

Chapter 1 of: An Intimate Mountie

Adventures of the First Woman Mountie

Book 9

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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 Although most of the historical references are accurate, a few are not, and names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.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. First PRELUDES

Boxing Day, December 26, 1978
Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia

"I think this is a good time," said Emily, "let's set up the card table and try out the cards."

Emily's husband, Jacob, gave a sigh. He wasn't particularly superstitious, and certainly not deeply into matters of the occult like his wife was. He was, however, willing to humour her, and her exercises in astrology, séances, and Tarot-card reading provided mild entertainment, if nothing else. He dutifully went for the card table and set it up in the sitting room at the front of their house.

It was a good spot for it, he reflected. The house itself dated from the early 1900s, and the sitting room was furnished in Victorian style, with ornate (but uncomfortable) upholstered accent chairs, and numerous end- and coffee tables made of elegant hardwood and bearing gilt-edged, marble tops. On the end tables were heavy table lamps with neoclassical-embroidered shades made of chiffon and velvet, while in the front corners were floor lamps bearing Cottage Rose lamp shades, with lengthy gold fringe. It was already dark outside, and the low-level light from the various lamps created pools of warm, yellowish-golden illumination. Although there was adequate light falling on the card table, most of the room was a patchwork of shadows.

Almost spooky, he thought, as he pulled two accent chairs up to the table.

"Perfect," said Emily, as she entered the room and tasted the ambience with a large indrawn breath followed by a slow exhale. "Here are the cards." She was holding a small box made of highly polished wood, the top of which bore a richly-detailed carved image of intertwined, somewhat snake-like Celtic animals.

"It was very nice of Laura to send us a Christmas present this year, don't you think?"

"It was," said Jacob. Laura was Emily's Toronto-based, professional occultist, and it was Jacob's private opinion that the present was a clear sign that Emily had been paying Laura far too much for her long-distance spiritual services.

"She sent us very specific instructions for the first reading using these cards," said Emily, opening the box to reveal a set of richly-embossed Tarot cards nestled in the royal-blue, felt-lined interior.

"Laura writes that this deck has been handed-down from generation to generation of only the most dedicated occultists, and that once a reading has been completed, the cards are only shuffled once before being put away. When the next session begins, the cards are to be played exactly as they come out of the box. This is to preserve the energy of the cards and not overtax them."

"Mmm hmm," replied Jacob.

"Laura says she has read the cards, but was very careful not to disturb the order, and she has given us her interpretation."

"The first card speaks to 'Present,'" said the Emily, drawing the top card and placing it in the centre of the table. "It's The Wheel of Fortune. That suggests change is coming. Let's see what Laura has to say.... She says life continues in cycles of change, good, bad, up, down, and even sideways. No one can escape the cycles of change, so it is wise to be prepared. This is a

good beginning for our reading, because the Wheel of Fortune represents one of the Major Arcana, a 'trump' card, if you will – very powerful.”

“OK. I wonder what’s coming next then,” said Jacob, dutifully.

“The second card speaks to ‘Challenge’; the one thing we need to resolve or be aware of as we go forward from today,” said Emily, with an approving glance at her husband. She drew the next card from the box, placed it diagonally across the face of the first card, then referred to Laura’s notes. “The Tower. This means some kind of sudden, massive change is coming – and there will be upheaval.”

“The third card speaks to the past. Something that has led up to the present and that might give us some background on the challenge.” Drawing the next card, she placed it to one side of the first two cards. “The Hierophant card, but reversed. Laura writes that this usually means something unconventional or to vulnerability and frailty. In view of some of the cards yet to come, she thinks we’ll see that in this case, it refers to someone’s frailty. Someone close to us.”

“The fourth card speaks to ‘Future’; something that is going to occur soon, maybe in a few months. This won’t be the end of the story, just another step of the cycle of life.” Drawing the next card, she placed it on the opposite side of the first two cards. “Oooh, it’s Death!”

“Someone’s going to die?” asked Jacob.

“Not necessarily, it could just refer to some kind of transformation or change. We need to look at each card in the context of the other ones around it. Let’s see what comes next.”

“The fifth card is called ‘Above.’ It refers to the best possible solution for us.” Drawing the next card, she placed it above the first two cards. “Hmm, ‘The World. I know that this card refers to major change, and the end of a cycle. Let’s see what Laura has for us. Ahh, she says it also implies a positive ending for us. Whatever the challenge is, we’ll survive it.”

