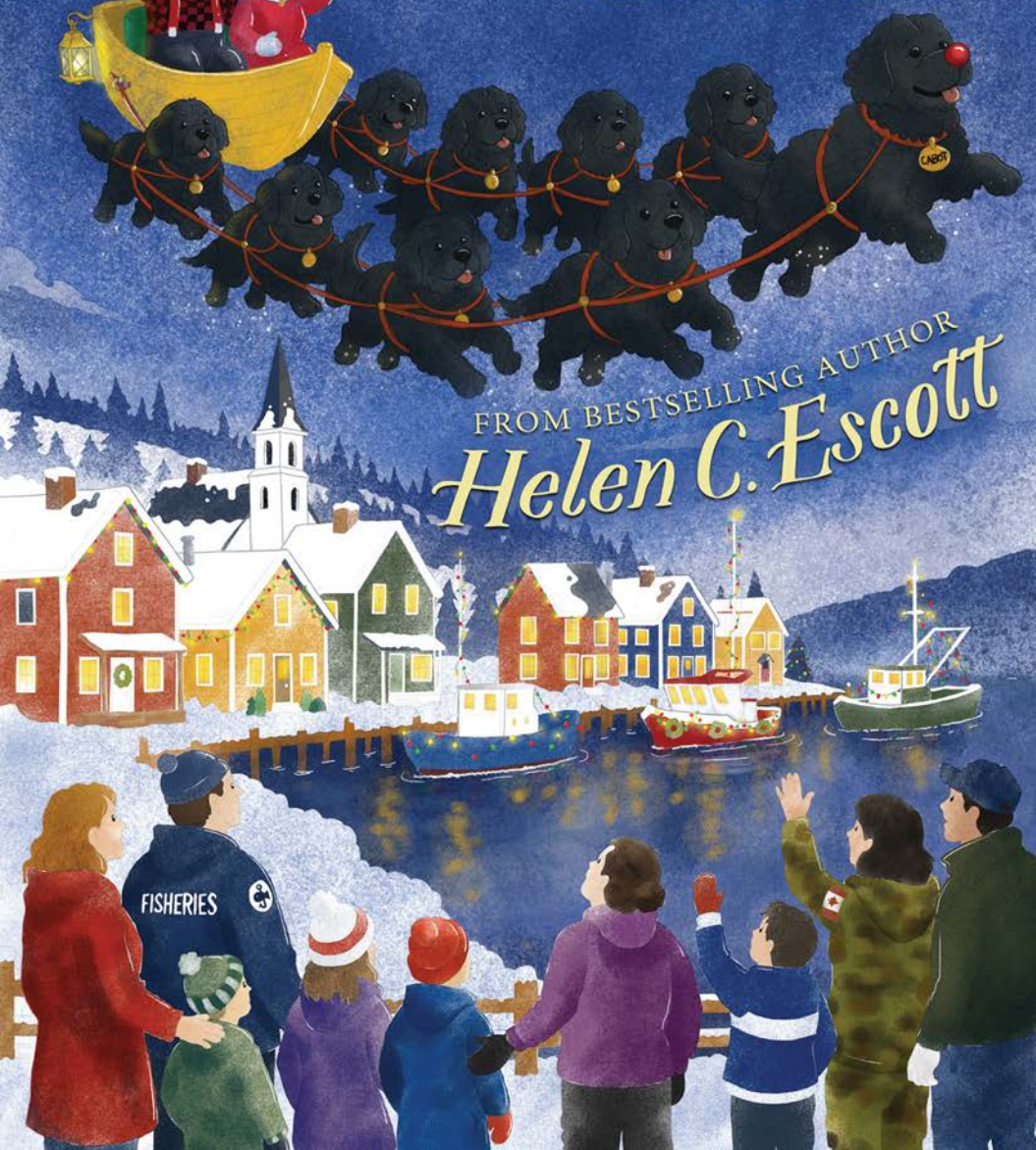


Christmas in Hope Cove

*A Newfoundland
& Labrador Yarn*



FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Helen C. Escott

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1

MY NAME IS Father Michael Walsh, and I am the parish priest of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Hope Cove. I came here to fill in for a month twenty years ago and never left. I'm from here, really. My parents are buried in the graveyard next door. Hard to believe it's already 2026. Where did the years go?

