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MYSTERY

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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Reynolds, John Lawrence, author  
Murder among the pines / John Lawrence Reynolds.  
(Rapid reads)

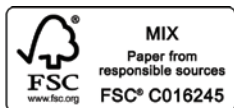
Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-4598-1819-4 (softcover).—ISBN 978-1-4598-1820-0 (pdf).—  
ISBN 978-1-4598-1821-7 (epub)

I. Title. II. Series: Rapid reads  
PS8585.E94M83 2018 C813'.54 C2017-904546-6  
C2017-904547-4

First published in the United States, 2018  
Library of Congress Control Number: 2017949721

**Summary:** Maxine Benson, police chief in a small town, sets out to solve the murder of her ex-husband's new girlfriend in this work of crime fiction.



*Orca Book Publishers is dedicated to preserving the environment and has printed this book on Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.*

Orca Book Publishers gratefully acknowledges the support for its publishing programs provided by the following agencies: the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Canada Council for the Arts, and the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

Cover photo by Creative Market/PhotoCosma  
Design by Gerilee McBride

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS  
www.orcabook.com

Printed and bound in Canada.

21 20 19 18 • 4 3 2 1

# ONE

**Henry Wojak turned over** the top card in the deck and said, “Is this it?”

Margie glanced at the ten of clubs and said, “No, it’s not.” She went back to filling out the weekly arrest report for the files. It would not take long, since there had been only five arrests since Monday. Margie wanted to keep busy with it anyway. She was not impressed with Henry’s card tricks.

“Is this the one?” Henry said. He took the

five of spades from the deck.

Margie swung her eyes to the card. “No, that’s not it either.”

“Then,” Henry said, “your card must be here.” He reached to the back of Margie’s computer screen and withdrew the jack of hearts.

“Yes, Henry,” Margie said with a sigh. “You’re right. That’s the card I chose. You are brilliant.” She did not pretend to mean it.

“You notice the new touch I added there?” Henry said. “How I took the card from behind your computer, not out of the deck? They call that *sleight of hand*.” He stroked his mustache and smiled.

“Really,” Margie said.

“See, a good card trick needs to be sold,” Henry said. “That takes acting skill. I used to be an actor. I was in a play once called *Harvey*. Do you know it?”

“Yes,” Margie said. “I have heard of it.”

“It’s about a six-foot rabbit that you can’t see.”

“Let me guess,” Margie said. “You played the rabbit.”

“Very funny.” Henry began to shuffle the deck.

Margie stood and walked to the coffee-maker. She had never wanted to work with a police force in the big city, where bad things happened hour by hour. And she did not want to leave Port Ainslie. What she wanted was to have more to do than watch Constable Henry Wojak show off his card tricks.

The sound of Chief Maxine Benson’s car pulling into the parking lot gave her hope that something better was about to happen. Until she saw the look on Max’s face.

“Hey, Chief,” Henry called when Max entered the police station. “You gotta see this new trick.”

“No, I don’t.” Max walked into her office

without a glance at Henry or Margie. When she spoke again, her voice had an edge as sharp as a razor blade. “But you need to go out on patrol,” she said. “Now.” She slammed her office door.

Henry put his playing cards away and left without a word. After his car pulled away, Margie poured a black coffee for Max. She carried it to the door of Max’s office and went in without knocking. “Such a nice summer’s day out there,” Margie said.

“So I hear.” Max did not lift her eyes from the papers on her desk.

“You look like you could bite off the back end of a horse.” Margie set the coffee on Max’s desk.

“That’s how I feel.”

“What’s up?” Margie sat in the chair facing Max.

“My ex-husband.”

“What about him?”

“You asked what’s up. He is. Up from Toronto. Right here in Port Ainslie.”

“How does he look?”

“What does that matter?”

Margie was about to say it seemed to matter to Max.

Before she could speak, Max frowned and said, “He looked smug.”

Margie blinked. “Looked what?”

“Smug. Happy. Pleased with himself. Just plain stupid. Take your pick.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it?”

Max told her.

She had been cruising downtown, waving at townspeople and giving directions to tourists. Stopping her car at the crosswalk in front of the new Ainslie Inn, she smiled at people walking in front of her. Her smile faded at the sight of a man walking hand in hand with a much younger woman.

“It was him,” Max said. “James Herbert



Benson. The guy I wasted twelve years of my life on.”

“That’s a bit harsh,” Margie said.

“No, it’s not. I stayed because I thought I could change him. I might as well have tried to change the color of the sky. He cheated on me every year we were married.”

“Anything good to say about him?”

“He was charming. And good-looking.”  
Max folded her arms. “Still is, damn it.”

Margie nodded and said, “Ah.”

“What does *ah* mean?”

“Why not tell me what happened?”

“In my marriage?”

“No, downtown. Today.”

“He knew it was me driving the cruiser. So he walked up to my window, dragging this...this woman with him.”

“What about her?”

“She’s fifteen years younger than him. Maybe more. Long dark hair, big brown eyes,

a figure like..." Max shook her head. "Never mind."

"Your classic ex-wife's nightmare," Margie said.

Max acted like she hadn't heard. "He said he wanted me to meet whatever her name is. Traffic was behind me, so I pulled into the parking lot of the inn. I got out of the car and watched her wiggle over." Max made a face like she smelled something bad. "She wiggled, he strutted."

