

John Lawrence Reynolds

A MAXINE BENSON  
MYSTERY

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# A MURDER FOR MAX

A MAXINE BENSON MYSTERY

John Lawrence Reynolds



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**Summary:** Maxine Benson, police chief in a small town, sets out to solve the murder of a local bad boy in this work of crime fiction. (RL 3.6)



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*For Pat and Phil Scott*

# ONE

**P**olice Chief Maxine Benson had to prove something to the people of Port Ainslie. They did not doubt that she could perform most of her duties. And until now they had not questioned the wisdom of hiring a woman as police chief. But Maxine feared this all might end when Billy Ray Edwards was found shot to death in his garage.

“Sure,” she could hear them say, “you do fine with break-ins and drivers who speed through town. And you lock up Bop Chadwick when he drinks too much rum on Saturday night. And you handled that

three-car smashup last New Year's Eve. But this is *murder!*"

"Bop" Chadwick had been christened Bruce Olivier Pratt, which was a mouthful. As a young man, he hated all three given names. So when signing his name he used his initials only, and B. O. P. Chadwick became "Bop." Bop married a Toronto girl and moved there. Ten years later he returned to Port Ainslie, homeless and jobless and with a thirst for rum, and the nickname seemed to fit. Everyone liked Bop. And everyone blamed the Big City Woman for Bop's troubles. But no one knew for sure. And Bop wasn't talking.

Some people would expect Max to report Billy Ray's murder to the Ontario Provincial Police. That's what other towns in Muskoka District did with major crimes. But if she asked the OPP to solve Billy Ray's murder, she feared they would take over the whole case and send her home to have

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a nice cup of tea. She would feel like a child being told she couldn't play with the big kids.

Would this really happen? Maybe, maybe not. But Maxine Benson had seen how male cops could act around women. Even women who wore a police badge like hers. Her badge might say *Chief*, but she believed this wouldn't keep them from looking down on her.

She refused to put up with that. She had spent too much time proving she could do all the things expected of a police chief. And she did not want anyone to think she couldn't deal with a murder herself. Especially the murder of a thug like Billy Ray Edwards. So she intended to solve it on her own. Or at least try.

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Almost two years had passed since Maxine Benson was named police chief in Port



Ainslie. It had been two years of hard work to show the town councilors they had not made a mistake when they gave her the job.

There had been doubts at the start. A lot of doubts. Many were based on the fact that she was a woman. For some people in town, that was reason enough to wonder if she was up to the job.

Most of the town councilors liked Maxine as soon as they met her. Many were ready to sign her up right away. In a letter to the council, the chief of the Toronto police force praised Max, saying she would make a first-rate chief. The council was impressed.

There was only one problem. The council had been ready to hire a gruff, gray-haired man with a deep voice and a cold stare. Instead, they were about to give the job to a slim woman who spoke softly and smiled sweetly. Everyone who met Max said she was “nice” and “polite” and even

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“pretty.” The fact was, she looked more like grade-school teacher than a police chief.

So why did they hire her?

The fact that four of seven councilors were women had much to do with it. They did not believe it took a deep voice and gray hair to keep the peace. They thought other things counted as well. Things like being nice to people and using soft talk instead of loud threats.

And so she became Port Ainslie Chief of Police Maxine Benson, “Chief Max” to everyone in town. This bothered her at first. She hated being called Max. All her life she had wanted a “normal” woman’s name, like Susan or Emma or Hannah. As a teenager, she had told her mother over and over how much she hated her name.

*Your name, her mother had replied, is lovely and elegant. It comes from Maximus, meaning “great.” So there you are. You are great.*

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*To the kids at school, Maxine said, I am Max, which is not lovely and elegant. It is short and ugly, and it sounds like a tattooed guy who drives a truck.*

She could have changed her name as an adult, but she was afraid it might insult her parents. She loved them very much, even if they had given her a name she hated. So she remained Max. She didn't like it, but she grew used to it.

None of this mattered much now that Port Ainslie had a murder on its hands. Would the people in town doubt that Max could solve it? She was afraid they would. She needed to prove she could deal with serious crimes. Even a murder. And she intended to. But there was a problem.

When Max was hired, the town council had told her the OPP was to deal with any and all major crimes. *Major crimes* meant anything more serious than theft and speeding. Based on the small size of the

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Port Ainslie Police Force, this made sense. In fact, calling it a *force* was a stretch. Max was expected to keep the peace in and around Port Ainslie with a staff of just two. One was Constable Henry Wojak. The other was the office manager, sixty-eight-year-old Margie Burns.

Henry Wojak had grown up in Port Ainslie and joined the police after high school. He had roots in the town and had never wanted to go anywhere else. The farthest he had ever traveled in his life was to Montreal for a weekend. There he learned four French words. One of them, he learned later, was obscene.

Margie Burns brought her knitting to work with her. Sometimes she brought homemade cupcakes as well. Margie's job was to answer the phone, keep the books and lock prisoners in the two jail cells. Anyone who wondered if a sixty-eight-year-old grandmother could perform such

duties had not met Margie. As a young woman, she had won contests in martial arts and could still place an armlock on a man who did not want to be put behind bars. In less time than it took him to say *I'm not going!* he would find himself in a jail cell. Margie would smile as she walked away. Sometimes she'd jingle the keys of the cell door for him to hear. Word of Margie, it was said, had spread far and wide beyond the town. *Do not mess with the old woman in Port Ainslie*, a lot of rough men were warned. *She could break your arm and laugh about it.*

Max could have had two constables to assist her instead of just Henry Wojak. She chose a new police cruiser instead.

