

DEAD LAWYERS, is a humorous mystery set in the fictional world of Cheater's Lake, Washington. Local lawyers are dropping like flies, bodies turn up in unlikely settings and others connected to the legal biz disappear! Read on!

DEAD LAWYERS

By Judith Ayn


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A CHEATER'S LAKE MYSTERY

DEAD LAWYERS



"The storytelling in this novel is compelling...the premise is creative and fresh."

— BookLife, Publishers Weekly

Judith Ayn

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Chapter One

Previously ...

(Wednesday before Thanksgiving/November 22)

Cheater's Lake Police Detective Mark Walsh rose from the customized leather chair, knocking an empty cup to the floor as he stretched his six-four frame. Shoeless, he stubbed his small toe on a bookcase, muttered a curse and limped over to close the window letting in the rain.

His office overlooked Main Street and the new municipal center, a view repeated in the pastel painting hung behind his whitewashed oak desk. Despite heavy rain and winds, the town below bustled with activity as residents headed for restaurants and bars to start the long holiday weekend.

Mark would be on duty all four days, his third Thanksgiving since transferring from the dry heat of Phoenix to the soggy Pacific Northwest. Four years ago, on another Wednesday before the holiday, his marriage ended, courtesy of a depressingly familiar old tale. He arrived home early from work, walked into the bedroom and found his wife in their bed with his "superior" officer.

Immediately, he turned around, left the house and drove his pickup truck south. His best friend, Greg Hogan, retired San Diego Police Detective, lent his spare bedroom and got him through the next horrendous few weeks. Mark spent every day on his laptop searching for a new law enforcement position, as far away from Phoenix as possible. By some miracle, he stumbled across Cheater's Lake, Washington, which definitely met the distance requirement.

He'd been intrigued by the history of the town he read about on the Internet.

In the 1940s, an area of land seventy miles northwest of Seattle, Washington, consisted of little more than a lake surrounded by undeveloped woods. No towns, only makeshift cabins built helter-skelter around hit-or-miss fishing holes. Over the years, bored fishermen played poker for increasingly big pots. Soon, loud whispers circulated of serious money to be won, along with illegal liquor and abundant available women to spice up the games.

One successful player looked up from his cards long enough to notice prime real estate on the waterfront. The Delite family patriarch set things in motion to develop the land. Cheater's Lake was born.

Mayor Dick Delite himself, proud grandson of the town's founder, recruited and hired Mark, over the objections of his own police chief, Terrence Riley. The job began on the first day of the new year. Since then, the detective stayed away from town politics and worked hard to win over Riley, with mixed results. Additional years with the chief hadn't yielded much warmth or support for Mark in his job, but he managed to go with the flow and keep his nose clean, for the most part.

As he watched the rain, he realized again how little he missed the big city of Phoenix, even though he'd grown up there. Mark also shed no tears over his ex-wife. Overall, the move north suited him, at least most of the time.

Cheater's Lake had quadrupled in size in the last decade, along with an increased crime rate, but not in Mark's specialty, homicides. The new community college now scheduled to open in a few months would also be a game changer. A modern police headquarters and staff additions were moves in the right direction. He had managed to earn himself a pretty good reputation as a competent detective and was fairly convinced there was a future for him in the town.

Basically, the way Mark saw things, except for the lack of female companionship, he was settling into a comfortable life in Cheater's Lake.

He'd pulled on his raincoat, straightened the desk and was ready to leave when his cell rang.

"Hey, Markie," Greg said, "or should I say, Happy Thanksgiving, turkey?"

Mark groaned. "What's up?"

“Just checking in. I suppose you’re working the holiday, as usual?”

“You know me so well. What’re your plans?”

“Pizza, football.” Greg laughed. “Next year I expect to have a drop-dead gorgeous woman cooking me a feast. Maybe she’ll even have a sweet, younger sister for you. How’s the weather up there?”

“Seventy, sunny, breezy.” Mark rolled his eyes.

“Liar. The Weather Channel advises rowboats. Stay safe, Markie, and call if you get bored.”

Mark pocketed his phone and shut his office door.

In the department parking lot outside, the wind gusts were so strong, he had to hold onto his driver’s side door for an anchor. He finally managed to angle himself inside the pickup.