If there's one place that I genuinely love during Christmas, it's Hope Cove in St. Mary's Bay. It is a remote settlement by the ocean where you feel a sense of pride in the place. Hope Cove is often called Christmas Cove. It's where people go to renew their souls. Let me take you to this special little place and tell you about the people who understand the true holiday spirit of joy, magic, love, and goodwill that you will only find in Newfoundland and Labrador.

It is an hour's drive, along the Irish Loop, from the capital of St. John's. You won't mind the drive because you'll be too taken up with the beautiful scenery. Your worries and fears fall to the side of the road the closer you get to its bright, colourful houses.

Turn off the Trans-Canada Highway onto the Salmonier Line, bless your self at Father Duffy's Well, hope the only moose you see is in the nature park, marvel at the glistening sun on St. Mary's Bay, pass Admirals beach, salute the Royal Canadian

Legion, and just before St. Vincent's, turn off on Harbour Drive and you are in Hope Cove.

You'll know you're there when you see the sunrays pointing down over God's country like a glorious crown, and the smell of wood stove smoke fills the air. When you can laugh while you're going through trauma, that's hope. That's what Hope Cove is about.

It's not the town that time forgot – it's the town that time protects. There are houses there that date back to the sixteenth century when the French and Portuguese would come to fish off its shores. During Christmas, throngs of families drive to Hope Cove to see the lights. Each family competes with the others to see who can offer the most ingenious displays. Every boat in the harbour is equally lit up, its reflection luminous on the water.

One of my favourite things to do in Hope Cove is to take off my boots and woollen socks and walk along its cobblestone beach. I like to feel the coolness of the smooth stones rounded by age and the rough seas on my bare feet. I enjoy collecting the ones that lightning has left with a white jagged scar through the blue and grey surfaces.

The beach rocks lead to the most beautiful sandy beach where humpback whales breach the cold Atlantic Ocean. The massive, gleaming mammals rise into the air, sunlight dancing on their silvery black skin. It's truly a God-given miracle to watch its powerful yet graceful body, adorned with a crown of hard-shelled barnacles along its head, exhale in powerful bursts through its blowhole, sending plumes of mist into the air before crashing back into the sea. It takes my breath away.

Then there are the puffins, proof that God has a sense of humour. Their black-and-white plumage makes them look like tiny penguins flying at high speed. It's almost therapeutic watching them bobbing on the sea and diving for fish.

The northerly cold winds can blow the milk right out of your tea on some days. They're fierce and filled with the spray

of salt and taste of fish. They can even cut through your oilskins and blow your sou'wester to Ireland, where your ancestors will find it. The most experienced sailor would never go up against the North Atlantic's unpredictable and powerful waves when it's angry. But when she's happy, what a glorious day on the bay you can have. What's that old saying? Red sky at night, a sailor's delight – red sky at morning, sailors take warning.

It's the smell I love the most. It's the smell of home. The fried fish, the boiled potatoes, a hunk of salt meat, pease pudding hot or cold – I don't even care if it's in the pot nine days old. The homemade bread that can only come from the oven of an old-fashioned oil stove. I can almost taste its soft crusts dripping in butter. And the smell of roasting wild meat. I wonder if someone will offer me a feed of moose. I'm sure they will if I drop enough hints.

The people are what make it truly special. They are traditional, hard-working people. Some depend on cod and crab for their livelihoods. Others depend on careers in government and tourism, and most are retired old fogeys enjoying what's left of their lives. In between catching and processing their fish or doing their jobs, they cut wood for the winter, do some hunting to stock their freezers for the long months ahead, and grow their own gardens. In this area of the island they speak a distinct, rhythmic dialect deeply rooted in Irish and Southwest English, often sounding like a blend of the two. They are quick with a joke or a story and will keep the party going when the accordion comes out. What a tune they can sing when the mood hits.

