

EMMA'S GHOST

BY KAT KARPENKO



Emma's Ghost
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Catherine (Kat) Karpenko

katkarpenkoauthor.wordpress.com
authorkkarpenko@gmail.com
facebook.com/authorkatkarpenko

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*For my loving husband, Gene Hood
whose support has kept me moving forward*

AND

For the memories of the Dear Departed

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PREFACE

This story was inspired by the discovery of love letters in the wall of a historic house being renovated in Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia. Although I never saw the content of these letters, I thought it was a great plot line for a short story. My Mazatlán writers' group told me different. No. It had the makings of a novel.

The other inspiration was the history that permeates Nova Scotia (where I lived most of my life) and of particular interest, the incredible facts of the 1917 Halifax Explosion that devastated the city during World War I. I have tried to remain true to historical events.

As I persevered, the characters started taking over. Before I knew it, I was transported into two historical time settings, two sets of morality, two dysfunctional marriages, and two emerging love stories born out of chaos and linked by a determined ghost. Perhaps it WAS Emma's ghost that drove me on, just as she obsessed my heroine, Laura.

NOTE: The characters are fictitious, but I have tried to use common names from the south shore of Nova Scotia. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely

coincidental. I have read the letters (1884-1888) of Ned Harris, a minister of St. James Church, but his character and the rectory he lived in, do not in any way resemble that of Charles Lindsay, the Mahone Bay minister in Emma's story. The Dockside Pub, mentioned in Part One, is also fictitious but has a resemblance to the many fine eateries of Mahone Bay.

Stories and descriptions of the Halifax explosion in Part Two have been based on historical accounts of the time.

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I would like to thank the members of my Mazatlán Writer's Group who over the years have encouraged me to continue and have shared their knowledge of the craft of writing. The years of input and support from these gifted writers have been extremely instrumental in the development of this work. The following writers have stuck with me to the end (in no particular order): Angela Jackson, Sue Carnes, PJ Reece, Myrna Guymer, Sarah Trevor, Marie Hermanson, Katrine Geneau, Evelyn Wolff. Previous members who have also been most helpful: May Wong, Ken Martens, Mike Latta, Rubye Hinton, David Kindopp, Barbara Horton and our dearly departed fearless leader Rick Azulay.

I must also thank the following for editing assistance: my daughter Sonya Irvine who is a freelance editor, author and friend Lorraine Johnson, and my supportive "readaholic" husband Gene Hood.

Kat Karpenko

- PART ONE -

THE LETTERS

1985

MAHONE BAY, NOVA SCOTIA
CANADA

During a time in history when cell phones and computers were not an integral part of our lives. Personal communications took place with the written word, the telephone, or face to face.

- ONE -

DISCOVERY

PLASTER CASCADED FROM THE WALL FILLING THE AIR WITH a fog of fine powder and ancient dust motes. One more swing and Ted broke through the corner of the closet adjoining the exterior wall of the Victorian home. His wife, Laura, insisted that the closet needed to be made larger. A sudden cold draft caused a flutter of something red.

“Wait Ted. There’s something behind the laths. It looks like it was hidden in an opening from the closet side.” She pointed. “Can you tear that last one off?”

Ted picked up the crow bar and removed it with one muscular tug. Laura coughed through her mask as she reached through the broken corner of the closet to pull out a small bundle covered with dust.

She pulled off her mask. “Wow! These look really old! Who put them here?”

Ted dropped the crow bar and came closer to peer over her shoulder.

With trembling hands, she untied a faded red ribbon wrapped around four letters. Carefully, Laura opened the first pale envelope. The hand-written note on sepia

paper, in scratchy black ink, appeared hesitantly scribed, as if written in fits and starts. She read the words to Ted with glowing emphasis.

Lunenburg County

April 3, 1918

My Dearest Emma,

I have spent the week trying to occupy my mind with the daily chores at the acreage. The lambing is near completion and we have kept a watchful eye to keep the coyotes away. The new dogs have worked well and are easy to train.