The town had two cruisers when it hired Max. She told town council the two were really just one and a half cars. The newest was two years old and in good shape. The other was over ten years old,

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and been driven more than three hundred thousand miles. Its paint had faded, and the driver's door did not quite close. The muffler was tied in place with a coat hanger. "And the siren doesn't work," Max said when she asked town council to buy a new police car. The horn was one of the few things on the car that worked.

*That should be enough for cruising around town,* a male councilor said.

*No, it is not,* Max said. *Everyone gets out of the way when they hear a siren. No one moves when you honk your horn.* Max said if the town did not buy a new police car, she would not take the job.

The council said it could not afford to buy a new police car. Max said that without a new cruiser, she couldn't do all the things expected of her.

It looked like the town would have a rusty police car that was nearly always silent in an emergency. And it would not

have Max as police chief. One member of town council had an idea. He said there was money in the budget to hire a second constable to help the new police chief. *If we don't hire one, he said, we can buy you a brand-new cruiser with all the bells, whistles and sirens you want.*

So Max had two choices. She could run a police force with two constables, Margie and one and a half police cars. Or she could do the job with just Henry and Margie and two police cars, one of them brand new. She could even have *POLICE CHIEF* painted on the new cruiser's door.

*You have one other choice, another male council member said to Max. You can find some other town that will hire a woman as police chief.*

The female members of council told him he had no respect for women.

*I'm just being honest, he said. She doesn't need another constable or a new car. She can*

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*do her job with one guy and Margie Burns. Margie is worth two people on her own. Most of the crime in this town is all about making noise and stealing bicycles. Sometimes old Bop Chadwick drinks rum in the park. That's it. He pointed at Max. The two of you and Margie should be able to handle that.*

*You need to be ready for more serious crimes,* Max said. *This is a peaceful town, but you have to expect bad things to happen now and then.*

*Bad things?* the councilor said. *Like what?*  
*A mugging? A murder?*

*Yes,* Max said. *That's just what I mean.*

The councilor laughed at the idea that a murder could occur in Port Ainslie. *I don't expect anything like that to happen in this pretty little town of ours,* he said. *But if it does, you agree to let the Ontario Provincial Police take over. How's that?*

Max knew that calling on the OPP for help in cases like murder made sense. But she still did not like the councilor's words.



She only agreed because she wanted the job badly. Maybe too badly.

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A mile or two of lakeshore spread on either side of Port Ainslie, so the area to be covered by the police was larger than it appeared. All in all, it covered almost four miles along the north shore of Granite Lake, and two miles north. It included the south face of Granite Mountain, the highest hill in Muskoka. Calling it a mountain was like calling a chicken an ostrich. The town's slogan, "Home of Muskoka Magic," was another stretch of the truth. The only magic in town happened when Henry Wojak did card tricks for Margie on a slow day at the police station. But it was a pretty place. Everyone agreed on that.

Max had first come to Port Ainslie for a holiday with her parents when she was ten years old. The town had seemed like heaven to the young city girl. At age forty-three,

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with a broken marriage to get over, she saw the chance to live and work there too good to resist.

She had left Toronto to escape heart-break and stress. She wanted out of the politics of big-city police work. The cottage she found at Willow Cove, on the lakeshore west of Port Ainslie, was perfect. She loved the idea of drifting to sleep to the cries of loons, and waking to watch the sun rise over Granite Lake.

Max had spent fifteen years as a police officer in Toronto. Those years had taken their toll. For eight of them, she had been married to a man who was a good golfer, an okay cop and a poor husband. Now she wanted to forget her life in Toronto. She would work with Henry Wojak and Margie Burns. She would have a shiny police cruiser to patrol the town and the area around it. And she would go home to Willow Cove each night.

*Don't forget, a councilor warned when she took the job as police chief. Call the OPP in Cranston when you need help. They can be here in half an hour. If the bridge isn't stuck.*

He meant the lift bridge over Cold River, raised to let boats pass under the highway. About twice a week, the bridge got stuck in the raised position. When this happened, it stayed there until the gears could be fixed. That could take hours. Meanwhile, highway access between Cranston and Port Ainslie was cut off. Half of the people in the area wanted a new bridge, no matter how much it cost. The other half said the bridge was part of history and should not be replaced. Neither side would budge, so nothing was done.

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For almost two years, Max, Margie and Henry had kept the peace in Port Ainslie. Which wasn't hard. Max had evenings to relax at her cottage on the lake. Henry found

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time to show card tricks to tourists he met on Main Street. Margie knitted jackets for every new baby in town. And no one found a reason to complain about the town's police force. Not once did Max think of calling on the OPP.

Everyone in town was pleased with her work as the only woman police chief in Muskoka. Many even bragged about it. There was no glass ceiling in Port Ainslie, they boasted.

But, of course, Max had never had to solve a murder on her own.

Until now.