

# **Chapter 1 of: An Inconvenient Mountie**

Adventures of the First Woman Mountie

Book 1

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This is a work of historical fiction, set in the mid-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 Although most of the historical references are accurate, a few are not, and names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.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. AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

“IT’S NOT HALLOWEEN IS IT?”

It was June 1975, and that was my greeting as I stepped off the de Havilland Twin Otter aircraft at the airport (more like a small airstrip, really) in Radium City, Saskatchewan. I knew what was coming next and as my inner voice reminded me to keep a straight face, I said: “No, not yet.”

It was, in fact, only June but as I say, I knew what was coming next.

“If it isn’t Halloween, then why are you dressed up like a Mountie?” asked the man who was helping unload the modest cargo of luggage, mail bags, and supplies for the town’s store. He seemed both forceful and slightly sneaky in demeanour, a bit larger than average height and build, but slightly stooped in posture. I later discovered him to be a hunting and fishing guide named Norm Poole.

“It’s because I really am a Mountie,” I said, deciding to play it straight and wait for the inevitable response.

“Well, if you are, then you’re the first I’ve ever heard of,” said Norm. “What’ll they think of next?”

I kept to my standard script, and simply said: “Yes, one of the first.” In fact, I really was the first woman Mountie, but I didn’t feel the need to tell him that. I hadn’t even intended for it to happen at all. It came and found me.

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Cst. Alexandra Houston

*There had been women police officers in Canada since about 1830 in Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia, or 1912 in Vancouver or Edmonton, depending on who you listened to. I had always wanted to become a police officer of some kind, and I admit that I even harboured a secret admiration for the Mounties in the old classics my parents would wake me up to watch when they came on late night television. **Rose Marie**, with Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy, and **Susannah of the Mounties**, with Shirley Temple and Randolph Scott, inspired in me a fascination with the notion of becoming a police officer of some kind.*

*They say you should be careful what you wish for.*

*I did become a police officer of 'some kind.' Appointment of female police officers dated back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it had only been in recent years that women officers had been allowed to become 'real' officers, as in allowed to carry guns and do 'real' policing – at least theoretically. In 1972 I had graduated from training and become a Constable in the Metropolitan Toronto Police force ('Metro'). My two years since then had mostly consisted of such critical policing tasks as desk-duty, matron-duty (searching female prisoners), and traffic-duty. Not that there's anything wrong with those jobs, they're important, and they need to be done well. But, for me, they didn't fit the Hollywood vision I had developed, and I wasn't finding them to be very challenging.*

*All of that changed with an unexpected meeting in 1974.*

*I had been called in by my Captain and ordered to go and see a Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officer that wanted to meet me. My reaction to this was apprehension. I wondered what I had done wrong. I probably could have asked my Captain, but it was only my second year on the force, I was insecure in my position, and I was still a bit afraid of him. I knew how to take orders though, so I went to the meeting, which was arranged for a quiet downtown coffee shop.*

*Walking into the coffee shop, I was immediately waved to a corner table by an older man (these things are relative), with short greying hair, and wearing civilian clothes. I didn't recognize him but he obviously recognized me. He introduced himself as Assistant Commissioner George MacLeod and explained that he was the Commanding Officer (CO) of the RCMP's 'Depot' Division training centre and that he was an old friend of my Captain.*

*He'd already ordered a pot of coffee and launched straight into a volley of questions that ranged all over the map. He asked about my preferences for dealing with tense situations and volatile people, and I explained that I preferred to engage in discussions with people over brute force. He asked how I felt about Aboriginal people, immigrants, and visible minorities. I replied that I thought any police force should be representative of the population that it serves, and related an experience I'd had patrolling in 'Chinatown' with a fellow Constable who was of Asian descent. I was just about to launch into a full-out discourse on the merits of diversity when he cut me off and jumped to his next question. With each question, he'd let me talk a bit and then cut me off and move to the next question. He asked about my girlhood, education, training in the Metro force, and my duties over the preceding two years. I eventually realized that I was being interviewed for something.*

*Finally, he leaned back in his chair, looked at me broodingly, and got to the point. He had asked my Captain, his friend, to recommend one of his young officers for a special pilot project he had in mind. He wanted someone who wanted to accomplish things, someone eager and tenacious, someone chomping at the bit to be allowed to do some 'real' police work, and ... someone female. At this point, he shed his stern 'Mountie Look,' relaxed his entire body, chuckled, and said that my Captain had recommended the "biggest pain in the butt" in his Division - me.*

