

Chapter 1

“I hope you haven’t got any plans for lunch.”

Anna looked up from her desk to see her boss, Dr. Magdalena Lewis, standing in the office doorway. Magdalena was the chair of the Kinesiology Department at Calgary’s Chinook University. The regal blond looked perfectly turned out, as usual, in a red-and-black wool jacket and black pencil skirt.

“Why? What’s up?”

“Julia Moreland wants to vet the candidates for the Robert Moreland Scholarship over lunch at her house. With you.”

Anna’s eyes widened. “You’re kidding. Why would she want to see me instead of you? I’m just the administrative assistant.”

“She mentioned that she wants to meet, and I quote, ‘the assistant who sounds so capable over the phone.’ More likely, however, she’s read about the two murder investigations in Crane this past year and wants to meet the woman who almost died in both of them. Julia would think that was fun.” Anna noted a touch of sarcasm in Magdalena’s voice.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go?” Anna asked. “I’m in the middle of the verification report for the spring course schedule, and Scheduling wants it by the end of the week. Besides, I’m hardly dressed to have lunch with the CEO of Westmore Resources.”

Magdalena perused Anna’s green-and-white striped t-shirt, black corduroy trousers, and black flats. “You’ll do. If the sponsor of a \$5,000.00 scholarship wants to meet you, you go. Besides, her cook is excellent. I’m sure you’ll enjoy the meal. Last year’s meeting only took an hour and a half, by the way, so you should have no difficulty in returning in time for the department meeting at three.” The toe of one of Magdalena’s red crocodile pumps started to tap impatiently on the floor, and Anna took the hint.

“No problem. I’ll have lunch with Mrs. Moreland and see you at the meeting at three.”

“Excellent.” Magdalena retreated to her office across the hall while Anna sighed and returned to her spreadsheet.

Two hours later, Anna was waiting in the foyer of Julia Moreland's mansion on an acreage just south of Calgary. She had carefully wiped the snow from her boots on the outdoor mat, but was conscious of a puddle spreading on the pristine grey-and-white marble floor beneath her. She looked up as she heard the sound of heels coming toward her down the hall. A young woman with flawless coffee-coloured skin, prominent cheekbones, and designer pink-and-silver eyeglasses appeared. She smiled coolly as she offered Anna her hand.

"Ms. Nolan? I'm Latona Taylor, Julia Moreland's personal assistant. A pleasure to meet you."

Anna returned the smile as she shook the young woman's hand. "How do you do?"

"Very well, thank you. Julia is waiting for you in the dining room. Please follow me."

As Anna hurried after Latona, she admired the hall's graceful columned arches and the colourful glass sculptures suspended from the ceiling. "Such a lovely house," she said. "I bet you enjoy working here. It sure beats the university."

"Yes, it is beautiful," Latona replied over her shoulder. She paused outside an open doorway. "The dining room is right through there. Enjoy your lunch."

Anna nodded her thanks and walked into the room. She hesitated before a gleaming mahogany table with eight chairs sitting on an Indian carpet of soft blues and greys. There were two place settings at the far end of the table, next to a crackling fire in an open, marble hearth. She recognized Julia Moreland sitting at one of the places. Julia, wearing a pair of black-framed reading glasses, was studying some paperwork. She looked up seconds after Anna's arrival, however, and removed her glasses.

"Anna, thanks for joining me on such short notice." Julia's smile was warm and welcoming as she patted the chair beside her. "Come and sit next to me."

Anna studied her hostess while hastening across the room. Julia wore her silvery hair short and spiky, and her blue silk tunic matched her sparkling eyes. Anna knew that Julia had to be at least sixty, but the effects of aging were difficult to detect on her heart-shaped face.

"I'm delighted to be here, Mrs. Moreland. I saw the newspaper spread on your home in the *Calgary Record* last summer. I'd have paid money for a tour."

Julia laughed. "Really? Well there's no charge today, plus we're throwing in a free lunch. And please call me Julia." She offered her right hand with its glowing, square-cut emerald ring.

Julia's clasp was firm. Anna liked that in a woman. She placed her tote on the floor and slid into a chair at the second place setting.

A middle-aged woman dressed in a sleeveless black tunic and slacks entered the room carrying two bowls. She marched up to the table and placed the bowls carefully on the gilded charger plates before Julia and Anna.

"What have you got for us today, Nicolette?" Julia asked.

"Sweet potato and red pepper soup." Nicolette waited next to the table with her hands clasped over her stomach.

Julia turned to Anna. "You'll like this. It's creamy with a touch of heat." She watched as Anna carried a spoonful to her lips and sipped.

"You're right. It's delicious," Anna said. The cook nodded and left the room.

"I hope you don't mind looking at the scholarship applications while we eat?" Julia asked. "Magdalena asked me to choose the winner before the end of exams. That's a week from tomorrow, correct?"

