

From the bestselling author of *Operation Wormwood* and *Operation Vanished*

HELEN C. ESCOTT



OPERATION WORMWOOD
THE RECKONING
A CRIME THRILLER

PRAISE FOR HELEN C. ESCOTT

Operation Wormwood

“Brilliant! Absolutely brilliant! With skilled, detective-like precision, Escott kept me at the edge of my seat throughout this well-told story of hurt and faith. Filled with a ton of well-researched facts and figures regarding Newfoundland and Labrador’s history, criminal investigative processes, and relevant political complications, this novel fills the reader’s need for action, suspense, and emotion. This book will make every Newfoundlander and Labradorian reflect on their complicated history and fully intrigue those who come from away. *Operation Wormwood* is wicked . . . simply wicked . . . in every definition of the word.” — E. B. MERRILL, S/SGT. (RTD.), ROYAL CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE

“At the heart of this gut-wrenching, savagely realistic novel is a deep theological struggle: why does evil against the most vulnerable go unpunished by a loving, all-powerful God? Escott combines first-hand police experience, superb storytelling, and deep faith in this Dan Brown-style epic.” — REV. ROBERT COOKE

“*Operation Wormwood* . . . gives us a sense of what first responders deal with in their daily lives. A well-written book. Great job, Mrs. Escott.” — EDWARDS BOOK CLUB

“*Operation Wormwood* is one heck of a thriller.”

— THE TELEGRAM

PRAISE FOR HELEN C. ESCOTT

Operation Vanished

“Operation Vanished is a powerful page-turner that will resonate with any reader who enjoys a good murder mystery. Helen C. Escott doesn’t just seek justice and remembrance for female victims of crime but makes a brilliant attempt to emancipate them from the bonds of yesteryear.” — FIRESIDE COLLECTIONS

“Operation Vanished is a must-read Newfoundland mystery-thriller!” — THE MIRAMICHI READER

Operation Vanished was awarded a Silver Medal for
Best Regional Fiction at the 24th annual
Independent Publisher Book Awards

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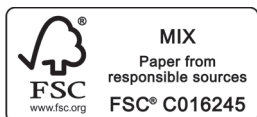
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To my husband, Robert, and our children: Sabrina, Daniel, and Colin, my daughter-in-law, Alanna, and grandchildren Sophie and Maximus.

“One day, you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again.” — C. S. Lewis, The Chronicles of Narnia

*Love forever and always,
Mom*

To Minnie,

How can I ever thank you for always being by my side? I can never thank you enough for your love, companionship, and loyalty. You could never be replaced.

I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me. — C. S. Lewis

1

“How was the flight from Rome?” Kathie Fagan had settled in the old downtown house her mother had left her. The early morning sun poured in through the kitchen window, squeezing past the ledge of growing plants onto the new linoleum floor. She had spent the last few months renovating the house, putting in an updated kitchen while leaving its quaint and lovely charm intact.

“Long. Long and boring,” replied Father Peter Cooke as he took off his old felt fedora and placed it on the table. It had left his grey-white hair in a tuft on top of his head. Worry lines crisscrossed his elderly face. “I watched four movies going over and four movies coming back. It seems the only movies Hollywood is putting out these days are about organized crime. No one is making great movies like *The Bells of St. Mary’s* anymore.”

Father Cooke looked like he fell out of a 1950s-era movie. He proudly wore his priest’s attire every day: black pants with polished shoes, shirt with the Roman collar, and blazer. There was no excess about him, and material things didn’t interest him.

Kathie placed a plate of fresh baked cookies on the table alongside a pot of tea.

“Have you noticed every mob movie is about getting out?”

"Have you noticed every religious movie is about the same thing?" she answered.

They both laughed. The old kitchen wasn't the only thing that had been renovated this summer. Kathie Fagan had retired from the convent and left her former name behind. She looked older than her fifty years. She was thin for her small frame. A life of humble penance had taught her to dress conservatively. She still buttoned her blouse to the top, and the only makeup she owned was a tinted Chap Stick and a jar of Vaseline moisturizer. Sister Pius was gone.

