Swinbourne," he said, holding out his hand. She shook it. "We're just asking a few questions, trying to get a feel for the situation. Please, sit down."

They sat across from each other, like opponents over a chessboard. For her, it *was* a type of game—this is what I can tell you, this is what I can't. She was a master at fishing for information without revealing suspicious interest.

"I'm told you left the party an hour ago? By yourself?" She nodded. "Why?"

His dark eyes were serious, genuinely interested. Trust me, they said. Because of his attitude, she felt even more ill-at-ease. He's good, she thought, sharp. She would have to be as honest as possible, while adding the kind of reaction that would let him think his approach was opening her up.

"The crowd was getting to be too much for me. You know how noisy these things get. So, I went for a quick walk to clear my head." Starting out honest. That was good.

"And Alaister MacDuff followed you?"

"I wouldn't say followed." It wouldn't do to make him sound like a stalker. "But he ended up down there. We talked."

"This didn't worry you?"

She shrugged, crossed her legs. "I know him. So, no, I wasn't worried." She grinned. "I can take care of myself."

"Maybe." He looked at the yellow legal pad before him. "This says you have a PI license. Did a client or a case bring you here?"

"No. A friend brought me. Her husband hates parties, and she wanted company."

"Why you?"

“Why not? In my line of work, I don’t meet a lot of eligible bachelors. The main quality for eligibility being an eighty-five-percent chance I’ll get home in one piece and still breathing.”

“So, you came all this way to find a man?”

She looked him straight in the eye.

“Is that so strange?” She let a little righteous indignation seep in. Really, the man was tactless.

He asked her more questions and cross questions, trying to catch her up. This was nothing new to her, but it was annoying. It meant she couldn’t risk sliding in her own questions, since he—despite all sense—seemed to want her to be his pet suspect.

His suspicions didn’t worry her. Sometimes, Balance employees got tossed into jail, since they certainly couldn’t tell the whole truth, but Balance always managed to get them out quickly. She’d even made some interesting friends in Arizona because a policeman had decided a night in the tank would soften her up.

“If you think of anything I might find useful, please, call me. Here’s my card.”

She smiled and took it, inspecting it carefully. It was plain, white, with the usual information on it. It didn’t have any symbols or abbreviations that would hint he knew of things outside the mundane world.

The mundane world. The place where most people grew up, thinking that vampires were only found in horror movies, that myths were only stories that tried to explain how things came to be. So they were, but half the world lacked the key information to interpret those explanations properly.

Back in the living room, she began her job in earnest, observing what the guests were doing—even crowd patterns could be telling. People were mostly gathered at the long buffet tables on either side of the room, or clustered around the couches and chairs. Seeking comfort. She looked for a sort of midpoint place to sit, where she could safely eavesdrop on most of the conversation groups.

The room was pretty—ivory walls and bright crystal chandeliers, the decor done in hunter green, burgundy and gold. Very *Architectural Digest*, with its huge flowered rug and neo-Victorian furniture. She helped herself to something pink and fizzy, the raspberry smell removing any illusions of champagne, and a variety of quarter-sized sand-

wiches and cheese cubes, then situated herself on a striped-cushioned dining room chair.

Alaister was across the room, talking to a woman of cool, discriminate beauty. He smiled at Andromeda, and she pretended to be intently studying the filling of her small triangle of sandwich. When she'd entered the room hours earlier, she had been both deeply mortified and ridiculously pleased to see him. Now, she wiggled tired feet and wished she could take her shoes off and rub her cramped toes.

"Have you seen Evan?" The voice was high, fluty, female and somewhere to the left of her.

"Did he even come? I've heard things aren't all that peaceful in love-land these days." A chuckle, insinuations.

Another voice, behind her, taut as a drum. Margo Perkins, the hostess. "Hello, Charlotte. Having a good time? I'm looking for Olivia."

"I haven't seen her. I'm terribly worried, but the police haven't said anything about the victim. I hope it's not her."

Andromeda winced.

"Oh, you two! Evan was here, but he left." a matronly person informed the conversationalists to her left. "His aunt's ill, and he went to see if he could help."

"That's what that little cat Mary said, but I wouldn't trust her with anything as far as Evan's concerned."

Laughter and insinuations again followed, but Andromeda turned her attention away. Insinuations were not facts. They could be important—she knew that—because rumors sometimes had some factual base they could be traced back to, but she was too tired to bother.

No, not tired. Regretful, perhaps. It seemed somehow especially vile to listen to gossip when a girl was lying slaughtered out in the cold. Anyway, gossip could always be found again.

Margo was called into the library, and when she returned a few minutes later, she was even paler. Someone rushed over to her, and they spoke as she passed through the room on her way upstairs. Word was passed along—Olivia Calloway's death was confirmed and the rumor mill ran even more viciously.