Starting his truck, Mark reviewed a scribbled, damp grocery list and headed for the 24/7 chain store. He snagged kitty litter, cat food, herbal tea and the last frozen turkey pot pie. Except for the pie, he needed the other three items on most trips, regardless of weather, the time of day, or his exhaustion from long hours. At least he’d eaten a leftover sandwich for lunch and the Maalox managed to keep his stomach calm.

After his stop for necessities, Mark drove cautiously through town, calling into Dispatch when he spotted downed trees in residential areas. There was always the possibility of live power lines tangled up in the branches and drivers unknowingly making contact, especially in such low visibility.

Luckily, his small two-bedroom home was close to work. Dark green, ranch-style, it was an ongoing project he attacked one major undertaking at a time. A new roof, furnace and wood floors throughout made the place livable. Next would come painting each room, installing better windows, and in the spring, attacking a neglected spacious yard.

Mark eased the truck through puddles in the driveway, glad to see his house lights shining thanks to a new timer. As he opened the heavy wooden front door, Fred and Ethel, two rescue cats, streaked out and wrapped around his legs in greeting.

Ethel, marmalade colored, possessed one eye and diva attitude. Fred, three times her size, a gray striped tabby with large, rabbit-like

feet, thought himself still a kitten and tended to run headlong into human ankles and heavy furniture. The two meowed in their own peculiar quasi-Siamese language and led him to the kitchen, demanding to be fed. Mark opened a can of tuna for them and freshened their litter box.

After an evening of watching mindless television, he checked doors and windows and fell into bed, instantly asleep.

Chapter Two

(Thursday/Thanksgiving/November 23)

A few minutes past midnight, in the seedier part of Cheater's Lake, Attorney Tom Kendall nursed a beer while he waited to meet a mysterious new client. He'd gotten a call at the office after five from a woman begging for his help, promising to pay a \$5,000 retainer. She wouldn't take no for an answer and hung up when he tried to protest the time and place she'd suggested. He'd debated coming but the money was a good chunk of dough and he needed it.

None of the few souls populating Pete's Pool Hall showed interest in Kendall. Country music thumped as he shelled peanuts, squinting through the politically incorrect haze of cigarette smoke to watch a pool game between two old timers, who played without speaking. Finally, they finished and left.

"Hey, honey, how about some action later?" he asked a bleached blonde, tee-shirted waitress clearing the table beside his. She never made eye contact as she swept plastic glasses and napkins into a cracked rubber bucket. Her middle finger emphasized the point as she sashayed back to the kitchen.

"Doesn't know what she's missing," Kendall addressed the room. He tucked his shirt back into wrinkled khaki dress pants and smiled at the bartender to get her attention. Despite crooked teeth, shaggy hair hanging over his collar and a sprinkling of dandruff, Kendall still firmly believed he was attractive to the opposite sex.

The only other customer sat hunched over a bar stool, muttering to himself, several empty beer mugs and an overflowing ashtray in front of his gesturing hands.

The bartender followed the waitress, disappearing into the kitchen, leaving the attorney and the drunk to fend for themselves.

Where in hell was the new client? Kendall gnawed his fingernails. He didn't want to be professionally brushed off, too. The black wall clock showed 1:00 a.m. He decided to give the woman ten more minutes.

The flimsy front door patched with aluminum cutouts banged open, pulling in fresh cold air. Mayor Dick Delite, close to six feet tall and nearly as wide, strode directly toward Kendall, accompanied by two business-suited associates in dark glasses.

"Hello, Mr. Mayor," the lawyer said affably to the redheaded politician. "It's always a pleasure. What brings you out tonight?"

Scowling, Delite approached Kendall with a bark. "And just what are you trying to pull, you sorry ambulance chaser? If you think you're gonna shake me down, you little pansy, you've got another thing coming.

"I got a re-election campaign coming up and I don't intend to be seen anywhere in public with the likes of you. How dare you demand I meet you here at midnight? Who do you think you're dealing with?"

"Ah, D-D-Dick, the attorney said, "I left a message I needed to talk to you Monday about some paperwork – honest. I didn't ask you to meet me here."

"Like hell you didn't. I heard the message myself. You said you'd go to the newspapers if I didn't show up." The mayor's stomach bumped up against Kendall and jiggled as he jabbed his finger into the attorney's chest.

"Come on, Dick, you know me. I keep secrets. It's my job," Kendall said. "I wouldn't go to the papers. Let's be reasonable about this."