She caught him staring at her and reached up and tucked her newly cut and dyed blonde hair behind her ear. Kathie felt this new style hid her life in the convent. It didn't.

A sleek black cat with big green eyes sauntered into the kitchen.

"Well, who is this?" Father Cooke reached down to stroke the glistening fur.

"This is my new fur baby, Salem." She proudly picked him up for a cuddle. "I told you I wanted a cat."

"Well, you are certainly using your new-found freedom wisely." He admired her new life.

"It gets lonely at times. I've been surrounded by sisters in the convent since I was nineteen. I'm not used to having privacy."

Father Cooke looked around at her new cupboards. "You've done a lot of work here while I was gone. It's so homey here. So comfortable." He let out a great sigh. "It's so you."

"It was the house I grew up in. There are a lot of great memories here. I didn't want to throw them out with the rotted wood and mould." She poured the tea. "Tell me the truth. How was Rome?"

"Well, you know what they say, the more things change, the more they stay the same." Father Cooke poured tinned milk into

his tea followed by a heaping teaspoon of sugar. "You know, the Vatican takes for granted that everyone knows the story of God and reads it the same way. But that's simply not true anymore."

Kathie nodded. "If it ever was true. Now that I'm away from it, I can see that the Church has piled years of religious and cultural baggage on the story of Jesus."

"I tried to tell them, as a front-line priest, that it is of the utmost importance to listen to people's stories of faith, pain, loss, rejection, doubt, and questioning." He shook his head.

"I have long criticized the Church's use of tradition as a way to keep people involved." Kathie pushed the plate of cookies toward the priest. "We have relied on Christmas Mass, christenings, Easter Sunday, Holy Communion, and weddings to bring people in. But then they don't show up any other time of year."

"Now people don't even bother teaching these traditions. Weddings take place on sandy beaches. Christmas is about how many gifts you can fit under a tree, and then post pictures of the extravagance to Facebook, so others less fortunate can feel bad about themselves." He took a cookie from the plate. "We have taken our traditions for granted. Now they are empty and meaningless."

"I believe that these religious traditions are the most important contribution that churches give to people. Who will teach children the real meaning of Christmas or the sanctity of marriage when churches have closed their doors? Marriage has lost its meaning. It has become as recyclable as this tin." The former nun picked up the tin of Carnation milk. "Tradition is how faith is passed from one generation to the next."

Father Cooke broke the cookie in half, a force of priestly habit. "It seems to me that loneliness and despair are at epidemic proportions. Suicide has become an option for elderly and youth. The community that the Church offers is more important now than ever."

“Personally, I think the Church was off-track when they focused on Mass on Sundays. Jesus ate with everyone, sinners and saints alike, but he was deemed a glutton and a drunkard. He brought people together in celebration. Even His miracles were about removing barriers to community. As followers of Jesus, we are literally called to be a community of gluttons and partiers.” Kathie grinned from ear to ear.

Father Cooke could only chuckle. “Oh, we should put that on bumper stickers. ‘The Catholic Church—the original gluttons and partiers.’”

Kathie poured him another cup of tea. “At the heart of our worship and community is a table and a simple meal shared by friends.”

“Agreed. But how do we turn meals into a sacred encounter? How do we take the idea of ‘Church’ beyond the four walls of our buildings?”

“We used to be good at this,” Kathie replied, deep in thought. “We built schools, hospitals, and universities. We educated women when the world told us they had no value other than procreation. We helped the poor. Wherever there was a need, the Church met it. But we have lost our way, forgot about those we really serve. We find ourselves holed up in cold stone buildings, longing for the good old days.”

“I tried to tell them that the Church was at its best when it added value to people’s lives. When it made the world a better place.” Father Cooke sipped his tea. “We need to focus on love, partnerships, and service, not programs, hierarchical structures, and protecting the status quo.”

