

*Why would someone burn down kennels and murder a kindly old caretaker at a no-kill animal shelter? Cheater's Lake, Washington, Homicide Detective Mark Walsh must solve the crimes. If successful, the shelter's back in business. Failure= cat-astrophic!*

## **MURDER AT THE NO-KILL ANIMAL SHELTER**

By Judith Ayn

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*A Cheater's Lake Mystery*

# Murder at the No-Kill Animal Shelter



Judith Ayn

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## Chapter One

The only spot of color in the muddied driveway near the kennels, or what remained of them, was a blue tarp under the body. Cheater's Lake Homicide Detective Mark Walsh knelt on the wet ground, then bent closer to examine the old man's bearded face.

"This is Carson Butts," Officer Sharon Laskey said in a loud voice to be heard over the nearby fire truck engines. "The caretaker for the shelter according to one of the witnesses." She scraped mud from her boots on a nearby rock.

Walsh rose to his full six-four height and surveyed the area. The small soggy yard contained two run-down wooden buildings, reduced to little more than their foundations. Further down the driveway closer to the road stood a tiny brick house with a large Cheater's Lake Animal Rescue sign across its upper front.

Wisps of gray ash swirled in the air as a soft but steady rain fell. Springtime in Washington state, weather-wise the same as summer, fall and winter.

"There doesn't seem to be a mark on him. How'd he die?"

"Maybe smoke inhalation from the fire?" Laskey stepped aside as a firefighter deftly wrangled a huge hose and dragged it back to one of the trucks. She pulled a glove off and retied her light brown hair through the back of a Mariners baseball cap. Shorter than Walsh and a few years younger than his early thirties, Laskey was dressed in dark

jeans and a waterproof jacket. Grocery shopping when dispatch called her to the scene, there'd been no time to change.

Across from the burned structures a variety of cars, trucks and vans lined up. Volunteers struggled with cages and carriers loading dogs, cats, birds, rabbits and other orphans for transport. Creatures complained in barks, meows and hisses, while a few voices shouted directions.

“Where do the animals go now?” Walsh asked.

Laskey sighed. “To other shelters within a hundred miles. As if these poor things weren't traumatized enough being here. Dammit! What kind of monster burns down an animal refuge trying to help unwanted pets? And why kill an old caretaker?”

“Questions we get to answer.” Walsh nodded in the direction of crime scene personnel working the grounds.

“While they gather evidence, let's check behind the buildings.”

The two of them walked around the back of the kennels and followed a swampy path into thick woods. After a few minutes slog through the muck, they came upon a tiny clearing. A rough campsite set up with a circle of stones for a cook fire also contained a beat-up aluminum pan nearby. In addition, a tattered one-man pup tent and neon yellow sleeping bag were stashed against a tree trunk. Their search turned up no campers in the area.

Before they headed back, Laskey snapped photos with her phone and noted the GPS coordinates. “Why camp here?”

Walsh shook his head. “Add it to the other mysteries. The techs can check this out, too.” He shivered as raindrops slid inside his collar. “Let's get out of here.”

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A half mile away from the fire scene, DM Collins, founder and director of the animal rescue, sat at the kitchen table of her cozy cedar-clad ranch home. As she sipped black coffee from an oversize mug embossed *Animal Rescue Rocks*, her German shepherd, Henry, rested his large black head on her feet.

Someone killed her gentle caretaker and destroyed the animal refuge she'd worked so hard to establish. She was determined that someone would be caught and punished if it took every dime DM had to make that happen. And thanks to her late husband, there were many, many dimes in her bank account.

Was this personal? DM ran through a list of enemies she'd made over the years. Admittedly, a short one, but no one got through life unscathed. She didn't plan to offer names to the police until she'd investigated on her own.

So, was this all done to make a political point? An animal extremist group looking for publicity? But what point could they make? That unwanted animals shouldn't be saved? And why both arson and murder?

DM refilled her cup. Could an enemy of Carson's be the culprit? Again, he'd lived and worked on the property for a decade, so why would someone kill him now?

