

An Excerpt From

# **OF HEARTS AND MURDER**

R.K. Benton

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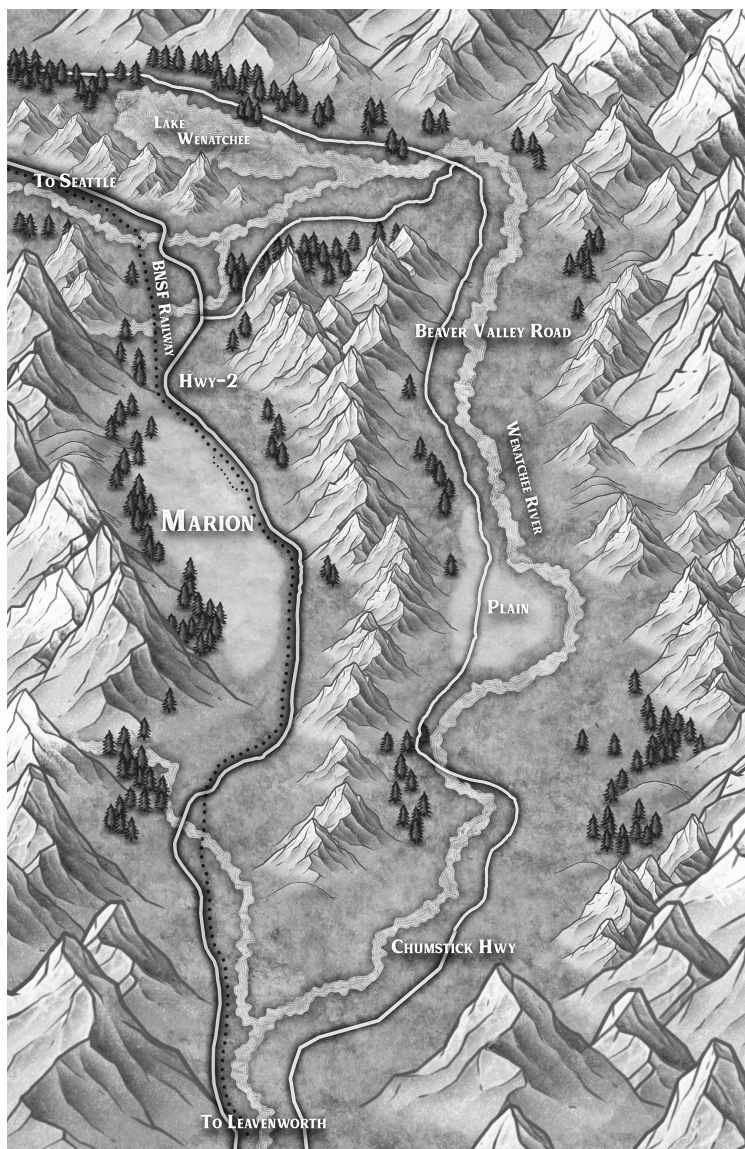
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# Four

Inga

7:43 am, Monday, June 22nd, 1992

**Excerpt Introduction** Cal Walker, a thirty-three-year-old private investigator from Seattle, has reluctantly returned to his mountain hometown of Marion after twenty years away. He only meant to settle family affairs and leave quietly, but the town—and its people—are drawing him in again. Now, the local police have asked him to consult on a case and help one of their own.

Marion's only police station was pretty much as Cal remembered: a compact, one-story, bone-white stuccoed box with small windows. A low hedge was the only attempt at landscaping. The only real difference between his memory and what he saw now was the layer of blue tarp lashed to the upper right of the structure and some black scorch marks marring the exterior.

The desk sergeant was affable enough when he mentioned his reason for being there and he was soon being ushered back into the office by Police Chief Juliette Hume herself.

