

Chapter 1 of: An Incommunicado Mountie

Adventures of the First Woman Mountie

Book 11

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This is a work of historical fiction, set in the 1970s. Although most of the historical references are accurate, a few are not, and names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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Chapter 1. PRELUDE

August, 1978
Edmonton, Alberta

The university campus and its attached teaching hospital were quiet. The summer term had ended and it would be a few weeks before a horde of new and returning students would arrive for the fall term. The campus was especially quiet because it was 6 am on a Sunday morning.

The morning sun was just dawning and, although the parking lots were virtually empty, most of the large buildings still had their interior lights on.

A solitary figure crossed the campus without hesitation. They knew this route well enough to be able to follow it blindfolded. The familiar route led to a very familiar building, and the figure walked up to and through the front door with an air of casual assurance.

Climbing the broad, stone stairs, the figure went up to the third floor and then passed through one of two sets of large double doors. A broad hallway ran the length of the building, half on each side of the staircase. Without hesitation, the figure turned right and headed for one of the many laboratories on this floor – in this case, one of the last two at the end of the hall.

Along the way, occasional glances into some of the many open laboratory doors showed that there were a few people working in some of the labs, even at such an early weekend hour. These were graduate students, working on their M.Sc. or Ph.D. thesis projects, and/or post-doctoral ('post-doc') research associates, working on team-based research projects. They all looked alike, clothed as they were in faded jeans, white lab coats, and unfashionable safety glasses. Their only distinguishing features were the hair on the backs of their heads: short, long, pony-tailed... one even sported a rather wild-looking 'afro.'

Whether any of these people heard the figure's quiet footsteps in the hallway was impossible to detect, as not a single one looked up from their work. This, as the figure well knew, was quite normal, making the risk of being observed very low.

The door to the laboratory at the end of the hall was locked, but yielded to one of the keys that the figure produced from a pocket. The figure entered the lab, closed the door, and removed the small daypack they had been wearing. The figure then selected a lab coat from a nearby rack and put it on. In the unlikely event that anyone else came into the lab, it would be important for everything to appear normal; routine even. The lights, like most of the others in the building were already on.

Suitably clothed, the figure made for the back of the lab where a tall, double-doored chemical cabinet stood next to two fume hoods¹. Selecting another, smaller key from a pocket, the figure unlocked the cabinet doors and swung them open. Before removing anything, however, the figure went to one of the fume hoods. The big glass sliding door was

¹ A fume hood, of the kind found in most chemical laboratories, is waist-high cabinet with a moveable front window made out of safety glass. When working with chemicals in the cabinet ('the hood'), the window is left open just enough for a person's hands and forearms to access the inside. Air is drawn into the hood under and through the partially-closed window, and is exhausted through openings in the rear and top of the cabinet. From there, the air is ducted to an exhaust stack on the roof of the building.

already partly open, and the figure raised it completely open then reached in and switched on its interior light and exhaust fan.

Next, the figure went to one of the three big lab benches that stretched the full length of the laboratory and occupied most of the floor space. The figure walked to exactly the right spot, opened exactly the right drawer, and withdrew a modest-size cardboard case containing ten Pyrex™-glass media bottles of the type that had drip-free pouring rings, and liner-less, plug-seal type leak-proof screw caps. At 25 mL (0.84 oz) each, the bottles weren't particularly large; they didn't need to be. And there was no need to clean them, as they were brand new. Returning to the fume hood, the figure opened the case, withdrew the media vials, unscrewed the caps and placed the bottles in a neat row, with their caps placed to one side. With these preliminaries accomplished, the figure took a wooden step-stool from one corner of the lab, moved it in front of the chemical storage cabinet and stepped up onto the higher of its two steps.

In future years, there would come into place university regulations prohibiting the storage above shoulder height of dangerous chemicals in heavy containers, but it was still only 1979, and people still had a marked tendency to place seldom-used chemicals in the back corners of high shelves. This was a direct consequence of people's natural desire to store the most frequently used chemicals in the most easy-to-reach places.

In the present case, however, the figure was after a chemical that, in this particular laboratory at least, was very rarely used. An advantage of this feature, was that if some of the chemical went missing its loss might not be discovered for years, if ever.

Standing on the top step of the stool, the figure began moving bottles of chemicals away from the front-left side of the top shelf. There were a lot of them, in various sizes and shapes, some made of clear glass, some polypropylene, and others – those that contained chemicals that were prone to degrade in the presence of light – made of amber glass. Eventually, this activity exposed a large, wide-mouth bottle made of heavy, clear glass that was standing in the extreme back, left-hand corner.

That was the one.

