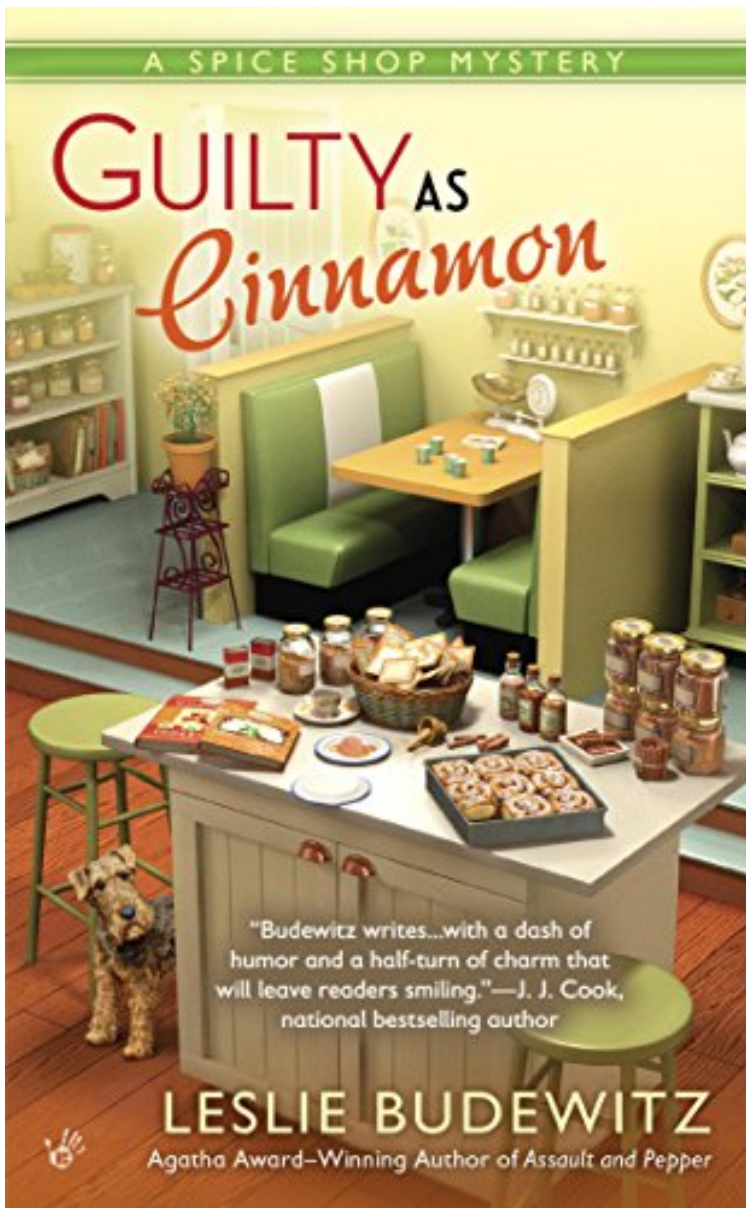


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Guilty as Cinnamon



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurMurder heats up Seattles Pike Place Market in the next Spice Shop mystery from the national bestselling author of *Assault and Pepper*.Springtime in Seattles Pike Place Market means tasty foods and wide-eyed tourists, and Peppers Spice Shop is ready for the crowds. With flavorful combinations and a fresh approach, shes sure to win over the public. Even better, shes working with several local restaurants as their chief herb and spice supplier. Business is cooking, until one of Peppers potential clients, a young chef named Tamara Langston, is found dead, her life extinguished by the dangerously hot ghost chilia spice Pepper carries in her shop.Now stuck in the middle of a heated police investigation, Pepper must

use all her senses to find out who wanted to keep Tamaras new caf from opening before someone else gets burned INCLUDES DELICIOUS RECIPES! Extrait Praise for Assault and Pepper Berkley Prime Crime titles by Leslie Budewitz Title Page Copyright Dedication Acknowledgments and Historical Note Seattle Spice Shop Checklist Chapter One Chapter Two Chapter Three Chapter Four Chapter Five Chapter Six Chapter Seven Chapter Eight Chapter Nine Chapter Ten Chapter Eleven Chapter Twelve Chapter Thirteen Chapter Fourteen Chapter Fifteen Chapter Sixteen Chapter Seventeen Chapter Eighteen Chapter Nineteen Chapter Twenty Chapter Twenty-one Chapter Twenty-two Chapter Twenty-three Chapter Twenty-four Chapter Twenty-five Chapter Twenty-six Chapter Twenty-seven Chapter Twenty-eight Chapter Twenty-nine Chapter Thirty Chapter Thirty-one Afterword Recipes and Spice Notes Note to the Reader Acknowledgments and Historical Note Seattle Spice Shop Checklist Everyone you need to cook up a mystery! Pepper Reece owner, ex law firm HR manager Sandra Piniella assistant manager and mix master Zak Davis sales clerk by day, musician by night Lynette Cobbs sales clerk who calls herself an actress Reed Locke part-time sales clerk, full-time college student Kristen Gardiner part-time sales clerk, Peppers oldest friend the job applicant so, for the right one! Arf the Dog Peppers shell never tell you her real name Kristenshe knows, but she knows enough to keep her mouth shut Laurel Hallorandeli owner, caterer, houseboat dweller Seetha Sharmastill a bit of a mystery Ben Bradley ace reporter Jim and Hot Dog men about town Fabiola the Fabulous graphic designer Jen the Bookseller and Callie the Librarian Peppers former law firm employees Vinny the Wine Merchant Hal ghost scholar Tamara Langston aspiring chef-owner of Tamarack Ashwani Patel owner of the Indian restaurant next to Tamarack Alex Howard chef, businessman, rule breaker, heartbreaker Danielle Bordeaux successful restaurateur, Tamaras business partner Tariq Rose a line cook in Howards employ Scott Scotty or Glassy Glass Howards longtime bar manager Officer Tag Buhner aka Bike Boy, aka Officer Hot Wheels, Peppers former husband Detective Cheryl Spencer homicide Detective Michael Tracy homicide One An ancient token of friendship as well as an ingredient in the anointing oils Moses used, cinnamon is one of the oldest-known spices, well traveled and heavily traded. Parsley poop. The Indian silver chandeliers hanging from the Spice Shops high ceiling swayed, their flame-shaped bulbs flickering. The crystal candelabra they flanked burned on defiantly. As I stared up, unsure whether to curse the Markets hodgepodge of ancient and modern wiring or the fixtures themselves, all three blinked, then went dark. Cash registers got power, Sandra called from behind the front counter. And the red light districts open. I glanced over my shoulder at the miniature lamp perched on the Chinese apothecary that displays our signature teas and accessories. The red silk shade glowed steadily, a beacon in the back corner. Better call the electrician, I said at the exact moment as my customer asked, Wheres your panel? and Lynette, my newest and most annoying employee, said, Ill check the breakers. At the very next moment, the ceiling lights came back on, bright and steady. Kristen started whistling the theme from Ghostbusters as she unwrapped a tall roll of paper sample cups for our special tea, black Assam spiced with cardamom, allspice, and orange. Any day now, wed start serving an iced version alongside the hot brew made in the giant electric pot that looks like a Russian samovar. Dont those ghosts know they should be sleeping this time of day? Whether Sandra Piniella, my assistant manager, believes in ghosts, I dont know, but she holds the wisecrack sacred. This was one of those undecided mornings, common in a Seattle spring, that could turn gloomy or glorious, and the shop needed lights. I shrugged and turned back to Tamara Langston. I would let nothing not even the magical, maddening Market interfere with the prospect of becoming chief herb and spice supplier to this promising young chef, on the brink of launching the citys hottest new bar and restaurant. Gotta love old buildings, Tamara said. The power in our new space has been giving me fits, too. Tell