"Why would anyone be so stupid as to walk in those woods alone? All of those wild animals."

"My dear, most of those wild animals are hibernating."

“Are they?”

“I wonder what the library will do without Olivia?” another voice, in another conversation asked. “She was their best reference person.”

Andromeda switched away again, riffling through snippets of conversation.

“I’m Amber. A friend of Mary’s...”

“My father told me of this bear attack once...”

“She always thought she was smarter than everyone else. Wouldn’t give you the time of day unless you wanted to know what time it was in China.”

“Her parents were rich enough she didn’t even have to work, but she wanted to go out, make her own mark on the world. It’s rather sad.”

“Oh, Lord, this is awful.”

The first real voice of grief, and Andromeda turned her head to see the woman it belonged to. She wept freely, mascara making ugly streaks on her out-of-season tan.

“She told me only a little bit ago that she was finally going to get something she had wanted for a long time.”

“What was that?” The woman she was talking with had smoky-blue hair, and the color almost distracted Andromeda from the reply.

“I have no idea. She made me guess, and I kept trying, but I never got it.” She blew her nose then said wistfully, “Now I wonder if it was a *someone*, not a thing. Someone she’d wanted very badly for a long time. I never even attempted to guess it might be *him*. She was so lonely, you know. She used to joke that the library field wasn’t the ideal place to meet men.”

They continued, but Andromeda was distracted by an angry voice. It belonged to a woman in her mid-fifties, and beside her a much younger man sat, trying to placate her. Their actual words were hard to make out, so she stood and wandered back to the buffet, looking for something salvageable in the carnage. They stopped talking and watched her as she picked up a cracker and spread brie on it. It tasted fishy and bitter, and Andromeda added it to her list of life’s little disappointments.

The woman dismissed her as unimportant and continued.

“I told her he was no good. He probably lured her out there, then stabbed her to death with one of his scalpels.”

“Aunt Gladys, please. They rarely saw each other. There’s no reason to think Evan had anything to do with it.” He all but whispered the name, as if afraid to speak it aloud.

“Then where is he?”

Andromeda thought that was a very valid question.



“SO, THEY USED TO DATE?” ALAISTER ASKED.

Lucy, who looked every inch the Nordic princess, nodded. He’d probably spent more time talking to her than he should have, but the look Andromeda had flashed him a couple minutes ago was priceless. Yes, he was an evil person.

“But that was just in high school. People are blowing this out of proportion because Evan split the party early.” She sighed. “They parted amicably, and high school was ages ago.” She blushed. “For them. I’m a bit younger.”

Margo reappeared. She looked as if all the color in her face had re-deposited itself around her eyes and on her nose. She spotted Alaister and came over to him.

“It was a lovely party. I’m so sorry it was spoiled.” Lucy held out her hand.

Margo didn’t seem to see it. “I’m even more sorry someone died. May I speak with you privately, Alaister?”

“Sure.” he said, following her to her study. He saw another door, and asked, “Does that lead to the library?” At her nod, he asked, “Have they spoken to you yet?”

“Yes. He’s a very nice man. I have a lot of confidence in him.” She was worrying a handkerchief into threads and knots as she paced. “This is awful. I thought it was only a ghost or something making those noises, that you’d be able to research it, then we’d figure out what to do. Now, it’s too late. You should have come sooner.”

Alaister felt guilty, even though he’d responded only a few hours after she’d called.

“I could hardly start a spiritual investigation during a party.”

Her shoulders fell. “I suppose you’re right. It’s just, well...Olivia.”

“I know. I feel terrible, too. Were you close friends?”

“Not really. We ran in the same circles, saw each other at parties like this. I mostly invited her tonight because I didn’t want to hurt her by having a party and not including her.”

“So, you knew her well enough to care about her feelings?”

Margo faced the window; the reflection didn’t give away her expression. He walked around the desk, trying to get her to look at him, or at least to see her profile. Her hair, tinsel-blonde and fine, blocked his view.

“She is—was—a nice woman, and although we never became close, I enjoyed talking to her.”

“Did she know Evan Forest?” He had heard some strange things from Lucy, and from the other guests.

“I think so, but I never saw them together.” She turned, and he could see her eyes were raw. “Do you really think it’s odd that I’m upset? Olivia was a good person! She didn’t deserve to die. Do you think I have no normal emotions because I’m rich?” She swiped at her tears, but the handkerchief was useless, so she threw it away.

Alaister reached for a tissue.

“Of course you do.” He patted her shoulder awkwardly and moved away. Something about what she’d said didn’t play right in his head, but he set it aside. Why would she bring that up at all?

He leaned against the connecting door to the library, trying to make out the muffled conversation. If he were a vampire, he’d be able to hear them perfectly, but he wasn’t. His blood chilled at how close Andromeda had come to being attacked by the rogue werewolf that had killed poor Olivia. He wanted to call his cousin Connor and get someone over to hunt the thing, but he knew he would have to wait for the opportunity.