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The woman's attention turned to the strikingly handsome Detective Walsh seated across from her. Thick dark hair, blue eyes, strong jaw. She was forty-plus and he was easily a decade younger but definitely yummy. Unfortunately, this was not the time for flirting.

Walsh didn't waste time on small talk. "Ms. Collins, what do you know about your caretaker, Mr. Butts?"

“It’s DM, Detective. Carson worked at the shelter from the time I opened it. Very quiet guy, no outside life. I hired him to clean the kennels at first, but he was so good with the animals, he eventually became the all-around caretaker.”

Laskey stirred her coffee. “How did he apply for the job?”

“He didn’t actually apply. He just showed up during construction and we began talking. I liked him and decided to give him a try.” DM rose and brought a plate of pastries to the table.

“Is that how you usually hire employees?” Walsh asked, eyebrow raised. He bit into an apple turnover. Delicious.

DM laughed. “You might not approve, Detective, but I’m generally right-on about the people I hire. Anyway, I can’t add much about Carson. He never left the property and didn’t have any visitors. His only hobby that I know of was fishing on Sunday mornings.”

“Do you know where he lived before, where he came from?” Laskey’s pen was poised over her notebook.

“Nope, sorry. A slight accent that sounded Southern, but he never talked about himself and I didn’t push. As I said, he was good with the animals, and that’s always been my major concern with people I hire.”

Walsh changed the subject. “How far does your land extend from the shelter?”

“I own sixty acres. Have you found something on the property?”

Officer Laskey leaned closer to DM and thumbed her cell. “Somebody’s camping about a half mile from the shelter. Did you give permission for that?”

She swiped the campsite scenes. “No. I don’t recognize anything here.”

Walsh uncrossed his long legs. “Our crime scene people have been out there. So far, it appears to be a lone camper. This stretch of land seems pretty deserted, except for your shelter and this house.”

“I know and that’s why I bought it, for the peace and quiet of the woods. The only drawback for me living in the Pacific Northwest is the days are short in the spring and it gets dark so early.” DM switched on another lamp. “I don’t understand what happened at the shelter, none of it.”

“Do you have anywhere else you could stay?” Laskey asked as she put her phone away. “This house may not be safe for you.”

DM sighed and pointed to Henry, fully alert and standing in front of her. “I have protection, so I’ll be fine.”

“Can you think of anyone at all who has a grudge against you? Any social media trolls?” Walsh asked.

“No, Detective.” She rubbed her eyes. “People are more upset with the high-kill shelters. A no-kill shelter costs a lot more to run because virtually every animal is promised a home till they can be fostered, adopted or pass away. Social media hasn’t been a worry for us. We use it for adoptions all the time.”

Walsh and Laskey asked a few more questions then left DM to her musings.

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The arsonist took a long hot shower. He changed into sweats, grabbed a cold beer and plopped onto his faux leather recliner. His lip curled as he thought of Collins. Bitch got what she deserved. He picked up an oily rag and methodically cleaned several guns on the battered coffee table.

As he washed his hands, of course, his cell rang. “Yup.” He grabbed a dish towel to dry off and put the call on speaker.

“You idiot!” a man’s shouted voice. “The caretaker died. Simple arson’s murder now.”



“I didn’t kill him! He got in the way, Tony. He came at my back when I was pouring the gasoline, trying to stop me. I punched him and he fell on the ground, out cold. Since he couldn’t see my face under the mask, I left him there. The fire did the job. I expect the money in my account within the hour.”

The voice was so loud it echoed around the living room. “I told you before — don’t use names on the phone! Who camped out close to the shelter? Did you miss that little detail, too?”

“What? What are you talking about? There wasn’t anyone else around.” He kicked the edge of the table. “Goddammit!”

“Well, there was, moron. So, don’t expect the second half of your payment just yet. You gotta make sure you didn’t leave a boy scout witness out there.” The call ended.