Today, I see the youngsters turning away from their forefathers' fishing careers and making a living in tourism and service jobs. I suppose, who could blame them? It's a hard life making a living on the sea.

Let me introduce you to the people who make Hope Cove the colourful, warm, glorious cove that it is. They are the fam-

ilies who understand that a community that comes together in good times and in bad is what the true Newfoundland and Labrador fighting spirit is all about.

Let's begin with the Stamps. They live in the first house on Harbour Drive backing on Peter's River. It's a big two-storey yellow house with a large front yard and a backyard that overlooks the ocean. George, better known as Skipper due to his years as a sea captain, is in his eighty-first year, and Annie, his "first mate," is in her seventy-ninth. They are a hard-working family. Skipper spent his life fishing and is still captain of his own boat, the *Annie May*. Annie often worked alongside him on the boat when she wasn't raising and tending to their six children. Four strong boys and two lovely daughters. Neither stayed to take over the boat nor wanted to work in the fish plant. They all live in St. John's now with the Stamps' fourteen grandchildren. Their eldest daughter, Elizabeth, sends them both a weekly email trying to sell them on the benefits and wonders of moving to St. John's, a lovely, active retirement community where their every need would be met. Skipper uses the brochure packages to light the oil stove.

Both Skipper and Annie have their share of health problems, from Skipper's heart issues to Annie's crippling arthritis in her knees, hips, and hands. Skipper has his own issues with the arthritis but refuses to acknowledge it. He is a wise old owl who understands the ways of the ocean and the shifts of the wind. He spent his life studying them. There's not a sailor who would go to sea if Skipper Stamp said, "Storm's comin'." He has explored all the oceans throughout his life but says the most beautiful one is the one he can see from his kitchen window.

The Stamps are a fine couple whose faces and bodies are shaped by the bitter North Atlantic winds, hard work, and time. George's back has been giving him trouble for years. The surgeon told him his spine is permanently curved and there are three discs that have deteriorated, causing terrible pain down

his left leg, making him limp at times. It was all from decades of hauling nets, lifting traps, and making a living on the sea he loved so much that sometimes didn't love him back.

Poor Annie's hands are scarred, her knuckles swollen from the arthritis. Her skin is thin, and the bulging blue veins are a map of her life. The medication does little to help her. The only comfort she knows is to put them over the old oil stove and let the heat rise up and loosen her joints.

Annie is the grandmother that everyone should have. I've never met another person with her capacity to love. Whether it's her own children or a stranger who wanders into the church, Annie puts the kettle on and makes time to listen. She's a passionate volunteer at the Blessed Virgin Mary Church and a loyal friend to the group of women she calls sisters. But at the same time, she can be impulsive because she leads with her heart rather than her head. But if that's the worst you can say about somebody, then I suppose that's not bad. Annie and Skipper have been married for sixty years and have built a strong family based on their love for one another and their belief in the Good Lord's protection.

Despite their afflictions, their house is a delight to see. I'm sure you could spot it from the moon during Christmas. They've spent weeks stapling strings of lights to every eave and window on their large two-storey home. Each of the eight bedrooms has a red five candelabra sitting on the windowsill. A number of wooden ornaments cover the large front lawn. The star of the show is a life-sized Santa sitting in a real fishing dory that's pulled by nine black Newfoundland dogs – the front one's nose is lit by a single red bulb. It's how he honours his faithful companion, Cabot, a twelve-year-old Newfoundland dog. George cut them out in his shed years ago and each fall gives them another lick of paint and fixes any damage. This year George and Annie went all out with daily trips to the local hardware store to buy even more lights. It's

the first year all six children, their spouses, and grandchildren are coming home for Christmas. Annie is over the moon about having the house filled again with laughter, song, and stories. Just imagine a total of twenty-eight people living in the house from Christmas Eve to the day after New Year's Day.

Annie has been baking for weeks. Even George's weathered old face has lightened up with a grin at the thought of grandchildren piling onto his tractor for rides around the property. Oh, it's going to be a grand Christmas at the Stamp place.