me more about your plans. Ingredient driven. Simple, yet adventurous. Food I love, prepared and presented in a way youll love. An all-inclusive you, meaning anyone passionate for a great plate of food. Tamara vibrated with intensity, her presence boosting everyone around her to a higher frequency. Maybe thats what disrupted the lights. Like people whose personal magnetism stops watches and messes up computers. Id known a few in my decade-plus as a law firm human resources manager, before buying Seattle Spice in the venerable Pike Place Market. The chef was a fair-skinned blonde in her early thirties, roughly ten years younger than I. Thin and wiry from hard work, not workout her features were too intense to call pretty. But she buzzed with an irresistible energy. Not vegetarian, she continued, but we will champion vegetables. And cocktails. Well pour the best gin in town. Im sold. We can get anything you need. Our supply networks circle the globe. I gestured to the map on the wall, speckled with pushpins showing the sources of our hundreds of herbs and spices. In the year and a half since Id bought the place, Id worked hard to expand our offerings. To not follow trends, but set them. Peppers were hot, as was almost anything new. Especially the new and hot. I like to think

beyond that. So did Tamara. Tamarack is all about flavor, she said, her small hand, scarred by burns and knife blades, opening and closing as she pumped her lower arm. Both bold and subtle. Spicing should complement the food, not dominate it. Music to my ears. Love the name. Wheres the space? She hadnt said. Restaurateurs often keep plans under wraps as long as possible, then leak a few juicy hints, aiming to pique curiosity and build buzz. Lower Queen Anne. She kept her tone low and cagey, though we had no other customers at the moment. Next to Tamarind, the Indian place. Im spending every spare moment there. The architect came up with the coolest design woodsy but light filled. Like the best picnic you ever had, but no rain and no ants. Tamarack was a joint venture with Danielle Bordeaux, the visionary owner of half a dozen of Seattles favorite eateries and drinkeries. If I played this right, we might get her business, too. Great concept. Good location near the Center, Queen Anne, Magnolia. Near money. Arent you worried that the names are too similar Tamarack and Tamarind? Sandra swept by, a giant jar of Turkish bay leaves in her plump arms. I like the synchronicity. Our image will set us apart. Tamaras luminous green eyes shone. Not to mention the line streaming out our door. Isnt that space haunted? Black Sharpie in hand, Lynette paused in her task of checking items off a delivery list. Ghosts, shmosts, Tamara said. Let me give you a sample of those Ceylon quills. True cinnamon, my finest grade, still called by the ancient name of the island where it originated. I pulled a jar off the shelf and carried it to the front counter. Alex giving you a hard time about leaving for a competitor? I twisted off the lid and reached for clean tongs. Tamaras silence snagged my attention and I looked up. Ihavent told him yet. Behind her, Lynette straightened, glancing from Tamara to me. I want to get all the details in place first, Tamara said, the words breathy and rushed. Finish the build-out. Nail down sourcing. Recruit the key staff. I read between the lines. And you dont want to tell him until youre ready to draw another paycheck. The creases in her forehead and the red stains blooming on her white flour cheeks told me Id guessed right. Our lips are sealed. You dont honestly expect him to be surprised, do you? Or behave rashly? As lead sous for the First Avenue Caf, the flagship of Alex Howards restaurant empire, Tamara knew the man well. He bought his spices from me, even after Id ended our fling too fast and furious to call it a relationship last September. Tall, dark, hawkishly handsome, and one heck of a chef, he boasted the legendary temper and bravado as well as the cooking skills. Rumors of his cutthroat business practices swirled through Seattles food community, but hed always been fair with me. In business, at least. Not a chance Im willing to take, she said. I reached for her shopping basket brimming with fresh produce, but she tucked the samples into her own green-and-white-striped tote. The quills were for her, not the Caf. Im dying to try your ghost chiles. Alex makes a terrific relish out of them, but he wont let anyone else handle it, so Ill have to work up a recipe myself. From under the counter, I drew a canister of the double-bagged devils. Bhut jolokia, better known as bhut capsicum, the ghost chile, is a naturally occurring hybrid from the Assam region of northeastern India that blasts the top off the Scoville heat scale. Alex uses the dried whole pepper, but Ive also got a powder. Kinda like ground lava. He mentioned an oil. Right. An experiment he and I tried one night. We extracted the capsaicin by roughly grinding dried peppers, heating them in oil, and straining it off. The result was a gorgeous, fiery red-orange oil. He made the relish by adding a few drops to a medley of fresh peppers, white onions, and cilantro. And fresh corn, if