

## Chapter One

Anna lay as if asleep, her head turned slightly to the side, her auburn hair still neat in its habitual bun. Flies buzzed around her face, landing now on her chin, then on her right ear, drawn by the smell of blood congealing beneath her head. The summer sun burned down on her freckled skin, which was now unguarded by the hat she had always worn. The axe lay nearby.

The boy, Neil, whistled as he strode across the stubbled field, his bare feet silent on the red clay path, his fishing pole balanced across his right shoulder. His melody stopped when he saw Anna lying in the middle of the field.

'Tis a strange place to take a nap, he thought.

A fly landed on her cheek.

She's awful still, he thought. He looked at her more closely. "Mrs. Gillis?" He leaned over and reached out his hand, then drew back without touching her. "Mrs. Gillis?" He spoke more loudly.

Anna did not move. A fly buzzed and crawled over her hair and disappeared behind her head. A few more joined the feast.

"Mrs. Gillis!" Neil shouted. He reached out his hand again and shook her by the arm. He felt the dank cold of her deadness through her dress, and he pulled his hand away from her as if she had burned him instead.

She's dead, he thought. He leaned back on his haunches staring at her. "She's dead!" He repeated it aloud to make it seem more real. He jumped to his feet and began to run, leaving his fishing pole beside the still form that had been Anna Gillis.

"Someone's gone to great pains to leave her comfortable." Angus stared down at Anna. He was a church elder, and because of his wisdom, the unspoken head of the community. The ten minutes since Neil had arrived with his news had seemed an hour.

"Aye, they have indeed." Duncan regarded the neatness of Anna's grey drugget dress arranged modestly around her ankles, her folded hands lying across her abdomen. "It's more than she deserved."

"Hush now, Duncan, it's bad luck to speak ill of the dead."

"Yes, Duncan, she might come back and haunt you," said Hector, his pale blue eyes quite serious.

"Och, Hector, you're always thinking of ghosts." Angus shook his grey head. "The poor thing probably has more to do than come back and haunt the likes of you."

"She's likely dancing in the hot place wishing for a bigger fan," said Duncan.

A giggle erupted from Neil who had been hovering at the periphery of the small group of men. Angus looked hard at Duncan. "No more of that talk now, in front of children." He squatted down beside Anna. "Is this the way you found her, Neil?"

"Yes, sir."

“You didn’t touch her?”

“No, sir, only to shake her arm to see if she had just fallen asleep. She was stiff with the cold.”

Angus regarded Anna for another moment. “Help me turn her over, then.”

The three men knelt and turned her onto her left side. A small swarm of flies rose from their feast of sticky blood left on the pillow of yellow straw that had supported her head.

“It must have been someone who cared about her to take such trouble with her remains,” said Hector.

“Aye, it’s as if she was being put to bed,” agreed Angus.

“One more time,” said Duncan.

“Who’s going to tell Ian?” asked Hector.

“I will,” said Angus. “He’s my own cousin and we’ve known each other since we were schoolboys.”

“But we’re his cousins, too,” said Duncan.

“Nevertheless, I will tell him. You two will follow with Anna’s remains.”

“We need something to carry her on,” said Hector.

“There’s the door to Murdoch’s house that’s fallen in,” said Neil.

“Run, then, and be quick about it. Go with him, Hector, he’ll not be able to carry it by himself.”

Hector and Neil set out across the field where they had worked side by side with Ian only a few days before. The oats had been thick that summer and the straw had been plentiful, its shadowy roots home to field mice and grass snakes and crickets. Murdoch’s house had long stood vacant, its windows broken and its door fallen off its leather hinges. The roof had blown off in a winter gale three years ago and now the whole structure sat at a crazy angle not quite ready to fall into its cellar.

“You’re lighter than I am,” said Hector. “Go in and get the other end of the door, but mind where you step, it’s none of it very stable.”