*Seeing my obvious confusion, he moved on. "The Force has fallen behind the times," he said, "it's becoming embarrassing, with political pressure for change mounting, but some of us have a genuine desire to catch up and build a more diverse police force."*

*"We're going to be recruiting immigrants, visible minorities, maybe even people with some kinds of disabilities as well, but we have to start somewhere, and that somewhere is by engaging women"*

*He went on to explain that as CO of the training centre he was ready to try a first “pilot test” with a woman, but that the pilot test had to succeed as it would pave the way for an entire first troop of policewomen that would follow<sup>1</sup>. He had thought of using someone that had already qualified as a policewoman, and simply re-train them in the “RCMP way.”*

*That brought me up to full attention. “Wait a minute! Do basic training all over again?”*

*“Yes!” he replied, “that’s the only way you can possibly succeed. In the old days of the Northwest Mounted Police, a person could get appointed straight into the Force, even as a commissioned officer, if they had the right political connections. No more. Now everyone starts out the same way, as a Constable, and by going through the same basic training. If you want to have any hope of being accepted, much less respected, that’s how you have to begin.”*

*“Will you do it?”*

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Radium City, Canada

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<sup>1</sup>In real life, a first full troop of women began training in the RCMP in 1974, but for this fictional story, it all began with a single-woman pilot test.

Two years later, I'd arrived at the Radium City airport and played out the "IT'S NOT HALLOWEEN IS IT?" scene as part of my first introduction to a local resident, Norm.

As I collected my luggage, I was eagerly looking forward to doing some "real" police work. There was a large van serving as the airport shuttle for the four-mile trip into town, driven by – Norm, again. Although he had given me a hard time, the others taking the shuttle seemed nice enough.

Despite the name, Radium City is actually a town, not a city. It is located on the northern shore of Lake Athabasca, the 22<sup>nd</sup> largest lake in the world (8<sup>th</sup> largest in Canada), in the extreme north-western corner of Saskatchewan, one of Canada's prairie provinces.

When we reached the centre of town, I took in a fairly typical small-town Canadian scene: a long main street accommodating most of the key stores and offices, with several back streets radiating out to each side. One block back from the main street was the RCMP Detachment, a standard one-and-a-half story brown building of the same architecture that characterized hundreds of small RCMP detachments across the country. That's where I headed.

When I arrived, I was greeted by a locked door with a typed notice taped to it, saying "Gone fishing. For emergencies, contact the Mayor's Office. Otherwise, leave a note." I noticed that the door also had a notebook and pen hanging from a string. I wrote: "Cst. A. Houston reporting. Just arrived. Will report back tomorrow am," and went off to check-in to the one hotel.

It was late afternoon by the time I had settled into the hotel, so I tried the Mayor's Office. I found the Mayor, Horace Best, was in and was eager to welcome me to the community. Horace was about average in height and build, with thick blond hair, and lively blue eyes. I found him to be instantly engaging. He would lean forward and look directly at me with a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye. Obviously relishing the opportunity to speak to an eager listener, he soon launched into a sketch of Radium City's history.

I already knew some of the histories, having looked-up what I could in the City of Regina's library. I knew that Lake Athabasca was originally spelled "Athabaska," from a Cree word meaning "the place where there are reeds," referring to a reedy delta where the Athabasca River flows into the big lake. I also knew that Radium City had gone through a boom and bust cycle, and was now continuing to decline. Horace brought it all alive.

There had been mineral exploration activities in the area since the early 1900s, with prospectors looking for everything from iron, to gold, to radium. There hadn't been much development though, as the ore bodies discovered had been small, or the market timing was off, or both. Then, in the late 1940s, government interest in finding and stockpiling uranium for atomic weapons created an exploration rush in the region. By 1950, uranium prices had risen sharply, and prospectors' "tent cities" had begun to spring up around numerous mine sites in the area. By 1950, thousands of radioactive "surface showings" had been discovered. In response, the Saskatchewan government established the community of Radium City, in 1951, with the aim of serving the entire region.

Apparently, the city had been named after the "Radium Ore," everyone was prospecting for, this being the old term for the uranium mineral pitchblende. Horace chuckled, "The irony is that this radium ore was the same mineral prospectors had searched for in the 1920s and '30s, as an indicator of radium potential, but back then, the uranium itself was thought to be worthless and no one bothered to take much notice of it."