Whereas the previous bottles had been moved away one-handed and rather quickly, the figure's manner now changed completely into one of extreme care. Using both hands, the big glass bottle was slid forward on the shelf, then lifted up, off, and down.

It was heavy!

Taking a moment to reset their grip, the figure carefully stepped backwards and down the two steps of the stool, then over to the fume hood. The main working surface of the fume hood was like a mini-lab bench, covered in black, chemical-resistant epoxy and set at a convenient working height for most people. The heavy glass bottle was placed onto this surface, well inside the hood, after which the front glass door was lowered about three-quarters of the way; open enough to permit the figure's hands and forearms to work inside, and closed enough to ensure most fumes remained inside the hood, where they could be sucked away by the exhaust fan.

Now that everything was assembled and ready, the figure opened the top of the big glass bottle and, again holding it with both hands, carefully poured some of its contents into each of the smaller bottles. This particular chemical flowed very easily and smoothly, so it was just a question of having steady hands and proceeding slowly. After each vial had successfully

been filled about three-quarters full, the figure replaced the top on the big glass bottle. Next, the caps were carefully screwed onto the smaller bottles, all of which were placed – standing upright - in their original cardboard case. Then, the figure raised the sliding glass door of the fume hood completely open.

Done, the figure thought.

Remembering in time that this was not the right time to relax, the figure took up the big glass bottle, walked back to the step-stool, stepped up, and then replaced the bottle in the back-left corner of the top shelf with as much care as had been used during its removal in the first place. Next the various bottles that had previously resided in front of the big glass bottle were moved back to their original positions, or at least as nearly to their original positions as the figure could remember. Given that when these latter were originally moved, the figure had taken care to temporarily arrange them in rows that matched their original ordering, then reversed the process when replacing them, every one of them ended up back in almost exactly its original location. With this done, the figure got down, replaced the step-stool in its original position, then closed and locked the doors of the chemical cabinet.

Returning to the fume hood, the figure picked up the case of bottles, switched off the light and exhaust fan in the fume hood, then partially closed its door in an approximation of its original position.

The figure walked to the door of the lab and looked out the small window that is characteristic of all chemical-laboratory doors. The hallway appeared to be deserted.

So far, so good, the figure thought.

The figure removed their lab coat and restored it to its former place on the rack, stooped down to place the case containing the glass bottles into the daypack that had been left there on the floor, then rose and partially donned the daypack (meaning that it was worn using only one of its shoulder straps in the prevailing fashion of the day).

The figure paused and took a long, last look around. Everything looked normal. Leaving the lights on, the figure went out, closed the lab door, and relocked it.

Finally, the figure strolled down the hallway, down the main stairway, and out of the building as if it were the sort of thing that they had done a thousand times before.

This, with the exception of the theft of the chemical, was the absolute truth.



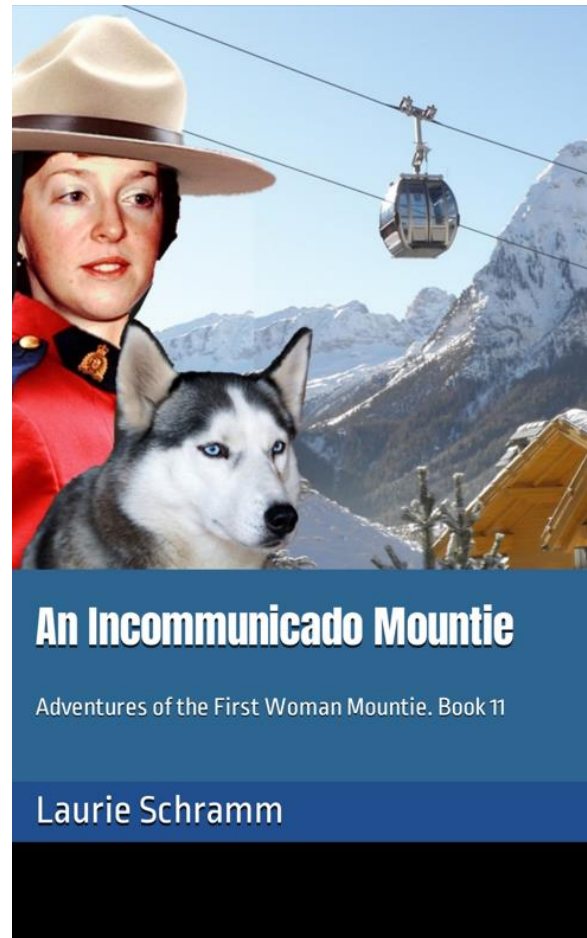
RCMP Constable Alexandra Houston's adventures continue in: ***An Incommunicado Mountie. Adventures of the First Woman Mountie Book 11***, by Laurie Schramm, 2023.

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