Even in this busy season I cannot keep you from my thoughts. I am desperate to see you. It feels like an eternity. How can we manage this wait until your husband leaves? Please leave your reply in the usual place.

In the meantime, I will keep the memories of our last sweet embrace in my mind constantly to sustain me.

Your devoted,

Andrew

Laura's large eyes sparked with excitement. She swept her blonde curls away from her face with one hand and clutched the letter to her heart with the other. "Ah, Andrew, you sound divine!"

"Don't be such a drama queen. Divine? Are you kidding? He's screwing with somebody's wife. Not what I would call a prince," Ted exclaimed with indignation.

She stopped and blinked. "Now wait a minute. This was the rectory in the early 1900's, before the new one was built. My God, Ted, I feel like I've opened the proverbial closet full of skeletons. Dare we go on?"

"Laura, could I possibly stop you?" he grimaced, hands on hips.

"Not a mud-wrestling chance, buddy."

Laura put her head to the side and narrowed her eyes. "Who was this Emma? She must be connected to this house. But it was my Gran's house, and her name was Katrina, also known as Kate. My great-grandmother's name was Suzette. No Emmas there. She must have lived here before my great-grandparents. This is going to involve some research. We need some more clues Watson. Let's take a break and read on!"

"But there's still lots more to do. Can't it wait until later?" Ted's voice whined in a weary tone.

She pulled him down next to her on the plaster-covered workbench to examine the contents of the bag more closely.

The letters were in date order, well read, with the corners curled. As she quickly opened the next one, she noticed that they had originally been sealed with wax.

Kat Karpenko

Lunenburg County

April 8, 1918

My Dearest Emma,

I have received your news and grieve daily that we have been parted for such a long time. Edgar's departure cannot come soon enough. It upsets me greatly that your husband would lay a hand on you. To dare such an act in your brother's house is beyond belief. The man is a scoundrel. Drink is no excuse. I highly commend Charles for his actions and wish that I had also been there to protect you.

Having a man of the cloth in the family certainly has some merits. Edgar dare not turn his anger on Charles or the community would react very badly against him. I agree that it is likely true that your brother is torn between his belief in the sanctity of marriage and his desire to have you out of Edgar's grasp, and share your fear that the former may be stronger. You are wise not to tell him of our love until our plans are underway.

My greatest concern is that Edgar will take you away upon his return from sea as he has threatened to do.

Please meet me in the orchard by our favorite tree Sunday evening. We must act soon, my love.

Yours forever,

Andrew

Laura stared up from the letter and cursed under her breath. "That poor woman! What kind of chance was there for her in those days? Divorce was not an option. Women had no rights, not even to their own property." Laura glared angrily. Her voice rose. "Emma was trapped in a brutal marriage!"

"Well, maybe her husband had a right to be upset the way things were going."

"But to physically attack her, Ted! I agree with Andrew. There's no excuse for that. I wonder what happened to her?" She opened the next envelope with little care for the age-worn paper.

Lunenburg County

April 12, 1918

My Dearest Emma,

I think of nothing but our final escape. From dawn to dusk, as I work my way through the endless chores of the farm, the dream of our departure buoys me with happiness.

Every day my mother, Louisa, and I await my brother's return from the war. For her, it is the joy of his presence that brings her happy thoughts. For me, it is the knowledge that he can take over the farm and I will be free. Robert will return soon my love. I ask for your patience although I can hardly bear the burden of time myself.

Very soon, while Edgar is away at sea, you will be able to make your escape. You will be safe here in the country until we can leave for Newfoundland. I know we will find refuge in the coastal village where we will make our new home.

In the meantime, I look forward to our next meeting when our precious moments of bliss will make the waiting less painful.