“I didn’t tell you that I’m taking on a new ministry.” Kathie laid her cup down. “I will be volunteering with Survivors of Suicide. Its acronym is SOS.”

Father Cooke’s pride for her filled his heart. “You are the Church. That’s such a great fit for you.”

“Peter, did you know that Father Charlie Horan was my son?” She watched his face.

“What?” His face took on a serious look.

“When I was sixteen, I became pregnant. I gave the baby up for adoption, but the lady who adopted him died when he was twelve, and he was put in the orphanage.” She stared into her cup, unable to look at her friend. “I knew there was something about him. Something familiar. I started to wonder. Then I did some digging. Before my mother died, she told me the truth. I can’t forgive myself for what happened to him. I gave him up so he could have a better life.”

Father Cooke was stunned. “What you did, you did in good faith. What happened to him was not your fault. Maybe God sent him back to you so he could have one soft place to fall before He took him home. Maybe God sent him back to you to say goodbye and to give you a new direction.”

Kathie looked up and met his eyes. A tear rolled down her face, and she brushed it away. “Only you could see the good in suicide.” She brushed the cookie crumbs off the table. “Anyway, my new direction is to work with youth and front-line responders such as police officers, firefighters, and paramedics.”

“That’s one of the things I suggested to the Vatican. The Church needs to find a place for youth.” The priest took her hand. “These youth groups and hip-hop music in worship don’t work. We need to give them a voice and a place of ministry. We need to give them leadership roles in our parishes, our finance committees, and strategic planning groups. Young people can bring a new energy, fresh eyes, and—I don’t know if they are ready for this, but—change.”

Kathie squeezed his hand and let go. “The days of large, rock churches are numbered, but the future of small, local, informal, loving, committed faith communities are wide open. That’s why I am going to be there for people who have lost someone to sui-

cide or who are thinking about taking their own lives. That will be my Church.”

“And I will be there for you.” Father Cooke’s genuine admiration for her was always hard to hide.

She locked eyes with him again. “Peter, tell me the truth. Now that you know I had a baby at sixteen and gave him up, now that you know it was Father Horan, how do you feel about me? Because I’m not going to hide that anymore. I visit my son’s grave every day and pray for his forgiveness. I’m not praying for anyone else’s.”

He took a deep breath. “I will drive you to the graveyard, and I will sit and pray with you. Who am I to judge anyone else? We all have something to hide. Nobody goes through this world untouched. Do you think you’re the only one in that graveyard praying for forgiveness? If I am going to change the Church, then it starts right here and now.”

Father Cooke made the sign of the Cross over Kathie. “Your forgiveness is granted. Instead of saying ten Hail Marys, tell your story to ten families who are suffering and help them find forgiveness as well.”

Kathie felt a weight come off her shoulders and a new purpose in her heart. “Thank you. This is what the Hail Mary is about.”

Then she added, “One more thing.”

“Yes.”

“What about this Wormwood business?” She waited for his reaction. “Do you really think God has sent a plague to the world to kill pedophiles, or do you think someone is killing them intentionally?”

“I’ve thought long and hard about that one. The hardest thing I do is hear the confessions of people who tell me they hurt children.” He pointed to a pocket inside his blazer. “I still keep a Bible here, you know.”

“I know you do.” Kathie knew the outline in his coat.

“I admire what Father Horan did. He was a brave man to go to Sgt. Myra with the detailed files of all those pedophiles.” He laid his hand over his pocket. “I wish I were that brave. But I can’t break my vow.”

“I’m not judging you, Peter.”

Father Cooke scratched his head. “I really do believe God is unfolding His justice upon the world.” His face was stone-cold serious. “Besides, there’s no way a serial killer could travel the world and infect so many people.”

She breathed in deeply and exhaled. “I believe it’s God’s work, too.”

2

Sgt. Nicholas Myra stood staring out the office window of the Integrated Child Exploitation Unit. The title on the open door to his office reflected in the glass read: ICE UNIT COMMANDER.