“Nice to know we’re going to win, before we even start to grapple with the challenge,” offered Jacob.

Emily looked at him reprovably, suspecting a touch of cynicism. “You can’t take the messages in the cards for granted, Jacob, or they’ll turn on us.

“Now then,” she continued, “the sixth card is ‘Below.’ It refers to some deeper aspect of the situation.” Drawing the next card, she placed it below the first two cards. “OK, now we’ve formed the Celtic Cross with the first six cards. The new card is Five of Cups. That means there’s going to be a loss.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” offered Jacob.

“No, it doesn’t. Maybe you were right about the Death card after all...” Emily drew the seventh card. “This next one is ‘Advice.’ It’s supposed to give us advice on how to deal with the challenge



of the second card. She placed the card to one side, and a bit below the first group of six cards.

"It's the Ten of Pentacles card, but reversed. Let's see... Laura says that this refers again to the loss we're going to experience, and the advice is to go against tradition."

"Go against tradition? What's that supposed to mean?" asked Jacob.

"Maybe we'll know when the times comes?" suggested Emily, with a shrug. "OK. The eighth card is 'External Influences.' This one tells us something about people or things that will affect the future but are beyond our control." Drawing the next card, she placed it above the seventh card. "The Knight of Cups, but reversed. This usually means sadness or heartbreak are coming, but we already knew that... Hmm, Laura says she thinks the card has a deeper meaning, in this case, that someone in our life is not who they pretend to be, so we have to beware."

"That sounds ominous," offered Jacob. "Who could possibly betray us at our stage of life?"

Emily was too eager to continue to stop and address this, however. "The ninth card is 'Hopes and/or Fears.' "Let's see what it says." Drawing the card, she placed it above the seventh and eighth cards.

"The Eight of Swords, but reversed. Laura says this represents release, and getting on with life. She says that's for later, when it's all over."

"Not very helpful, though" suggested Jacob.

"I think it's meant to encourage us," said Emily. "Now! One last card. The tenth card is 'Outcome,' and it should tell us something about where we're heading with all this." She drew the card and placed it above the seventh, eighth, and ninth cards.

They now had on the table the 'Celtic Cross' formed by the first six cards, plus 'The Staff,' a column to one side containing the final four cards.

"The last card is the Three of Wands. Let's see... Laura says this means that as things happen, don't react in the moment but step back and take the broader, long-term view of things and everything will turn out well."

"Sounds like good, general-purpose advice, but what does it all mean?" asked Jacob.

"Just a minute, Laura's notes say she wasn't satisfied so she drew another card."

"What?" asked Jacob, in mock horror. "Doesn't that break the rules?"

"No silly. All ten cards have been drawn. We didn't upset anything there. Let's see what she says... Ahh, Laura says that she was a little bit worried about her interpretations, and that you're allowed to draw more cards after all the rest have been drawn, so she drew two more. Let's do it," and Emily drew a tenth and an eleventh card.

"One is the Page of Pentacles, but reversed. So that's just reaffirming that something bad is going to happen, but Laura says it will have something to do with money. Rats, that doesn't sound good.

"The other is the Queen of Pentacles. Let's see... Laura says this is the 'mother card,' and refers to someone that's been a mother more than once... I think she means one of our grandmothers, Jacob!"

"Laura thinks this was a good reading," Emily continued. "We drew four Major Arcana (The Wheel of Fortune, The Tower, The Hierophant, and The World) which are like trump cards – very powerful. She also reminds us not to focus too much on the individual cards, but to see how they all work together to tell us a story. She thinks that a close relative is going to pass

away in the next few months. Perhaps one of our mothers or grandmothers.” Emily paused at this point. “That has to mean Grandma MacLerie! You know how worried everyone’s been about her health for the past year.”

“Could be,” said Jacob, doubtfully.

“Laura says the cards indicate something about money, so we’ll probably be left something in a will.”

“That sounds like good news,” said Jacob, brightening considerably.

“But Laura says, it won’t be a good thing for some reason, that there will be upheaval, and that someone close may attempt to betray us in some way, so we should beware.”

“That’s not very specific.”

“Laura knew you were going to say that. She writes, ‘I know that’s not very specific.’ So there Jacob. Anyway, she goes on to say that the card about going against tradition and the several cards referring to taking the long-term view and getting on with life suggest that if anyone offers us something, we should refuse it. If we do, we’ll have a happy ending.”

