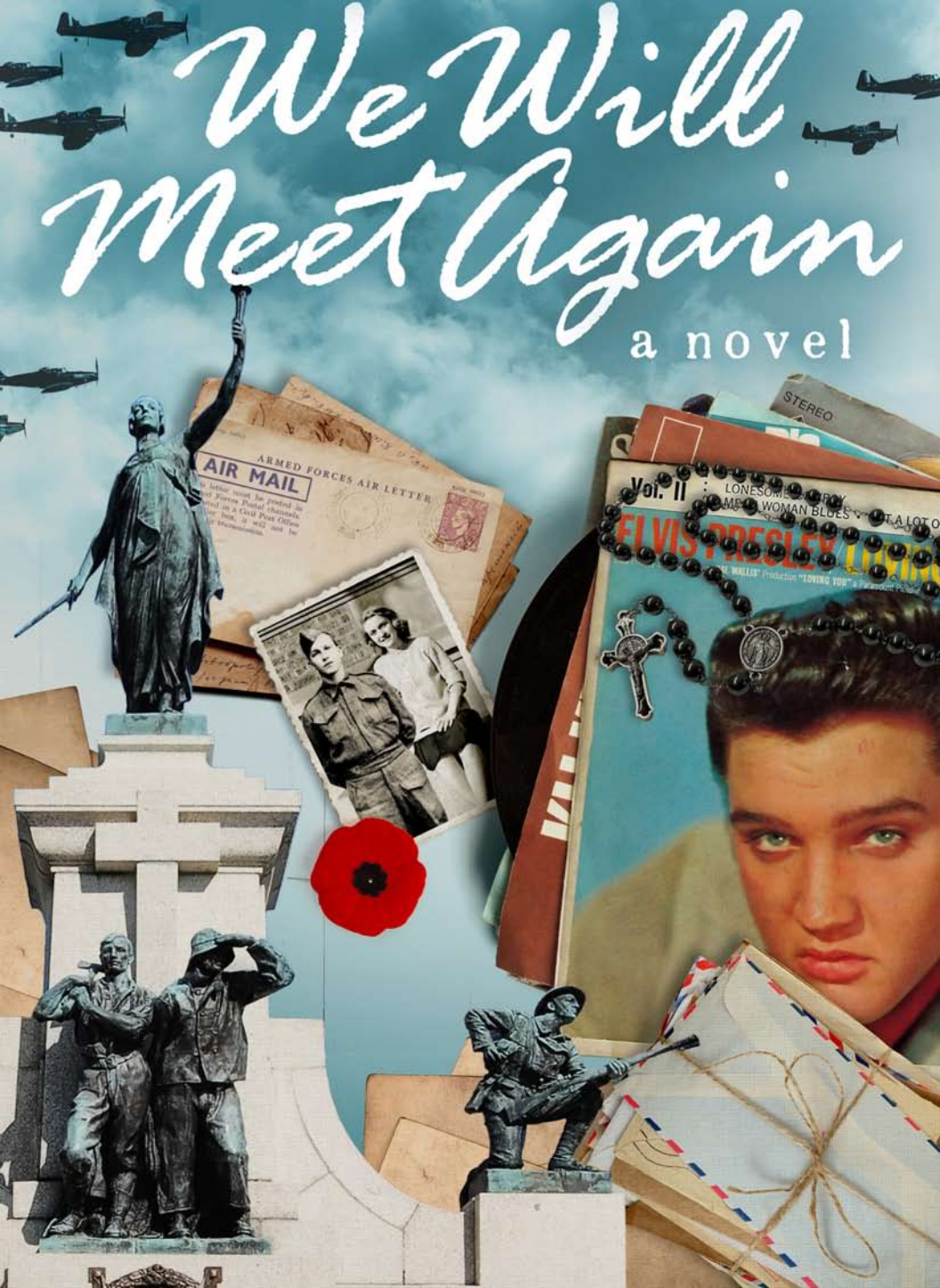


#1 ATLANTIC BOOKS TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HELEN C. ESCOTT

We Will Meet Again

a novel



HELEN C. ESCOTT

*We Will
Meet Again*

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*We Will
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We acknowledge the [financial] support of the Government of Canada. *Nous reconnaissons l'appui [financier] du gouvernement du Canada.* We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested \$153 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout the country. *Nous remercions le Conseil des arts du Canada de son soutien. L'an dernier, le Conseil a investi 153 millions de dollars pour mettre de l'art dans la vie des Canadiennes et des Canadiens de tout le pays.* We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts and Recreation for our publishing activities. Also, we acknowledge the support of Celebrate NL, a Crown corporation within the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts and Recreation for its support of arts organizations in the year 2024, Year of the Arts.