When he’d arrived here an hour before the party, Margo had shown him the house. A bibliophile of long standing, he had immediately stepped into the library. He hadn’t been impressed—the books were all matched sets of dyed leather and gold embossing. They were beautiful, but cold. No one had chosen them for their contents but rather bought them, he figured, by the yard.

Here, in Margo’s study, he found books that had been chosen for pleasure. The shelves took up the entire wall, and were stuffed. His practiced eye could almost guess which ones were bought new and which

had passed through other hands. He looked at romances and mysteries, classics and dictionaries. A book of memorable quotations still had a library label on it, the Dewey number too blacked out to read. The *Lais of Marie De France* was beside it. He had almost confessed to Margo that he owned most of the same folklore books.

Other than the shelves, there was nothing in the office to look at. Scattered CDs, filing cabinets, and a nice framed copy of a vaguely familiar lighthouse scene filled the rest of the space. This left him with very little to think about while Margo pulled herself back together, so he thought again of Andromeda.

He'd been kind of (understatement) upset when she'd unceremoniously broken off their relationship but had forced himself to accept the good side of it. He hadn't been looking forward to the conversation that would have started "Hey, I never told you about my parents. My mother was a mage, and my father used to kill vampires and werewolves for a living. Not all of them, mind you, just the bad ones. It's sort of a family business...yeah, that means I do it, too..."

Yep. Right. That's the way to a woman's heart. But, now that she was back, sort of...

"Alaister? How do you know a ghost didn't do it?"

He went back over to her, considering, not willing to reject her notion out-of-hand even though he thought he knew what probably happened.

"In my experience, I've never seen a ghost that could take solid form. A ghost has to kill someone using one of three ways. They can throw things, like a poltergeist does. They can commit murder by convincing someone to do it, either by possessing them or by taking on the form of a loved one. Mostly, they use the old-fashioned method of scaring the victim to death, which takes much longer than you might think. There's no evidence any of those things happened. Her body was savaged."

She blinked a couple of times.

"Then, what? One of my guests?"

"I don't know, but I'd like to find out." *And, hopefully, keep you and your little sister from finding out what really happened...especially first-hand.*

She looked at him, as if deciding what to say.

"I don't really think I need you anymore." She was apologetic. "The police are here now, and if it's a rabid dog or something, they'll track it

down. They'll take care of things. There's no sense in you getting involved."

"Are you sure? Miss Perkins, a horrible murder was committed a short distance from your back door. Don't you think you might need protection?"

"From what? A pack of rabid dogs? A bear?"

"Bears? This time of year?"

"And if I'm wrong, I don't want to be responsible for you. You're a scholar, not a warrior."

"Thanks." He could hear the tightness in his voice, and saw her roll her eyes. She thought he was put out because of some insult to his masculinity. What he was really thinking was that the woman was going to get herself—and probably some innocent cops—killed.

He smiled.

"Well, if you change your mind..."

It was time to gracefully depart. He had no intention of just letting things lie, but she didn't need to know that.

She reached into the desk and brought out a checkbook. She signed the already made out check and handed it to him.

"Two hundred dollars, just for coming, like we agreed."

He felt uncomfortable. "But I didn't do anything."

The two hundred dollars was supposed to cover the use of the equipment, him going over her house and property thoroughly before deciding what was going on. All he'd done was take a brief tour and eat her food. Two hundred dollars, because he figured that was just high enough to make sure the person was serious before he came out.

"Please. You came all the way out here to help me. I made a promise, let me keep it." She tried to smile. "You helped me figure out it wasn't a ghost making all that noise by the garage. Technically, you've done your job."

He took it, folded it in half and put it in his wallet, promising himself he'd do something to earn it.

"I'll leave as soon as the police permit."

"The morning's plenty of time. Your room is already made up."

He smiled and backed out of the room, shutting the door firmly behind him. Daria was waiting for him. She practically pounced on him.

“Did she say anything interesting?”

He tried very, very hard to like her—they were related by marriage, a cousin-in-law or something—but there was something off about her that prevented him from really feeling comfortable.

“Not really. Why do you ask?”

Daria smiled sweetly, but Alaister didn’t yet know what to make of it; it all depended on her mood. Usually, he didn’t find it a challenge to put up with her, but tonight all her worst traits—she was uncomfortably gossipy, pushy and arrogant—seemed to be magnified.

“It’s all Knight’s business,” she said. “A girl was murdered, obviously by a werewolf, and we need to clean things up. Anything you know is essential to finding out who did this.”

“Of course,” he said dryly. Never mind he’d been a Knight longer than she had. “Let Connor know what you find out, and I’ll call him up tomorrow with what I know.”

