

**Heart-Shaped Box**  
By APRIL HENRY

**PUZZLD?**

At the end of each chapter and sprinkled throughout the book, you will find a vanity license plate puzzler. See if you can decode these hidden messages. Look for the glossary key at the end of the book to check your detective work.

## Chapter One

Friday, July 2, 11:43 p.m.

### South parking lot for the Ye Olde Pioneer Village Theme Park

Like the long stem of a flower, her neck curved away from him. He hesitated, then softly kissed Cindy's nape, just where the tousled blond curls began. How many times had he kissed her there, at just that very spot? She was finally quiet in his embrace. As if in a dream, he gave her shoulders a squeeze, feeling the press of her open lips against the palm of his other hand.

But his body remembered what had happened, even as his mind shied away from the terrible weight of the truth. His heart hammered like a fist in his chest, reminding him of where he was, of what had happened.

When he said her name again, it came out a whisper. "Cindy?"

No answer. He had to let go, to face what he already knew. His arms loosened. Cindy (what was her last name now? Perez or something like that?) sprawled on the blacktop, her body half-turning as she fell. Her denim mini-skirt - Cindy's interpretation of tonight's western theme - hiked up, exposing slim, tanned thighs.

He was afraid to look at her face, but when he finally did he found that in the faint, filtered light she didn't look too bad. Her eyes were half-open, and the tip of her tongue protruded between her teeth, but otherwise her expression was oddly calm.

He stared down at her, surprised by the speed of death. Unbidden, memories swamped him. The naughty smile Cindy used to give him, grinning up from the shelter of his arm, her lids at a knowing half-mast. The magpie way she collected things - shiny

jewelry, dozens of shoes, pretty clothes, pretty boys. Now a single sob escaped him. He clamped his hand over his own mouth, silencing himself the way he had so recently silenced Cindy.

His mind was racing now, faster and faster, as he calculated what he must do. Leaning down, he grabbed the lapels of her yoked red satin western shirt and pulled. To his ears, the sound of the pearl snaps popping open was as loud as gunfire. Underneath, Cindy wore a bronze-colored satin push-up bra. He remembered how she used to go braless. Avoiding contact with her skin, he tugged her skirt up further. He lifted his head and listened. Nothing more than the thrum of distant traffic. Her purse was within arm's reach. Grabbing her wallet, he got to his feet and stumbled off.

Cindy Sanchez had never been comfortable with silence, but now she lay quietly on her back in the overflow parking lot of Ye Olde Pioneer Village. Her blue eyes were still open, but filmed with dullness. The bright blood that was layered over her red lipstick was already beginning to brown as it dried.

Forgotten in her uncurling fingers, manicured to sharp crimson points, was a little wooden box. A heart-shaped box.