*Your devoted
Andrew*

“Wow! The plot thickens!” Laura exclaimed with a playful nudge. “I think there was some hanky-panky taking place in this old town. I wonder if my great-grandparents knew them? I wish Grandmother Kate were still alive so I could ask. But, then, there’s Aunt Rosie. She was Gran’s friend and might know something. She usually knows all the gossip.”

Ted groaned. “Not Aunt Rosie.”

Just then an angry blast of cold air whistled through the cracks in the exposed outer walls of the bedroom. Somewhere down the hallway a door slammed violently, rattling the windows. Laura jumped with a start and nervously looked down the hallway. “No one there,” she said as she closed the bedroom door.

Ted shivered and grabbed for his sweater.

“You know, we really need to get on with this nasty

job before the snow flies. Besides the oncoming winter, the unchangeable fact is: we're moving in at the end of the month, whether the work is finished or not."

"Oh, I know honey, but there's only one more letter. I can't stop now."

"Okay. Okay. Keep reading. I'll keep on working." Ted muttered testily as he bent over to gather up the bits of plaster and laths for garbage pickup. Laura opened the last envelope and cleared her throat.

Lunenburg County

April 19, 1918

My Dearest Emma,

I am distraught. The letter came today. How can this be happening now? Just as Robert arrived back from the war, the army has decided to conscript me. It is unfair in so many ways. I had no idea that Robert is in such poor condition. He is shattered of mind and body having lost an arm in the war. How can he look after mother and the farm? But she is strong. Somehow things will work out if you can assist her.

Thank you for asking your brother to do something but I cannot shirk my duty. My great-grandparents came here from Germany. They were pioneers. I am proud of them and grateful to the country that took them in, gave them this land. I would not dishonor my family by not serving, or have

people think that we side with the Germans.

It is vital that I take you to the farm where you can safely await my return. Edgar will not find you there. Robert and my mother will look out for you, and you can be a great help to them. I pray that the war does not last much longer.

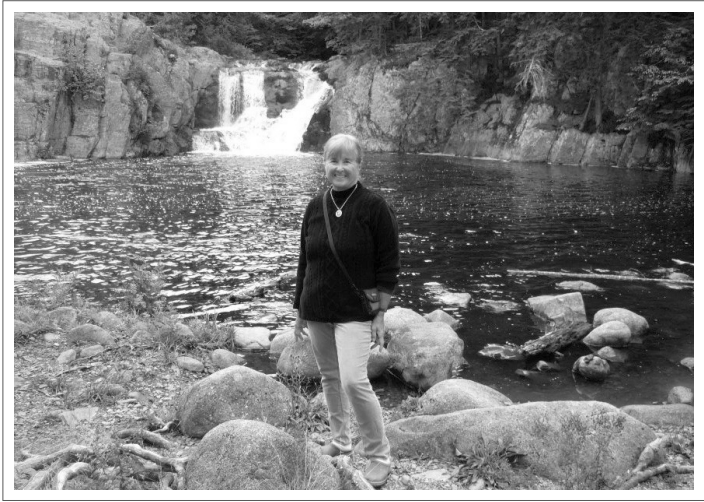
Make ready to leave soon. Please meet me tonight. I cannot wait to hold you in my arms.

*Your loving,
Andrew*

Laura slowly folded the letter, sighing with furrowed brows. "I have a terrible feeling that this romance did not have a happy ending. Ted, keep ripping those laths. Maybe there are more letters hidden."

Laura rejoined the work pulling at the boards, peering into corners, but the rest of the day's efforts revealed no more secrets.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kat Karpenko has had a varied writing career in technical writing, journalism, and short stories. This is her first novel which originally started as a short story. Born in Windsor, Ontario, Canada, she has also lived in England and Australia, but has spent most of her life in Nova Scotia where she worked in various administrative capacities at Dalhousie University in Halifax. Now retired, she divides her time between Mazatlán, Mexico and Canada.

katkarpenkoauthor.wordpress.com

authorkkarpenko@gmail.com

facebook.com/authorkatkarpenko