The floor creaked and moved even under Neil’s slight weight. A few moments of careful manoeuvring freed the door from its bed of fallen rafters. In a few minutes Hector and Neil returned to the others.

Neil watched as Hector, Duncan and Angus loaded Anna’s remains onto the grey planks of the door. A smear of blood darkened the wood as they positioned her head for the journey home.

Hector shuddered. “Old Annie said this door would be smeared with the blood of the just.”

“Will you stop it, Hector,” said Duncan. “When did she say that?”

“The winter before Murdoch left for the Boston States.”

“That’s years ago, and Annie’s senile.”

“Not then she wasn’t. She said it as plain as day. I was there and I heard her.”

“And what did Murdoch think of all that?”

“There’s some say that’s the reason he left the Island.”

“Och, I don’t believe it,” said Duncan. “A more level-headed man than Murdoch you’d never find. He’d scoff at such an idea.”

“Well, all I know is that she said it,” said Hector, “and right after that Murdoch went away.”

“Will you two stop it,” said Angus. “I’ll take the axe and go on ahead to Ian. You bring Anna, and mind you don’t drop her.” He turned on his heel, shouldered the axe, and trudged away across the stubbled field.

I knew the day Ian married her it wouldn’t last, he thought. She was too young. And now she’s dead and someone’s killed her and I hope it wasn’t Ian, although he’d have had plenty of reason, with her going off to see James whenever she wanted to. He trudged on, his feet in their homemade shoes quiet on the red clay path. I’m sorry to be the one to bring him such news as this, but it’ll be better coming from me than from Duncan or Hector. They’re such clowns. He shook his head. It’s hard to believe that my own father’s brother fathered them, and two of them at once. He quickened his pace through the woods. Poppa and Uncle Johnny were both so level-headed, and Aunt Isabella was too. Indeed, it’s hard to explain.

Angus paused at the top of the rise that overlooked Anna’s house. Its setting was framed by the distant blue of the Northumberland Strait. The whitewashed house, trimmed in red, nestled in the hollow, flanked by the two barns and the workshop, also whitewashed. A long row of tall fir trees grew close behind, protecting the little farmhouse and its outbuildings from the vicious winter winds that could sweep across Prince Edward Island burying small houses, such as this, in drifts up to the eaves, and freezing a person to his very marrow. Angus shivered and hastened down the track.

I helped Ian build the big barn, and my father and my grandfather helped his father build this house, he thought. Anna planted those chestnut trees by the front door the day they were married. They’ve grown tall since then, but they’ve never produced nuts. A strange thing. He rounded the corner of the house and knocked on the door.

“Are you home, Ian?” He pushed the door open with the toe of his shoe.

“I am.” Ian’s voice sounded tired and far away.

Angus stepped into the sunlit kitchen, the bloody axe forgotten in his hands. His friend looked ill, weary-faced and worn, his eyes were red-rimmed and blood shot. His thick grey beard was still streaked with black and the hair on his head was grey too, except for the cowlick of black springing up from the front above his right eyebrow. He seemed rumpled and unkempt, and a little wild. He hunched his broad shoulders as if to ward off a blow.

“Where’s Donald?” asked Angus.

“Finishing the chores.” Ian was standing by the unlit stove, his hands busy shaving kindling off a stick of wood with the kitchen knife. “Have you found her, then?” He stared hard at the axe in Angus’ hands.

“We found her. Neil found her. They’re bringing her soon.” Angus followed Ian’s gaze, for the first time realizing that he still held the weapon. He almost dropped it in his haste to conceal it behind his back. “I’m sorry, I forgot to set this down.” His ruddy cheeks turned a darker shade of red.

“She’s dead, is she?” Ian stopped making kindling and stood waiting for the answer.

“She’s been murdered.”

Ian stood silently taking in the words. “It was bound to happen,” he said at last.

“Now why would you say that?”