This book is dedicated to all women who put their
shoulder to the grindstone and push.

To those who never back down.

Who fight for their family.

Who heal wounds from the past.

Who are a soft place to land.

Who forgive.

Who love.

Who bring life into the world and nourish it.

Those women, they rule the world.

Those who turn generational trauma
into generational strength.

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

— “The Secret Sits,” Robert Frost

1

Hadley Hynes sat rocking in her chair with her eyes closed, listening to Elvis Presley's "Love Me Tender." She gently rubbed her glass rosary beads with the fingers on her left hand while chanting prayers, her lips moving to the words but making no sound. The thin, pale fingers on her right hand tapped in time to the music on the faded arm of her old wooden rocking chair, which creaked in time to the music. She was completely oblivious to the noises going on around her.

A driving November rain beat sideways against the windows of her old three-storey Victorian rose-coloured home on Victoria Street in the heart of downtown St. John's. From her kitchen window she could almost see the harbour narrows and Cabot Tower. The damp of the morning seeped in through the seams of the rotted wooden windowsills, leaving a trail of condensation. The crackling of the vinyl album brought her back to another time in her life that would play forever in her memory.

Her small kitchen was full of boxes. Some empty, some half full, and some taped up, ready to move to their destinations. A half-dozen overstuffed dark green plastic garbage bags were thrown up against the hallway wall leading to the front door.

A handwritten sign that said “Throw away” was laid on top of them.

Hadley was oblivious to those as well, along with the sounds her granddaughter Ava was making packing dishes into moving boxes. Lost in her memories, she danced around in a polka-dot swing dress on a worn wooden dance floor at the old hall. Even though it had been torn down decades ago and replaced with an apartment building, it still stood proud in her nostalgia. She smiled as she looked around the faded hall at the many faces from her past. All gone now but her.

Hadley was a week away from her one hundredth birthday. Her daughter and granddaughters had made the decision that it was time to move her into a care home. It was against Hadley’s protests of everything from taking away her independence to the violation of women’s rights.

She pushed her gold-rimmed glasses up the bridge of her nose and raked her fingers through the short, grey hair that still held the shape of her pink foam rollers. She adjusted the starched collar on her crisp white blouse and pulled the navy blue sweater tighter around her thin, sagging frame. Her navy elastic-waist polyester pants had an ironed crease down the front. Hadley pushed the rocker with the toe of her well-worn pink slippers—with each push, it showed her white wool socks that hung slack around her ankles.

Hadley’s kitchen had a permanent aroma of homemade bread and tea steeping on the stove. Dust danced through the kitchen air as Ava sorted through the cupboards deciding what was “keep” and what was “throw out.” She tugged a garbage bag to the hallway and placed her hands across her lower back, kneading the muscles. “I hate growing old,” she cursed.

“Fifty is not old,” said Hadley, looking up.

“Feels old.” Ava hoisted herself up on the small ladder again and went back to searching the cupboards. “I’ll keep a few of the

dishes and other things here because Mom said she wants to have one last supper.”

Hadley’s kitchen had always been the nucleus of her family. The white wainscoting had been painted a multitude of colours over the past eighty-two years. The bright floral wallpaper added to the insulation over the many layers of paper underneath it. Various photos and cards of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and a multitude of other saints and family were tucked into the chair moulding that sat on top of the wainscoting. A 2023 calendar, compliments of the corner grocery store, hung on the wall next to the kitchen table reminding everyone it was November 10. Each wall displayed framed paintings of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, God, and an eight-by-ten photo of Queen Elizabeth II after her coronation.

“I don’t know how you can listen to Elvis and pray to Jesus at the same time,” Ava yelled over the music. “I can hardly hear myself think.”

“Maybe I’m listening to Jesus and praying to Elvis.” Hadley quirked a grin. “They’re both kings.”

Hadley looked at the growing mound of green garbage bags. How much of her life had been “throw away” this morning? She had stopped watching Ava clean hours ago.

