

Chapter One

It was the middle of the night, but Sherman couldn't sleep. Too many old demons whirling around his brain and pricking at his conscience. Frustrated, he threw back the covers and sat up on the edge of the bed, the soles of his feet chilled by the bare floor boards. Running his hands through his clipped, grizzled hair, he pushed himself up off the bed, jammed his feet into slippers, and limped downstairs in his shorts and undershirt.

The kitchen was dark, but Sherman didn't bother with the lights. He fumbled for a water glass from the cupboard and took the vodka bottle out of the freezer. The blue light from the stove's digital clock was enough to see by as he poured two fingers of Stoli into the glass and put the bottle back. Leaning against the counter by the kitchen sink, he took his first sip. Ahh. The alcohol was cold and smooth going down the back of his throat.

Meaning to count to twenty before taking a second sip, he rested the glass on the sink and looked out the window past the dingy curtains. The house was set up high on a hill next to the Crane municipal cemetery, allowing him to see over the wall into the grounds. For a moment, he thought he caught a flicker of light through the trees. He rubbed his eyes and stared, straining to see it again, but the wind was up and the trees were thrashing. There! He saw the light again, briefly. Maybe it was one of those damned kids up to no good. They had no respect for the dead, knocking over tombstones, spray painting ugly messages on the walls, and leaving empty beer cans right on top of the graves. He'd better take a look, or else he might have a mess to clean up tomorrow.

Forgetting to savour his drink, Sherman downed the rest and hurried upstairs to put on his pants and a warm jacket. It was mid-October in the Alberta Foothills, and the nights were getting frosty. He grabbed his cemetery keys and hobbled down the stairs as fast as his sore knee would allow. Letting himself out of the house, he slid down the damp grass heading for the gate in the cemetery wall. The door screeched as he opened it, and he cursed himself for not keeping the hinges oiled. Easing the door shut behind him, he paused in the flat orange light beneath a security lamp on the ring road.

Everything was still except for the gusting wind. He could see his breath coming out in excited puffs and smelled the sharp wood smoke from the houses on the far side of the church. He shivered as the wind penetrated his clothes. It was too cold to stand still for long, so Sherman crossed the road and set off across the frosty grass. The sky was enshrouded in thick, grey cloud, and it was inky black among the plots. He got his bearings from the familiar tombstones, running his hands over their chilled, smooth surfaces as he hobbled past them. Pausing by a stone angel, Sherman peered to the left, toward the older part of the cemetery. That was the direction the light had been coming from when he had seen it from the kitchen window.

There it was, blinking through a stand of twisting evergreens. He crept toward the trees, taking his time so as not to snap a twig along the way. Was that whispering he heard? He paused to listen, but the branches were creaking too much to be sure, so he kept on. Reaching the evergreens, he edged around them carefully, trailing his hands over their rough bark.

He knew exactly where he was. There was a bench on the other side of the trees with a plot directly in front of it. The words inscribed on the black tombstone read, "Evelyn Mason, Beloved Wife and Mother, November 2, 1954 – March 10, 2012." Evie's grave. He rounded the trees and burst out of hiding.

"What do you think you're doing here?" he hollered. But there was no one there, just the dim outline of the tombstone. He hesitated, sure that this was where he had seen the light.

"Sherman . . ." a voice sighed plaintively on the wind. He jerked his head sideways, trying to follow the sound, but it was impossible to tell where it came from. His hands clutched the bench for support, the metal cold and hard beneath his fingers.

"Who's there?" he yelled, straining to see in the dark.

"Sherman . . ." the voice moaned, emanating from the heart of the plot deep in front of him. His breath came in short gasps, and his legs were shaking.

"Sherman!" the voice shrieked, piercing his ears and squeezing the breath from his lungs. He turned to run and tripped. Clawing at the ground, he staggered to his feet, terrified of skeletal fingers clutching at his shoulder. He tore across the grass and ran between the plots, barking his shins on more than one tombstone. He found the ring road and pushed himself down it, running and hopping as fast as he could. Reaching the door in the wall, he flung it open and staggered up the slope for home.