"Sorry about the mess here," she said, her toothy smile and stylish glasses giving her a pleasant hospitableness. Wavy black hair shot through with strands of white complemented her face, and lent her a striking look. She had a lithe, athletic build—the kind that belonged to someone who bikes and kayaks and hikes, all in the same morning.

Hume led Cal by a crowded section of cubicles. "We had an unfortunate incident yesterday because *somebody* set the microwave to heat their Jeni's Pizza Rolls for *four hours* instead of four minutes. Who knew pizza rolls could explode in a fireball?"

"Sorry, Chief," said a mournful voice from beyond the cubicle wall.

Hume shook her head. "It's the water damage that messes things up. I love our fireguys, but whatever the fire doesn't get, their water surely will. Anyway, that's why we're double-desking right now." She paused in front of a door marked *Chief*. "Here we are," she said, opening the door and making way for Cal.

The office itself was cramped but comfortable. Cal sat and Hume plopped into the swivel chair behind her desk. She started describing the role of police in a tourist town like Marion. Cal's mind drifted to Liv and what she might be doing right now. He wondered if she was thinking of him. Maybe she was thinking of that kiss. *That* kiss. He shook himself internally. Wake up!

He came back to the present as Hume continued to describe the police's role in Marion. "...but lots of folks come through here, of course. Traffic control and parking are the major concerns, plus the occasional fender bender. We get a few drunks on the weekends, and teenagers can be pretty inventive at getting into trouble. It's not all penny-ante stuff. Heck, we got a missing-persons report just now, but it's pretty quiet overall."

Cal smiled. "So, what do you need me for?"

Hume appeared to appreciate Cal's let's-not-waste-time approach. "There's been a possibly suspicious death. We haven't had one of those in a long time. Old Tim deDario had been detective here, but he retired about a year ago."

"And you haven't filled the spot yet?"

Hume took off her glasses and closed her eyes; she rubbed them with her thumb and forefinger. "Mayor Polk wants us to promote from within." She opened her eyes again and replaced the glasses. "One of our officers, Inga Wells, has taken a lot of the coursework, but there's not much investigation that needs doing around here, especially about anything like a possibly suspicious death."

"I notice you're saying 'possibly suspicious,' not 'suspicious,' or 'murder'."

"That's right. The man's dead—fell off his horse—died from asphyxiation."

"Broken neck?"

"Nope. His neck is intact."

That made Cal raise his eyebrows a little. "Interesting," he said. His right hand tapped a few fingers on his chair's armrest. He looked at her and cocked his head. "I know your name, but I can't place how." The insurance work he'd been doing the last several years took him lots of places. "Los Angeles, maybe?"

"Good memory. We met briefly at the press conference where you got that commendation from the Mayor."

Aha, thought Cal. As an insurance investigator, he tried to stay out of the limelight, but the port commissioners had insisted on giving him a commendation and surprised him with a press conference with the Mayor. An ambush, he thought. They got what they wanted—great PR for cracking fake pharmaceuticals being shipped in from overseas—but it was years before he felt like he could work in L.A. again.

The lightbulb above Cal's head snapped on. "You were the lieutenant of the arresting unit."

"Bingo," said the Chief, looking happy to be remembered. "You looked miserable in front of those cameras, but you don't seem like the shy type."

"Publicity makes my job harder."

"Ha. As a police chief, I can't avoid it," said Hume, her words lightly seasoned with mirth. "It's part of the job, I guess."

"Someone's got to do it," said Cal diplomatically. "I bet you handle it well."

One side of Hume's mouth curled upward. "You're smooth, Walker. You handled that press conference well, too. Very professional. The scuttlebutt in the unit told tales of you taking huge personal risk to bring down that drug syndicate." She eyed him speculatively. "Is that true?"

"A gentleman never tells," said Cal.

Hume nodded thoughtfully and seemed to come to a decision. She leaned back in her chair. "The LA papers mentioned you were from a little mountain town in Washington: Marion. The name stuck with me." She shrugged. "Maybe that's what drew me here when the offer came up."