“Nan?” Ava balanced herself on the top step of a small stepladder, holding on to a cabinet door for support. “Nan, I need you to stay focused.” She held up a large white platter. “Will I put this in the ‘keep’ or ‘throw away’ pile?”

With Elvis’s magical voice drowned out, Hadley came back to the present and tucked her rosary beads into the pocket of her cardigan. “That’s the turkey platter your grandfather gave me for Christmas in 1946. I’ve used it for every occasion since.”

She looked at her granddaughter’s blank face. “You should keep it and continue to use it. Keep the tradition going.”

“I already have one.” Ava laid the platter on top of the “throw

away” pile. “I don’t have room for any more junk in my little apartment. Christine won’t know what to do with it, and Mom got the kitchen cabinets blocked with crap already.”

“Pick that up,” said Hadley in her sharp, feared, schoolteacher tone. “Put that in Christine’s pile.”

“She won’t want it.” Ava took heavy steps down the ladder and did as directed, dragging her feet as if she were carrying a large, heavy boulder. “How are you feeling, Nan?” she yelled in a condescending voice as if her grandmother were deaf.

Hadley rolled her eyes and went back to Elvis, who had now moved on to “Are You Lonesome Tonight.” She was too tired to correct Ava once again on her hearing capacity. “Well, on a good day I feel twenty, but on a bad day I feel ninety-nine. The worst thing about being older is the aches and pains, and the frustration that you can’t do as much as you would like. But at least age cannot take away your dreams.” She rubbed at the never-ending pain in her elbows.

Hadley’s knobby, thin-skinned hands were covered in brown age spots with big blue veins popping up around the knuckles, but they were still beautiful, almost elegant. Her manicured nails were perfect rose-coloured polished ovals. Each spot and wrinkle was a testament to the years she had lived, the family she had raised, the laughter she had shared, the love she had given and received, and the career she had loved. She clasped her hands together and let them fall to her lap.

She was tall, thin, and spry for her age. A wealth of life experience was etched into her soft, delicate, pale face. Age had taken away her ability to do most things, but it had not touched her natural beauty.

Ava stood on her tiptoes and reached up to the top shelf. Her black yoga pants were stretched to their limits in the front and back. She continuously tugged her overly stretched black knobby wool sweater down over her exposed belly rolls. Each time she

reached, she snuck a peak at her grandmother to make sure she hadn't noticed. Her shoulder-length, home-dyed auburn hair was pulled up in a messy ponytail and hung down over her neck, barely hiding a Chinese symbol tattoo on the top of her spine. She wiped a cloud of dust off her face and spat it out.

"This dust is aggravating my eczema." Ava scratched vigorously at her forearms, then drew a sleeve across her ruddy complexion and permanently red cheeks.

She held on to a shelf as she dragged out a dusty overstuffed shoebox with several thick rubber bands around it.

"What's this, Nan?" She held it up in the air.

Hadley looked up at the faded blue and white box. Her eyes lit up. "Give that to me."

"What is it?" Ava held it tight as she manoeuvred down the stepladder.

"Give it here." Hadley reached her frail hands out for it with glee, flexing her fingers, ready to grab it.

Ava brushed the dust off the lid and turned it around. "Now, what junk do you have stuffed in this? Old papers from your teaching career, I suppose, that should have been thrown out forty years ago."

"Mind your own business and pull that top down over your big gut." Hadley pulled the box from her hands and hugged it to her chest. She still spoke with the same tone she had used when addressing her class of high school students. "You have no respect. You also shouldn't be wearing those yoga pants. You've never done yoga. Get yourself a decent pair of slacks."

"Nobody says slacks anymore, Nan." Ava pouted and tugged at her knobby sweater.

Hadley rolled the rubber bands off the shoebox. The top popped up a few centimetres. She took the lid off, revealing a squatted collection of faded white envelopes. Each bore a red

and blue check pattern around the edges. She lifted the box up and breathed in the smell of old paper, then laid it on her knees.

Ava pressed her thin lips together in a straight line. Her cheeks burned. She took her phone out of her sweater pocket and checked for calls. There were none. She scrolled down through her emails, then moved on to Facebook.

"Where's Mom, I wonder?" Ava tucked the phone back in her pocket. "She better get here soon." She leaned into the kitchen window and brushed her hand over the condensation. "What's out in Pop's shed? I suppose that's full, too."

"I don't know." Hadley glanced out the window. "I haven't opened the shed door since he died twenty years ago."