He turned to look for Andromeda, saw she was heading for the kitchen. He decided to catch up with her later, not wanting to lead Daria to her. He really didn’t want to face the inquisition Daria would start up just to make sure he wasn’t fraternizing with the enemy.



Mary Perkins looked up from her lap when Andromeda entered the kitchen. She seemed relieved, yet there was still an edge of fear in her eyes.

“You wanted to see me?”

“Yes.” Andromeda said. “Thanks for agreeing to talk to me. I wanted to ask a couple of questions. Is that okay?”

Mary nodded. “Vera told me you were some sort of private eye. Are you helping the police?”

“No. I’m basically just trying to figure out what happened. The police are thinking that, since I was away from the party, I might have something to do with what happened. The more information I have, the easier it will be to clear my name.” Andromeda saw a ladder-back chair in the corner and grabbed it so she could sit next to the girl. “You found the body? I was wondering, since you live here, if you’ve seen anything strange going on.”

Mary shivered. She had blond hair and innocent blue eyes. She looked barely out of high school.

“I saw Olivia, and I got a really good look,” Mary said, shivering. “A person couldn’t do that. How would they clean up and hide everything so no one would know?”

“There’s a man missing from the party.”

“No!” Mary’s voice trembled with anger. “Absolutely not! Even if Evan didn’t have a perfectly valid excuse, he couldn’t have hurt Olivia. He’s a doctor.”

Andromeda nodded. “I’m sure you’re right.” Although she wasn’t sure of any such thing. “Have you heard any strange noises? Seen anyone prowling around?”

Mary stood and began pacing with barely contained energy.

“Last week, I was wandering around the house late one night. That was weird in itself, because I always sleep like a log and rarely get up.” She pointed at the door at the far end of the kitchen. “I found myself standing in the conservatory, looking out between the plants.”

“Did you turn on any lights?”

“No. I have good night vision, and I’ve been in this house all my life. I know all of the twists and turns. I looked out the window. There’s a good view of the woods.” Her words slowed down, and she spoke uncertainly. “I saw something come from the woods on all fours. It looked like a wolf, but larger, more muscular.”

“Are you sure it was wolf-like? Some people just assume...it could be a large dog.”

“I really didn’t see much of it,” she said in tones of confession. “The second I saw it, I hit the floor. For some reason, I was scared it would see me.”

Andromeda nodded as if to say she approved.

“Why didn’t you tell anyone else?”

“Because at the time, it was just a silly thing. Margo would tell me I’d seen a stray dog and turned it into the boogey monster. But now... who knows?”

Andromeda turned this over for a moment, then said, “All you can do for now is avoid the woods. Never go in them alone, and make sure you keep your doors locked.”

“You’re really looking into this?”

“Definitely.”

Mary brightened, as if something impossibly heavy had been lifted from her.

“Oh, good. Thank you. I feel so much better now.”



Magic burns inside you now, and it always will. It's in your blood, but you can't help that, and you'll have to control it. It's a balancing act, Alaster, between light and dark, Heaven and Hell...

— Hilda Seagrave to her nephew

ALASTER TOOK HIS LEAVE QUIETLY, DESPITE THE INVITATION, DRIVING home through the inky, silent night. The ride calmed him to the point where he was half-asleep at the wheel, but he managed to get home safely, trudge upstairs and flop into bed. His dreams were not pleasant, but rather cold black-and-white with impossibly vivid splashes of crimson.

In the morning, he woke, bleary-eyed and still half-dressed, to an overcast Sunday. He stared, muddle-headed and uneasy, at the ceiling, wondering if he was actually still alive.

The churches hadn't let out yet, and he contemplated opening the store at noon. He forced himself out of bed, changed and went to the kitchen. On his way past, he ran his hands over the bindings of his books and realized he was happy to be home. He pulled a few, on werewolves and magic, to take down and read later.

Alaster lived and made his living in an old-fashioned brick storefront situated on the main street of a two-stoplight town. A pair of bay windows flanked the dark-green door; a simple sign in the left window read "Hilda's Tea and Herb Shop" in gold calligraphy. Hilda was his aunt, who had owned the shop and the apartment above it; and even though she had passed away well over a year before, he'd never bothered changing the sign.

Most of his business was online now, but he liked keeping the store open—it helped him stay motivated.

He dug into a dark wood cupboard for a box of Cream of Wheat. Today, he would do some research and think about what steps he could take next. He glanced at the list of things to do he kept posted on his refrigerator. Most of the items were internet orders for herbal tinctures and teas he had to pack and ship.

He ate, then carried the selected books downstairs and set them on the long green-marble counter. He looked around to make sure the store was in order then pushed up the shutters, flipped over the sign and unlocked the door. Patchy daylight drifted in sluggishly as he settled behind his counter. He sat on the tall stool for a long moment, breathing in the scent of green drying things, of herbs that mixed and blurred together with the dust of paper and old leather.