Now, the Sextons are a different kettle of fish, as they say. Their family is a little more modest than the rest. They live in the red two-storey saltbox house backing on Peter's River about a mile down from the Stamps. Jack and Gracie are good people, both in their forties, with four children under the age of sixteen. Both born and bred on this shore.

While all the young people from Gracie's class left for the city, she stayed to look after her elderly parents. Gracie is a natural caregiver, drawn to caring for people. Her father, who had been sick for years, died after ten years of battling cancer. Her mother, broken with grief, died of a broken heart five years later. Her older sister moved to town and married. Gracie faced a harsh decision – move to the city and let the house fall into disrepair, or use it as a cabin. Or stay and do as her ancestors did and work hard to keep things afloat. She was never bitter about her life choices, but she always hoped for more for herself. From her youngest years, she was a natural mother, the first choice for babysitting in the community or volunteering at Sunday school. Children were drawn to her, and being a mother was something she had always dreamt about. Gracie was used to living on next to nothing growing up. She is selfless and loyal, often making sacrifices for her family. She put everyone else's needs ahead of her own. That's just who she is. But lately I've noticed she is discontented with life. Her children are growing up so fast and

don't need her like they used to. Gracie works in the fish plant when they need an extra hand, but mostly she is a domestic engineer. That is, she is a stay-at-home mom and wife who made Jack's paycheque stretch every two weeks to cover the costs of keeping an old house alive and feeding their four children.

Jack, her husband, went to university before he met Gracie and graduated with a degree in business. He was lucky enough to snag a full-time job with the Department of Fisheries as a Fisheries officer, with good pay, a pension, and benefits. Jack is an easygoing, down-to-earth man with few words to say. Some say he's shy, but I think Jack only speaks when he has something to say. He also has a speech impediment that sometimes keeps him from speaking up. He can be easily overlooked sometimes because he doesn't really stand out. If you know him as I do, you'll know Jack can be a hero when no one expects it.

This Christmas, Jack has a huge surprise for Gracie, whom he loves so much. When they were first married, he couldn't afford a proper ring and gave her a fake silver one from a department store. It was all he could afford. I presided over the wedding ceremony myself. I knew from the smile on Gracie's face that she could not care less about the ring. She loved Jack, whether he gave her diamonds or beach rocks. The ring had worked just fine for the past nineteen years, and now, coming up on their twentieth anniversary, which was Christmas Eve, it still meant the world to her.

Unbeknownst to Gracie, Jack had been doing odd jobs around town and getting paid in cash. One weekend, he painted someone's kitchen. The next, he fixed a fallen fence, changed the tires on Skipper's truck, and did whatever else he could to earn money. Of course, Gracie knew he was doing the hobbles but didn't know Jack was getting paid. She thought he was doing it all for free. Jack had secretly taken out a stunning gold wedding band set with a setting of three diamonds. One big one in the

centre, flanked by the two smaller ones on either side, atop a gold band. He put it on layaway last January and paid monthly with his hobble money so Annie wouldn't know. Now it was all paid off and in his pocket. Five thousand dollars of love in one single gold band. He can't wait for Christmas Eve to give it to her.

Their house is modest with the original wooden windows. It was built by Gracie's great-grandfather and still held onto that simple, rugged design that stood up to Newfoundland's harsh winters. Annie dreamt about replacing the old red clapboard with some new vinyl siding that everyone else had given in to, but that took money, and they had very little of that.

Gracie has spent the past few weeks stapling strings of the old-fashioned, colourful light bulbs to the weathered wooden frames that have long since needed replacing. They were on a long list of things that needed to be replaced. The staples from last year were still there among the cracked and peeling paint. The cold gusts of the Atlantic Ocean had spent years battering the old house and left it each spring in defeat. The frost etched itself around the glass and looked like an intentional lace of crystals. There were clear holes carved into the bedroom windows from the children blowing their hot breath on the glass to melt the ice. It was the only way they could see the decorations on the front lawn. Jack had taken some of his hidden stash to buy a huge eight-foot blow-up Santa, and it was now twerking in the wind on the front lawn, threatening to take flight at any time. As a salute to his job with the Department of Fisheries, Jack had a Santa fishing in their small koi pond that he and Gracie built two summers ago. Of course, Santa is holding up his licence.