Ian looked back at his friend, his blue eyes filled with tears. He blinked hard. “I knew about her from the very first time, and every time after that.”

“You didn’t...?”

“I suppose that’s what they’ll all be saying when the word gets around.” He sighed. “No, it wasn’t I, though I have more reason than anyone. Is that the weapon?”

“It would seem so.” Angus drew the axe out from behind his back.

“Whose is it?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen it before. I suppose we’ll have to notify the constable. This thing’s too big for us. Though what good he’ll be, I don’t know.”

Ian stood in silence for some seconds, then said, “I was just making Donald and me a bite of breakfast. Will you have some?” He turned toward the stove.

“I wouldn’t trouble you at a time like this. I should be making you breakfast.”

Ian shrugged. “We must go on, and to do that we must eat.” He began preparing the meal.

Presently the sound of men’s voices drifted in through the open window. “Be careful, Duncan. It’ll be a fine thing if we drop her in her own dooryard. It was bad enough that we dropped her once.”

“I can’t help that I tripped,” snapped Duncan. “If you hadn’t been going so fast, it wouldn’t have happened.”

“Well, how often do you hear an owl hooting in the broad light of day, I’d like to know. It’s an omen of bad things to come.”

“I think bad things have already come. How much worse d’you think it’ll get?”

Hector ignored him. “Go knock on the door, Neil, and see if they’re ready to receive us.”

Ian opened the door just as Neil raised his hand to knock. “Bring her inside.” Ian stood aside and held the door.

“Where are we to put her?” asked Hector.

“In her own bed.” Ian stood aside to let them pass.

“Where she should have been last night and none of this would have happened,” grunted Duncan under his breath, as the door that they carried Anna’s body on, stuck in the door jamb of the house.

“We’ll have to tip her a little.” Hector struggled to release the makeshift stretcher.

“Tip her and have her fall off again,” said Duncan. “She’ll be that bruised they’ll have to put a sign with her name on it at her own funeral, so the neighbours know who she is.”

“Will you be quiet!” said Hector through gritted teeth. He gave a vigorous tug at his end of the door. “Have some respect. If not for Anna, then for Ian.” The door jamb released its hold on the door, and Hector staggered backward, while Duncan lurched forward, each trying to maintain a grip on their heavy burden. They succeeded, and in a few minutes of careful tipping and sliding, Anna was arranged neatly on her marriage bed.

“She always was a fine figure of a woman,” gasped Hector as he sat by the bedside for a moment catching his breath. “I fancied her myself when we were young.”

“Hush, Hector,” said Duncan. “The next thing you know you’ll be lusting after a dead woman and her already married. C’mon now, and help me get this door back outside, and we’ll offer our condolences to Ian.”

By the time they had wrestled the door outside and returned to the kitchen, Donald had joined his father there.

Donald’s almost as tall as his father, thought Angus, though that’s not saying much. Ian’s not tall. In a few years he’ll be bigger than him. Donald’s dark like Ian, too, kind of ruddy in his face, although there’s a look of Anna about his eyes.

“It shouldn’t be too hard to find out who did this terrible thing,” said Angus. “If we find the owner of the axe, I expect we’ll have our man.”

“Aye, that’s so,” said Duncan and Hector together.

“D’you know whose axe it is, Ian?” asked Hector.

The twins’ pale bright eyes watched Ian’s face.

“No, I’ve never seen it before. It’s got an unusual handle and I would have remembered it.”

“Well, I’ll get this gruesome thing out of your kitchen, and send my Mary over to help you,” said Angus. “We’ll get to the bottom of this, right enough.” He turned to go. “I’ll send Minister MacDonald to you on my way by.”

Paddy, the constable, arrived at noon the following day. His shoulders and his moustache drooped, and the burden of his thin form seemed almost too much for him to bear. Angus watched his plodding progress up the hill. His respect in the community was minimal and his services were seldom sought.