"Those were the days," he mused dreamily. In 1952, the government changed the regulations, making it more attractive for prospectors to explore and stake claims in the Lake Athabasca region. This even made it attractive for amateurs to prospect for uranium. The result was a massive uranium exploration and claim-staking rush that helped Canada build an international position as a uranium producer. "For a while, anyone with a rucksack and a Geiger Counter could become a prospector," Horace Explained, "and for a few years, the place was crawling with them." He showed me a scrapbook of newspaper and magazine clippings from publications like the New York Times,

Maclean's, and Life Magazine, with headlines like "*Uranium - Canada Maintains Place in Frantic World Production Race.*"

Several large uranium mines were established near the town, with the Rix Athabasca and Eldorado mines starting-up in 1953, followed by Cayzor Athabasca in 1954, Cinch Lake in 1955, Gunnar in 1955, and Lorado in 1956. With all this activity, Radium City grew from about 1,500 people in 1953 to nearly 5,000 by 1957. "They even made documentary movies<sup>2</sup> about us," Horace gushed, "like *The Birth of a Great Uranium Area* in 1953, and *The Road to Uranium* in 1957, and those movies were shown all over the world!"

"And the money flowed like water for a while," Horace concluded. Apparently, by 1960 the twelve mines and three mills operating in the Radium City area had produced about \$300 million worth of uranium. This was big money in those days, and uranium was Canada's number one mineral export (ahead of aluminum, iron, and nickel).

"Of course, it had to end someday," Horace sighed, "We knew, or we should have known. But no one talked about it; no one wanted to think about it." By 1961, some of the mines had run out of ore and closed. By 1963 Canada, the U.S., and Great Britain had accumulated enough uranium, and they stopped buying.

"The next thing you know, uranium was a glut on the market, and the price collapsed." As the price collapsed, so did the exploration, mining, and milling activities, and the number of active mines shrunk to only two, the Eldorado and Gunnar mines.

"By 1964, Radium City population was 1,500 again, right back where we started, and it's still shrinking. Ten years later, and we're now down to about 1,000." To hear Horace tell it, Radium City was once a wild, frontier town, but that was in the past. With the boom and bust years well behind, it sounded like the town had eased into a nice, quiet life. There was a two-person RCMP Detachment, and Horace thought I'd find it nice and relaxing because, he said, "Nothing exciting happens around here anymore."

Horace was wrong.

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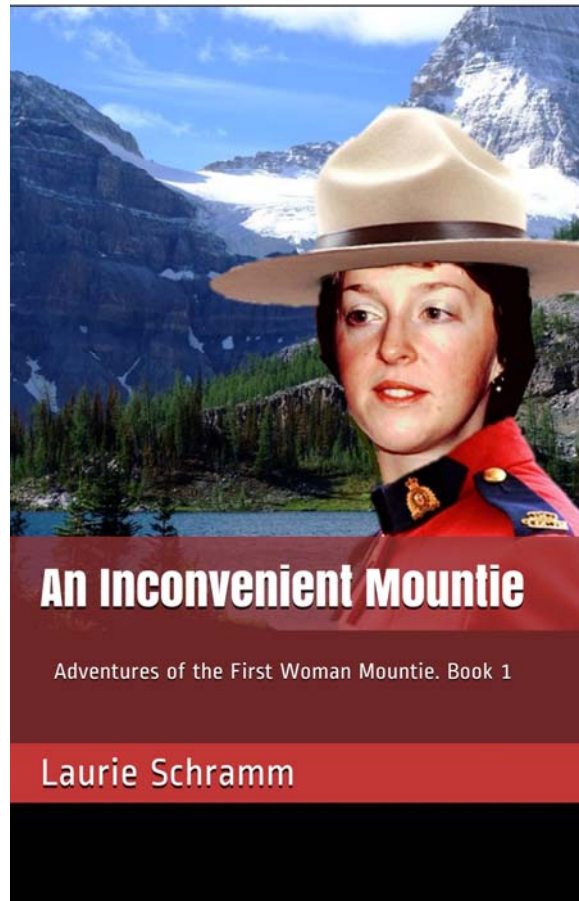
Alex's adventures continue in: ***An Inconvenient Mountie. Adventures of the First Woman Mountie Book 1***, by Laurie Schramm, 2018.

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For more information see: [www.laurieschramm.ca](http://www.laurieschramm.ca)

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<sup>2</sup>These movies can be found on the internet.



## **ADVENTURES OF THE FIRST WOMAN MOUNTIE**

*Book 1: An Inconvenient Mountie*

*Book 2: An Inconspicuous Mountie*

*Book 3: An Indestructible Mountie*

*Book 4: An International Mountie*

*Book 5: An Inseparable Mountie*

*Book 6: An Indispensable Mountie*