

WHEN THE BOUGH BREAKS
By Pauline Hayton

The mail truck stopped at her mailbox at the end of her long drive. More bills! Money was tight since Cindy's husband disappeared. No one had heard from him in nine months, but remaining in her semi-rural home with its three acres was cheaper than moving elsewhere. Besides, she couldn't leave. She was tied to this house.

Red-neck Tom, bloated by booze, lived on one side of her. He used to be kind and helpful, but ever since her husband left, he had been a mauling pest intent on getting into her bed. He had turned mean when she brushed him off. Then, when she began insisting he cut down his very tall, very broad tree overhanging his fence and invading her lot by twelve feet, he had turned venomous. She rarely saw her neighbors on the right; their business took up all their time. Jorge, her gardener/handyman, came once a week: a fatherly, reliable, man, he didn't ask for much money and took good care of her property.

"Walk with me to the mailbox, ladies?" she addressed her two snoozing cats. No response. "Okay, as you wish."

She ambled down to the mailbox, her bottom wiggling in tight, cut-off shorts, her midriff bare below a blouse knotted beneath her full breasts. Intent on retrieving her letters, she was oblivious to the towering Dodge Ram barreling down on her.

"Watch your back, bitch!" Tom yelled, speeding past before breaking hard to turn into his driveway.

Cindy gave him the finger. "Go screw yourself!"

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Walking back to her house, she studied Tom's monstrous tree. She hadn't pursued it when he did nothing about trimming it. The loss of her husband had left her jittery and exhausted. However, she was feeling better now. It was time to tackle the moron again. Indoors, Cindy grabbed her fly swatter and started swatting at flies, a habit she developed when her husband disappeared.

Next morning, anxiety kept her swatting flies that had gotten into her lanai via the cat door. She didn't like confrontation. She had suffered many beatings from her husband until she learned to acquiesce to his wishes. She never did figure out was why she had married someone like that. Cindy squared her shoulders. Anyway, she was well out of it now.

After breakfast, she knocked on Tom's door.

Tom stood on his doorstep. Of course, he didn't invite her inside. "Ready for a man, Cindy?"

"I want you to cut back the tree."

Tom crossed his arms. "Not that again. I happen to think it's a lovely tree."

"So do I, but you need to trim it. It's invading my space."

"Too expensive."

"Can't help that. I want it out of my yard."

Tom smirked, uncrossed his arms and moved as if to go inside. "I won't be cutting the tree, Cindy."

"Okay, the tree trimmers will be here Friday."

"You can't you do that."

"Yes, I can as long as I put the branches in your yard. Can't have you accusing me of stealing."

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With that she headed down his drive.

“You’re not dumping the branches in my yard. I don’t want them,” he called after her.

She felt great. Powerful. She’d wiped that smirk off his face. What a jerk!

Friday, Greenleaf Tree Company arrived at Cindy’s with cherry picker truck and wood chipper.

“Cut the tree straight off at the fence line,” she told the foreman. “No fancy shaping or anything. Just cut this bugger right back and off my property from the ground to the top.”

“You want we put branches through chipper, yes?”

Cindy nodded towards Tom’s. “They don’t belong to me. Throw them in his yard.”

Tom, red-faced and fuming, hurried over. “I told *you* I don’t want the friggin’ branches. You’re ruining my tree, you crazy bitch!”

Cindy lifted her chin. “*You* ruined it by not taking care of business.”

He yelled at the foreman, “Chip ’em” and stormed off.

The following week was windy, with gusts up to fifty miles an hour. Cindy sat in her rocking chair on the lanai, enjoying a coffee and listening to the swish and swoosh of her trees. She heard a loud splintering crash, plunked her coffee mug on the table and stood at the screen door, checking her yard. She saw nothing, but went outside, fly swatter in hand to find her cats.

Calling her pets, she walked toward the back of her lot, left overgrown to help wildlife. A tall slash pine in Tom’s lot sported a white gash where a large branch had snapped off. She heard a groan. Tom’s lot was neglected and overgrown, but curious about the groan, she squeezed through the gap in Tom’s fence.

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“What the hell am I doing here?” she said, pulling sticky seeds and burrs from her capris. Behind a large palmetto bush, she discovered Tom’s barely conscious body. A bloody wound on his forehead showed where the heavy branch had hit him when it fell. Cindy was jubilant. There is a God! She studied Tom’s prostrate form then whacked his face with her fly swat. “Take that, you bastard!”

She stomped home and rummaged in her garage. Standing over Tom once again, Cindy looked at him impassively and raised the hammer. She hesitated. Lowered the hammer and returned to her garage, where she swapped it for a box cutter.

“Better. Leaves no clues.”

“This is for making my life hell, loser,” Cindy said, bending over Tom. She nicked his carotid artery and watched the blood spray. “Just desserts, Tom. Just desserts.”

At her well, she hosed Tom’s blood from her clothes, then the box-cutter blade. She rinsed it in bleach, then water again and returned it to her garage. She stripped naked, threw clothes and flip-flops in the washing machine with a touch of bleach.

A quick shower later, Cindy heated her cold coffee in the microwave and settled down on the lanai. It didn’t take long. The first one flew in after forty-five minutes. Soon, a host of sharp beaks were tearing at Tom’s corpse. “Clean up the crime scene, boys.” The nick in Tom’s flesh would soon be gone. An indentation in the skull from a hammer would have been evidence of foul play. An avid fan of crime scene investigation programs, Cindy knew what was what.

She had gotten away with killing her husband Brad. Fifteen dollars was all it took for belladonna seeds, a few months to grow them, a dozen berries blended into his smoothie and, voilà, he was dead. She’d begun planning it when the abuse started. She had taken out life insurance on him; worked out in the gym to build her strength; told friends and work colleagues

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that she thought Brad was cheating on her, thought he was going to leave her; had grown the belladonna and two years later, when he breathed his last, she wrapped him in a blanket. Under cover of night, she almost killed herself with the effort of dragging his dead weight to a hole she had already dug hidden in the undergrowth at the bottom of Tom's lot. Then she had disposed of Brad's truck, clothes and belongings in a water filled quarry. Dog-tired, she barely managed the twenty-mile cycle ride home. In seven years, she would have him declared dead and claim the substantial life insurance. The police had found no evidence of foul play.

Next day, Jorge arrived to work in her yard. Cindy took him a mug of coffee as he finished picking up pine cones before cutting the grass.

"Many vultures next door," he said.

Cindy handed him the coffee. "Probably a dead animal."

"It stinks." Jorge finished his coffee and handed her his mug. "I'll check."

Panic stopped her breath. How much of Tom's body would remain?

She ran after Jorge.

Jorge looked back, his face pale. "Go back, Miss Cindy. There is a dead man. It is bad."

He pulled out his phone and called the police. "There is a dead body, next door, in the yard. Si. I am at 3577 16th Street SW. Bueno."

Jorge took her arm. "Not good. Eaten by vultures."

She shook off his arm. "Jorge, I want to see if it's Tom, my neighbor." They approached the body, hands covering noses. The vultures hopped away from their prize.

Tom's skull and bones gleamed white among the gore.

Cindy acted distressed. "Oh no, poor Tom!"

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Satisfied, she let Jorge lead her home. Another chore taken care of. If the police found any trace of her at the scene, she could explain it by saying she went with Jorge after Tom was discovered.

Tense and anxious with the police snooping around making inquiries, swatting flies filled Cindy's days. However, she was only briefly questioned by detectives. It was obvious he had been hit by the branch. With no evidence of foul play, Tom's death was ruled an accident.