Gracie hung colourful garland from the chandelier in the living room to the four corners of the room and did the same to the dining room and the kitchen. Years of tape and thumbtack holes scarred the edges of each piece of garland. It was well used and dated back to when she was a little girl. Recycling wasn't a

fad in Hope Cove – it was a tradition. They had renovated the old house over the years, always careful not to take the age out of it.

Their Christmas tree that Jack and the boys had cut down from out back was decorated with lines of silvery tinsel, red garland, and bulbs older than most of their children. Its branches were full at the bottom and thinned out near the top. Jack had cut some extra branches, drilled small holes in the trunk, and stuffed the branches in, giving the tree a full, proper look. Yes, Christmas is going to be special for the Sextons this year.

Just down from the Sextons are the Critches. They're a military family new to the cove. CFAs, or come from aways. They live in a bright blue bungalow with white shutters at the very end of Harbour Drive. Joseph, the father, joined the army when he was only seventeen. He was garrisoned at CFB Petawawa in Ontario. Then he went overseas to Bosnia, Somalia, and Haiti after the earthquake and tsunamis. He saw combat on two tours of duty in Afghanistan and then Iraq. He came back a proud but broken man after serving his country for thirty-five years. His wife, Carole, stuck with him all the way, dragging their two children, Susan and Benjamin, along. She was able to keep her civilian member position in the military throughout their many transfers and retired with a good pension. A thirty-five-year camping trip, she called it. Thirty-five years filled with happiness and, at times, sheer terror at not knowing where Joseph was.

Joseph is a natural-born leader with an insatiable curiosity about the world. People look to him for advice or an interesting conversation about world affairs. He is the type of man who can set his mind to achieving anything. He jumped into the community with both feet, volunteering at the Legion and the church when he wasn't spending time pursuing his passion for woodworking in his garage. He fits in perfectly in the community, with the exception of his thick Canadian accent and overuse of the word "eh."

Carole, his wife, kept the home fires burning and basically raised two children on her own while Joseph served his country. She worked hard herself as a civilian member in the military's finance department. She was an accountant with a head for numbers and ran her family like a company. Carole was careful to invest properly to ensure a long and comfortable retirement. Which is why her friends and family in Ontario were shocked when she announced that she and Joseph had bought an old house in Hope Cove, Newfoundland and Labrador. Everyone thought it was a foolish and expensive idea, but Carole, always the planner, knew Joseph needed a place to unwind after a career in the military, and their children needed a safe place to call home. She easily made friends after a lifetime of moving from place to place. Her motto has always been, "To be part of a community, you have to participate in it." She volunteers to handle the church's finances and has helped several small businesses along the shore file their taxes and create financial plans to follow, and many have prospered under her advice.

Their children, Susan and Benny, have grown up across Canada and around the world. They have not missed a Remembrance Day or Memorial Day ceremony since they were born. No matter the weather, Carole dresses them up and heads out to the service.

On a trip from Ontario when their children were still young, they took a Sunday drive around the Irish Loop and found themselves standing in front of a historic, faded blue house with a For Sale sign flapping in the wind. The large biscuit-box house was built in 1910 and had two full storeys, a central half-hall, and a peaked roof. It had been passed down through an original family in the cove until the last family member moved away. The house had been well kept up at one point but had not been lived in for about ten years, and the neglect showed in the peeling paint and broken windows.

Joseph and Carole looked at each other and called the real estate agent. The price was more than agreeable, and two hours later, the agent unlocked the front door and gave them the tour. She pointed out all the work that needed to be done, but all the Critches could see were possibilities. A week later, they owned their retirement home and all the land that came with it. Their careers kept them away, but every vacation was spent in Hope Cove reviving the property. While Joseph served overseas, Carole took a leave of absence. She and the children lived in Hope Cove, where both Benny and Susan attended school for a year, and Joseph joined them when he could. The community rallied behind her, supported her, and included her and the children in every event and social. Benny and Susan had been accepted by their peers and built lifelong friendships. They all cried when they had to move back to the mainland. After that, every waking thought was of going “home” to Hope Cove. It was the light at the end of their tunnel. Once they both had their retirement papers approved five years ago, they sold everything they owned in Ontario and moved home. Years of painting, plastering, papering, mowing, and replacing just about everything had paid off. The bright blue house with the white shutters at the end of the Salmonier Line was a piece of heaven.