A feeling of dread came over Ava, and she decided to turn her interest to the box Hadley held. "Jesus, what did you do? Keep every letter anyone has ever sent you?" She craned her neck over her grandmother for a look, tutted, and went back to the kitchen, climbing back up on her stepladder. Ava continued poking around the cupboard, pulling out unnecessarily saved margarine containers and lids. Taking advantage of Hadley's fascination and full focus on the contents of the shoebox, Ava slipped the works of everything into garbage bags and threw them in the "throw away" pile.

Hadley's hands shook, partly from her age, but mostly from the anticipation of the treasure trove sitting on her lap. She pulled out an opened envelope and ran a thin-skinned finger over the return address.

The blue-ink scrawled name of a Newfoundland sailor who volunteered to serve in the Second World War made her heart skip a beat. She put the envelope to her lips, gently kissing it. It still smelled of him. Elvis crooned as she pulled out the folded-over yellowed paper and straightened it out. Holes and deep creases had worn through the brittle paper.

There he was again in blue ink on a yellowed page. His words. His fear. His hopes. His love. His face young and fresh in her memory.

All sent to her from England.

"Are they from Pop?" Ava asked, pulling out dish after dish from the cabinets.

"No."

"Who are they from?"

"My first love." Hadley pressed the letter to her heart as she looked off into her memories.

"I thought Pop was your first love." Ava stopped what she was doing and looked back at her grandmother.

"Who told you that?"

"I just always assumed Pop was the only man you ever loved." Ava stepped down from the ladder and stood over Hadley's shoulder.

"Then you assumed wrong."

"There was a man before Pop?" She tried to peek at the name on the envelope.

"I wasn't a nun, Ava." Hadley tutted at her. "I was a good-looking girl in my day, you know. I had no problem getting a suitor."

"A suitor?" Ava laughed. "Back in the days of yore."

Hadley rolled her eyes and went back to her letter. "Back in the days when women didn't go with every Tom, Dick, and Harry in the bar and not know which one she got pregnant for."

Ava felt a direct hit to her chest, a common feeling left by Hadley's words. "Why wouldn't someone know who got them pregnant? That doesn't make sense."

"If you eat a tin a beans, do you know which one made you fart?" Hadley looked at her from under heavy lids and blew out an exasperated breath. "Leave me alone now. I want to read these. Go out to the parlour if you're done in the kitchen."

Ava whirled away from her grandmother, took her phone out, and checked for messages. "Where is Mom?" she said out loud. "I'm going to phone her." She stepped over the garbage bags in the hallway and stomped to the front room, leaving a trail of sweaty odour behind her.

"Lower your voice. I don't need to hear you arguing about me," Hadley said, pulling out another envelope.

Ava moved the white lace curtains across the front window and looked out at the rain pouring down the steep street. A couple ran through the downpour on their way to the ticket booth at the LSPU Hall next door. The sidewalk curbs looked like small, raging rivers carrying leaves, garbage, and branches down toward an impromptu waterfall falling on Duckworth Street. She dialled her mother and rolled her tongue around the roof of her mouth and lips, still feeling the dust in her nostrils and mouth.

"Mom?"

"Oh, hi," Patricia answered with a weary tone.

"When are you getting here?" Ava looked around the front room at all the things that had yet to be packed.

"I'm waiting for the rain to stop." Patricia peered through the blinds covering her living room window at the driving rain. "You know I don't like driving when it's like this."

"Oh, for God's sake." Ava pouted, scratching at her itchy arms. "I wouldn't have come here today if I had known you weren't coming."

"I am coming," Patricia reassured her. "As soon as the rain stops. My arthritis is acting up, and my knees are swollen. That hill is so hard to park on."

"Mom," Ava growled. "You know I can't stand being around her sometimes. She's cranky this morning, and she smells like mothballs. She hasn't let me alone yet today."

"Ava," Patricia scolded. "She's my mother and your grandmother. Show some respect. You're not wearing those old yoga pants that she hates, are you?"

"She hates me." Ava bit at a hangnail and spat it out.

"No, she doesn't. You're fifty years old, for God's sake. Grow up. She just has a hard time showing affection. You promised you'd get that kitchen cleared out for me today."

"She has a hard time showing gratitude, or patience, or anything that would make her remotely lovable." Ava peeked around the doorway before continuing. "I almost have the cupboards cleaned out. I left enough dishes for us to use."

