

Chapter One

Annie stood alone in the still frozen garden of the house her father had built. The spring-cold day had an air of waiting around her and no birds sang. Her thoughts rambled here and there over the last years. She wondered about her decision to remain on Skye when her family emigrated to the colonies while she stayed behind for the love of Alistair. He was useless, she thought, Just like Poppa said he was. I wonder if Poppa knew that he was my half brother? Belle said he didn't. Perhaps that was the reason she took me on when they went. Annie looked back on those days from today's mature perspective.

She surveyed her surroundings taking stock of all that now belonged to her. The tiny house was made of wide wooden slabs cut by hand from ancient trees that had stood on the property. The boards had weathered to silver grey; the gaps between them had lost some of the batting that would have kept out the cold. The garden at the front was generous but still filled with the stumps of trees at its lower end. Potato vines, wilted and blackened by the cold of winter, lay where they had grown about the stumps. Belle gave me the skills I needed to look after myself for the rest of my life. I wonder if she knew she was dying and that she could see what the future would hold for me if I stayed there. Annie sighed at the remembrance of Belle's last days. It was a difficult time, she thought. She knew her son too. She knew he couldn't be relied on.

Annie kicked one stump and overturned the clay to reveal a few potatoes still in the ground. She knelt and began scrabbling at the red clay with her bare hands. The ground was still frozen and she made difficult progress. A large clot of earth came out at once, nearly sitting her on her bottom on the cold ground. Underneath the piece of dirt was a layer of last year's potatoes. Tears filled her eyes as she dug deeper. "I was so ungrateful and contrary. I don't deserve all this." She scrubbed at the tears with the back of her hand leaving a red smear across one cheek. "Oh, Poppa, I'm so sorry. I was a wilful child. I am fortunate to have arrived here without you."

Her thoughts wandered on to the voyage over and the ship running aground just as they were about to reach their destination. That Mr. Wells, he was a strange one. I always knew he was near because I could smell his tobacco smoke. No one seemed to know who he was. Maybe he was just my imagination working on me. Or...? She sniffed back her tears, suddenly taking in the familiar smell.

"Annie, why are you crying? Don't you have what you wanted? It's a fine house, and a garden all ready to plant when the weather warms."

Annie startled at the familiar voice. She jumped to her feet. "Mr. Wells!" She stood staring at her elusive companion from the vessel, Mary Leafe that had transported them so many miles across the Atlantic Ocean. "What are you doing here? I thought you had business elsewhere."

Mr. Wells shrugged. "It fell through, so I thought I'd carry your trunk to you since you were so worried about it." He set the small trunk on its end on the ground and rubbed the shoulder he had carried it on. "Where would you like me to put it?"

“In the house. Let me help you carry it.” She tipped the trunk onto its bottom and took the handle at one end.

“What do you have in here that’s so heavy?” Mr. Wells chuckled. “It feels like stones.”

Annie’s face flushed and she looked away. “It is stones. But only one ... two.”

Mr. Wells raised an eyebrow at her. “Are you sure it’s not three or four?”

Annie ducked her head. “It’s actually five. I didn’t want to forget what Skye looked like so I packed a little of it to take with me.”

“Come then, let’s get your souvenirs into the house.”

Annie pushed open the door with one hip and balanced her end of the trunk on the opposite knee.

“Your house is easy to get into,” said Mr. Wells. “Aren’t you afraid at night?”

“T’is no good to be afraid. It’s where I must live.”

Annie carried her end of the trunk to the wall by her bed and set it on the floor. Mr. Wells followed.

“There. It will make a stand to set things on so I won’t have to get out of bed to light my candle at night.”

“I see someone has supplied you with blankets.”

“John the Store and Mrs. John have been more than kind to me. They gave me a bed for the night last night and a bite of breakfast this morning They keep the store in the village.”

Mr. Wells rummaged in his vest pocket for his pipe and tobacco. “Where are your Momma and Poppa?”

Annie looked away. “Poppa is dead and Momma has remarried and gone to Upper Canada with her new husband.”

