

*DEAD MERCHANDISE opens in California with the death of six young Mexican girls. The action moves to Seattle, where Homicide Detective Mark Walsh works undercover with the FBI to find newly kidnapped runaways and justice for the victims.*

## **Dead Merchandise**

By Judith Ayn

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A CHEATER'S LAKE MYSTERY

# DEAD MERCHANDISE

*"Ayn's thriller focuses on the hard-hitting topic of sex trafficking and offers a solid blend of action and measured development."*

— BookLife, Publishers Weekly

Judith Ayn

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**Also by Judith Ayn**

DEAD LAWYERS  
MURDER AT THE NO-KILL ANIMAL SHELTER

## One Month Earlier

“It’s your fault we’re stuck with dead ones!” Manny yelled at his partner. “You had to buy this piece of crap van. Lucky it got us up here but now we’re screwed.”

Hank wiped sweat from his forehead, spat into one of the freshly dug shallow graves and let loose a string of curses. “Ah, come on, Manny, you sure we can’t fit two in each hole? They’re kinda small. We’re gonna be here forever!”

Shovels clanged against stones in the rocky soil as the men worked, the sound echoing in the woods surrounding the old, abandoned freeway off-ramp. Somewhere in the distance a dog barked. Faint layers of daylight streaked the sky.

“Hurry up and do what I told you!” Manny yelled again. “We’ve gotta roll before someone gets curious.” He threw his shovel to the ground, stamped around to the back of the van.

“I’m digging as fast as I can.”

Manny reached inside for one of the naked bodies, struggling to grip it with gloved hands. One by one, he dragged and rolled the victims out, then wrapped them in tarps laid on the dirt.

“Here’s the first two.”

Hank continued digging, Manny emptied the van and bodies piled up. They worked in tandem to cover all six with soil, broken tree branches, and finally, assorted rocks.

“I can hear a lot of traffic on the freeway, man. The radiator’s cold now, so let’s get some breakfast.” Hank tamped the last grave and smoothed away the van’s tire tracks with a small tree limb. More perspiration dripped down his face despite the cool morning breeze.

Manny slammed the driver’s door shut and cranked till the engine sputtered, chugged to life.

Hank surveyed the makeshift cemetery one last time and swung himself into the passenger seat. “I’ll call a guy I know to meet at the diner. He’ll bring something to get us back to San Diego and torch what’s left of this clunker.”

“Great.” Manny punched Hank’s arm a little too hard. “Just great. Twenty hours up here, twenty back down, and twenty again with a new shipment. Our buyer will go apeshit with these days wasted.”

Hank rubbed his arm and glared at him. “I didn’t know exhaust leaked in the back. Next time, we’ll stop twice on the way to check the goods.”

“If there is a next time. If our buyer doesn’t kill us first.” Manny gunned the van. It skidded onto the blacktop, just missed the *Welcome to Weed* sign. He pulled the visor down and drove into sunshine.

**PART ONE:  
SAN DIEGO TO SEATTLE**

## Day 1

### **Chula Vista (San Diego), California**

Ana Martinez slipped into the bathroom, locked the door and pulled the shower curtain around for cover. She held her breath as she listened through thin walls. Her new “stepfather,” Manny, banged open the front entrance to the shabby little house and stomped down the hallway in her direction.

Manny barked into his phone, but she couldn’t make out what he was saying. He was a perv she tried to stay away from, usually successfully, but not always. Most of the time he’d be high on something – less aware of where she was or what she was doing.

The way he looked at her, licked his lips when they were in the same room made her sick to her stomach. He “accidentally” came into the bathroom without knocking the first week he moved in, eyed her up and down when she got out of the shower and laughed before leaving. From then on, she double-checked the door every time he was around.

The afternoon had been pleasant before she heard his crappy car backfiring in the driveway. She was in the midst of using her cell phone to practice reading poetry out loud – hoping the sound of her voice would help her memorize the latest two poems for the next library open mic night.

When she heard him outside, Ana stopped pacing around acting out the dramatic parts, and dove into the bathroom. Her forgotten phone lay on the bed still recording.