One of the mayor's companions opened his coat to let the attorney enjoy the view of a gun in his shoulder holster. He nodded to the door, then cold hard steel pressed against Kendall's spine.

"Hey, wait, you guys got this all wrong! I never made the call. Some woman asked me to meet her here tonight for a case. Dick, you believe me, don't you?" Kendall shouted, hoping someone would pay attention to his predicament.

His hands flailed in the air as he struggled against the big goon prodding him forward. He was desperate to explain. "Somebody's

setting us up. Please, Dick, we've got history. You don't want to do this. You have the wrong guy!"

The drunk never looked up to see Kendall's exit from the bar. Only one other would witness his permanent departure from Cheater's Lake.

Chapter Three

(Friday/November 24)

The day dawned overcast and cool, the last of the night's rain dripping from the trees in her small courtyard. Agnes Perkins sipped fresh brewed Kona coffee in the quiet apartment kitchen, yawning as she wrote a list of errands. Her daughter, Celia, eighteen, was away at a friend's for the rest of the holiday weekend. She'd be entering community college soon, which meant Agnes had to budget and plan carefully to make it all possible.

She savored a second cup, the aroma reminiscent of sunshine and a former life in California. Her bones were beginning to ache from the constant dampness of the Pacific Northwest. The phone's ringing startled her.

"Hello, Margaret, is that you?" All she could hear was her friend's whispering voice that sounded very distant.

"Agnes, you have to help me. I don't think we're safe here."

"Margaret, where are you? I can hardly hear you –"

"I'm at Mr. Kendall's office with Mother. I was trying to get caught up on month-end bills and looking for old notebooks. Someone's broken in. They could still be here." Margaret choked on a sob.

"I'll use Celia's line to call 911. Don't hang up, okay?" Agnes ran to her daughter's bedroom, grabbed the cordless and punched in the numbers. She rattled off Kendall's address and hung up. When she returned to the kitchen, the line to Margaret was dead.

Still in sweats, Agnes gathered car keys and sped the few miles to Kendall's office. A police cruiser was already there when she arrived. Lights ablaze, radio at full volume, the squad car was parked completely blocking the driveway to the attorney's building.

The one-story house contained four rooms, split into two office suites, shared between Kendall and a bail bondsman. Peeling gray paint, faded mustard yellow trim, patchy grass and a simple sign announced Lawyer and Bail. The only splash of color, pots of flowers Margaret set out each spring.

“Margaret, it’s Agnes,” she called, gazing around at the damage to the reception area. File drawers, folders and papers covered the green shag rug. Broken coffee mugs lay smashed against the fireplace, along with plants Margaret had carefully tended. The secretarial desk was overturned, a client chair and orange upholstered couch slit open, their white stuffing spread like snow. No one was in the front area of the house. Sounds of a squawking police radio and male voices drifted through the open doorway. “Is anyone here?” Agnes tried again.

A young male police officer appeared in the hallway. “I’m the one who called 911,” Agnes said. He motioned her back to Kendall’s private office. Stepping gingerly over yet more papers and debris, she joined Margaret and her mother in the wood-paneled room.

After showing the police officer her license for identification, Agnes hugged the two women. Margaret’s mother, Betty, hummed and nodded in Agnes’ direction, clearly oblivious to her daughter’s distress. Margaret was pale and teary-eyed.

“Agnes, thank God you’re here. Look what someone’s done to this office. Mr. Kendall will be so upset.”

“Let’s get you and your mom home,” Agnes said. “Can they go now?”

“Everything seems to be under control. Unfortunately, break-ins aren’t rare around here,” the older officer said. “I may have more questions for the ladies later but I’ll call. Better give me your name, address and number, too,” he told Agnes.

She complied, then looped her arm around Margaret and Betty to usher them outside. They lived two blocks from the office and walked over. The ride in Agnes’ car was short and quiet, each preoccupied with her own thoughts.

At the house, Agnes settled Betty down in her bedroom for a nap. In the living room, Margaret’s hands shook as she held the mug of hot tea Agnes brewed. “I can’t imagine why someone would ruin Mr.

Kendall's office. I know there are people who don't care for him, but why destroy his files? Who would do such a thing?"