“Offer us anything? You mean like in the will? Turn it down? Sounds crazy to me.”

“No! Remember the curse!”

“Curse. What curse?”

“The ‘Curse of the MacLerie Clan’ – you remember, don’t you?”

“That old bedtime story again?” Jacob scoffed. “A colourful take to scare children, that’s all that is. Nothing more.”

“Well, it’s easy to scoff when it’s not your side of the family, but every time one of my ancestors on the MacLerie side got rich, their heir never lived long enough to spend the money... and that must be it. Laura’s unwittingly reminding us of the family curse and telling us not to accept any money if it turns out that we’re in Grandma’s will.”

“Well. That won’t be a problem then, since all the money will probably go to your cousin Jack. He’s the oldest male heir.”

“That’s true, because he’s the only male. Jane’s actually the oldest.” Emily bit her lip thoughtfully. “Maybe we should warn them both.”

“You know they’ll just laugh at you.” Then, seeing the concerned expression on his wife’s face he relented a little. “Look, why don’t we wait until something happens to your grandmother then see what her will says. We can decide what to do then. OK?”

“Yes, all right. She took another look at Laura’s letter... Look at this last bit. Laura even predicted your reaction. She writes that she knows I’ll be sensible, but that you will be skeptical, if not down-right cynical. She says that if she was only doing this to make money, she’d never suggest that her clients turn down an inheritance – so there!”

“Well, I can’t argue that, much as I’d like to” agreed Jacob.

“I don’t think this was a very happy reading,” said Emily, sounding suitably disappointed, “I don’t want anyone to die, and it sounds like family turmoil – maybe over a will – is coming. I wanted something to look forward to!”

“Don’t worry. Maybe Laura didn’t read the message in the cards properly.”

Sometime in May 1979
Somewhere in Canada

The first images I can remember are of me in a vehicle, with Silver sitting on the seat beside me. We are driving on a narrow two-lane road, down the steep side of a mountain. It is very quiet, and I think of how peaceful and relaxing it feels.

As we round a steep curve in the road, a full-size adult moose, with a full rack of antlers, suddenly jumps out of a patch of trees on our left and starts crossing the road – but slowly, ever so slowly. The moose doesn't even spare us a glance and may not be aware of us at all.

I have no idea where the moose is headed, because the right-hand side of the road has no shoulder, just a guardrail and then a sharp drop-off to the ocean, which must be close to a thousand feet below us.

I immediately began pumping the brake, but something is wrong! I only have a fraction of the braking power I should have. I can't steer to the right or I'll plow through the guardrail and drop to the sea. If I hit the moose head-on it will come right up the hood, and break through the windshield. If that doesn't kill us, the force of the collision, and the resulting out-of-control spin will surely either send us through the guardrail or else into the oncoming lane of the road.

I have just time for a quick glance at the road ahead.

Uh oh! In the other lane, coming up fast, is a big commercial freightliner-type truck.

With only seconds left, I am trying to watch the guardrail on my right, the oncoming truck freightliner approaching on my left, and the moose that has just now made it to a position dead-centre in front of me.

I'm trying to watch the relative motions of the truck and moose, and I can't tell whether the truck is going to pass us quickly enough for me to swerve to my left and get around the moose. Meanwhile, I keep pumping the brake, which seems to be getting weaker rather than stronger.

Why aren't the brakes working?

There is a very loud noise, which my brain registers as the sound of the truck's big air horns. The driver has recognized the crisis and is trying to help!

The sound of the air horns spurs the moose into a small leap forward. For a heartbeat, I think the moose is going to break into a run, but no, he settles back into a slow plod. Damn!

I decide that the truck driver has given me the only chance I'm going to get, and I decide to aim for whatever slender space may open-up between the passing truck and the sauntering moose. All other options seem worse.

As the freightliner passes me, I steer as close to it as I can without actually hitting it, but my vehicle is fishtailing now.

I can't steer any closer to the truck. There's no time for second thoughts. The moose and I, and Silver beside me, are all going to have to take our chances now.

My vision blurs, and I think I can see – or sense – the last of the freightliner passing me on the left. My vehicle swings partly into the lane just vacated by the truck, and a huge, blurry animal shape passes me on the right. It can't be real, but I feel like we must be brushing the moose's hide as we pass.

My foot is still pumping the brake pedal. There is some braking there but not much. Where

the hell are the brakes?

As I pull back into my proper lane, the vehicle continues to fishtail from side to side.