I remember right. A big iftequila had also been involved. Like Alex, I dont let my staff handle the peppers. I pack them after hours, wearing a respirator and elbow-length gloves. A fleck landed on my eyelashes once and fell into my eye. I stuck my head in the sink and wanted to leave it there. Its the one task that makes me wish for a commercial warehouse, an option I reject at every suggestion. I like running a small show. You sure? Farmers in India smear it on their fences to fend off elephants. If he can handle it, Tamara said, so can I. I dropped the peppers into her tote. Confidence is more than half the battle in retail, the legal world, and the restaurant biz. She scribbled in her notebook, its spring green cover matching the stripes on her tote, and added a quick sketch. Ill wait for your price list, then make some decisions. Great. End of the week. I held out my hand. Her grip was firm but not overpowering capable of wielding a meat mallet or embracing a delicate filet of sole. After Tamara left, the brass bells on the door chiming behind her, Sandra and I restocked our Spice of the Month table. This months star: cinnamon half a dozen varieties, ground and sticks. Supporting players: recipe cards suggesting sweet and savory uses, and a few favorite cookbooks. No one, it seemed, had written the definitive book on cinnamon. Id searched online, scoured publishers catalogs, and consulted cookbook collectors. All wasnt lost, as the hunt had been a great excuse to reread a few favorite mysteries, including Cinnamon Skin by John D. MacDonald and Cinnamon Kiss, an Easy Rawlins outing by Walter Mosley, both now on display. A customer stopped to watch us. Cinnamon in April? I think of it in autumn. Its a year-round spice. Truth was, Id ordered a special crop of Ceylon cinnamon that had been delayed at customs and didnt arrive until after

Christmas. And then, with our staff changes and other hoo-ha, we hadn't gotten around to celebrating cinnamon until now. I took the lid off a small jar and held it out. Take a whiff. Sold, she said. I handed her off to Sandra, who held up a copy of Joanne Flukes Cinnamon Roll Murder and shot me a meaningful look. Right, I said. C'mon, boy. Break time. Arf, the black-and-tan Airedale bequeathed to me last fall by a former Market resident, popped up from his bed behind the counter. Technically against the Market rules, no one seems to mind dogs are commonplace down here. I snapped his brown leather leash onto his LED-studded collar a gift from the street men, in appreciation for the warmth my staff and I try to show them and grabbed a scooper bag. If any food known to woman is unavailable in the Market, don't tell me. Indulgence may be a hazard of the job, but I make up for it by walking. Walking the dog, walking to and from my loft a few blocks away, walking, walking, walking for nearly every errand. That's my story, anyway. In the last few weeks, Sandra and I had become cinnamon roll aficionados. (Lynette, nursing a dream of returning to the stage, declined to participate in the interests of her figure. Kristen, my BFF, and college student Reed, both part-timers, joined the finger-licking fun when they were around, and with Zak, a broad-shouldered, six-foot musician, on staff, we never had to worry about leftovers.) My current fave featured croissant pastry instead of yeast dough, cream cheese frosting, and raisins. Big enough to feel like you've indulged, but not so big it ruins your appetite for the rest of the day. After Arf stretched his legs and other parts, and greeted his two- and four-legged pals, we fetched a box of rolls from one of the Market's yummy bakeries and headed back to the shop. We can give you your money back, if you insist, but the manufacturer won't refund ours. You must have cranked it too hard. I wasn't two feet inside the door when Lynette's retort tone harsh as her words shattered my vision of a sugar-and-cinnamon orgy. To your bed, Arf. His nails clicked on the plank floor as he trotted behind the counter. Im Pepper Reece, owner of the shop. How can I help? The customer, a trim white woman in her forties with thin lips and a tight face, explained that she'd bought the nutmeg grinder from us a week ago. The second time she used it, one of the screws holding the blade in place snapped. I did not crank it too hard, she said, her words clipped. And it was not inexpensive. I am so sorry. Things break occasionally for no obvious reason. We'll refund the full price and give you a new grinder, at no cost. A generous offer; that's what it takes to mend a broken relationship. I reached for another style. Would you like to try the same model? Or this one? You can see it works a little differently. It's what I use at home. She chose the second, more expensive version and left with a smile on her face. After Lynette finished helping a customer who'd come in during Grinder Gate, I invited her to join me in my office. Not much more than a closet with a chipboard remnant jammed over two file cabinets for a desk, a few shelves mounted above, it was strictly utilitarian and the closest thing I had to a private woodshed. When Tory left last fall, leaving Sandra the sole employee who'd been here longer than me, I knew she'd be hard to replace. But I had not anticipated such a major pain in the anise. Lynette was my third hire in that slot, an unemployed actress who changed hair and makeup like most of us change underwear, and who could flip the charm off and on like a power switch. And it turned out, she did not take direction well at least, not from me. She'd pushed both my HR skills and my patience to the limit. What do customers and umpires have in common? She reddened. A small sign on the shelf behind me said it all: EVEN WHEN THEY'RE WRONG, THEY'RE RIGHT. I don't believe that. Her voice quavered, her eyes searching for anything to look at but me. You're an actress. I folded my arms. Pretend. Two

