

## Chapter One

### JULIE

The woman slid three photos to me across the table, her manicured nails immaculate. “I know you don’t want to believe me. But you need to look at these.”

I was already on my feet, having told her—Frances Boyle, she said her name was—that we had nothing further to discuss. She had no business coming to me with this preposterous story, and certainly not here at the library where I worked. Her manner suggested she wasn’t used to people saying “no” to her, but I wanted her gone.

Yet I couldn’t help glancing at the faded snapshots she’d spread in front of me. All showed the same grouping: a couple, seemingly in their forties, and two teenagers, a boy and a girl.

“That’s my family,” she said, a rasp deepening her voice. “My parents with my brother and me. That was the year before Papa died.”

Against my will, my eyes were drawn to the man in the photos. “Papa,” she’d called him. He sure looked like Dad. My memories of him were vivid, though I was only eight when he died. That dark hair, cut short, with a white streak just off-center. Neat ears, firm chin, and warm smile. And those pointed eyebrows: unmistakable.

But I’d never seen the other people in those photos before.

Heat flared at the back of my neck, and the walls of the small meeting room felt like they were closing in on me. I shook my head, trying to clear it. I wished I’d thought to bring a bottle of water in with me.

Frances leaned forward, the gold chain around her neck glinting as she moved. “From

your reaction, Julie, I'd say you recognize him." Her gaze intensified. "Now do you believe me? Our father had two wives, two families. Yours and mine."

This couldn't be true. I gripped the edge of the table and took a deep breath, fighting to get my emotions under control. Who was this woman and what was her game? Inspecting her more closely, I guessed she was in her late forties, a little older than me. Well-groomed. Stocky but not fat. Wearing cropped pants and a short-sleeved silk blouse, a good choice for the hot weather we were having. Her clothes looked expensive, more Nieman Marcus than Walmart.

"Can you show me some ID?" I demanded. Maybe I should have asked for that earlier.

She smiled coolly and reached into her leather bag, pulling out a passport. The photo was definitely her, but with shorter hair. Her name: Frances Louisa Boyle. Date of birth: 1975.

"Wait a minute. Boyle?"

"That was Papa's name—James Boyle."

The tightness in my shoulders loosened. "So. That's not my dad."

"When he married your mom, he used the name James MacMillan."

That *was* Dad's name—but this was ridiculous. She was claiming not just that he'd had two families, but two names.

She sat back abruptly. "I can see you're having trouble accepting it," she said. "I understand. It's hard to take in." Her expression hardened. "I only found out after Mama died in February and I was going through her papers. I found some old letters tucked away, referring to his other family." She raised her eyes to mine again. "Your family." After a moment, she added, "I have a couple of the letters with me, if you want to see them. They're in my safe at the hotel."

My mouth tasted of something bitter, metallic. "What are you after?"

She clasped her hands together. "I had a private investigator locate your mother, your

family. I came here to find out more.” Her gaze swept over me. “I thought it was best to come to you first, to see if you knew about it. Before I approach your mother.”

“You can’t be thinking of disturbing my mother with this!”

“I’m sorry, but that’s why I’m here. To find out what she knew, or knows, about what happened.”

If Frances confronted Mom with this story, it would devastate her. “Give me some time to think about this first.” There must be some way to check this woman’s claim. “Can I have copies of those photos?”

She pushed them toward me. “Those are for you.” She rose and pulled a card from her purse. “I realize you may need a bit of time to get used to the idea. Here’s my cell number. When you’re ready, give me a call.” She dropped the card on the table. “But don’t take too long. I can play tourist here in Ottawa for a couple of days, but then I’ll need to talk to your mother.” She straightened her shoulders and left.

I watched her cross the library’s open lobby, passing Tony at the info desk, heading toward the main entrance. I paced back and forth in the hallway, fuming. What she was claiming couldn’t be true.

But a coldness was rising in my stomach. Could Dad really have done this to Mom? To us?

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Returning to my office, I closed the door and collapsed into my chair, my stomach churning. I dropped my head back against the headrest and stared blankly at the ceiling. Frances’s story kept echoing through my mind. It had to be nonsense...except for those photos. That guy did look like Dad.

When she asked for me by name at the front desk, I had hoped the interruption would be short. I hadn't anticipated how shaken our conversation would leave me.