Miraculously, Manny moved past her bedroom and bathroom without stopping.

In the kitchen, he rifled through the refrigerator, clanked bottles of beer. He was still talking when he went out the back door, letting it slam shut behind him. The engine refused to start at first, but finally



caught on the sixth try. Manny screeched the car out of the yard burning rubber. The house was quiet again.

Ana had just turned eighteen and decided today was the day to leave this hellhole. She'd worked since she was sixteen, helping her mother with rent and food. But since Manny moved in a few months ago, she managed to squirrel away some of her wages and hid the money at a cousin's in San Diego. She had no intention of keeping that a-hole in beer and cigarettes like her mother did. Too bad her mother was an addict always trying to go straight – she'd worked her tail off forever and attempted to be a good parent after Ana's dad died but couldn't fight it – jerks like Manny zeroed in on her. Ana wouldn't follow her example.

The Chula Vista trolley rolled up. Ana boarded it with her duffel bag and bike. After she stopped off at her cousin's to pick up her hidden tips from work, she made it to the San Diego train station and claimed a one-way ticket to Seattle. Along with a free Amtrak pass courtesy of Uncle Joe, her mom's brother who lived in Tijuana, she had two hundred dollars saved to start a new life. It would be a long, grueling two-day trip, but she hoped another cousin, Olivia, could pick her up when she arrived in Washington State.

At the depot an hour early, she paced around and figured she'd get back to her poetry. She inserted her ear buds. When she heard Manny's recorded voice, she nearly doubled over.

"No one gives a fuck about dead Mexicans," Manny said, "especially young girls who keep their legs open for anyone who'll pay."

He laughed and paused to listen to the person he'd called.

"Yeah, you shoulda checked the air in the cargo space so they didn't end up dead. They're valuable merchandise to our friends up north. The next shipment to Cameron's due for Sunday. Don't mess it up when

you package them this time or we'll both be in trouble. I need the dough and I'm not covering your ass again."

This explained how Manny came into a chunk of money once a month and the household was temporarily flush with cash. Ana broke into a cold sweat, ran to the lady's room to throw up. She had to get out of town NOW and never come back, before he decided she'd become one of his girls.

Other people lined up outside and she joined them, keeping a lookout for anyone who resembled Manny. Luckily, the train was on time. She surveyed the station again as the line began to move. So far, so good.

Once inside the train, Ana found a window seat and watched San Diego slide away, missing it already. A family of three sat down in her area and tried to engage with her.

"Where are you headed today?" the mother in the group asked.

Ana shook her head and muttered *no comprende*. Her balled-up jacket served as a pillow. She turned away and napped on and off as the train wended its way up the northern coast.

Thanks to non-stop talking all around her, Ana couldn't sleep any more when the lights dimmed just before midnight. On top of that, she'd deliberately kept her phone off, but Manny's voice continued playing in her head. Maybe Olivia could give the recording to a cop, since she was some kind of lawyer or something. Maybe there was someone somewhere who could help stop the next shipment of young girls. There just had to be.

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### **Cheater's Lake, Washington**

Her screams woke him. Big tough Homicide Detective Mark Walsh sat straight up in his king-sized bed, breath stopped, heart pounding, sweat coating his naked body. Olivia was hurt and he had to help her.

He fumbled around for the bedside lamp and managed to knock it off the table. Finally, the room was lit.

He was alone, of course. No warm luscious body next to his with the scent of honeysuckle, no curtain of soft dark hair draped over him, no damsel in distress for now, at least not at this address. He'd always hated that lamp. He grabbed it and threw it across the room into the wall. It shattered magnificently – a nice direct hit.

Four o'clock in the morning and wide awake, wonderful. Groaning, he gingerly pulled on running sweats, the shirt material caught against raised scars. The dull pain of healing chest wounds returned him in an instant to Olivia's kidnapping and what he considered his less than heroic rescue of her. Mark struggled with shoes and socks, finished dressing.