Thank God he had left the front door unlocked. Once inside, he shot the bolt home and ran upstairs to cower in bed with the ceiling light on. He lay there, his heart thumping erratically in his chest, and willed it to calm down. Mental imaging the people at the hospital had called it after his heart attack five years ago. He swallowed hard and tried to think. Was he crazy, or had his wife just called to him from the other side of the grave?

Her photograph was on his bedside table in a polished silver frame, the only valuable thing still left. Staring at the beautiful young woman with shining blue eyes smiling into the camera, a snort of laughter burst from his lips. He laughed and laughed until his eyes ran, and he was gasping for breath. The laughter subsided, and he picked up the picture and clutched it to his chest.

“I’m sorry, Evie,” he said, his voice cracking.

Chapter Two

Anna Nolan strode down Main Street in pursuit of breakfast. It was a glorious autumn morning, the air fresh and crisp, the sky a cloudless robin's-egg blue. The leaves on the trees lining the street had turned sunshine-yellow and were dry and crunchy underfoot. Anna stopped outside The Diner and grinned at the scarecrow sitting on a straw bale beside the door. The Crane Chamber of Commerce was holding its annual Halloween contest, and most of the businesses were festooned with cobwebs, spiders, scarecrows, and jack-o'-lanterns. Frank Crow, the restaurant's owner, was a big Elvis fan – he even had one of the King's Vegas costumes mounted in a display case inside the restaurant – so his scarecrow was wearing a black wig, leather jacket, and holding a plywood guitar. Stooping, she kissed its scratchy cheek and went inside.

Mary, The Diner's full-time waitress, was wiping down a vacant spot at the front counter. Thirtyish, she wore her trademark skin-tight jeans, the strings of her white apron tied twice around her pencil-thin waist. Four of the five stools were occupied by truckers dressed alike in flannel shirts, jeans, and baseball caps, their forks scraping on their plates as they concentrated on shovelling food into their mouths as efficiently as possible.

A long, low wolf whistle pierced the silence. Glancing over her shoulder, Anna spied RCMP Constable Steve Walker grinning at her from a table at the back of the room. The rangy, darkly-handsome, twenty-eight-year-old had just finished his shift and was still in uniform, eating his supper before going home to get some rest. Anna beamed as she headed back to join him, a little sashay in her walk.

“Anna Nolan, you are looking fine this morning. Love must truly agree with you,” Steve said, leaning back in his chair to look her up and down as she paused beside his table. She was wearing a midnight-blue silk blouse over jeans that cupped her curvy hips, her long, brunette hair flowing over the shoulders of a soft black leather jacket. Anna was forty with a grown son, Ben, in university, and long walks with her dog helped to keep her fit and youthful.

“Thank you, sir, you are too kind,” she said with mock gentility, plunking down into the chair across from him. The men at the counter stopped following Anna with their eyes and turned back to their plates.

“Taking a vacation day?” Steve asked. It was Tuesday, and normally she would be on her way to work at eight o’clock in the morning. Work was at the Chinook University in Calgary, where Anna was employed as the administrative assistant for the Kinesiology Department. She had held the position for four years, driving the twenty minutes north to Calgary each day. Her ex-husband, Jack, a handsome charmer who had cheated on her throughout their marriage, had been an actor, and the family had settled in the small town of Crane when he had landed a role in a movie being filmed nearby. Anna had begun divorce proceedings before the shoot was over, however, and when Jack left town at the film’s wrap, she and Ben stayed on.

“Uh huh. I had to take a friend to the airport,” she replied.

“That’s right. I heard that Sergeant Tremaine was back in town last week,” Steve said around a piece of toast. “The guys and I were really disappointed when he didn’t drop by the station to see us. Here we thought that we had really bonded with Tremaine over your ex-husband’s murder investigation, but he didn’t take the time to visit his old buddies. I wonder who or what could have been keeping him so busy?”