"What's she doing now?" Patricia took her keys off the hallway hook and pointed the fob toward her SUV. She pressed the remote button and looked through the round window in the front door to ensure it started.

"She's sitting in her rocking chair listening to Elvis, praying, and reading old letters." Ava took another look around the door frame to make sure Hadley was not eavesdropping.

"Letters? From who?"

"I don't know. Some sailor she loved before Pop."

"Sailor? What sailor? I've never heard of any sailor."

"I don't know, I told you," Ava answered impatiently. "Ask her when you get here."

"Did you offer her some tea?" Patricia pulled her winter coat off a hanger in the hallway closet.

"Tea?" Ava huffed. "I'm the only one doing any work here. Christine hasn't even shown up, as usual. Now you want me to make tea."

"Ava, for the love of God." Patricia sighed, holding the phone to her ear with her chin as she tried to pull her coat on. "She's ninety-nine years old. Give the woman a cup of tea and make sure she had something to eat."

"You did this on purpose," Ava said lowly. "You don't want to deal with her, and you're using the rain as an excuse not to come."

"That's not true. I got arthritis. I'm eighty-two, for the love of God," Paricia protested. "I can barely get up the stairs. I'm putting my coat on right now."

"Fine. Just hurry up." Ava hung up on the call and opened her email. In between the junk was one from her boyfriend that she was not in a rush to open. She closed the screen and headed back to the kitchen.

"Do you want some tea?" Ava headed to the counter and turned the kettle on.

Hadley was lost in her letter, her cheeks wet with memories.

"I said, do you want tea? Or a sandwich?" She opened the fridge door and sighed heavily at the sight of so many margarine tubs. "What's in these?" She opened one, smelled it, and stuck out her tongue. "Jesus, how old is this turnip?" She threw the tub in a garbage bag and opened another one. "What are you saving all this for?" She threw out another tub.

Hadley pulled out a tissue neatly tucked in the sleeve of her cardigan and wiped her eyes. "What are you saying?"

Ava took note of her grandmother's tear-stained face and froze. She decided not to ask.

"You're not even listening." Ava slammed the fridge door. "You know, I have better things to do than dismantle your house by myself. The least you can do is listen to me."

Hadley took a slow, deep breath. "I didn't ask you to be here and certainly didn't ask to be moved out of my home and put into some old-age home."

"I'm not having this fight with you." Ava threw her hands up in the air. "It's already been decided."

"Someday you'll be in my position, and you'll understand why I don't want to get out of this chair."

"You're going in a home because Mom can't take care of you anymore." Ava took a teacup and saucer out of the cupboard. "She's a senior, herself. You both should be in a home. I can't take care of either of you. I have my own life."

"You?" Hadley sized her up. "You can't even take care of yourself."

"What does that mean?"

"Look at your hair." Hadley straightened up in her chair. "Do something with it. You look like nobody owns you. Why don't you get a nice colour and a cut and stop doing it yourself? No woman should do her own hair."

Ava caught a glimpse of herself in the glass door of the china cabinet. "I love this auburn colour. Everyone says it looks good on me, and besides, I'm packing up boxes. Sorry if I didn't have time for an updo this morning."

"And what are you wearing?" Hadley pointed at Ava's black leggings.

"Yoga pants."

"Yoga pants." Hadley tutted. "Have you ever done yoga? Put something on that covers your backside. I can see the print of your underwear every time you bend over. It's not flattering."

Ava's cheeks flushed redder. "Why are you always so critical? Why can't you just keep your thoughts to yourself?" She swallowed back a wad of familiar emotions, determined not to cry.

"Oh, there you go." Hadley folded her letter and tucked it back into the envelope. "I told your mother years ago to get you tested for emotional problems. Every time someone looks at you the wrong way, you cry."

"You make me cry." Ava wiped a betraying tear from her cheek. "Ever since I was a little girl, you've criticized me. I don't know why you always target me."

"I'm not criticizing you. I'm just offering you some advice." Hadley pointed at Ava's clothes. "You always look like you don't

care about yourself. The only colour you wear is black. It looks like you're always on your way to a funeral. I'm just saying, you should dress more like a lady. You are what you eat, so eat good things, and you are what you think, so think of yourself better than you do. Clothes and thoughts do make the woman."

Ava put her hand to her mouth to keep from shrieking at the old woman.