“Hm.” Mr. Wells filled his pipe from his tobacco pouch and tamped it down with a slender finger. “Are you going to follow them?”

“I don’t see how I can. And anyway, Momma may not want me. I’d be an extra mouth to feed.”

“And an extra pair of hands.” Annie remembered her imaginary picture of Aunt Maggie needing an extra pair of hands to care for all the children and sprouting them out of her back like wings, and smiled. It was the edge of hysteria back then but the memory had faded into amusement.

Mr. Wells peered at Annie over the bowl of his pipe and applied a lucifer to the contents. He puffed on the pipe stem and the billows of blue smoke gave him a haziness that had not been there before.

Annie looked at him and blinked. “How’d you know about the extra pair of hands? That’s a long time ago.”

“I heard you and Roddy that day.” He tamped the tobacco more tightly and puffed again. “It was a little funny in a hysterical sort of way.”

Annie frowned and tried to focus on Mr. Wells through the tobacco smoke. “Where were you?”

“Nearby.” He puffed comfortably on his pipe. “If it makes you feel easier, it was Big John who asked me to look after you.”

“My father asked you to look after me?” The sudden rush of anger startled Annie. “I don’t need to be looked after.”

“Of course, you don’t, but your Poppa didn’t know that.” Mr. Wells’ voice was soothing. He looked around the tiny room. “In fact you’re very well off. The potatoes that are left in the garden are frozen solid but they’ll be almost as good as new when you boil them, and if you look hard enough you’ll likely find a few turnips in the same state and tastier for having been frozen.”

His gaze roamed up to the ceiling and back. “You have a nice tight roof, and a little moss packed into the gaps in the wall will stop the wind until you can line it with birch bark.” He nodded to himself. “The Earl of Selkirk did a wise thing when he settled everyone only a mile or so away from each other. You’ll never be far from neighbours.” He went to the door and tried the latch. “You might take this to the smithy. It needs repair. In fact, I must leave you now. I can drop it by the forge on my way back to town.” He lifted the latch from the door and dropped it into his pocket. He tipped his hat to Annie and went out the door, closing it gently behind himself.

“Wait. Mr. Wells.” Annie ran to the door and opened it. “Will I see you again?” Mr. Wells was not on the narrow porch. Annie stood still and searched the garden for sign of him but he was nowhere in view. “I don’t see how you can disappear so fast,” she muttered. “One minute you’re here and the next you’re gone in a puff of tobacco smoke.”

A faint breeze stirred last year’s leaves on the oak tree at the end of the garden. A squirrel chirred from the line of spruce trees beside the house. A slight movement on the track to the village might have been Mr. Wells’ passing.

Annie stared into the dimness of the forest path but could not discern anything. She took a deep breath, heavy with the scent of spruce and pine, and cold with the freshness of the impending spring. Overhead the sun was misty through an overlay of clouds. Annie closed her eyes and sniffed again. There’ll be snow by tonight, she thought.

Presently the sound of whistling came from the darkness of the forest. Annie opened her eyes and probed the shadows. Movement from the path quieted the birds and squirrels and after a moment a figure appeared from the gloom. The boy saw Annie standing on her porch. His whistling stopped abruptly as did his step. He stood in silence staring at Annie for more than a minute. Annie stared back.

Older, but not nearly a man yet, thought Annie. She stepped off the porch and walked slowly to the gate. The boy stirred and met her there.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Perhaps you should tell me who you are first,” replied Annie.

The boy shrugged. “I’m Duncan. My father’s name is Ewan. I have a brother called Hector. He’s home in bed with a bad stomach.”

“I see,” said Annie. She continued to take Duncan’s measure. “Has he taken anything for his condition?”

“More of the thing that caused it, probably,” said Duncan.

“And what was that?” Annie held onto the gatepost with both hands.

“Oysters.” A grin hovered on Duncan’s face. “I told him he could eat them in any month with an R in it and he believed me.”

“You could have killed him.” Annie’s hands balled into fists in defence of the unknown Hector. “That was just plain cruel.”

“Och, he’s such a gommach.”

“Where d’you live?”

“T’other side of the store. Why?”