Then came the day their daughter, Susan, said she wanted to follow in her father’s combat boots and join the Canadian military. They were proud, but Joseph secretly wished she had been a nurse or teacher. Anything but a soldier. Not that he didn’t think she could do the job, but because he knew she would throw her whole self into it as he had. He just didn’t want her to have the nightmares and flashbacks that kept him up at night.

Susan was a good student, smart and ambitious – editor of the school newspaper, decorated Girl Guide, and now at twenty-five, a soldier in the Canadian Army serving at Camp Adazi, Latvia’s largest military base. Susan never lived by the rules

around what a woman could or couldn't do. She was a rebel in every sense of the word – a trait she learned from her mother. She is independent with a quiet sense of who she is. When she found herself dissatisfied with the world, she decided to change it by serving her country.

Her brother, Benjamin, is eighteen and has Down's syndrome. His round face always has a genuine smile that reaches his almond-shaped blue eyes. At five foot one, he only comes up to his father's shoulder. He may move a little slower than most, but he is sharp as a whip when it comes to memorizing hockey stats or Canadian military history. Sure, he processes information a little more slowly than the rest of us, but he is a good example of how a community raises a child. Everyone in Hope Cove looks out for Benny, and the manager of the fish plant gives him twenty hours of solid work a week. I've always said that Benny understands far more than people assume. In every situation, Benny brings the comic relief. He tries his best to make everyone happy, but at times he can be a little too outspoken. His intentions are always pure of heart. His parents and Susan have kept him sheltered as they watched him experience many challenges in life.

The Critch family is excited this Christmas. Susan has leave and will be home for Christmas for the first time in three years. Her father spent the last five months out in the shed cutting out hundreds of those well-known wooden yellow ribbons, a symbol of support for active-duty troops, veterans, and POW/MIAs. Carole and Benny have spent days painting them yellow. They have them nailed to every banister, railing, and tree around their house. They're hung in every window, on doors, and even nailed to posts and pushed down in the ground all the way up their driveway. One of the first things Joseph did when he moved home was install a flagpole in his front yard and fly the Canadian flag next to the Newfoundland and Labrador

flag. He also makes sure the flags at the Legion and the church are never frayed and are always hoisted and flown at half-mast when appropriate.

When you drive by the Critch house, you know they are a Canadian military family. Several families in the community have bought the yellow wooden ribbons from Joseph at car boot sales near the beach and proudly display them to show their support for our men and women who serve in the Canadian Armed Forces as well as their families. Especially for Susan, who everybody watched grow from a snipe of a pigtailed little girl when they first moved to Hope Cove, to the wonderful woman serving her country. Displaying the yellow ribbons is the only way they know how to show their hope for her safe return and to honour the sacrifices made for our freedom.

Every night at supper, the Critches bow their heads and pray for Susan's safe return, and before Carole falls asleep, she asks the Virgin Mary for the courage, strength, and hope to get through each day when her mind wanders to her little girl's safety.

That's enough telling you about the people of Hope Cove. It's time to meet them and find out for yourself why this place holds such a special place in my heart and in the hearts of everyone who comes to visit.

Only then will you truly understand why people say, "You'll know the Newfoundlanders and Labradorians in heaven, because those are the ones who want to go home."

2

THE SMELL OF the sea and the aroma of someone cooking a juicy pot roast are the first things to greet you in Hope Cove. The waves crashing into the rugged rocks around the cove are mesmerizing to watch. Dozens of bundled-up tourists from St. John's took photos of a boat bobbing in the distance with its Christmas lights just visible in the morning fog. A large osprey let out a high-pitched, whistling sound as it swooped down into the water and came back with a fish to the onlookers' great delight. They busied themselves taking photos next to the colourful fishing stages that stood sturdy on their raised platforms and the town's decorations along the river. An icy blast of ocean spray, combined with the sand from St. Vincent's Beach, sent a cold welcome along the main road.