“It’s good to see you again, Paddy.” Angus made a pretence at courtesy. “You got here in good time.”

“I started as soon as I got your message,” said Paddy. “It’s a long walk from Vernon River, and I have to get back for chores. My wife’s expecting any day now and can’t lift as well as she used to.”

“Another one. Well, now,” said Angus. “How many does that make?”

“Too many.” Paddy’s rounded shoulders drooped even farther with the expectation of further parental duties. “It’s hard to feed the ones we’ve got.” He sighed. “I hear you’ve had a murder.”

“Aye, that we have.” Angus nodded. “It was Anna Gillis. She was found yesterday morning in a field, with her head bashed in with an axe.”

“Let me be the judge of that,” droned Paddy.

“The axe was lying right beside her, man, there’s not much to judge about that.”

“Nevertheless, I am the law.”

Angus shrugged. “Whatever you say.”

“Where is she?”

“At home, lying on her bed until they can get a casket made for her.”

“You moved her?”

“We couldn’t leave her lying there all night. It was bad enough that she was there all the previous night and no one knew about her, with the flies feasting on her blood. The next thing you know she’d have been eaten by the ravens.”

“No, I suppose not.” Paddy blinked his pale grey eyes at the gruesome possibility. “It’s a shame though, to have disturbed the scene of the crime.”

“There’s not much scene to it. There was just her on a pillow of straw and the axe lying beside her.”

“You’ll have to show it to me anyway.”

“It’s in Ian’s big hill field. They had just harvested the oats a few days ago, and she was lying beside the path as neatly placed as if she’d just lain down to have a nap.” Angus led the way down the track toward Ian’s.

The morning was bright with sunshine. Wrens warbled and trilled. The distinctive chick-a-dee-dee-dee of black-capped chickadees sounded nearby and was answered from across the meadow. A salt breeze from the Gulf of St. Lawrence sifted through the branches of the trees, rustling the leaves of birches, oaks and maples. The air was warm with the smell of pine and spruce and the sea, mixed with the sweet odour of ferns crushed underfoot as they walked. Somewhere nearby a single locust sawed loudly. Ahead of them a dark blue dragon fly hovered and dipped in the sunlight. Together they climbed the hill and crossed the field.

“It was here that she was.” Angus stopped on the path and pointed to the pillow of straw stained dark with Anna’s blood.

“And the axe was beside her?”

“Just there.” Angus pointed to a spot slightly to the left of the pillow.

Paddy bent over and examined the site more closely, his narrow rump pointing heavenwards. “It’s too bad that you had to move her and the axe, too.”

“Humph!” said Angus, “I told you already, we couldn’t leave her here in the field while we waited for you to show your face. It took you long enough as it was.”

Paddy glanced up. “I came as fast as I could. She wasn’t going anywhere in a hurry was she?”

“According to you she was,” said Angus. “Have you looked enough yet? I don’t like being here. It makes me uneasy.”

Paddy straightened up. “I guess so. There’s not much to see anymore, is there? I don’t suppose you have any idea who did it?”

“That’s what I called you for.”

“What was she doing here at that time of night anyway?”

“She was visiting a neighbour.” Angus turned toward the path. “We think she was on her way home.”

Paddy followed him, his homely face made homelier by the scowl of his thoughts. “Did she get along with everyone?”

“As well as anyone.”

“What about her husband?”

“Ian? What about him?”

“Did she get along with him?”

“As far as anyone knew.”

“I’d like to talk to him.”

“He’ll have nothing to tell you. He and his son, Donald, were together all evening.”

Paddy sighed. “What about the people she was visiting?”

“Person. No one’s seen him, and he’s not at home.”

Suddenly the pieces fell together for Paddy. “Oh, that Anna. Rumour has it that she was playing on the side with an old boyfriend.” His homely features lighted into the beginning of a smile, then fell back upon themselves with the effort required.