Anna rolled her eyes. Charles Tremaine was a sergeant with a national RCMP unit that investigated high-profile homicides throughout Western Canada. She and Tremaine had become personally involved during the investigation the previous spring, an investigation in which Anna had figured as the prime suspect. She thought that looking into her ex-husband’s personal life would help to find the murderer, and had made it her mission to meet the women Jack had been romancing. Tremaine had discovered the real killer despite Anna’s interference, and now they were conducting a long-distance romance.

Mary bustled over to the table to take Anna’s order. “We missed you at breakfast on Saturday. Did you sleep in or something?” Anna often met her friends for breakfast at The Diner on Saturday mornings.

Anna braced herself for some extra teasing and said, “I’m sure everyone has heard that Charlie was taking a seminar in Calgary last week.”

“Uh huh,” Mary and Steve said in unison.

“So, he stayed over for Thanksgiving weekend when it was done.”

“And?” Mary asked with rapt attention.

“And, nothing. It’s none of your business,” Anna said, smiling to soften the sharpness of her retort.

Mary smirked at Steve, who winked back. “How’s he getting along with Ben?” the waitress asked. Ben was nineteen, and had moved out of the house just over a year ago to attend Chinook University’s computer science program. He was in his second year, sharing a house in Calgary with four other roommates and holding down a part-time job at a building supply store. He still came home every Friday night to have supper with his mom, however.

“They sure got off to a rocky start,” Steve added. “First Ben dragged his feet on providing an alibi for his father’s murder . . .”

“Ben just got his back up about that,” Anna interrupted.

“And then Tremaine brought him in for questioning,” Steve said with a grin.

“Yeah, that didn’t help.” Anna shrugged and smiled. “Ben had Thanksgiving supper with Charlie and me, and no blood was drawn, so I’d say their relationship is improving.”

Frank Crow, who was both The Diner’s owner and cook, rang the pass-through bell, signalling that there was food for Mary to pick up. The waitress got down to business. “What’ll you have, Anna – the usual?”

“No, I made pancakes and bacon at home this weekend. What are you having, Steve?” she asked, peering at his bowl beside the stack of whole wheat toast. He was eating oatmeal topped with raisins and raw apple slices. Anna wrinkled her nose; it didn’t look very appealing to her. Steve must be on one of his health kicks.

“I think I need a little more protein than that,” she said. “I’ll have the Tex-Mex Scramble. And a glass of apple juice, please.”

“Coming right up,” Mary said, spinning on her heels and walking away.

“So, how’s it really going with Tremaine? Are you happy?” Steve asked, scooping up some oatmeal with his spoon.

Anna leaned her elbows on the table. “It’s going really well. Charlie’s a great guy. I trust him, even though we’re apart so much. Not like my ex-husband, that dog. And the long-distance thing is working for me. It keeps us in the honeymoon phase of our relationship all the time.”

“Yeah, but how much time have you actually spent together since he left last spring?”

“Well, he had to come back for the trial, so that was four days in July. Then we had his two weeks’ vacation in August, plus this past week for the course. That’s three and a half weeks. But we talk all the time on the phone. Well, as much as we can when he’s not tied up with a case.” Anna sighed. “Problem is, every time he leaves, I have to get used to being alone all over again. It’s funny. I was fine with not having a man in my life for four years, but now that there’s one back again – well, it’s hard when he leaves.” Anna toyed with the packages of sugar in the bowl on the table while Steve watched.

The restaurant door opened. Anna looked up as a young woman paused in the doorway. Backlit by the morning sun, she was striking in a purple velvet jacket worn over a snippet of floral skirt and high-heeled, scarlet pumps. Her most exotic feature, however, was the smooth cap of flaming-red hair that framed her oval face. The young woman sauntered over to the counter and claimed the empty stool, laying a sheet of paper on the counter top before sliding onto the cushioned seat. The men on either side of her looked up in surprise. Removing smoky sunglasses, she swivelled on the stool to check out the rest of the restaurant, crossing her shapely legs as she did so. Her skirt rode up high enough to revive a dead man’s heart, and the truckers gaped at her over their shoulders. The young woman spotted Steve and gave him a half-wave with her fingertips. Steve waved back and beckoned for her to join him and Anna.