In 1971, the people of Seattle voted to establish the Pike Place Market Historical District and a Historical Commission to preserve the physical and social character of the soul of Seattle, in the words of the Market's saviors. Alice Shorett and Murray Morgan, *Soul of the City: The Pike Place Public Market*. I spent the rest of the morning trying not to glower. It doesn't actually help. And it creates wrinkles. If I fired Lynette, would I find a better candidate? She'd learned our spice talk and sales patter like scripts and delivered them with dramatic flair. But she stank at personal interaction and improv and low-dollar, high-traffic retail is fast-paced ad-lib. I sat in my office, flipping through the short stack of job apps on hand and studying the online inquiries. Nothing promising. Anytime you ignore your doubts and hire because you're desperate, you regret it. As Lynette had just proven. Breathe, I told myself. Breathe and think. You own the joint. What can she do? She knows she's in trouble. I sighed and dug my phone out of my apron pocket. We had to get fully staffed before tourist season. The Market feeds the city, but it also entertains millions of visitors who stroll the arcades and cobbled streets every year, most of them between May 1 and October 15. I texted Laurel Halloran, good friend, Flick Chick pal, veteran chef and caterer: Help. Send job candidates. And gin. Then I called an employment agency I'd used in my HR days, managing support staff for one of the city's largest law firms. When it imploded, taking my job with it only a year after my divorce and move to a downtown loft, I'd shocked everyone, including myself, by buying the Spice Shop. Spice has added flavor to

the Market since shortly after its founding in 1907. In the fervor surrounding the campaign to save the Market from redevelopment in the early 1970s, hippie chick Jane Rasmussen threw her lot with capitalism and started this shop, just down the street from a competitor. Why she thought the Market could support two entirely separate, unrelated spice merchants, I didn't know but she'd been right, running this one for forty years until she sold to me and retired to the San Juan Islands. Time to prepare for the inevitable. I brought up the Craigslist job postings. Food/beverage/hospitality covered it. Lynette seemed to have misread the job as part of the hostility industry. I checked the right boxes, pasted in my standard ad copy, uploaded a picture, and voil! Copied the listing and e-mailed it to a few contacts. Hey. Zaks booming baritone broke my reverie. I glanced at the clock. Five minutes to noon. Hey, big guy. I slid back my chair and gave him a half hug. Tall, muscled, a few months past thirty with a shaved head and arms full of tattoos, Zak worked weekdays so he and his band could rock the weekends away. His eyes darted nervously to the clock. I trust my staff to request time off only when necessary, no questions asked, and no one had abused the privilege. He'd asked for a rare morning free, and I appreciated his conscientiousness. Right on time. Quiet morning. Cinnamon rolls out front. Umm, thanks. He stashed his pack in the tiny cupboard. Delivery just came. Gotta get to work. Hey, boss. Sandra stuck her head in, the space too small for the three of us. Guy to see you. And he's cute. Zak trailing like a bodyguard, I headed out front. A man in slim black pants and a black jacket over a white shirt, a black leather messenger bag in hand, surveyed our shelves of colorful jars and tins. He wore his light brown hair in a classic square cut, longer on top and combed back. Professional, but stylish. Ben Bradley, he said when I offered my hand and my name, a touch of Chicago in his pleasant tone. He flashed an ID card from the weekly paper and gestured at the Spice of the Month display. Looks like I'm in the right place. Hoping you have a few minutes to talk about cinnamon. The Cinnamon Challenge. One of the stupider tricks bored high school kids have found to amuse themselves. But, better than dropping bowling balls off bridges. Can I quote you on that? He flashed me a genuinely sweet smile I couldn't help return. For the next few minutes, I gave him the cinnamon spiel: its origins, its role in ancient burial rites and trade. Some call it the spice that launched a thousand ships, referring to the Age of Exploration. Cinnamon is one of our biggest sellers. Nearly every kitchen has a jar, even in homes where