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Walsh and Laskey met in the Cheater’s Lake PD conference room. The two examined printouts after they grabbed sandwiches and hot drinks.

“I have a friend, Greg Hogan, retired San Diego PD, who’s opening a PI business. He’s looking into the background of the deceased caretaker as a favor to me. All we know so far, he’s got no criminal history.” Walsh pinned a driver’s license photo of Butts on the wall’s whiteboard.

Laskey opened a bag of chips. “In the meantime, the medical examiner promised a report by tomorrow.”

Walsh took a couple of sheets of paper from Laskey and opened the blinds in the room. “What’d you find on Collins? Besides the local scuttlebutt because she’s wealthy.”

“Daisy Marigold,” Laskey laughed, “was brought up in Oregon by parents who lived off the grid, homeschooled, etc. When she turned

eighteen, she fled to the big city of Seattle, met a much older man and married him. After a few years, he developed inoperable cancer, leaving her a very well-off widow.”

Walsh pinned Collins’ current driver’s license photo on the board. She was a redhead with green eyes. The picture didn’t do justice to the attractive, petite woman they’d interviewed. He might ask her out after the case was closed.

“DM, legal name change, got into animal welfare.” Laskey popped a peanut butter cookie in her mouth and tossed her paper plate in the trash. “At first, she financially backed a vet clinic and private shelter, then built the no-kill she runs now. Along the way, she bought a bunch of real estate in Washington state, most of it rural and undeveloped. She’s pioneered prison programs for therapy dog training and has another site on her land planned out for classes on personal security animals. That’s due to open sometime soon.”

“We’ll have to search for any large insurance policies on the place. Any unhappy step-children or business partners gunning for her?” Walsh asked.

“No one’s surfaced yet. I’ll keep checking.” Laskey drained the last of the coffee pot.

“It’s too early for the Fire Marshal’s report, although the chief told me he suspects arson. Evidence techs have their hands full. Let’s split this pile and sift through the 911 calls and witness statements.” Walsh filled his cup with hot water and dropped in a teabag.

They walked back to their offices to search for more answers on the mysterious Mr. Butts and the fire.

## Chapter Two

In the early morning hours before dawn, two cats awoke to loud sounds at the opening end of their cave. A man dragged himself inside, slumped against one of the walls and swore as he wedged himself into place. A few minutes later, noise from his nose rattled the air.

Orange Cat padded quietly over to the rumpled form. The man smelled like fire and something else that made her one eye water. Suddenly, he sat up and noticed her.

“Get away from me or I’ll break your neck!” he yelled. He threw a rock in her direction, spit and laid back down again. Soon the rattling noise resumed.

The kitten fled to Gray Cat and hid behind him. When nighttime came, the man was gone.

## Chapter Three

Detective Walsh switched off his pickup truck's engine. The animal shelter grounds were covered in several inches of thick mud thanks to days of constant rain. Walsh's boots pulled with each step as he methodically checked around the burned buildings, then headed behind them for another look into the surrounding woods.

No useful evidence had been recovered at the deserted campsite he and Laskey discovered, but he had a strange feeling they all missed something. He circled the same site, but nothing special drew his attention.

Walsh sighed, pulled his waterproof hood tighter. He slipped and slid as he followed a narrow deer path deeper into thick stands of trees and brush. The wind lessened and eerie sounds floated on the air from a northerly direction. For half an hour he pushed on, then emerged from the trees into a place full of rocks and boulders. No signs of camping, but the noise he'd heard was more distinct. Howling, animals in distress.

After a few more minutes, Walsh investigated a small slit between two giant boulders and found a cave. He lowered his head and half-crept inside. Pitiful crying echoed and two pairs of green eyes blinked when the police flashlight penetrated the darkness. Momentary silence.

Two lumps, one small, one much larger. Both drenched, gray black with soot, shivering. Somehow weak, yet furious enough to hiss and spit when he approached.