His first customer was his cousin Connor, Captain of the Knights of the Sun. He was about the same height as Alaister, blond instead of brunette, blue-eyed instead of green. Both once boasted the same plain, squarish nose, but Connor had since had his broken twice.

“Did you get to talk to Daria yet?” Alaister asked.

“Yeah. The creature sounds interesting, in a sick and twisted kind of way.” He rolled his eyes, displaying the other shared family trait—sarcasm.

“Sick and twisted is right. Do you think it’s a werewolf?”

“What else?” Connor leaned on the counter, shaking his head. “I really hate the rules that force the Knights to wait until something happens before we can strike out against their kind.”

Alaister pulled a chair over for him, but he declined.

“There’s some wisdom in those same rules, though. Not all of them want to hurt humans.”

Connor snorted. “They’re all evil.”

This was the typical stance for a Knight of the Sun. They were a medieval order dedicated to protecting humans against werewolves, vampires and sorcery. The part about his magic was particularly uncomfortable for Alaister. His father had been a Knight, his mother a mage and the daughter of a powerful warlock. He lived his life in both worlds, was a credible mage and a decent warrior. He also was constantly trying to make sure the left side of his genealogy didn’t know what the right side was doing.

“Well,” Connor said, “we’ll be going on patrol tonight. Do you have any more of that goo?”

“Yeah. I’ll go get it.”

The “goo” was a mixture he’d gotten out of a magic book, more chemistry than sorcery, that he made for the Knights to put on their weapons. It prevented cuts dealt to werewolves and vampires and other creatures allergic to silver or iron from sealing. The smallest injury could then turn deadly.

He went to the storage room in the back where he kept unmixed herbs in dark jars and cool cupboards. The carved rosewood cross his aunt had given him hung from two hooks, as if sealing the blue cupboard doors. *We are gifted, you and I*, she had said, holding the carved wood up to him. *We must not forget where these gifts come from. We must not abuse our powers.*

He picked up two heavy canning jars filled with smoke-colored grease. Silver was in it, along with black cohosh, beeswax, wolfbane, rust, valerian and rue.

“We really appreciate this.” Connor said.

“I’m glad to help.” He meant it. It gave him a way to support his family without having to go out and patrol. He wasn’t afraid of patrolling—in fact, he enjoyed wandering around at night. He just didn’t want to get into a situation where he’d have to fight fellow mages. That, and he didn’t see the world as black-and-white, night-and-day like the Knights did.

Connor left before the next customer came in. She was a bookish-looking young thing with brown hair and glasses. She approached the counter shyly, her smile awkward and innocent.

“Can I help you?”

“I hear you sell a tea that’s really good against headaches.”

He nodded then went to the shelves, looking for the sage-colored boxes.

“Lots of pretty colors.” she said, commenting on the boxes that lined the shelves.

“It helps me keep track of what’s what.” He handed her the box and smiled apologetically. “It’s five dollars for twenty-four teabags. One of the ingredients is expensive.”

“That’s not bad.”

She sniffed the box, but he knew she couldn't detect anything but paper. He always put the tea in a heavily waxed paper bag to keep it fresh.

"Do you have an incense burner?" he asked. "I have some lavender my customers really like for headaches."

She looked at the glass jars with their neat, laser-printed labels. He followed her gaze, taking a certain amount of pride in the fact that everything looked clean and professional. She picked up one jar lid and sniffed, then another. He gave her some space, walking away to do a mental inventory.

There was a rustle of paper. She was standing by him, lavender incense in a long, slender paper bag. She stopped to pick up one of the cheap stick-incense burners. He also kept in stock a few fancier ones, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and bright paua shell or carved, but mostly he sold the plain dollar ones. Sometimes, people came back and bought the nicer ones after they became addicted to incense, but not often. People generally just made do, and he could totally understand that.

He smiled at her and wrote her order up on a pad. She was studying him now, her eyes seeming to bore into him.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, then scribbled in a margin, trying to get a little more life out of the pen.

She acted as if he'd startled her.

"No." She smiled, but it was quick and slippery, like a flash of sun on fish scales. "You look tired."

"Nothing some sleep won't cure. Are you sure there isn't anything else I can interest you in?"

She looked at him again, her head tilted so she was studying him out of the corner of her eye.

"Nope." She scooped up her change and the brown paper bag with the name of his store stamped on it and left.

He stood without moving for a long moment. Something about that young woman didn't feel right. He shrugged. He had a stack of things to do, and if today went well, he'd be interrupted constantly.

He picked up a book and got started.



Andromeda wasted a good half-hour of what should have been a pleasant drive fuming over Alaister.

“I can’t believe you’re still hung up on that stupid man,” she muttered as she fiddled with the radio. Even her overnight stay at Vera’s hadn’t calmed her down.