no one cooks. In my mother's brown bread phase, when our family had shared a big house with Kristens family up on Capitol Hill, she baked with whole wheat flour, honey, molasses, the barest minimum of salt, and liberal doses of cinnamon. Fortunately, my mother had been an excellent cook despite the strictures, which hadn't lasted long. She flew out of them with a vengeance, embracing butter, cream, and well-butchered meat like a pig embraces mud. The Challenge, Ben prompted. Its sweeping the high schools. Not again, I said. He was about five-tenths inches taller than me and clearly a regular at the gym. I gestured to the mixing nook, a built-in table and benches in a raised corner of the shop. Perfect for reviewing price lists and sourcing options with our commercial customers, for staff gatherings, and, yes, for mixing and testing our custom seasonal blends. We sat. Cinnamon does contain coumarin, which can be toxic to the liver in high doses. But a dash or two in your coffee or on your oatmeal isn't going to hurt you. What about those cinnamon rolls? I drew the box closer, and we plucked out the last two. Its the cream cheese and sugar that'll get ya. He grinned, then swallowed before asking his next question. What about medicinal uses? Ive heard it can lower high blood sugar and blood pressure. Not my expertise, and I don't give medical advice. But youre talking about extracts, which are generally considered safe. On the other hand, trying to swallow a tablespoon of dry, powdered cinnamon the Challenge is just dumb. It won't kill you, unless youre allergic. You'd probably sneeze most of it out before you could swallow it. We moved on to culinary uses far more fun. You know, this place is fascinating. Id love to do a feature interview, bring in a photographer. He closed his notebook and gave me a wink. And get the scoop on how a woman named Pepper ended up running a spice shop. Destined for my job, like you. He slid out of the nook. Not spelled the same. And how do you know him? Watergate happened ages before you were born. Besides, nobody reads the Washington Post out here. Barely a year before I was born, but I didn't say so. The Ben Bradley in front of me couldn't be more than thirty-five to my forty-two going on forty-three. Hey, he was legendary. Besides, my mom had a crush on Robert Redford. And Dustin Hoffman. Ive seen All the Presidents Men at least a dozen times. She likes to say she named my brother for Carl Bernstein, while my dad insists hes named for Carl Yastrzemski, the Red Sox left-fielder, but in truth, Carl is a variation of an old family name. Maybe you can show me around the Market. Give a newcomer the insiders view. I peered outside. The rain had held off. Sandra and Kristen eyed us like a pair of fifth graders plotting a trick on their teacher. He was young, but cute. And they were convinced I needed a new man in my life. Despite a few fun dates over the winter, nothing had ripened into a relationship. Turns out I kinda like being

singlemost of the time. Okay, some of the time. Sure, I said, grabbing my shopping bag and a jacket for insurance. We made the tour into a walking lunch, starting with pizza at DeLaurentis. At Rachel the Pig, the Market mascot that stands guard beneath the iconic sign and clock, we stopped to ogle the fishmongers flinging whole salmon through the air, and I bought a filet for dinner. We ambled up the Main Arcade, past the daystallers who haul in their produce, art, and crafts season after season. We stopped to chat with Angie Martinez and taste raspberry and strawberry jam from her familys Central Washington orchard. Tried honey from the beekeeper in the adjacent stall and checked out Herb the Herb Mans crops. Tulips, daffs, lilacs, and other spring bloomers filled the flower sellers buckets. Too soon for aconite, thank goodness. Not their fault that on sleepless nights, bundles of their purple blossoms crowd my dreams. Early produce filled the tables, and I picked out gleaming white scallions, peppery arugula, and fresh spinach. Pondered radishes: classic red balls or a slender white-tipped French variety that Id discovered last year? Pointed at a bundle of orange, red, and purple carrots. Ben made a face at the purple roots, until the farmer scrubbed one clean and handed it over for a taste test. Its sweet. His eyebrows dipped in surprise. Orange inside. Purple Haze. Very popular in Seattle, birthplace of Jimi Hendrix. I paid the farmer and tucked the veggies in my shopping bag. As we reached the end of the Arcade, I glanced west to Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains. A hint of clearing. Nice. The skies, the walk, the company all nice. We crossed the cobbles of Pike Place, the Markets main thoroughfare, on our way back to the Spice Shop. A familiar whizzing sound snagged my hearing. My jaw tightened. Beside me, Ben stiffened reflexively, as people often do at the sight of a uniformed police officer. Even one on a bike. Hello, Tag, I said flatly. Is there a problem? You tell me. He stretched one long leg, in sleek black spandex, to the cobbles, the other foot on the pedal. Seattles finest, here to serve. Ben Bradley, reporter, meet Tag Buhner, beat