“Who’s that?” Anna asked, her eyebrows arching as the woman undulated her way through the tables.

“That’s Tiernay Rae, the owner of the new store that’s going in where Henry’s old restaurant used to be,” Steve said, mesmerized by Tiernay’s progress.

Anna managed to whisper, “You know her? You sure work fast,” before the young woman arrived at their table.

Steve rose to greet her. “Tiernay, you are the perfect ending to an uninspired day,” he said, whisking out a chair for her. Tiernay smiled at him, and he seemed to lose himself in her eyes. Feeling like a chewed-up dog toy spat out for a meaty bone, Anna cleared her throat. Steve glanced at her before adding, “Let me introduce you to a good friend of mine, Anna Nolan.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Tiernay said, leaning forward to offer her hand. As Anna took it, she noticed that the younger woman had unusually light blue eyes. Those cool eyes were assessing her. Obviously, Tiernay was sizing up the competition. She needn’t have bothered, though; with twelve years between them, Anna had dismissed Steve as potential boyfriend material years ago

even though he had demonstrated some interest. Besides, she had Charlie to keep her happy. Releasing Anna's hand, Tiernay sank into her chair and turned her attention back to Steve.

“‘Tiernay.’ That’s an unusual name,” Anna said.

“Tiernay is a Celtic name that means ‘noble.’”

“Oh. Do you have a Celtic background?”

“No, I’m French-Canadian.”

Anna nodded as if she understood, even though she didn’t. “Steve tells me that you’re opening a new business in Henry Fellow’s old restaurant.”

“That’s right.”

“I must say, you’ve done wonders with the building renovations. It’s been an eyesore for months, but it looks terrific now.” Henry Fellows, a long-time resident of Crane and a former member of the town council, had owned “Hank’s Hearty Home-Cooking,” The Diner’s only competition in town. The restaurant’s kitchen had been demolished by a hit-and-run driver last spring, however, and to make matters worse, Henry had been given a two-month jail term for his involvement with the accident. He was back in Crane, although no one had seen much of the fussy, middle-aged man since his return.

“Thank you,” Tiernay said, nodding at Anna’s compliment. “Mr. Fellows gave us a really good price because the place was in such rough shape. My brother, Greg, drew up the renovation plans himself. I’m very proud of Greg – he’s got an artistic soul.”

“What kind of business are you opening?” Anna asked.

“It’s called ‘Healing Hands’ – part store, part massage therapy clinic. I’m a registered massage therapist, by the way. The store will be open in the afternoons, and the clinic in the evenings. I’m not much of a morning person,” she said with a lazy smile, “although I’m up with the birds lately. There’s so much to do with the store opening this week.”

“Sounds intriguing. When do you open?”

“The stars will be in their proper alignment on Friday.”

“Really? Are you an astrologist, too?” Anna asked with a condescending smile. She didn’t hold much truck with astrology.

“Among other things.” Tiernay leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs again. Anna wanted to tell Steve to put his tongue back in his mouth, but kept the comment to herself.

Mary returned with Anna's breakfast and plunked it down on the table in front of her. Catching the waitress's eye, Tiernay said, "Excuse me, ma'am. I'm Tiernay Rae, owner of the new store that's opening across the street. I wonder if I could talk to the owner about putting up a flyer in your window."

Mary paused to consider her, a hand on her hip. "What kind of flyer?"

Tiernay held up the poster for Mary to see. "It's for a cleansing ceremony after the store closes on Saturday night. Everyone in town is welcome. I always do a cleansing ceremony when I'm in a new location, plus I want to get rid of any negative energy left over from the accident."

Mary shrugged and reached for the flyer. "Sure, I'll put it in the window. Frank Crow, the restaurant owner, sits on the town council. He's always happy to promote local business."

"Marvellous. Thanks so much," Tiernay said with a patronizing smile. "By the way, would you bring me a pot of green tea?"

"Sure. Be right back," Mary said as she left.