Across the street from the ocean, retired Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Critch stood back from the end of his long driveway and scanned the house and surrounding land with the eye of a sharpshooter. He stood with his feet shoulder width apart, his hands locked behind his back, and the zipper of his snowsuit open to his chest. He spotted a small area next to the shed where he could fit at least two more yellow wooden ribbons. The front lawn was banked with snow. Joseph had spent the morning with his snow-

blower clearing the driveway and shovelling the stairs from the most recent storm. A mystical, icy air hovered above the ground, turning the property into a winter painting. The Critch family, who moved here from Ontario, were called the CFAs, or come from aways. No matter how many years they lived in Newfoundland, or whether they assimilated into St. Mary's Bay life, their mainland accents gave them away as CFAs. But no one held that against them. You can't help where you are from.

"Don't you think we have enough ribbons?" Carole asked, standing on the front bridge, her short blonde hair whipping her face in the wind. She wrapped her red knitted sweater around her body to fight off the cold.

"Roger that." Joseph knew what was coming. "I'm going to use up the rest of the wood in the shed, then I'll stop."

"Don't forget Mrs. Stamp wants two, and Gracie Sexton wants one."

"I'm not forgetting. I have it all up here." He tapped his cold, red knuckles off the top of his head. "This is still like a steel trap. Nothing gets lost." Although he had been retired for five years, he still maintained his regimented presence. He kept his grey hair buzzed close to the scalp, still got up at 5:00 a.m., ran two point five miles up the Salmonier Line and then back, regardless of how his knees and hips felt. His military ethos was easy to spot. Joseph never referred to himself as a former soldier but rather a retired soldier, maintaining that title for life.

"Steel trap, all right," she teased as she watched him contentedly while he busied himself with his work. It made her happy to see him working through his PTSD with projects. "Poor Susan is going to laugh when we pull up in the driveway and she sees all the yellow ribbons."

Joseph stopped and looked around. "I hope she likes them."

"You know she will." Carole walked to the end of the veranda and looked around. "Where's Benny?"



Helen C. Escott is an award-winning Canadian author and playwright whose cinematic storytelling and deep insight into the human condition have earned her a distinguished place among contemporary crime writers. A former senior communications strategist with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, she brings a rare authenticity and precision to her work translating decades of real-world experience into gripping narratives that pulse with realism, emotional truth, and suspense.

Her bestselling “Operation” series, a six-book collection of crime thrillers, has captivated readers across Canada and beyond. The first book in the series was shortlisted for the Crime Writers of Canada’s Best First Crime Novel Award. The entire series has been optioned for television by Rink Rat Productions, and it has been lauded for its chillingly current investigations, unpredictable twists, and deeply human characters. The series’ success was further recognized with a Silver Medal for Best Regional Fiction at the 24th Annual Independent Publisher Book Awards and the 2023 Best Atlantic-Published Book Award from the Atlantic Publishers Marketing Association (APMA).

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Helen's writing is distinguished by its cinematic pace, vivid realism, and emotional resonance. Her works reflect not only the complexities of crime and justice but also the moral and psychological landscapes of those who live within them. Drawing upon her years as a civilian member of the RCMP, she weaves intricate plots rooted in authenticity and insight. Her career with the RCMP included leading communications for high-profile national operations, such as the force's response to the September 11 terrorist attacks, and developing regional communications strategies to combat organized crime and outlaw biker gangs. She also designed and taught a media relations course delivered across Canada, including at the Canadian Police College in Ottawa, and she served as a communications strategist at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics.

Her literary and public contributions have been widely recognized. In 2021, she received the Veterans Ombud Commendation Lifetime Contribution Award for her outstanding work with veterans. Among her other honours are the CLB Governor and Commandants Medallion (2017) for excellence in volunteering and fundraising, the Governor General's Sovereign's Medal for Volunteers (2019), and the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador Certificate of Recognition (2022) for her advocacy on behalf of veterans.