cop. My ex-husband. I sent Tag an unspoken message to play nice. We worked our way back to being friendly, even going out together a few times to catch up, but he had a history of not being so friendly to men who showed any kind of interest in me. Ben extended a hand. Tag, Ray-Bans gleaming, ignored it, flexing his fingers in their black gloves. Thanks for the interview and the tour, Pepper. Ill call you about the feature, Ben said to me. Then, with a slight nod, Officer. The future? Tag drawled as Ben walked away. Feature, as in newspaper. I pushed past him into my shop, the brass door bells chiming like a call to prayer. Sandra and Kristen stood shoulder to shoulder, conspiratorial looks on their contrasting faces one round and olive skinned under a dark pixie cut, the other narrow, her fine bones framed by straight blond hair. I liked it better when you two didnt like each other, I said. We never didnt like each other, Kristen protested. We just had to find common ground. Like you and Mr. Reporter, Sandra said. Until Mr. Cop showed up. Lets Google him. Kristen whipped out her phone. Dont you have work to do? Not a customer in sight. Lynette had left for lunch, and Zak was unpacking the days UPS delivery. B-R-A-D... She spoke the letters out loud as she punched. But Ben Bradley is too common a name for a good search, though we did find a few recent bylines. Check him out on Facebook, Kristen said. Enough of the proxy stalking. I cant date him. Hes too young. Besides, my luck, hes married with three kids and a metal allergy that makes his hand swell up when he wears a wedding ring. Mr. Rights sister married a man ten years younger, and its a match made in heaven. Sandra always calls her husband Mr. Right, in contrast to his predecessor, Mr. Oh-So-Wrong. Business picked up a bit that afternoon. Kristen and Reed helped customers while Sandra focused on the new wedding registry we hoped to unveil shortly. Zak took the days shipments to the mailing station. Lynette straightened shelves and sulked. I huddled in the nook with my laptop, working up Tamaras price list. Lively, intriguing choices. Consulting with chefs is great. Im able to see what gets their juices flowing, and steal ideas for combinations to recommend. But helping new cooks is just as sweet. I love when a customer comes in asking for more of our special Herbes de Provence, after insisting she wouldnt know how to use them, or graduates from measuring out each half teaspoon to developing her own sense of how much of this, how much of that. And its all a lot more fun than mediating interoffice squabbles between legal assistants or counseling a stressed-out lawyer on how to work with a pregnant staffer whose bladder sends her to the bathroom three times an hour and whose fluctuating hormones plunge her into tears every afternoon at three fifteen. The antique railroad clock over our front door had just struck four thirty when the door flew open so abruptly I half expected the glass to shatter. Alex. What a surprise! If he needs a special spice or runs out between deliveries, he usually calls or sends someone down. He hadnt set foot in the shop in months. His burning eyes said this was not a social visit. He delivered his words like a crime boss in a Mafia movie. I get that you dont want to be lovers. But I thought we were still friends. I am a loyal customer, and I counted on your loyalty in return. Understanding crept in. Alex, I sell to half your competitors, at least. Vendor exclusivity has never been part of the deal. I dont give a rats back end about

exclusivity. You knew an employee I took in and trained an employee I trusted means to cut my throat, and you didn't bother to say a word. That was rich. The man who stood me up and lied about it protesting an insult to his honor. When to tell you was Tamara's choice, I said, ignoring the muscle spasm in my jaw. She had her reasons for waiting, and I'd be out of business tomorrow if I ran around spilling my customer's secrets. He leaned forward a fraction of an inch. I resisted the urge to lean back. You knew, he repeated, as if I hadn't heard him the first time. And you didn't say a word. A stab of pain shot past my ear and into my skull, but I managed to keep from wincing. When you were young and ambitious, did you tell your employers everything you were up to? Or wait until the time was right? You know Tamara. She had no intention of leaving you in the lurch. But she also didn't need to give you time to talk her out of it. Or to make her life miserable. This isn't about Tamara, he said, but I refused to listen. No, I said. It's about you wanting to control other people. To run their lives for your convenience. Sorry, Alex. That's not my game. I'm happy to be your spice purveyor. But I am not willing to be your spy. His jaw stiffened, and his eyes hardened to marble. After a long, unblinking stare, he flung his left arm out in a well-see-about-that gesture. The back of his hand struck a tall tree-like sculpture made of found metal objects that stood between the nook and tea cart. The Guardian, the sculptor had christened it. Dangling leaves made of silver spoons and forks struck gears and pipes, clattering like