Cal sat quietly, knowing that silence was the best way to get someone to talk.

"I called my old boss in LA and asked about you."

"Now, why would you do that?"

Hume didn't bother to answer. She leaned forward. "I know it's a big favor to ask—"

"That won't stop you, will it?"

"You can always say no," Hume said.

"Sorry. Fire away." He was interested in hearing what she had to say. Big-headed police chiefs normally repelled him, but Hume seemed all right. Plus, he was in an excellent mood.

"What I'm about to say is just between us, okay? Officer Wells has been with the Marion PD for five years. Very capable, very smart—"

"Let me guess. She's bored."

"Exactly. Most of the work we do is routine. Repetitive. That's fine for a lot of our officers. Inga wants to do more than just traffic stops and drive tipsy tourists back to their hotels."

"And that open detective slot is making her itchy."

"If I had more time, I'd have had deDario train her, but he left suddenly, and we've been focused on other things. Until now."

"Why not call the County Sheriff? They have detectives."

Hume's face broke into a wolfish smile. "Let's just say that the Sheriff and I don't always see eye-to-eye and I'd rather we stayed independent."

Cal rubbed his right eye while he thought for a moment. "Okay, let me see if I got this straight. You have a suspicious death on your hands—"

"Possible suspicious death."

"—and no detective on staff. You have an officer who wants to be an investigator, but only has academics, no field experience. It's probably a simple case, so you bring in someone with some background to get your officer some practical, real-world experience with practice and procedure."

"In a nutshell, yes."

Cal's nose scrunched up. He was already behind on getting the house ready. He didn't know any of the players in Marion, really. Dottie knew everybody, and he knew Dottie, but that wasn't the same thing. Hume seemed reasonable, though, and Cal had a soft spot for lending a hand when he was asked.

Hume, probably sensing Cal's indecision, picked up her phone. "Inga, can you come in here a moment?"

After a perfunctory knock, the door opened. Officer Inga Wells—mid-twenties, rosy of cheek and husky of build, with blonde hair in a regulation bun, and frowning eyebrows—walked in. "Yeah, Chief?"

"Inga, meet Callum Walker," Hume said.

"Please, call me Cal," he said, rising and shaking Wells' hand.

"You're the one who—"

"He is," interrupted Hume. "He's thinking about helping with the Easton situation."

"I see," said Wells, with unenthusiastic intonation.

"Don't be like that, Inga. He can help."

"I'm sure."

Hume pressed ahead. "Listen, deDario was going to slow-walk your promotion. Cal would be doing us a favor—"

Cal cleared his throat pointedly.

"—if he decides to, and then he'd be out of your hair." Hume beamed an encouraging smile at Wells. "With real-world chops under your belt, I can easily pitch you to the Police Commission for Detective."

Wells seemed to turn that over in her mind for a moment. She turned to look at Cal. "What do *you* say?"

"I want to know what you want," he said.

Inga's eyes flipped over to Hume and then back to Cal. "Just so we're clear: I want to be an investigator. I want to solve cases, I want to help real people. I want to *matter*." Wells was picking up steam. "What I *don't* want is a babysitter, and I don't need someone with a clipboard checking my every move."

Cal heard Hume suck in her breath.

Inga continued, "I want more than what I've got now and," her eyes bored into Cal's, "if you're what I need to get my ticket punched, then I'm on board."

Hume pumped out a tight laugh, clearly worried that Inga's candor may have crushed any charitable urge on Cal's part.

"Let's give Mister Walker some time to—"

"I'd be happy to do it," said Cal, not breaking eye contact with Wells.

Inga held still for exactly two seconds and then gave a tight nod.

"Thanks, Inga," said Hume. "I'll need to talk to Cal for a minute."