He watched the sun slowly set behind Signal Hill. The sky had changed from a brilliant promise of a day into a dark, inky black lit only by a scattering of stars and a greyish full moon.

Myra watched the patrol cars leave the parking lot of the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary. Each was driven by an officer starting the evening shift, policing the city of St. John's, the oldest city in North America.

The police headquarters had a vantage point in historic Fort Townshend. It was strategically built on the hill overlooking the harbour, a reminder to all that they, the police, were there. Adjacent to it stood the Basilica of St. John the Baptist, positioned to offer a blessed overwatch of protection to the officers. On the opposite side was the CLB Armoury. The concrete arches, built in 1910, was a memorial to the first 500 men who answered the king's call to arms at the start of the First World War, when Newfoundland was still a colony of Britain.

Myra's police portable radio sat on his desk, and he listened to the officers signing in one by one to the Operations Com-

munication Centre. Each gave a car and badge number, opening the lines of communication for the evening shift.

Their lifeline. Their umbilical cord to safety.

A sheen of sweat covered his face, trickling down into his thick brown moustache, even though the air conditioning in the building was on bust. His heavy wool dress uniform confined him, and he could smell the stench from his own body.

Myra tried to remember the vigour he had when he first joined the force. He was a young constable eagerly leaving at the beginning of a shift to fight crime and protect and serve. He could not calm his mind tonight. The thick taste of too many coffees stuck to his tongue, and the nauseating taste of bile caused by a stomach ulcer felt like it was choking him.

The darkness of the evening made the windows in his office reflective, and Myra looked at his imposing frame dressed in his black uniform with the silver trim. He reached over and turned off the light to get a better look at the city he had policed for thirty years.

Earlier that afternoon, he had been presented with the Chief's Commendation by Chief Robert DeSilva for his outstanding leadership during Operation Wormwood. It was an investigation that had brought down a network of pedophiles in the province and across the country.

The Chief's Commendation is the highest honour a police officer can receive. Myra opted to receive it alone in the chief's office to avoid the pomp and circumstance. He had not invited his father, even though, as a retired police officer himself, he would have been bursting with pride. Nor did he tell his mother, because he knew she would cry watching her only child receive acknowledgement for his hard work, and that would break him. He thought about Maria, his ex-wife, but pushed that thought out of his mind.

But Myra couldn't push from his mind the thousands of images and videos of children being abused. No matter how he

tried or how many times he went to his psychologist, he couldn't stop hearing their cries for help. The screams of torture. The helplessness in their eyes. They stalked him daily and caused him night terrors. They isolated him from family and friends.

He didn't tell his staff about the commendation. He was too embarrassed to receive the award in front of them. They knew about Father Charles Horan, the priest who hanged himself after giving Myra the thirty-two files that had brought down the network. Myra couldn't stop thinking about Father Horan's life as Archbishop Patrick Keating's assistant—and victim. A twelve-year-old orphan trapped in a life of horror. How horribly confused he must have been, disobeying the archbishop's dying request to destroy the detailed files, the files the archbishop had used to blackmail the pedophiles who made him untouchable.

Father Horan had reached out to Myra for help when he panicked and regretted betraying the archbishop. Myra was in the middle of the takedown, organizing the arrests and running Operation Wormwood. He was too busy to answer the phone.

Father Horan, fearing retribution from those in the archbishop's network, and terrified he would abuse children himself, took his own life in Archbishop Keating's office. The archbishop's final victim.

The investigation into Wormwood had been long and exhausting. Myra's theory of a serial killer who hunted down pedophiles had fallen apart. There was no way one person could criss-cross the country so quickly, identifying and infecting pedophiles, causing their slow and painful death. The excruciating pain and nosebleeds they suffered had become front-page news around the world. Instead, the police investigation focused on the details in the files Father Horan had given him. They led to the disruption of the largest pedophile ring in Canadian history.