Both her former husband and his girlfriend wore tight jeans and tighter T-shirts, Max said. The girl also wore jewelry. Lots of it. Long earrings, a charm bracelet on one arm, bangles on the other arm and a diamond ring on a silver chain around her neck. The words *Sex Goddess* were printed on her T-shirt. Her dark hair shone in the sun. Max was wearing her summer police tunic, as shapeless as a potato sack. And she was having a bad-hair day.

“He introduced us,” Max said. “Told me her names. All of them. I held my hand out for her to shake. She didn’t take it. She just looked at Jim and said, *You were married to her?* and giggled.”

“Not very nice,” Margie said. “What did your husband say to that?”

“I think he was embarrassed.”

“Good. Then what?”

“I went back to the cruiser. He called out to me, but I got in and drove away.”

“Now you’re here and angry at him.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Then what are you?”

“Angry at myself. For giving a damn.”

“That makes sense.” Margie stood to go back to her desk. At the door she stopped, looked at Max and said, “You didn’t say her name. The young woman, I mean.”

“Names. She has more than one.”

“Can you remember them?”

“They’re burned into my jealous brain.  
Lana Jewel Laverne Parker.”

“Lana Jewel Laverne?” Margie said.  
“Oh dear.”

• • •

**“If you can tell something** about a person from her name, that one says a bunch.” Geegee Gallup looked over the edge of her teacup at Max. “It sounds like her job involves taking off her clothes on a stage.”

“She looks like it does too.” Max sat back in her chair and stared out the window at Granite Lake. The sun was behind the hills on the far shore. The water was glass, the sky was a blue bowl over the world, and the air was calm. She loved that view. She loved her home by the lake. She loved having Geegee as a neighbor. She loved much of her life in Port Ainslie.

She hated that the sight of her ex-husband and his girlfriend had spoiled her joy.

“He was trying to make you jealous,” Geegee said.

“I know.”

“So he still cares for you.”

“I doubt it.”

“Men do dumb things where ex-wives are concerned. I know one guy who...” Geegee stopped at the sound of a car approaching. She stood to look out the window at the road. “Do you know anybody who drives a red sports car?”

Max was still staring at the lake. “No.”

“How about a guy maybe six feet tall with thick dark hair and a cleft in his chin?”

Max stood and looked through the same window. “What is he doing here?” she said.

“I’ll go home now,” Geegee said.

Max told Geegee to wait. She walked outside and stood with her arms folded.

“Why are you here?” she asked Jim Benson as he stepped from the sports car. He had changed into a blazer and white linen shirt. Standing in the low light, he looked, Max thought, even better than he had earlier.

“I wanted to say I’m sorry,” he began. “About what happened. When you saw us, Lana and me, today.”

“How did you find me?”

“I asked an officer downtown, funny guy with a mustache.” He meant Henry.

“He had no right to give you my address. Please leave.”

“I explained that I was your husband.”

“Yes. *Was*. The past tense.”

Jim didn’t answer. He stood looking past her at the view of the lake from her patio. “This is very nice,” he said.

“It’s nicer without you,” Max said. “Go back to that...that *child* you brought with you. Is she your next wife?”

“She’s not so bad when you get to know her,” he said. “A little...” He shrugged. “Immature. We’re staying at the Ainslie Inn for the weekend. Why don’t you come and have a drink with us?”

“I would rather stick needles in my eyes,” Max said. She turned toward her door. “Go away, or I’ll lay a trespass charge on you.”

“I still care,” Jim said. “For you, I mean. I really do.”

Max answered by slamming the door behind her.

“Now there,” Geegee said as she watched Jim Benson walk back to his sports car, “is a man in love with you.”

“So you heard him.” Max sat in the chair facing the lake.

“Didn’t have to. Saw it in his face.”

“He was always a good liar,” Max said.

• • •

**Just after 5:00 AM,** Maxine rolled across her bed to answer the telephone on the first ring. Gray predawn light seeped through her bedroom window. All calls made to the police station were routed to her phone line after hours. She knew this could only be bad news.

The woman's voice shook. "This is the night clerk at the Ainslie Inn. We have been told there's..." She began again. "There is a body in the lake. One of our guests saw it."

"Where in the lake?" Max was out of bed, one hand holding the phone to her ear.

"Near the grove of pines down the shore. I'm told it looks like..." She stopped and started over. "It looks like a young woman."

...

**Racing toward town,** Max called Henry and told him to meet her at the inn, near the pine grove. She wondered if the dead woman



could be someone she had met the day before. Someone with long hair and killer legs and lots of jewelry. She told herself to stop thinking that way. It could be anyone besides Lana Jewel Laverne Parker.

Later, she felt guilty about having such a thought.

With good reason.

**JOHN LAWRENCE REYNOLDS** has had more than thirty works of fiction and nonfiction published. His work has earned two Arthur Ellis Awards for Best Mystery Novel, a National Business Book Award and a CBC Bookie Award. His bestselling book *Shadow People*, tracing the development and influence of secret societies through history, was published in fourteen countries and twelve languages. He has also authored several business and investment books, including the bestselling *The Naked Investor* and its sequel, *The Skeptical Investor*, as well as his assessment of the 2008–2009 global financial crisis, *Bubbles, Bankers & Bailouts*. *Murder Among the Pines* is his third book in the Maxine Benson Mystery series, after *A Murder for Max* and *Murder Below Zero*. He lives in Burlington, Ontario, with his wife, Judy. For more information, visit [www.wryter.ca](http://www.wryter.ca).