No, he wasn’t stupid. That was the problem, or at least something that made the solution harder. The few short weeks they’d spent together had convinced her he was the closest thing to perfect there was.

Oh, he had flaws, plenty of them. But they were flaws she could live with. If he’d had some nasty ones, she could hold them up to herself, go “See? Better off without him,” and walk away, her conscience clear, her emotions appeased.

Then things had followed her home. Nasty things. She didn’t want to bring that home to him, but it didn’t make her miss him any less.

“Great.” She glanced around then merged into traffic. “Lovely. I’ve got a murder to solve, and a knight errant running around with a bruised chivalry bone. This is going to be a wonderful next couple of weeks.”

She could hear the phone ring in her purse. She looked around again then pulled off onto the berm, wincing as something crackled under her tire.

“Andromeda Pendragon, at your service.”

“We got your report. What do you need?” The voice was slightly nasal, but edged, business-like. Andromeda wasn’t sure of the sex, but was leaning toward female.

“How about a password?”

The voice—a woman, definitely—recited a series of numbers. Andromeda closed her eyes and envisioned the lines of numbers she had forced herself to memorize. The woman was saying them backwards, which was correct.

“I appreciate that,” Andromeda said. “Could someone please send me the coroner’s report on last night’s murder? Also, if we have someone who can snag the case file for us, I’d be grateful—the detective in charge had someone typing up the interviews as they went.

“I’d especially like to see what the coroner makes of the wounds. I also need any reports anyone might have filed on unrest between vam-

pires and werewolves, as well as mundane reports on animal attacks in this area.”

“Alright. We’ll email them as soon as possible. It’s Sunday, though, and the coroner might not even look at the body today.”

“Understood,” Andromeda said. “Thank you for the help.”

“It’s okay.” The voice finally warmed up. “I hope you’ll get to salvage some of your day.”

Not very likely, she thought, going into her phone’s email. She sent a quick one to her new boss. She’d known Mark Anderson for years. He and Tom Marsden had both been fellow agents and friends to Grigori—Balance had adopted her from the orphanage, but Grigori Timkov had raised her. They had risen in the ranks, and now she was working for them.

She threw the phone back on the seat and pulled onto the road. She wished desperately she could ask Grigori what he made of all of this, but he’d died a few years back; and as far as she knew, his ghost had moved on.



Andromeda’s new apartment was the smallest in a refurbished Victorian house. She liked the place because it was on a quiet street, in one of the better sections of town. There were only four other tenants, the landlady was very nice, and all the electricity and pipes and paint were close to new. The last place she’d lived in had smelled of gas all the time, giving her a slight headache as well as feeding fantasies of lighting a candle some day and sending herself to kingdom come. After that, she made it her business to find a place with electric appliances.

She glanced at the mailboxes in the entry but saw nothing in hers, so she went on up. The metal door opened quietly.

“Zelda? I’m home.”

She closed and locked the door then kicked off her shoes. Her apartment was one big room with a kitchenette to her left, separated from the rest of the room by a long breakfast bar. The bathroom was across the room on the right.

Rugs overlapped each other, pillows were heaped almost as high as the futon that served as couch and bed. There were short bookcases, soon to be crammed with books and trinkets; the electronics were piled,

wires trailing, on a cheap entertainment stand. Everything else would soon, hopefully, be either hung up in the closets or stashed in various plastic storage containers.

Right now, everything was scattered around in pretending-to-be-organized piles and cardboard boxes. The boxes were fun, in a way, advertising whiskey and liquor she'd never gotten around to drinking herself. They made her feel slightly hedonistic. She'd never had friends who could help her move, so she bought furniture she could take apart in minutes and haul down to the car by herself.

She checked the plants to see if they needed water then put fresh water in Zelda's bowl.

"Get your over-pampered Siamese butt out here." she said in a light, friendly voice as she opened a can of food. It was Sunday, and in lieu of Sunday dinner, she fed Zelda a better caliber of food.

She could see bright-blue eyes peeking out from under the crocheted lace that decorated the water-damaged square table she used for everything from eating to crafting.

"Come on, puss."

Zelda crept forward then backed deeper under the cloth. Andromeda knelt before it, reaching under. She yanked her hand back when her cat hissed at her. Generally, Zelda was incredibly good-natured.

"This isn't the first time I've left you alone overnight. What's wrong?" She crawled away from the table, craning her neck to look at the cat. "Are you hurt?"

Finally, she stood up. *Maybe she doesn't like the way I smell*, she thought on her way to the shower. She couldn't wait to get out of her evening dress and cloak and into something warmer and more comfortable.

She rinsed the mud out of the hems and hung them up to dry. The life of a Balance Agent was all glamour.