“I have something left in my cobhan that will benefit your brother.” Annie turned toward the house. “You stay there until I get my medicine and you can show me the way to your house.” Annie hurried toward her door. “I never heard the like,” she muttered. “Trying to poison your own brother with unfit food.”

She rummaged in her trunk and found a small bag of dried berries. I’m glad I thought to include these in my packing. Bilberry is the best cure for diarrhea I know of. She dropped the bag into her apron pocket and closed the trunk lid. She wrapped her shawl more closely around her shoulders and hastened to the gate. Duncan squatted beside the gate leaning on the gatepost drawing pictures in the sand with a spruce twig. He looked up at Annie’s approach.

“You’re ready,” he said.

“I’m always ready,” said Annie. “Now show me the way to your house.”

“We’ll take a shortcut.” Duncan set out at a smart pace and Annie trotted behind him. Duncan strode toward the village. It was a foreign path to Annie, different from the one that John had taken her through that morning. The path was narrow and darkened by the density of the trees. Spruce boughs pulled at her shawl and winter-dead brambles tore at her skirts.

“Are you sure you know where you’re going?” Annie disengaged her skirt from a particularly sticky vine.

“I was born here.” Duncan turned his nose up and looked down the length of it at Annie. “I know these woods like the back of my hand.”

“Aren’t you the haughty one?” Annie tipped her nose to the same height as Duncan’s. “I just hope you know enough to get us where we’re going.”

Duncan turned toward the path again. “I’ll get you there. Don’t you worry. Just you keep up with me.”

“If I knew the way I’d race you.” Annie freed her skirt from another bramble. “Where are we, anyway?”

“Halfway to the store.” Duncan quickened his pace and presently they emerged from the gloom of the forest into the backyard of the store.

“How far are we from your house?” Annie pushed her way past the spruce boughs and straightened her shawl.

Duncan shrugged. “About a mile, maybe a little further.” He set out at a fast trot. “C’mon or we won’t make it ‘til sundown.”

“What?!” Annie stopped and stood still in the dooryard of the store. “Where are you taking me?”

Duncan laughed. “I was only teasing. It really is only a short distance.” He slowed his pace to a walk.

Annie followed at a slower pace. “Don’t you get me lost. I’d never find my way home.”

“Sure you would. This is an island. Sooner or later you’d come to some house or other. Of course, you’d have to be careful not to fall off.”

“In this weather that’s cold comfort.” Annie pulled her shawl more closely around her shoulders.

Duncan started down the road toward Charlottetown, then abruptly plunged into the forest again. The track here was somewhat wider and easier to follow. Occasionally they passed small farms with their gardens cleared of stumps. Their passage set the family dogs barking, and quieted the squirrels and the birds in the trees. Birches were intermingled with the spruce trees and now and again an oak tree had taken root, its dead leaves still clinging to the branches where they rattled in the wind from the Northumberland Strait.

Presently Duncan stopped at the top of a rise. He pointed through the overhanging canopy of trees. “There it is, and if you look to the right beyond it you can see Uncle Angus’ house.”

“Only if you know what you’re looking for,” said Annie. She squinted through the shadows of the forest and saw a flash of white as the breeze moved the bare branches.

“Of course, in the summer you can’t see it at all.” Duncan took up his rangy boy’s stride again and Annie followed after him. “I hope Hector didn’t die.”

“No thanks to you if he did,” said Annie.

Duncan burst into a run when they reached the dooryard leaving Annie to follow him however she could. Last fall’s rain had turned the yard to mud which had frozen into the ruts of the last cart that had crossed it. The dents of the feet of the cows and the horse were preserved there until the spring thaw. Annie picked her way across the rutted yard.

This’ll be an awful mess come spring, thought Annie. All that red mud. She shook her head in disbelief. I can’t imagine it.

“C’mon, hurry up,” Duncan urged her from the red sandstone step at the door.

“You’re in a fine hurry for someone who perpetrated this misery on his brother,” said Annie.

“Sh-h-h! Momma doesn’t know about it. She’ll tan my hide if she finds out.”