“Hey, guys.” Walsh used his softest voice. “You’ll be okay. There’s still animal people from the shelter who can help you.” He reached for the smaller lump first, rewarded for his efforts with a razor-sharp swipe which bloodied his hand.

A string of loud curses followed. The cats backed themselves further against the stone walls. “I can’t believe you did that!” Walsh used tissues to stem the bleeding. “You can’t stay here, so like it or not, I’m getting you out.” He took a deep breath and calmed himself.

The detective grabbed the smaller cat by the scruff of the neck and placed it in his jacket pocket. The cat half-heartedly struggled as Walsh zipped the pocket mostly closed. Then he removed the jacket, set it on the stone floor and shrugged off his down vest. The larger cat fought valiantly but was soon swathed securely in the vest and held against Walsh’s chest. The rain jacket back on, the threesome left the cave huddled together for the long slog back to Walsh’s truck.

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A short drive away from the shelter, Walsh rang the doorbell of Director DM Collins’ home. In his arms he clutched a small box with crudely punched air holes. Beside his feet sat a similar box, three times larger than the first.

She held the door open and motioned Walsh inside. Once he’d set the boxes on the floor, she handed him a cup of coffee. “Is there news about Carson or the fire?”

Walsh shook his head. “Not yet. Can someone take these two cats? They look kind of rough.” He gently slid the makeshift carriers over to her with his foot.

She moved across the room, away from him and the boxes, to a floral couch. “Where did you find them? Never mind. I can’t help you.” DM pointed to the window overlooking a big yard where a group of dogs played. “With six large dogs crammed in here, cats wouldn’t be safe. I’ll fix you up with a litter box and food. They can go home with you.”

“Me? What I know about cats wouldn’t fill a thimble,” Walsh protested and rose to leave.

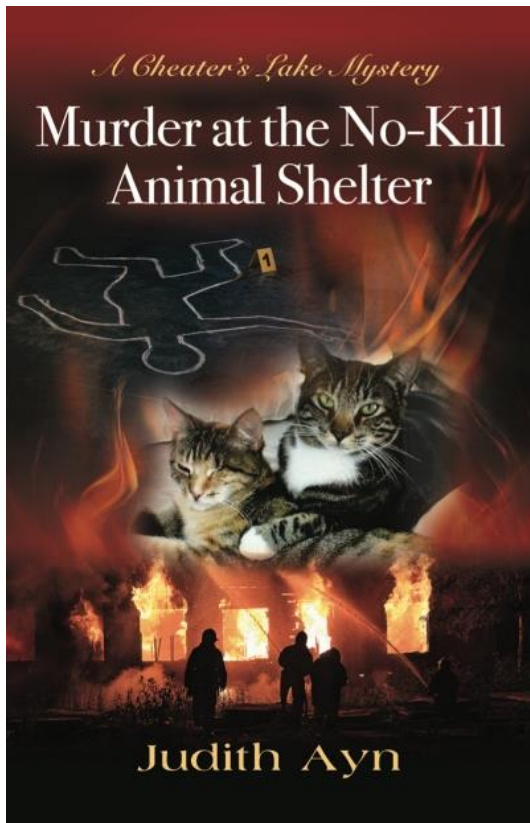
“Then take them to the nearest shelter you can find. I expect they’ll be euthanized by tomorrow.”

Walsh stared at her. “You’d let them be killed?”

DM shook her head. “I run one of the few no-kill shelters around. Or, I did. Unfortunately, there isn’t another one close by anywhere. The others do what they can, but they’ve got the rest of the animals from my shelter now, too. I can’t just this minute miraculously take in more with Carson murdered, the kennels burned down and a criminal investigation that’ll tie us up forever.” Tears welled in her eyes. “Please, Detective. Take them with you.”

Great! Again, what did he know about taking care of cats?

At home, Walsh set the litter box up in his guest bathroom. He filled two small bowls with canned slop, another with dry food and a big bowl full of water. Both cats disappeared as soon as he opened their cardboard carriers. Muttering to himself about felines in general, he took a shower and dropped into bed.



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