Alaister walked his last customer for the day to the door. Her name was Alix, and she had two constants in her life—her kids laughing and fighting and running around her like a madly orchestrated circus, and the fact she always came in at the last minute, just when he was about to

close. He didn't mind; the kids were honest and nice-tempered, and any sale was welcome. It wasn't as if he had a long commute home.

"You're looking a lot better," he commented, and she smiled.

"I feel a lot better. I think I've finally gotten..." She looked at her children. "I think my problems are gone for good." She looked at him meaningfully, and he nodded to show he understood she was talking about her ex-husband.

"It's tough, taking care of your kids by yourself," he said. "But I think you're doing great."

She was one of those women whose faces lit up when they smiled. Her smile made her look nineteen or twenty rather than thirty-five.

"Thank you. And thanks for the discount."

His eyebrows shot up.

"What discount?" He'd subtracted a couple of bucks, but he didn't think it'd been obvious.

She just smiled again over her shoulder and called her kids to her. They surrounded her like a gaggle, the small one grabbing her belt loops, the older one following like a grave ghost.

He flipped the sign over and locked up. Tomorrow was his day off, because he always closed the store Mondays and Thursdays. He would have chosen Wednesday as his second day off, but he'd noticed the comic book store a couple of shops down from him received its new shipments on Wednesdays. A lot of people who came to pick up their monthly books would also stop and look in his shop, so Wednesday was one of his best nights.

Okay. He'd bottle some herbs and oil and put them in a sunny window while he cooked supper. He'd watch a movie and stuff teabags for his internet orders.

Or, he thought, looking at the stack of books and notes he'd carried up, he'd do more research on werewolves.

He stretched, put water on to boil, then grabbed the canning jar box off the shelf and lined them up. They glistened in the afternoon sunlight, cheering him, bringing him back to the love of his work. It was like meditating as he chopped the herbs and fruits.

He took out the long, partially dried peppers and bruised them, then washed his hands. He hummed under his breath and thought good thoughts, pausing only to add rice to the boiling water. He added the oil

to the jars, enjoying how the colors of the ingredients changed slightly, immersed.

He used some herbs and some oil to cast a small spell, then coated the inside of each lid before laying it on top of the jar and screwing it on firmly. The spell would filter into the oil, just as the properties of the ingredients would filter out into the oil. The oil wouldn't burn the food, and if there was something off in the meat, if it was a little old or not quite clean, the oil would help counteract any sickness it might otherwise cause.

He shook each jar, checked for leaks in the seals. He scooted his plants around so he could put the jars in the window.

"You know," he said conversationally to the spider plant, which in a moment of morose symbolism or mooncalf love he'd named Andromeda, "I have a business to run. Orders to fill. In short, better things to do with my time than ingratiate myself with an ungrateful wench."

He watered her, looked at the spider babies that hung down, wondering if he should cut them. He examined the fat aloe, running his fingers down a fleshy leaf, avoiding the twin rows of thorns.

"I mean, it's not like she wants my help. Anything I dig up, either I can't tell her or she'll already know. Or she'll act like she did. All she'll do is say, 'Thanks, sweet of you, mind your own business.' Like these things are a mundane's business. If she ever saw a vampire..."

The time on the rice was running out, so he went over to the fridge and took out the Chinese leftovers, arranging them on a divided plate so he could heat them in the microwave.

But his gaze still lingered on the books. What she couldn't use, Connor and the rest could. Well, the parts that didn't include spells.

He shrugged and went on with his evening.



"I don't mind you sitting on my head. Or my lap, or even hanging from my neck. But you must let Mommy type!"

Andromeda picked Zelda up, the cat's claws pulling a few delicate filaments of long black hair as she set her down on the floor. Zelda was enjoying the attention—whatever had been bothering her earlier was

gone. She circled, deciding what part of Andromeda's anatomy she was going to clamber over next.

"Next stop's the bathroom, cat," Andromeda warned as she scrolled down the computer screen, trying to get to the parts of the file she didn't already have firsthand knowledge of.

Detective Swinbourne had spent several of his Sunday hours putting the statements and everything up on his computer. There were long notes about each person, checking the validity of what they'd said. The introductory note on her file said that none of the PIs he'd talked to knew anything about her, that the federal government had her listed as a clerical employee. Andromeda was surprised, because he shouldn't have been able to get to that information so quickly. Balance was so top secret and classified even the US president didn't know about it.

He mentioned a lot of bits and pieces in his reports. He spoke about Alaister's herbal business. Andromeda had met him while he was still trying to decide what to do with the place, and she was happy to see he'd kept it open. Margo's file mentioned a society page clipping, announcing her engagement to Evan Forest. Swinbourne poked a tiny bit of fun at Mary, saying, "Miss Perkins is an undecided fourth-semester sophomore." There was more dross than gold in the files, but from time to time she scribbled down nuggets of information.