Myra had spoken to Dr. Luke Gillespie at the Health Sciences Centre earlier that morning. Gillespie told him the med-

ical community was still hotly debating the possibility of a new disease but could not agree that it only affected one group of criminals, as others without charges against them also presented with the same symptoms. Gillespie told Myra he was frustrated that their newly formed group of medical professionals was not getting much support on the federal level.

Myra wasn't sure if Father Peter Cooke's news conference on the steps of the Basilica was a help or a hindrance. Father Cooke's announcement that God was back with a disease that only made pedophiles suffer gave the religious community the opportunity to promote the God theory every chance they had. Reported miracles were happening throughout the world as the faithful thanked their God for coming back to judge the good from the evil. It seemed to Myra that Father Cooke was in over his head, and he suspected he was becoming a pawn in someone's game. But whose? He did not know.

Sister Pius, who seemed to be the only voice of reason in the Catholic Church, had retired and returned to civilian life. Myra had great respect for her.

Sister Pius. He smiled. *Now there's a lady who could have been a great police officer. That woman is fearless. She stood up to the devil himself.*

Myra often wondered what she was up to but didn't make the time to call her. Maybe that was just another excuse to hide the shame he felt over Horan's death.

His dedication to the file, the numerous arrests, and the hard work of his task force had earned accolades from the public, politicians, media, and his own chief. But it had taken a toll on him. His jaws were permanently clenched, caused by the frustration of interviewing sexually abused children. His cheeks were sunken, his skin pale. He glanced at the calendar on his desk. A black X covered his appointment with his psychologist. Another appointment missed. Revealing his feelings was too overwhelming.



NATE & NICOLE PHOTOGRAPHY

Helen C. Escott is the author of the widely read blog-turned-book *I Am Funny Like That*, which has over 222,000 readers, and two bestselling crime thrillers: *Operation Wormwood*, which was nominated for the Arthur Ellis Award for Best First Crime Novel in 2019; and *Operation Vanished*, which was the Silver Medal Winner for Best Regional Fiction, awarded by the 2020 Independent Publisher Book Awards. Both *Operation Vanished* and *Operation Wormwood* have appeared in the *Atlantic Books Today* top five bestsellers lists. Her fourth book is *In Search of Adventure: 70 Years of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Newfoundland and Labrador*, which profiles retired RCMP members and commemorates their service. And her fifth book, *Operation Wormwood: The Reckoning*, is the exciting conclusion to the crime novel *Operation Wormwood*.

Helen is used to blazing trails. She is a retired civilian member of the world-renowned Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). In 1998, she created the RCMP's Media Relations / Communications Unit in Newfoundland and Labrador, and she became the first female senior communications strategist and media relations spokesperson for the RCMP in that province. (*continued*)

Escott was the communications lead on high-profile events, including the RCMP's Newfoundland and Labrador response on September 11 after terrorists attacked the World Trade Center in New York City. During her service, she wrote and implemented the Atlantic Region Communication Strategies to combat organized crime and outlaw biker gangs, created the Media Relations course and guidebook used by the RCMP, and was invited to teach the Media Relations course for senior management and RCMP members at the Canadian Police College, Ottawa. Helen is regularly asked to teach this course to other uniformed services. She also served as a communications strategist at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics.

Before joining the RCMP, Helen C. Escott worked in the media for thirteen years in various positions, including reporter, on-air personality, marketing, and promotions.

In 2017, she was presented with the CLB Governor and Commandant's Medallion in recognition of her achievements of excellence in volunteering and fundraising work, including creating the idea and concept for the Spirit of Newfoundland dinner theatre show *Where Once They Stood*, a tribute to the Church Lads' Brigade members who served at Beaumont Hamel.

Helen also volunteers with St. Mark's Anglican Church and created a successful communication strategy to bring people, especially families and members of the LGBTQ+ community, back to the church.

In 2019, she was presented with the Governor General's Sovereign's Medal for Volunteers.