Fred and Ethel, his two rescue cats, cautiously crept back onto the bed, sensing the excitement was over for now. Mark grabbed a windbreaker and assured the fat gray tabby and thin calico he'd be back soon. They each licked various body parts and ignored him.

August in Washington meant the sun shone all day, when it deigned to appear, till ten in the evening. Bedtime last night happened after a dinner of bacon and eggs near midnight. He couldn't sleep when it was still light out, or when he was physically exhausted, or when his mind wouldn't quit obsessing, or lately, just about any time he consciously tried closing his eyes.

A foggy, cool morning, but comfortable. This time of year perfect for solitary running and trying to clear his head – no one else in the neighborhood up this early. Not even a newspaper delivery for a couple more hours.

He managed to remember his phone. When he stopped at the halfway point of two miles right at the Cheater's Lake sign, he checked for messages. Olivia called last night, and he'd missed it, probably half-doing to a sports recap on TV.

“Mark, how are you? We haven’t spoken for a while. Please call me.” As she hung up, she added, “I miss you.” Her voice sounded strained.

Six months ago, they were both in the hospital. She, with a concussion and badly broken leg – he, with internal damage from two bullets in the chest. If he could kill Dan Turner again, he’d do it over and over and over. One quick and painless death did not atone for either the nightmares Olivia had been subjected to, or his own slow recovery and leave from work.

Back then, spending more time with Olivia while they picked up the pieces of their lives seemed like a good idea. He was head over heels in love with the Latina beauty, but he’d pushed her into intimacy too soon. She spent a weekend at his place and woke him up both nights with her nightmare screams. Mortified, she refused to sleep over or even make love again. Now they were taking things at a glacial pace. Something had to give in his world, but he wasn’t sure where to start cleaning up the mess.

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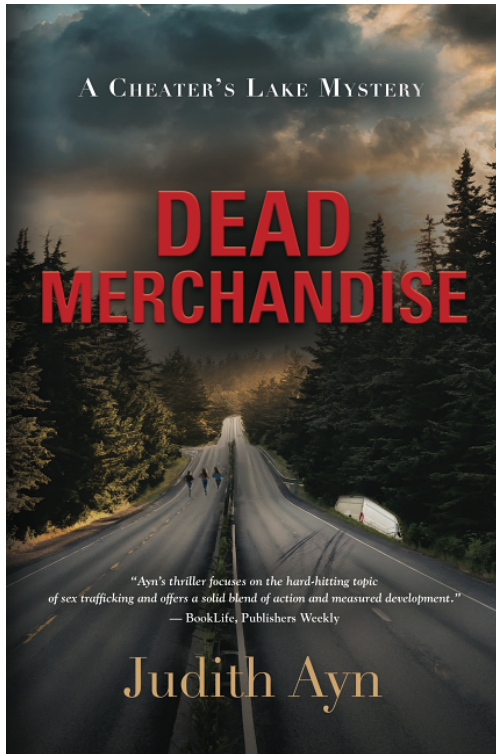
In her cheerful, butter yellow kitchen, Olivia Ortega poured coffee and skimmed the Seattle newspaper. No more thinking about Detective Mark Walsh. Much better to review today’s work schedule.

After a few minutes, she admitted Mark wasn’t going anywhere, whether she wanted to think about him or not. He’d become a big part of her life and denial of that was a waste of time.

Even her new boss was courtesy of Mark. His best friend, Greg Hogan, a retired San Diego Police detective, had taken on training her to become a private investigator. The job was a good fit with Olivia’s legal knowledge and experience as a paralegal. She loved research, especially tracking things on the Internet that no one else could. Not for a nanosecond did she miss working for lawyers.

Her thoughts drifted back to Mark, the man who'd saved her life and nearly lost his at the hands of the same serial killer. A couple of months after they both were somewhat healed from their injuries, Mark finally made love to her. She'd repaid him by pushing him away – she could barely function since the kidnapping. Mark's patience with her was wearing thin and she didn't know what to do, except hope time would take care of it all. So far, that wasn't working.

Olivia poured more coffee, turned the page to a story about sex trafficking on the West Coast. That put her tiny problems into better perspective.



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