There is a sudden jolt, and a loud thud. The right-rear corner must have struck the guiderail. I dimly realize that wasn't such a bad thing as it helped slow us a little bit.

Feeling reckless, or perhaps panicky, now, I deliberately steer into the guardrail again... and again... and again. The collisions are making the vehicle bounce, and the shrieking sound of scraping metal is making my head pound, but at least our speed is dropping somewhat, as we continue down the steep mountain slope.

Now there is more traffic approaching and there's another sharp left bend coming up, still with only the guardrail separating us from the road and long drop into the sea.

Feeling slightly reckless, I decide that we've slowed enough to risk downshifting the automatic transmission from 'drive' to 'low.' I tap the gas pedal to get the engine revolutions up, then quickly shift down. The engine roars like it's going to pop out of the hood, and a glance at the tachometer shows the needle swing up and past the red line.

The brake pedal is now going all the way to the floor. The brakes are completely gone.

This is the critical moment: if the engine self-destructs, we'll end up accelerating down the slope out of control. If not, then the engine-compression-effect will slow us down.

More seconds pass by as the engine roars. It's still cranking well above the red line, but we're slowing, actually slowing, and I can almost – but not quite – control the vehicle.

There is one last thing I can try: keeping my right foot on the brake pedal, I put my left foot on the parking brake pedal and push, hard. That helps a bit, but I know well that parking brakes aren't designed to be used when a vehicle is in motion. It's only a matter of time before it too self-destructs.

We've lost a bit more speed, though, and I can almost control the vehicle.

I glance ahead. I was wrong! There is one more thing I can try.

I realize that I've been presented with a final three choices: allow the vehicle to skid over the line into oncoming traffic, allow it to break through the guardrail and plunge into the sea, or try to drift into a large boulder that's coming up on the side of the road.

Three choices, none of them good.

I have one second to decide.

I choose the boulder.

The boulder appears larger and larger as we close-in on it.

Just before impact, my eyes fly wide open, my body spasms, and I sit up in bed fully awake.

It takes a moment for me to realize that I am alive. I'm trembling and my body has broken out into a cold sweat, but I'm alive.

As my pulse and breathing rates begin to come down, I realize that Silver is licking my cheek with a look of concern in his big eyes.

I throw my arms around his neck and bury my face in his fur.

He knows what I was dreaming, I realize.

It was a dream – a nightmare.

No. It was a recollection, come back as a dream, because something like this had actually happened to us.

Was it really only a month ago?

RCMP Constable Alexandra Houston's adventures continue in: ***An Intimate Mountie. Adventures of the First Woman Mountie Book 9***, by Laurie Schramm, 2022.

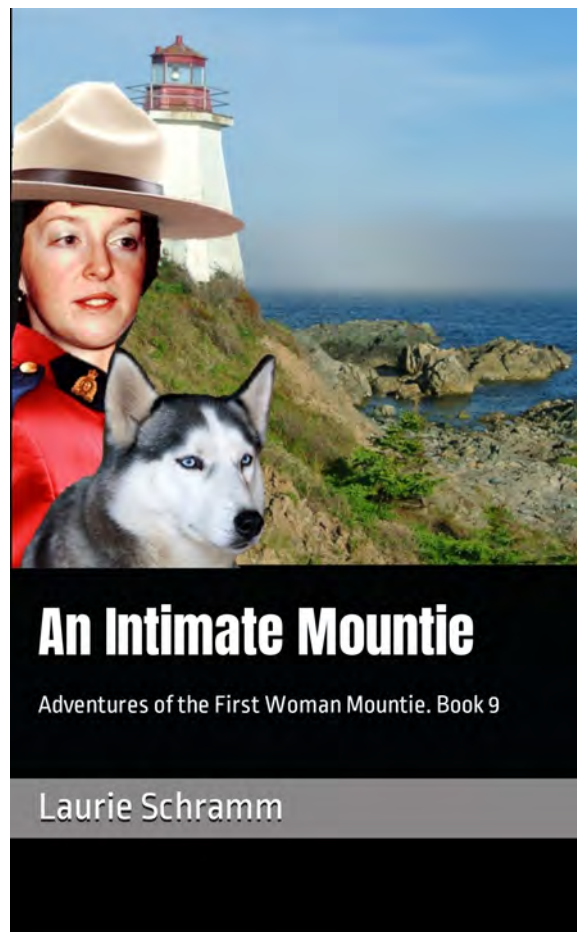
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