“It was only a rumour. There was nothing in it.” Angus quickened his step. “There’s Ian’s house. I have to be going. He can direct you wherever you want to go next.” He turned on his heel and strode back the way he’d come.

Paddy’s investigation was over in a day. In that brief time of sunshine and birdsong he managed to alienate everyone in the community, and they closed ranks against him.

“He’s a daft Irishman,” said Duncan. “What he knows about investigating isn’t worth knowing.”

“He only took the job for the money,” said Hector. “He said so once. He’s had no training.”

“With all those children he needs the money. That’s about all he’s good for, that and complaining.”

Paddy’s report described Anna’s death as an accident. His superiors in Charlottetown shook their heads, considered starting another investigation, then filed his report under Accidents.

In the curve of the dark spruce woods gleamed the whiteness of St. John’s church surrounded by its tidy graveyard. The neatness was marred only by the gape of the freshly dug grave that was to be Anna’s final resting place. The church was filled with neighbours and relatives; in fact, most of the neighbours were relatives in varying degrees. Anna lay in her plain wooden casket at the front of the church, all evidence of her injury washed away, her face turned slightly toward the congregation to hide the dent behind her right ear.

Ian sat in the mourners’ bench and stared stonily ahead, his gaze barely taking in his wife’s body just a few feet in front of him. His expression was hidden by the thickness of his beard which for once had been brushed into smoothness and trimmed neatly around the edges. His eyes were downcast. His broad shoulders stretched at the seams of his wedding suit, too small for him now after fourteen years of heavy toil on his little farm. A black top hat, borrowed from John the Store, perched incongruously on his knees. Donald sat beside him in equal stillness, emulating the manners of his father, his face strained to whiteness in his effort not to cry.

The church was silent except for the rustle of breathing, and the occasional stifled cough. There were few tears for Anna. From the far corner in the back pew a child’s shrill voice whined, “But I want to see.” It was instantly hushed and the silence came again.

Presently Minister MacDonald entered and climbed to the pulpit. He had been sent by the church in Scotland to minister to these children of the Highlands thirty years ago. By now it seemed as if he were one of their own. He stood for a moment surveying his flock, his black suit giving him the air of a great raven roosting over the congregation. “Let us pray,” he intoned in Gaelic. The congregation rose as one body to pray and afterwards reseated themselves, and the long service began.

Mr. MacDonald adjusted his glasses on the end of his nose and cleared his throat. “Proverbs 31:10.” He cleared his throat again.

“Who can find a virtuous woman, for her price is far above rubies?” In the very back of the church someone snorted. Mr. MacDonald glared out into the dimness.

“The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her so that he shall have no need of spoil,” he continued. “She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.

“Anna Gillis’ memory will live on in our hearts. You have all known her since she was a child.”

“Some better than others,” said Duncan under his breath.

Hector nudged him and shook his head.

“She has been a faithful communicant with this congregation all her life. Her presence here will be sorely missed. I doubt that she has missed a Sabbath in church except at the birth of her son, and that of her daughter beside whom she will lie this day. Her help in the work of this congregation was immeasurable.” He paused to draw breath.

“Aye, that’s as may be,” muttered Duncan again, “but it’s what she did after church that got her in this fix.”

“Will you be quiet,” whispered Hector. “Have some respect for Ian, at least.”

Duncan looked ashamed and subsided into silence.

“We can look to Anna’s life as an example, even as we look to the ancient Christians for that example. Both their sins and their acts of faith are recorded for our benefit that we should learn to avoid their errings, to guard against sin, to imitate their virtues, and to walk in piety so as to obtain the blessing promised to godliness. In the same way, Anna’s life in all its sin and virtue can lead us to the godly path.”

Mr. MacDonald trudged on through his sermon. The congregation grew restive. Somewhere a child whimpered and was hushed by its mother. A man sneezed and blew his nose with a loud trumpet. Few tears were shed for Anna.