"That's right."

"I have some pressing business to take care of over the next few days, so why don't you help me make the decision right now?"

Anna nodded. "I'd be happy to." Putting down her spoon, she ducked to retrieve the files from her tote before laying them on the table next to Julia's bowl.

"The scholarship committee has already screened the applicants based on academic achievement and financial need," Anna said. "These applications are from the top six students."

Julia nodded, fixed her glasses on her nose, and opened the top file. Her hand absent-mindedly ferried soup to her mouth as she flipped through the pages. Anna was just swallowing her last mouthful when Julia looked up.

"This group is an improvement over last year's candidates." Julia pointed at the pile. "At least this bunch can spell."

Anna's mouth curled into a smile while Julia pulled out two files and set the others aside.

"If it were up to Robert, he would choose the boy who plays hockey." She tapped the top application with her finger. "Robert loved to play hockey when he was a boy. It was because of your department's sports research, and because Chinook University was Robert's alma mater, that he decided to endow the scholarship for the Kinesiology Department in the first place."

Julia laid the file on the table and held up the second. “But this young woman’s average is two points higher, and I’m impressed that she wants to do a master’s degree on bone loss resulting from spinal injury. I have a friend who broke her back in a motorcycle accident twenty years ago and has been confined to a wheelchair ever since. It would be lovely to think that something could be done to rehabilitate patients like my friend someday.” Julia laid the second file on the table. “Who do you think I should choose?”

While she waited for Anna’s answer, Nicolette returned to the room. She set two plates of what looked like a meat and bean stew with a side of corn before the women and removed their soup dishes. Anna waited until Nicolette had left the room before responding.

“I’m afraid I’m out of my depth when it comes to academic evaluation. Maybe you should call Magdalena for her opinion?”

Julia shook her head. “If I do, I’ll just get a lot of hot air about test percentiles and academic aspirations. I want to know who these kids *are*. I bet you’ve seen them around your office, though.”

“Sure. The kids are in and out all the time, dropping off assignments, picking up essays, and making appointments to see Magdalena.” Julia nodded encouragingly, and Anna shrugged. “Okay, here’s what I think. When Jessica, the girl who wants to study spinal cord rehabilitation, comes into my office, she always helps herself to my stapler and pens without asking. I know that it’s a small thing, but it’s rude, you know? Nick, on the other hand — the hockey player studying sports kinesiology — always apologizes whenever he hands in a late assignment. Not that he’s habitually late, you understand, but a couple of the professors set an exact deadline, like 3:00 p.m., on the day their assignments are due. If the kids are even a few minutes late, I’m supposed to stamp their papers with tomorrow’s date. Then they get docked five percent of their grade.” Julia nodded. “So if Nick’s a few minutes late, I laugh and tell him that he should apologize to his prof, not to me, and then I stamp his assignment with today’s date.”

Julia smiled. “I understand. Nick’s polite, and Jessica’s presumptuous.”

“Exactly.”

“Done!” Julia slapped the two files back onto the pile. “Good manners triumph over academic achievement. Nick gets the scholarship.” She picked up her fork. “Now, let’s enjoy Nicolette’s pork and duck cassoulet. It’s a real stick-to-your-ribs kind of dish, and perfect for today’s cold weather.”

Anna sniffed the delicious, garlicky aroma steaming up from her plate and tasted the food. It was so good that she closed her eyes as she chewed.

“To change the topic, I hear that you were the top suspect in your ex-husband’s murder case last spring,” Julia said.

Anna’s eyes sprang open. “Excuse me?”

“So, I’m curious. What’s it like to be the focus of a murder investigation?”

Anna groaned inwardly. She should have known that Magdalena would be right; she always was. After being intimately involved with two murder investigations in less than a year, Anna still felt shell-shocked. After all, the last murder had just happened five weeks ago, right before Halloween. She was sputtering, trying to think of a way to change the subject, when Julia’s assistant hurried into the room waving an envelope. Anna took one look at Latona’s tense face and knew that something was gravely wrong.

Julia looked up. “Yes?”

“It’s another one,” the young woman said, halting beside the table and handing the envelope to Julia. Anna peeked at it sideways and saw “Julia Moreland” spelled out in black block letters cut from a newspaper or a magazine.

Julia grimaced. She picked up her butter knife and slit the envelope open. Gingerly removing a single sheet of folded paper, she flicked it open and studied the contents. Anna was unable to read the message, but saw that it was spelled out in the same cut-out letters.

“What should we do?” Latona asked. “Do you want to call the police this time?”

“What?” Julia returned her attention to her assistant. She refolded the message and slid it back into the envelope. “This is getting to be a nuisance. I think we may have to involve the police this time.” She tossed the envelope onto the table and glanced at Anna.