a busboy's nightmare. A red scratch opened up on the back of his hand. Alex didn't notice. Shooting me one last burning glare, he stalked out. Whoa, Sandra said. Behind her, Lynette surveyed the scene, eyes flicking from me to the door and back like a drunken mosquito. You okay, boss? How had he known? My eyes burned as hot as after the ghost pepper incident, and my hands curled tight. To my surprise, the cramp in my jaw let go. I had stood up for myself. I had refused to back down. Good girl, my inner cheerleader said. But how had he known? Sandra continued to study me, concern welling in her dark eyes. Lynette unplugged the samovar and rolled the red enameled tea cart one of the few pieces I'd taken when I left Tag toward the front counter to empty the days-old tea into the big sink. I frowned. More than an hour left before closing. Besides, that was Zak's job. Zak hadn't returned yet from his mail run. Kristen was deep in conversation with an avid cook whose tastes run to Middle Eastern and North African cuisine. The mental light burst on. And I could tell by the determined way she refused to look at me that Lynette knew I knew. No need to finish that, Lynette. She shoved the tea cart toward the wall, and one balky wheel swiveled the wrong direction. The tower of paper cups crashed to the floor. The samovar teetered, and instinctively, Sandra reached out to grab it. No, I cried. It's hot. Too late. The samovar tipped over and hot tea splashed out. Sandra recoiled in pain. Lynette's mouth fell open. He deserved to know, she said, her voice thin and rushed. He deserved to know that Tamara was planning to quit and try to take his best people with her. Leave, I said, dashing behind the counter to turn the cold water on full blast. I steered Sandra forward, not sure how badly burned she was, and plunged her hand into the sink. And don't come back. ***SANDRA was more stunned than hurt, the palm of her right hand a pale, puffy red. Dr. Ron Locke, Reed's father, had been tutoring me in basic homeopathy, and I insisted she take a dose of cantharis and cover the burn with calendula gel. Not your fault, boss, she said, sitting in the nook soothing on the cooling gel. In a show of sympathy, Arf rested his bearded chin on her black-clad knee. She overheard my conversation with Tamara, I said. After the nutmeg grinder incident, she felt humiliated and decided to get back at me. And when she realized I was onto her, she panicked, and Sandra had gotten in the way. They call that collateral damage. Reed mopped up the spilled tea, and he and Zak carried the samovar to the counter for closer inspection. See that? Zak pointed to a long, fine crack in the ceramic interior. Collateral damage can add up. ***MOST weeks, Tuesday night is movie night. But two of the four Flick Chicks Kristen and Laurel had kid-related conflicts, so we'd canceled this week. I clipped on Arf's leash, tugged the collar of my pink-and-gray jacket up around my neck to ward off the early evening mist, and grabbed my tote and market bag, carrot tops poking out. Red or white, boy? I asked my dog on the way to the wine shop in Post Alley. He did not reply. Silent is not my usual type, but it made a nice change. Vinny Delgadono clue whether his mother gave him the first name or he picked it up on the job pointed to the treat jar and, at my nod, tossed a liver chew. Arf plucked it out of the air. Oh, to be so easily satisfied. Wild world out there, from the looks of your cute mug, he said as I debated light reds. The old bromide white with fish, red with red meat doesn't take salmon into account. Plus I drink what I like. Short version, I'm hiring again. I chose a Cte de Brouilly Beaujolais and handed over a twenty. A blend rather than a varietal, the classic Beaujolais is full-bodied, tannic, and fruity. According to Vinny, it had recovered nicely from the popularity-driven quality crash a few years ago. I fired Lynette. Excellent choice. The wine, I mean. But also canning that wanna-be actress. He gave me back more bills than he should have. Employee discount. You don't have any employees, Vinny. Thank God for small favors. Believe me, I know

what I'm missing. Have I mentioned I adore working in the Market? And I equally adore living downtown. All the comforts of home and no lawn to mow. Of course, my four-legged roommate enjoys a bit of green grass now and again, so we swung by Victor Steinbrueck Park on the north end of the Market before heading home to my warehouse loft. With my neighbors' help, I revamped what they charmingly call my outdoor space so there's enough room for a round black bistro table and two slim metal chairs in a vivid willow green. And a propane grill, three varieties of tomatoes, and potted herbs. My neighbors say skip the small pots in a small space; go big to make it feel bigger. And by golly, it works. I raised my glass toward their silent veranda. They were celebrating their anniversary with a three-week trip to Paris. Lucky dogs, I said out loud. Arf thumped his tail, as if in agreement. I reached down and scratched his chin, behind the scraggly beard. He let out a soft, contented sigh. After the day we'd had, we were lucky dogs indeed.