“When Israel was camped at Shittim, the people began to commit fornication with the daughters of Moab and to participate in their idolatrous festivals. But this sin cost them dearly, for the plague took twenty-three thousand in one day. Be forewarned! Whoremongers and adulterers God will judge! He will condemn them, though once they were His children. Let us pray.

“Heavenly Father, we offer our prayers of intercession for the soul of Anna Gillis. In your mercy, remember the good she has done for this community. Forgive her the sins she may have committed, and lay them not hard against her. Remember her husband, Ian, and her son, Donald. Be with them in this time of great sorrow. We ask these things in Jesus’ name. Amen.”

The congregation stirred and rose as one body to file silently past the open casket, each one searching for a sign of the blow that had taken Anna.

The pall bearers closed the lid over Anna’s still face and nailed it shut. They shouldered its weight and carried their burden to the gaping red hole in the ground. The day had grown cool and overcast, and the birds were as silent as the people who followed the pallbearers.

Mr. MacDonald waited until everyone had assembled then began the ceremony of committal. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures ...”

For once Duncan held his tongue.

“Ashes to ashes, from dust we came, unto dust we shall return.” The clumps of earth echoed hollowly off the top of the casket. Ian forgot himself and rubbed the residue of soil on his hands onto his pant leg, leaving a streak of red behind.

“Into Thy hands we commend the spirit of our sister Anna Gillis.”

“A fine funeral, Mr. MacDonald,” said Angus leaning on his shovel for a moment. “It must have been a difficult sermon to preach.”

Mr. MacDonald pursed his lips before replying. “No. In fact it was one of the easier ones I’ve done.”

Angus looked at him in surprise. “It was?”

“Indeed it was. She was as good a woman as I said she was, and perhaps even a little better.” He turned on his heel and strode away. Angus stared after him for a moment then returned to the task of filling in the grave.

I wonder where James was? It’s strange he would miss her funeral. Him of all people. He whistled a hymn tunelessly under his breath as he worked. He paused to wipe the sweat from his eyes. Where are Duncan and Hector? It’s just like them to disappear when there’s work to be done. He pulled off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. I’d better not get any mud on this good white shirt or Mary’ll be cross. She says the red mud is just like dye, once it’s in, it’s the devil’s own job to get it out. He chuckled to himself. I’ll be wearing pink shirts for awhile if that happens.

Another fifteen minutes of hard work saw the job almost finished just as Hector and Duncan hurried around the end of the church.

“You’re almost done,” said Duncan.

“He always was a fast worker,” said Hector, “and a fine job he’s done, too.”

“Well, you two showed up at the right time, as usual.” Angus scraped the last of the dirt onto the grave mound and patted it down with the back of the shovel.

“We were over at the store. I was all out of tobacco,” said Duncan. He chewed rhythmically on a mouthful of the black stuff.

“Gossiping, more than likely.” Angus threw down the shovel and wiped his sweating hands on the seat of his trousers.

Duncan looked hurt. “No, just getting the news. I wouldn’t call it gossiping.”

“So, what is the news?”

“Did you not wonder where James was today?” He spat a stream of rich tobacco juice into the bushes and waited for Angus’ reply.

“The thought had crossed my mind.” Angus rolled down his sleeves and picked up his coat.

“He’s gone,” said Hector. “No one’s seen him since the day before yesterday.”

“That’s strange,” said Angus. “Has he taken a trip?”

“No one seems to know,” replied Hector. “He’s just gone.”

“The next thing you know, he’ll be turning up dead too,” said Duncan.

“And it wouldn’t be too good for him, either,” said Hector. “It’ll teach him to leave married women alone.”

“Maybe they’re down there sharing the fan right now,” said Duncan.

“I doubt that,” said Angus, “though I don’t know where he’d go. The last time he came back to the Island he said he was here to stay. Maybe he’s just gone visiting. He has a brother up in Stanchel. He could be there.