Annie pursed her lips. “And you want me to keep your secret?” She stood staring at Duncan.

“Please.” The remnants of the mischievous child he had been sparkled in Duncan’s eyes.

“You’ll never do such a thing again?”

“Never!”

“What’s he promising this time?” A woman’s voice came from the darkness of the kitchen. Presently she appeared at the door wiping her hands on the tail of her apron.

Duncan’s eyes widened. “I’m dead. She won’t let go of this until I tell her.”

“Be sure your sins will find you out.” Annie tossed her head.

“You must be Big John’s girl. I’m Cassie, mother to those two hooligans. Come in.” The short sturdy woman stood aside for Annie to enter. “You look for all the world like your mother.” She inspected Annie from head to toe with her faded blue gaze. “So you stayed behind to learn from Belle. She was a witch, don’t you know.”

“She was a healer and a good woman and I’ll hear no talk of her otherwise. She firmed her lips and changed the subject. “You knew Momma?” Annie asked the question then answered herself. “Of course, you knew her, she lived here.”

“She was a fine woman. I was sorry to see her go. She did the best she could for her boys.”

Annie’s face flushed and she changed the subject. “I hear you have a sick one of your own here.”

“Aye. The wretch dug a couple of oysters out of the river the other day and ate them. He knows better than that so he’s getting just what he deserves.”

“Are you sure it was all his fault?” Annie closed her lips into a tight, straight line at the end of the question.

“I expect Duncan had something to do with it. He’s been much too smug about his brother’s discomfort.”

“I brought some bilberries with me from across the water. They’re very good for just such a condition.”

Cassie frowned and looked Annie up and down again. “You don’t look old enough to know all that.” Cassie continued to stare at Annie with suspicion. You look like your maither”

“I have kept my looks as did my maither and her maither before her.” Annie’s nose rose a little.

“What else did Belle teach you?”

“Everything she could.” Annie clamped her lips shut and dropped her eyelids a little.

Running footsteps sounded in the loft overhead. A pair of bare feet appeared at the top of the steep stairs, followed by a skinny young body clad only in woollen underwear. The boy stopped for only a moment then headed outdoors and down the garden path.

“That was the patient,” said Cassie. “D’you think you can heal that?”

“I can only try,” said Annie, “if I can catch up to him.” She rummaged in her apron pocket for the small bag of bilberries. “Put the kettle on to boil and I’ll have this ready when he comes back.”

Cassie picked up the kettle and began dipping water from the bucket on the stand by the door. “I’ll only fill this part way. It’ll boil quicker.”

“D’you have something to mash these with? A fork’ll do. The tea steeps better when the berries are broken and I didn’t bring my mortar and pestle so I’ll be needing a bowl too.”

Cassie rummaged in a drawer in the kitchen dresser and produced a fork, its tines askew with use. “This is the best of the lot.”

“The others must be really bad if this is the best you have.” Annie took the fork and began stroking it. Gradually the tines straightened and she began mashing the berries.

“What did you do to that?” Cassie stared with wide eyes at Annie. “Was it magic? You must be a witch.”

Annie continued mashing the berries. “It’s not magic and I’m not a witch. I’m a healer. You could do that too, if you wanted to.”

Cassie continued staring at Annie. “It’s spooky.” She stepped back a pace from Annie. “Are you sure you’re not a witch? You know they burn witches at the stake.”

Annie sighed and looked up from her work. “I am not a witch, and the kettle is boiling. Bring it here, please.”

Cassie hurried to do Annie’s bidding.

Presently the kitchen door opened and Hector peeped around the edge of it, his mop of brown hair dishevelled by his hasty trip down the garden path, his face pale from his malady.

“Ah, Hector, come in. I have just the cure for you.” Annie stirred the decoction of berries and hot water.

Hector eased his way around the door and tried to cover his lack of clothing with shaking hands. His teeth rattled from the cold of the outdoors.

Annie poured a little of the juice into a cup and added more hot water then handed it to Hector. “Drink this. It’s good for what ails you, and you’d better sit down while you do it. You look as if you’re going to fall over.”