I needed to get back to work; I had to post next month's staff schedule soon. But after staring at my computer screen for a few minutes, I picked up my phone to call Caroline.

She and I had been friends since our university days in Toronto. I was studying library science and she was a psychology grad student. We met when we both moved into a shared student house near campus and clicked from the beginning. We'd stayed close friends ever since.

I came back to Ottawa after graduating. When she moved to Ottawa as well, joining the psychology staff at the Royal, our friendship grew. She had become my rock, the person I turned to first for advice.

"Do you have a few minutes?" I asked.

"I do. What's up?"

I quickly recapped my meeting with Frances and the story she'd told.

"That's quite the tale." Caroline's voice deepened. "But you don't think it's true?"

"I'm not sure." I wanted to say no. But those photos had left me with doubts.

"Have you told Matt?"

My husband. "No. I haven't had a chance." I wasn't even sure I wanted to tell him.

"Or your mom?"

My jaw clenched. "If Dad had another family, if he deceived Mom, I don't see any need for her to know about it after all these years. She'd be heartsick."

"But you say Frances wants to talk to your mom. How can you prevent that?"

"Maybe I can't. But I wish I could find out first..."

"If it's true?"

“Yeah.”

“There’s a foolproof way to check. A DNA comparison.”

Trust Caroline to have a scientific suggestion. “Yeah. But I don’t know if Frances would agree to be tested.”

“Why wouldn’t she? She’s the one who says you’re related.”

I sighed. “Testing takes time, and I don’t think Frances wants to wait.”

She paused. “Do you know about Ancestry.com?”

“...I’ve heard of it, but don’t really know—?”

“It’s a site where people upload their DNA, and check to see if they match with anyone. I keep hearing about people finding linkages there to relatives they didn’t know about.”

“So we could check that site to see if we’re related to Frances?”

A doubtful tone entered her voice. “Well, maybe not, if you’ve never sent in a sample. If you send one in now, it could take several weeks for results to show up. And you don’t even know whether anyone on Frances’ side has uploaded there. If not, there’d be nothing to match to.”

I grimaced, disappointed. “Doesn’t sound like DNA’s going to help us. In the short run, anyway.”

“Yeah, maybe not. So let’s look at this another way. Is Frances’ story plausible? Could that have happened?”

Frustrated tears were pressing behind my eyes. “I don’t think so. But I wish I remembered more about our family, how things were before Dad died. I was so young, and my memories are pretty thin.”

“How about your brother? Would he remember more?”

I sat up at the thought. “That’s a good idea.” Patrick was four years older than me, so his memories of our family life back then would be better than mine.

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Calling Patrick was complicated by the fact that he lived in Canberra, where he moved when he married Melissa six years ago.

Checking my watch and doing a time conversion, I realized it was still the middle of the night in Australia. But if I called around 4 p.m. my time, it’d be 6 a.m. there. I didn’t know what shift he’d be working—he was a paramedic with the Capital Territory Ambulance Service. If he was on the day shift, he’d be up. I’d text to see if he was awake.

He replied with a yawning-face emoji, but I took that to mean I could call. He answered on the first ring, “Yeah.”

I cut our usual time-and-weather chitchat short. “Listen. A woman came to see me today with a weird story.” I blurted out Frances’ claim that Dad had had two families, ours and hers.

His reaction was immediate. “That’s ridiculous.”

*Thank you.* “I know, right? It’s just not possible.”

“Wait, let me put on some coffee.” A series of indistinct sounds came through the phone. Then he was back. “Tell me the whole thing. From the beginning.”

I ran through it all, starting with Frances showing up at the library, and ending with her dropping a card as she left.

“Ridiculous,” he repeated. He was silent for a moment. “You think it’s Dad in those photos?”

“I don’t know.” I breathed out. “It looks like him. But photos can be manipulated...”

“Can you send me copies?”

“Sure. Hold on. I’m sending them now.”

While he waited for the images to arrive, he asked, “Are you thinking it’s some kind of scam?”

“Well, what could she be after? It’s not like there’s any inheritance or anything…”

He gave a small cough. “What about Mom? Are you going to tell her?”

“No! Can you imagine her reaction?” I swallowed. “Even raising it… I don’t want to spoil her memories of Dad.”

“Hold on—the photos are coming through.”

-END EXCERPT-