She then went to the Balance database, to see if anyone mentioned any type of unrest or fighting among werewolves or vampires. Prince Sevrin looked to be settling into his role as leader well. They'd met a few months back, and she'd found herself liking him.

Zelda went to the futon and took a running jump to the computer. This caused Andromeda to click the exit button rather than the minimize-screen button, meaning she would have to re-log in, retype a ton of passwords, redo her search.

"That's it, cat."

She picked up the feline and marched to the bathroom. The second she stepped into the room, Zelda spat and hissed, wriggling like mad.

Andromeda looked at the silver-shot material of her dress and the dark velvet cloak she'd hung from the shower rod to dry.

"Okay, honey," she said, closing the door as she backed out. She sat back down and petted Zelda, saying soothing words. She gave the cat Kittenlet, a small stuffed toy, and Muffy, a piece of cloth that was more rag than blanket. Zelda sat very still among Andromeda's bedcovers.

The cat soothed, Andromeda went back into the bathroom and examined the clothing. She found nothing amiss; a couple of long red hairs she hadn't found earlier showed that Vera had run around wearing the cloak.

She'd only washed the hem of the cloak, since the rest was fine and she was leery of washing velvet for fear of ruining it. She sighed, decided to move the litter box to the kitchen because she didn't want to ball the still-damp clothes up into a bag. When they dried, she'd try and find a place to hide them.

The bright-blue letters of the alarm clock told her it was way too late for her to continue with her readings anyway.

"But I have to get them done," she groaned as she made herself some ginseng-and-lemon green tea. "Miles to go before I sleep..." She went back to work.

She started, this time, with local newspaper databases—many papers put their stories up on the net. The first one was the best and most thorough, focusing more on the victim's life. Olivia had been the head reference librarian at the local university. She had lived in this area all her life, and was survived by a brother. She was well-loved, not involved in anything that could have lead to a violent murder. The police were giving out very little information.

She looked over the things she had written down.

"There's no hope for it. I guess I better revisit the scene of the crime tomorrow."



Helena wasn't much on patting herself on the back, but today she thought she deserved it.

About, oh, five months ago, she'd stayed at a Super 8 in New York—Batavia, she thought it was, right off the New York Expressway. After dinner, she'd stopped at a gas station, filled up and bought a six-pack of Heineken, mostly because she thought it was neat to buy beer at a gas station. She was halfway through her second bottle, watching nothing much on TV and keeping half an eye on her car, when she remembered something from a John Sanford novel.

Brilliant, she thought, practically untraceable. So, she saved the bottles, wiped them down, resisted the temptation to keep just one because

they were such a pretty green, and etched them. She etched them as deeply as she could, unsure how strong the glass was; but in the end, it was just like Mr. Sanford had that silly woman do—up and down, around and around, until the bottles looked like they were in nets. Well, when you squinted, anyway.

She'd kept them in the trunk of her car, and now they would finally come into use.

She sat with four of them lined up in a neat row at her feet. She watched the activity below, the deceptively human forms laughing and joking with each other as they bedded down for the night in their cabins. Calls of *goodnight* and *pleasant dreams* echoed down the valley and up to her.

Helena looked at the sky. Tomorrow would be a full moon. She should wait, just to be sure. No. Tomorrow they would also be at full power. She knew she was right; her instincts, the little primeval part of her at the base of her spine, recognized these things for what they were, and urged her to run.

She waited a bit as silence settled around the camp. Her rear end began to get numb with cold, and she kept twitching. After awhile, she uncorked the kerosene and filled the bottles, then put in the wicks. She had waited to do this, fearing the things below would smell the fuel on the wind.

One-by-one, she lit and threw the bottles. They arched in the air, and it was right pretty, the way the fire made them look like falling emeralds. She aimed well, and they shattered across both roofs.

Grabbing her bag, she turned, ran up the hill, climbed a tree she had selected earlier and took up her rifle. Now, she thought, if the police, or any other kind of thing investigated this, they'd start with the beer distributors and bars in the area. They'd never get a lead on her, because she'd bought her last beer several hundred miles and a couple of states away.

And, she made a mental note, she wasn't going to buy any more, not for awhile.

She checked the sight again on her rifle, using the telescope to keep watch. There were screams, now, and they were finally beginning to run out of the cabins. She aimed, took a deep breath, and went to work.

TITLE: *Unbalanced*

AUTHOR: Cindy Lynn Speer

GENRE: Romantic Suspense/Paranormal

PUBLISHER: Zumaya Publications LLC

IMPRINT: Embraces

RELEASE DATE: January 2011

ISBN: Paperback: 978-1-934841-90-7; ebook: 978-1-934841-91-4

FORMAT: Trade paperback, perfect bound; \$14.99; 256 pp.; 6x9; ebook, \$6.99

Available wherever fine books are sold.