"Cleansing ceremonies, negative energy, stars' alignment – what's that all about, if you don't mind my asking?" Anna said, picking up her fork and taking a bite of her steaming, peppery omelette. She closed her eyes and chewed slowly, taking a moment to savour Frank's cooking.

"She's a witch," Steve said. Anna's eyes popped open, and she stared at Steve's grinning face.

"Now, don't tease, Steve," Tiernay said, shaking her head at him. "You can call me a Wiccan, if you like, Anna, although I don't like being pigeon-holed by conformist religious definitions. Healing Hands will promote physical, emotional, and spiritual health, however people choose to arrive at it."

Mary returned with a mug and a tea pot and plopped them down in front of the young woman. "Only had brown," she said over her shoulder as she bustled away.

Tiernay frowned at the pot, poured some tea into the mug, and sipped it warily. Shuddering, she returned the mug to the table before continuing the conversation.

"Steve here, for instance, has an imbalance between his left and right sides. See how his left shoulder is higher than his right? His 'qi' – his energy flow – is blocked, which can lead to a weakened immune system."

One side of Steve's mouth curled upward. "So, how would you suggest I fix that, Tiernay?"

She studied him for a moment. "We could start with massage. I'm sure that I could work out the blockage with my hands. But I could also give you an herbal tincture that would help dissolve the blockage and purge your system."

"I'm not too keen on the purging, but I sure could use a good massage."

Tiernay looked deep into his eyes and said, "Give me your hand." Their eyes locked as he slowly extended it. She took it between her own and held it for a long moment. "It's a little cool," she murmured. "We need to increase your energy flow." She began massaging the flesh between his thumb and forefinger, watching his face as she did so. After half a minute, Steve sighed and closed his eyes.

"That's it. Let the tension go," Tiernay purred.

Anna stopped eating to watch them. "I think it's working. Look, the crease between Steve's eyes has already smoothed out," she said with a sardonic grin. Tiernay ignored her to begin kneading his palm with her thumbs. Steve's mouth dropped open.

"Holding a free clinic, Tiernay?" a baritone voice asked from behind Anna. She turned and saw a stranger standing at her shoulder. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, a tall, lean man with shaggy black hair and a glittering emerald stud in one ear. A prominent hooked nose gave him an aristocratic appearance, but good-humoured brown eyes saved him from seeming haughty. He smiled at Anna, swung the table's remaining chair around, and straddled it. Steve tried to free his hand, but Tiernay clung to it as she continued her massage.

"Where did you pop up from?" she asked, her eyes on her work.

"Oh, I've been all over town," the stranger replied.

Tiernay released Steve's hand with a final caress across the palm and turned her head to gaze at the stranger. "Anna, Steve, this is my big brother, Gregory," she said. "Greg and I are partners in the store. Greg, this is Anna Nolan and Constable Steve Walker."

"Yes, but I'm more of a 'silent' partner. I won't actually be working in the store," Greg said. He gave Steve a casual nod, but took Anna's hand and raised it to his lips in one smooth gesture. "Anna, I'm delighted to make your acquaintance," he murmured, kissing it. Anna's eyes assessed him coolly. In her experience, only a particular kind of man did that sort of thing, and she didn't want to meet another one.

“Don’t let Greg bother you. He likes to practise old-fashioned European courtesies,” Tiernay said in a dry voice.

“Are you old-fashioned, Greg?” Anna asked, slipping her hand from his grasp.

“No, but it’s a good excuse to kiss the hands of beautiful women whenever I get the chance,” he replied with an impish grin.

Anna found it impossible not to return his smile. “And how’s that working for you?” she asked, leaning back in her chair.

“You’d be surprised how well a little old-fashioned charm works on the gentler sex.”

“No I wouldn’t. I married a graduate of the old-fashioned charm school myself.”

“Lucky you. Still married to him?”

“We got divorced, and then another woman shot him,” Anna replied, straight-faced. “So you might want to rethink some of those old European courtesies of yours.”

Greg nodded with a poker face. “You’ll have to tell me all about him some day.”

“Would it do any good?” Anna asked, winning a chuckle from him.