ThreePluviophile: (n) a lover of rain; someone who finds joy and peace of mind during rainy days *Urban Dictionary* I can work an extra day, Kristen said at our Wednesday morning staff meeting. More breathing room in the nook without Lynette. Until schools out. No summer classes for me this year, Reed said. Pile on the hours. Thanks. That's a big help. But we need another full-timer. Eyes and ears open. Sandra's right palm sported one small Band-Aid. A teeny, tiny blister, she said. Worth the price to have this place back to ourselves. All heads nodded. Lynette's departure had been eagerly awaited. It amazes me how much good employees will endure without a peep, to avoid creating more trouble. Sometimes, you've almost got to be a master of divination to understand what they're thinking. Zak scraped a bit of sugar off the butcher-block tabletop with his thumbnail. He and Tory had deliberately kept their romance from me, to prove that it wouldn't interfere with their jobs. It had, but in a good way. She'd left to pursue her art, and I was genuinely happy for them both. Other employees let it all hang out, setting the place on fire with their hot words. Thank goodness Lynette had lashed out at me, not them. Sandra's blister aside. And if Alex Howard chose to shop elsewhere, fine. But the loss of the pseudo-samovar hurt. Electric versions are scarce, and I crossed my fingers that we could find another. For the short term, I'd borrowed vacuum pots from Ripe, Laurel's deli and catering company, as we had last fall when the samovar spent a few nights in a police evidence locker. Update me on the wedding registry, I said, returning to the morning's agenda. The computer terminal should be set up this week, Sandra replied. We'd created space along the back wall, using a repurposed entertainment center Kristen scored at a block sale on Capitol Hill. She and her family live in the house we grew up in, though it bears little resemblance to the hippie commune slash peace-and-justice center it had been in the 70s. It's a blast to work with women who share my love of antique and vintage, despite our wildly different tastes. Mine runs to diner style, while Sandra favors midcentury modern, the Space Age, and Kristen the Gilded Age. We brainstormed our contribution to the Market's spring festival. After Tory left, I roped Laurel in to collaborate with Sandra and me on the spring spice blends, which we'd just shipped to our Spice of the Month Club members. A small display hugged one end of the front counter. We had ideas for future blends, and our new gift packs were selling well. If only we weren't shorthanded. But being free of Lynette lightened the mental load so much that I almost didn't mind. I clapped my hands playfully to signal the end of the meeting. So, let's have a spicy day! Pepper, Zak said when we'd all vacated the nook. Can we talk? Sure. I'm meeting a rep from the Historic Commission. I glanced at my shiny pink Kate Spade watch, the last splurge before I'd lost my law firm job five minutes. After that? His big bald head bobbed. So serious. Must want a raise, or time off for a band tour. All manageable, if we were fully staffed. My young employees bring so much spirit to the job, but the trade-off is that their passions often lie elsewhere. Oh, for someone who loves food and retail and wants to make spice a career. A younger version of Sandra. I closed my eyes and aimed a tiny prayer at heaven. The design, colors, and materials suit the age and style of the structure, the Commission rep said ten minutes later as we stood on the cobbles of Pike Place facing my building. Its tasteful. *Revue de presse* Praise for Assault and Pepper. Pepper and her crew serve up a tantalizing mystery and a fragrant treat for the senses. Connie Archer, national bestselling author of the *Soup Lovers Mysteries* A smart blend of zesty characters, piquant spices, and scrumptious food. Set against the intriguing Seattle backdrop, this well-plotted whodunit is the perfect recipe for a great read. Daryl Wood Gerber, national bestselling author of the *Cookbook Nook Mysteries* Leslie Budewitz writes her new *Seattle Spice Shop Mystery*, Assault and Pepper, with a dash of humor and a half-turn of charm that will leave readers smiling. J.J. Cook, national bestselling author of *Death on Eat Street* An iconic Seattle setting, a smart and capable heroine, and a spicy investigation. What mystery reader could want more? Budewitz combines it all with effortless finesse. Victoria Hamilton, national bestselling author of the *Vintage Kitchen Mysteries* Parsley, sage, rosemary and murder. [The] *Spice Shop Mystery* series will add zing to your

reading.Barbara Ross, author of the Maine Clambake Mysteries