Hector took the cup from Annie and sat down on a stool beside the hearth. His shivering nearly caused the cup to overflow.

Cassie wrapped a shawl around his shoulders. “What were you doing running around in your underwear, and bare feet for, anyway? You’ll catch your death of pneumonia.”

Hector took a gulp of his tea and grimaced. “It was that or make a mess. I shouldn’t have eaten those oysters.” He clutched his belly and moaned.

Annie laughed. “Live old horse, you’ll get grass. The next time you’ll know better.”

Hector took another gulp of the tea. “I did know better. It was Duncan persuaded me. He had me so doubting myself that I believed him. Especially when he took one himself.”

“Duncan persuaded you to do this?” asked Cassie.

Hector nodded and groaned.

Cassie rolled her eyes. “That rascal! I might’ve known. Wait’ll I get my hands on him.”

“Well, don’t tell him until he’s shown me the way home,” said Annie. “He took me through the forest and we only went through civilization once. I have no idea where I am, nor north nor south either.”

Cassie shook her head. “He’ll take you home if he values his hide.” She glanced toward a birch switch that hung above the door. It was grimy on one end from frequent use.

Annie’s gaze followed Cassie’s. The switch was out of easy reach of children.

“Not that it’ll do him much good,” said Cassie.

“Take that path.” Cassie pointed the way. “It’ll lead you back to the store and you know your way from there. Never mind Duncan, he can find his way like an Indian in the woods. And thanks for the medicine. Will you take a little stew with you for your supper?”

“I will,” said Annie, “and thanks.” She waited while Cassie went indoors to dip a serving of stew out of the pot that hung over the fire.

“It’s venison and you’ll likely want to cook it longer when you get home. It can be tough.” She put an ill-fitting lid on the basin and handed it to Annie. “You can return the basin to me when you come to church on Sunday. You do come to church, don’t you?”

“I will,” said Annie, “and many thanks.” She wrapped her shawl more closely around her shoulders and stepped out into the cold of the early spring day. “Just through that gap in the trees, then?”

“Aye, it’s not far.”

Annie’s stride soon took her to the top of the rise. She turned to wave at Cassie but the door was already closed against the brisk wind from the Northumberland Strait. She turned and stepped into the shelter of the spruce trees. The path was broader and not such a tangle of trees and brambles as the one that Duncan had led her on. Presently she stepped onto the track from Charlottetown and turned her steps toward the store. The wind’s strength was lessened to a breeze in the tops of the fir trees that lined the road and the walk to the store was a pleasant one. Overhead the clouds scudded across the sky ahead of the wind. Birch and oak intermixed with the fir and spruce, and rattled their branches in the

wind, and two crows bobbed and dipped on the air currents looking for carrion. Ahead of her a rabbit skittered across the path and disappeared into the underbrush. A squirrel chirred at its hasty passage then fell silent at the sound of Annie's footfall.

"One crow sorrow, two crows joy," crooned Annie to herself. "Three crows a letter, four crows a boy." Her rhyme ended as she neared the store. Mrs. John was hanging dishtowels on the fence to dry and Annie waved to her. "G'day," she called to her.

Mrs. John beckoned. "I see you've been visiting already. That's Cassie's pan if I don't miss my guess."

"It is, indeed," said Annie. "She was kind enough to give me a basin of stew for my supper. Her youngest one was sick and Duncan told me about it when he happened by."

"He must have been very sick." Mrs. John gave a brisk snap to a dishtowel and hung it next to the other one on the fence.

"He was that, no thanks to that brother of his."

"Duncan? What did he have to do with it?"

"Convinced him that it was alright to eat oysters this early. He has been on the trot all day and half the night."

"It's a wonder he didn't kill him."

Annie shook her head. "No fear of that. He'll just be uncomfortable for a day or two."

"They're a pair." Mrs. John hung the last cloth on the fence. "I have bread just out of the fire; will you take a loaf to have with your stew?"

"You've done so much already," said Annie. "Perhaps just half a loaf and some start for a loaf of my own."

"Half for yourself and half for the widow Finlayson, if you'll be so kind as to carry it to her. It's on your way."