Agnes thought there were probably countless people who'd enjoy wreaking havoc on Kendall. Criminal defense attorneys weren't well-loved, and Kendall's reputation in town wasn't exactly glowing. She didn't share her thoughts, unwilling to add to Margaret's misery.

"I didn't know if I should tell the police about the car I've seen," Margaret said.

"What car?"

"I think someone's watching me and our house. I don't know what to do."

"What makes you think someone's watching you?" Agnes asked in alarm.

"I'm up every morning before six, with Mother, you know. That's when the newspaper hits the front step," Margaret began. "For the last two mornings a black car has been parked across the street, in front of the empty lot on the corner. The windows are smoky or something and I can't see inside, but today the sun was coming up and the silver trim caught my eye. I know I'm not imagining it. Once I look at it, the car pulls away."

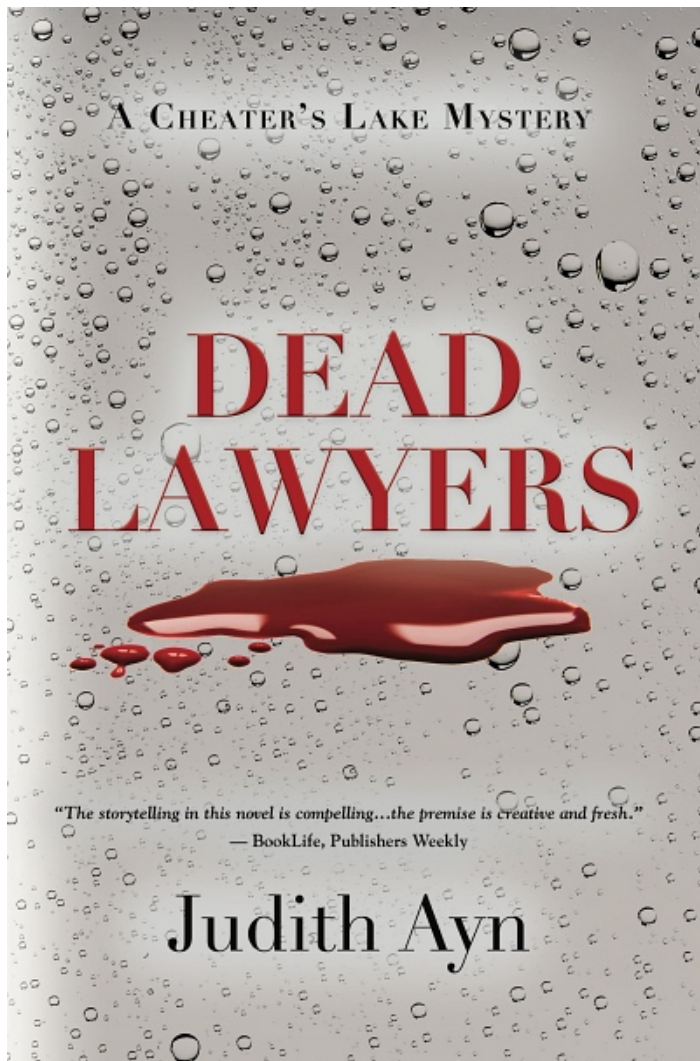
Agnes kept quiet and let Margaret continue.

I couldn't get over what someone had done to the office, so I guess I wasn't much help to the police," Margaret said. "And Mr. Kendall moved into a new condo. I don't even have his new address. I should have had it. But I did try to call him, and all I got was his voicemail."

"Try not to worry about it, Margaret. You and your mother are safe. It's a holiday weekend. Kendall can clean up before you open on Monday. The police will figure out his new address." Agnes tucked a small blanket around Margaret and stayed beside her on the couch until she dozed off. Then she called their mutual friend, Olivia Ortega, speaking softly to her voicemail, describing the morning's events.

At a loss for something to do, Agnes wandered around the small, meticulously kept house. The Baxter women loved birds, and winged creatures were everywhere from wall paintings to pillows, vases and even teacups.

Atop Margaret's small writing desk, Agnes saw a pair of birding binoculars. She gazed out the living room window at the empty lot on the corner. An older model Buick was parked there. Positioning herself at an angle behind a lacy curtain, Agnes focused on the car's license plate, getting the first two characters before the black car suddenly started up, u-turned and bolted away, out of sight. The car was exactly as Margaret had described. Agnes watched her sleeping friend, increasingly afraid for her safety.



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