“Will you excuse me?”

Julia rose from her chair while Anna gaped up at her. “I hate to cut our lunch short, especially when you were about to tell me about your ex-husband’s murder, but I have some urgent business to attend to.”

Anna half-rose, but Julia waved her back down.

“No, please don’t let me interrupt your lunch. Nicolette will be angry if at least one of us doesn’t enjoy her food. I only wish . . .” Julia paused to think. “I don’t suppose you’re free tomorrow night?”

Anna was startled. “What’s tomorrow? Thursday?”

Julia nodded. “November 29th.”

“No, I don’t have any plans,” Anna said warily.

“Good. Do you think you might like to come to my Christmas party?”

“What, here?”

“No, at the Vandesand Hotel in Calgary.”

“Wow!”

Anna felt tempted. The Vandesand was a private hotel with notoriously-expensive rates. She had always wanted to have lunch there — maybe even peek into a guest room — but had never splurged on their gourmet menu.

Julia half-smiled. “Yes, it’s a very nice hotel, especially the ballroom. The party’s my annual bash for the oil company bigwigs, plus some friends and family. I’d love for you to come. We could continue our conversation about your ex-husband’s murder there.”

Anna frowned. Not only did she not want to discuss the murder with Julia, but she knew she’d feel uncomfortable at the party.

“I’d feel out of place. I wouldn’t know a soul.”

“That won’t be a problem. Latona can arrange for you to sit at Warren and Magdalena’s table.”

Anna stared at her. Did Julia mean *her* Magdalena?

“Didn’t you know that my stepson is dating your boss?”

Anna shook her head.

“I’m not surprised. Magdalena is practically a clam when it comes to discussing her private life. She and Warren have been seeing each other for months. So, can I count on you? We usually have a good time. It’s one of the perks of being the second-richest oil company in Canada.”

Anna hesitated. She had read about the glamorous Moreland Christmas parties in the *Calgary Record*, but had never imagined attending one.

“I just happen to have a new dress,” she murmured, weakening. Oh, what the heck. She’d never get the chance to attend an extravaganza like this again.

“Thanks, I’d love to come.”

“Great. The party starts at seven. I can’t wait to see Magdalena’s face when you show up at her table.” Julia glanced at Latona, and her smile faded. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Anna. Business before pleasure, I’m afraid.” She nodded at her assistant, and the two women exited the room.

Anna picked up her fork and thoughtfully ate another mouthful of cassoulet. It really was delicious. Too bad that Julia’s meal had been interrupted. Latona certainly had seemed upset about the note, whatever it said. Anna’s eyes strayed to the envelope next to the files. Julia had neglected to take it with her. Maybe it wasn’t such a big deal after all.

Anna looked back at her plate and tried the sweet corn flecked with red pepper. Hmm, was that a hint of maple syrup she tasted?

Her eyes strayed to the envelope again. She nudged it until she could read the letters the right-side up. The only reason someone composed a message with cut-out letters was to avoid having his or her handwriting identified. That indicated criminal intent.

Anna knew that curiosity was her downfall. It had gotten her into trouble plenty of times. Just this once, she should mind her own business. She drummed her fingers on the table. Still, what harm would a peek do? No one would ever know. She snatched up the envelope, took out the sheet, and read the message. It said: “Holding the press conference on Monday could be hazardous to your continued existence.”

Shoot! Anna refolded the note, shoved it back into the envelope, and dropped it hastily onto the table. Who was sending Julia death threats? And what was this about a press conference on Monday?

Fumbling for her napkin, she wiped her mouth, bent to retrieve her bag, and stuffed the files into it. Time to go. She didn’t want to be anywhere near this kind of trouble again. No sir! Julia was rich and she had three sons, or two sons and a stepson. She could have all the help she needed. She was probably calling the chief of police right this minute, as a matter of fact.

Damn, now she wished she hadn’t accepted the Christmas party invitation. It would be best to stay away from Julia and her friends. But Anna couldn’t risk Magdalena’s wrath by not turning up for the party and possibly jeopardizing the scholarship.

Springing from her chair, Anna was making a beeline for the door when Nicolette returned with two plates of fruit tart.

“Where are you going? Where’s Julia?” the cook demanded.

Pausing, Anna said, “Julia got called away unexpectedly on business. I’m so sorry to rush out on you like this, but I’ve got to get back to work. The cassoulet was delicious, by the way, and the soup was to die for. I mean, it was really terrific.” Anna coloured and clutched her bag to her chest. The threat of death was making her as jumpy as a cat.

Nicolette frowned. “Are you all right?”

“Sure. So, I guess I’ll see you at the Christmas party tomorrow night. Should be fun, eh?” Without waiting for a response, Anna bolted from the room, leaving Nicolette shaking her head and staring down at the dessert.