Inga left after briefly acknowledging them both. Hume sighed. "She'll warm up. Listen, we need to get some paperwork done and fix your consultancy fee, I—"

"Oh, hold up a sec. You don't need to pay me. Besides," Cal said, gesturing towards the fire damaged structure beyond Hume's office walls, "you probably have better uses for that money."

Hume smiled slightly, but she shook her head. "No, we need to pay you. There's a slew of regulations that require it, not to mention insurance. We have a standard contract we use during Marion's Wild West Days to beef up our coverage." She pulled out a sheaf of papers and slid them across her desk to Cal. "We'll back-date the formalities later. Ink the dotted line and that'll get us started."

Hume had left the daily rate blank. He thought for a moment and then put in a modest amount and began filling in the personal information. Two minutes later, the ink on his signature dried and a wry laugh escaped him as he thought, What have I gotten myself into?

Hume smiled candidly. "We're pretty informal here."

"That's fine by me."

"Great," said Hume, this time with a wide grin. "When would you like to start?"

"How about now?"

Another two minutes later, and Cal and Wells were walking to her cubicle.

Attempting to start a conversation, Cal said, "Sounds like a simple case."

Inga whirled on him, eyes ablaze and an index finger in his face. "Let's get one thing straight, Walker. You are *not* my boss."

"Got it." Said Cal, his demeanor courteous. Inside, however, he was amused.

Inga spun and continued down the corridor. "If Hume says this is the way it has to be, I'll do it. But that doesn't mean I have to like it. Where do you want to start?"

"A briefing would be a good place."

Inga looked around at the various officers working or lounging at their desks.

"Let's go for a walk," she said.

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Outside, Wells seemed to loosen up a bit. But just a little.

"Listen, Cal, I didn't want to talk the case in there. Too many ears."

"I get it. If this *isn't* an accidental death..." Cal let the sentence hang.

"Right. Everything becomes confidential, need-to-know, red-yarn on pushpins."

She was correct. Investigations, Cal knew, had to be closely held.

"There didn't seem to be a private place for investigation at the station."

Wells gave a derisive snort. "There isn't. deDario was a jackass and a showoff, so he'd work cases right there in the bullpen. He didn't care; he wanted everyone to know he was a *Detective*. I'm surprised there haven't been lawsuits."

"And that's why Hume fired him, isn't it?"

"'He left to spend more time with family,' is the line, I think."

They walked in silence for a minute.

"Did Easton make a habit of falling off his horse?"

Wells kicked a pebble and watched it skitter into the gutter. "Easton was a grade-A, fat-headed goon, but a good horseman, or so said the groom at the stable where he kept his horse."

"Do you normally have such strong opinions about subjects in your investigation?"

"Not opinion. Fact. Ask anyone."

"Check. What did the coroner say?"

"Death by misadventure. He called it at the scene. The body was bagged and carted over to the funeral home. The M.E. is there now."

"Next of kin?"

Wells gave him a little side-eye.

Cal held up his hands. "Hey, I'm just trying to get a picture."

Wells blew air through her lips. "Right. Sorry. Easton has a daughter. Lives in LA but was in New York on business. She's flying back. Anything else?"

Cal rubbed his jaw. "Was the scene secured and searched?"

"The officers on-scene would have kept people away until the coroner showed up. No reason to search."

Cal nodded, but said nothing.

Wells' eyebrows bunched together, but she didn't say anything, either.

Cal cleared his throat. "Where are we going, anyway?"

"Funeral home. Hume wanted me—*us*—to talk to the M.E."

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## About the Author

R.K. Benton has been a storyteller all her life. She has penned plays and live-audience interactive fiction, composed scripts for video games, written operatic librettos, stories in every genre, ranging from darkly serious to sensibly chucklesome.

A former writer and Associate Editor for *The Comical* newspaper, she has also contributed many articles to *The Native*. She is a co-founder of *Write Club*, based in Leavenworth, Washington.

You can find out more (and get downloadable recipes!) at [RKBentonWrites.com](http://RKBentonWrites.com)



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