“Oh, I like her,” Greg said.

“So, how’s the flyer distribution going?” Tiernay asked.

He broke his gaze from Anna’s face to heft a leather pouch onto the table. Opening it, he displayed the contents to his sister. “The flyers are half gone.”

“Well, we’d better get busy on the rest,” she replied, rising from the table. Tiernay was about to say more when she paused, her mouth frozen open in mid-sentence. Her face flushed, and she broke into a sweat.

“No . . . leave us alone,” she murmured, staring into the distance.

“Sis?” Greg said as Steve and Anna stared at her.

Tiernay’s eyes rolled toward the ceiling, and her knees buckled. Greg grabbed her around the waist as Steve sprang to his feet to help.

“What’s wrong?” Greg asked in alarm.

“I just felt this overwhelming sense of evil,” she whispered, staring at him with huge eyes. “Give me a moment.”

“Here, you’d better sit down,” Greg said, helping her back into her chair. Steve reseated himself, watching the young woman attentively. Tiernay closed her eyes and raised a hand to

her temple as Greg explained to Anna and Steve, “She gets these premonitions from time to time.”

Tiernay’s eyes opened. “It felt like something was trying to smother me,” she whispered. “I had to fight it off. It’s gone now.” She pointed across the table at Anna. “It was you! The evil was following you,” she declared in a stronger voice. Anna gazed back in astonishment as Tiernay rose and hurried around the table to stand beside her.

“May I?” she asked, lifting Anna’s chin and peering into her eyes before Anna had a chance to respond. “You have a very old spirit – even primitive, I’d say. You’re strong. That’s good. The evil will not easily overpower you.”

Anna jerked her chin out of Tiernay’s hand and muttered, “That’s a lot of crazy talk.”

Tiernay’s eyes sparkled with anger, and she drew herself up to her full height. “It’s not crazy. You listen to me, Anna Nolan. Something poisonous is coming to get you. I frightened it away, but it will be back. As soon as you feel anything, you come and tell me about it. I’m deadly serious about this, do you hear?”

Anna stiffened as she studied Tiernay. She had no idea why this bizarre young woman was trying to frighten her, but she decided to play along until she found out. “Okay, I’ll come running as soon as I feel anything,” she said, nodding and relaxing back into her chair.

Tiernay’s anger evaporated, and she patted Anna’s shoulder. “Good. Don’t worry, I’m sure that we can handle it between the two of us.” Turning to Steve, she added, “Well, Greg and I have work to do. You will come by for that massage sometime, won’t you?”

The constable rose from his chair. “I’ll be sure to do that. Good luck with your opening on Friday.”

Greg stood as well and bowed to Anna. “Wonderful to meet you, lovely lady,” he said. “Take good care of yourself.” Nodding at Steve, he added, “Constable.”

Tiernay trailed behind her brother on the way to the cash register, where she paused as Greg paid Mary for the tea. “Don’t forget to come to the cleansing ceremony on Saturday, everyone,” she called before sauntering out the door.

Steve sat down with an amused smile, but Anna didn’t find anything funny in what had just happened.

“What was all that nonsense about evil following me? Was she serious?”

Steve shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it's just an act she puts on to promote her business. It doesn't really matter, does it? She didn't spook you, did she?"

Anna frowned. "Not really, but she looked so sincere when she warned me. She seemed to really believe what she was saying."

Steve shivered and rubbed his hands together. "You'd better be careful. The bogey man's coming to get you, and just in time for Halloween."

Anna punched him in the shoulder. "Don't be ridiculous. Tiernay's as phoney as a three-dollar bill."

"Ow," he complained, rubbing the sore spot. "Well, who cares? You know what? I think that Tiernay and her brother are going to liven things up around here. She definitely brightened my day." He stood and stretched. "Gotta go get some sleep. See you around, Anna."

"Tiernay Rae brightened up your day, did she?" Anna mumbled to his retreating back. "Some people just don't have any sense." She forked up some omelette and ground it between her teeth. But, thinking of Greg and his hand-kissing, she smiled.