"You have a pretty face. If you'd just lose a few pounds, you'd be lovely," Hadley carried on. "You're in your fifties now. You should be married and have more children. You spent too much of your life chasing losers. You're lucky you have the one daughter, although it would have been nice if you had married her father."

"Why do you do this?" Ava asked breathlessly. "Every time."

"Ava." Hadley's voice lowered to a gentler tone. "You were on the dean's list. You just had to finish your teaching certificate. You could've gone back after Christine was born, but instead you gave up and chose to wallow in your own self-pity. You punished yourself to prove what a bad father the other idiot was. It was only one more year and you would have been a teacher."

Ava stomped her foot and headed toward the front door. "You're just a mean old woman. I don't know how Poppy put up with you."

"Here we go with another temper tantrum." Hadley irritably tapped her fingers on top of the box of stacked letters. "You're a bit old for that now, aren't you?"

"I'm going to the bathroom." Ava was stomping up the stairs to the second landing. "Get your own tea."

Ava slammed the bathroom door shut, sending a vibration through the historic house. She looked at herself in the mirror and placed her fingers on her crimson cheeks. They were hot. She ran the water until it was freezing and splashed it on her face to cool the heat. Then she dried her face in a white hand towel and gathered up her home-dyed auburn hair in a black scrunchy. Rain

slid against the dormer window. Ava pushed the blinds up and looked around for her mother's vehicle, to no avail.

She moved back from the sink mirror and pivoted to take a look at her behind in leggings. Her grandmother was right. Of course she could lose weight. Of course she should have finished her teaching degree. Of course she could have made better life choices. She stretched her sweater to its limit down over her backside and scratched at the eczema on her arms. Ava couldn't remember the last time she wore pants with a zipper and button.

She opened her phone and stared at the email from him. Her heart pounded as she opened it. It was simple and to the point: Didn't have a chance to discuss it with her, the kids are home from school, sick. Talk later.

Deciding not to dignify it with an answer, Ava deleted the email and tucked the phone back in her sweater pocket. She trudged down the stairs and back into the kitchen, paying no attention to Hadley. The kettle clicked as it came to a boil, sending plumes of steam above the spout.

Hadley half watched from her rocker, considered laying down the box and making tea, then decided against it. She pulled out another letter and began to read it.

She hardly noticed Ava coming back into the room.

Ava threw a tea bag into Hadley's favourite porcelain teacup and poured hot water over it. She laid it in front of her grandmother, sending hot tea slopping over the top and into the saucer. A tin of Carnation Milk and a sugar jar were permanent fixtures on the table.

She went back to the cupboards, cleaning with a renewed vigour. Everything she touched went into the "throw away" pile. Ava took notice of a real estate folder on the counter and flipped it open. She looked back at Hadley, who was engrossed in her letters, and quickly scanned the document for the listing price. Looking toward the ceiling, she did the math. With only her, her mother,



PHOTO BY OLIVER WHIFFEN

Helen C. Escott is an award-winning, bestselling Canadian author and playwright. She had a ten-year career in radio and TV. In 1998 she joined the Royal Canadian Mounted Police as Senior Communications Strategist. She began writing books full-time in 2014 upon her retirement.

Described as a prolific writer, she has written eight novels and one play. *Operation Wormwood* was shortlisted for the Crime Writers of Canada's best first crime novel award; *Operation Vanished* won the Silver Medal – Best Regional Fiction at the 24th annual Independent Publisher Book Awards; *Operation Masonic* was a finalist for the 2023 Best Atlantic-Published Book Award by the Atlantic Publishers Marketing Association (APMA).

(continued)

In 2024 the first five novels in her Operation series—*Operation Wormwood*, *Operation Wormwood: The Reckoning*, *Operation Vanished*, *Operation Trafficked*, and *Operation Masonic*—were optioned for film and television by Rink Rat Productions.

Escott is a retired civilian member of the RCMP and was the communications lead during high-profile events, including the RCMP's Newfoundland response to the September 11 terrorist attacks. She wrote and implemented the Atlantic Region Communication Strategies to combat organized crime and outlaw biker gangs, created a media relations course, and taught it in several provinces as well as at the Canadian Police College, Ottawa. Escott also served as a communications strategist at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics.

In 2021 she was awarded the Veterans Ombud Commendation Lifetime Contribution Award for her outstanding work with veterans.