

A CAMILLA MACPHEE MYSTERY

*Speak*  
**TILL**  
*of the*  
**DEAD**



MARY JANE MAFFINI

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**Speak Ill**

---

**of the Dead**

**by**

**Mary Jane Maffini**

RENDEZVOUS  
PRESS 

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Much of Ottawa is as it is portrayed, although it is only fair to mention that Justice for Victims and the Harmony Hotel are both figments of my fevered mind, as is St. Jim's Parish. Don't waste your time looking for them. Strangely enough, the one million tulips are real.

-MJM

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Seventeen](#)

[Eighteen](#)

[Nineteen](#)

[Twenty](#)

[Twenty-One](#)

[Twenty-Two](#)

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That particular morning all I could think about was getting rid of Alvin.

It was the thirteenth of May. After the three feet of snow that came in November and stayed topped up all winter, I should have been paying attention to the signs of spring. I stomped along the bike path bordering the Ottawa River, not looking for groundhogs or robins and unaware of the fresh buds on the deciduous trees. Instead, black thoughts of Alvin clogged my mind.

All down Wellington Street and up on Parliament Hill thousands of tulips had popped out of the ground, on schedule for the annual tulip festival. I didn't notice them.

My mind was focused primarily on liberating my office from Alvin's presence, and secondarily on dealing with my large, meddlesome family, so Alvin or someone just like him never happened to me again.

By the time I picked up an extra large Colombian Supremo and honey oatmeal muffin across from my Elgin Street office, I was concentrating on the family part and my theory that I'd been switched at birth. That's how I account for being short, stocky and dark-haired in a family where everyone is tall, slender and fair. My sisters are long-boned and ash-blonde, beautiful still in their late forties. Their pleats in their good wool slacks always lie flat; there's never a button missing on their silk shirts; their hair is just the way they want it to be.

I'm lucky if I can find my clothes on the chair in the morning, and my hair doesn't even bear talking about. And if I don't take the fifty-three minute walk to and from work every day, I go off the top end of the scale.

Even now, thirty-two years after my birth, my father still looks at me with surprise. It's a look I remember well from my childhood. Surprise—when he found me hanging upside down from a tree, when he discovered six frogs in the bathtub, or when he read a note from The Nun of the Year saying I had played hookey from First Communion Class.

My beautiful sisters would just laugh. They were perfect. So they could afford to think it was amusing when I got fished out of ponds, ejected from Sunday School, stranded on the school roof. And one of them, Edwina or Alexa or Donalda, would rescue me, take me by the hand and make sure that even my father could see the humour in the situation. I would stand there, looking way up at a tall, fair man, hoping he would recognize me.

Donalda was named for my father, Donald MacPhee, and like him she was cool, detached, correct. Alexa and Edwina were named for my mother's brothers. Good Cape Breton names, although a bit out of place when we moved to Ottawa—a city of Barbaras and Beverlys and Susans. It's a tribute to my sisters' elegance as teenagers that they were never tormented about their names. Just floated through high school with their lovely long straight noses in the air, their blonde hair just so and lots of boys carrying their books. I suppose it didn't hurt that my father was the principal of St. Jim's.

All I got was the best name, Camilla, from my mother, who died when I was born.

My sisters returned to Nova Scotia to get good solid degrees in English at St. Francis Xavier Mount St. Vincent or to train in nursing at St. Rita's. They returned with tall, respectable husbands—dentist, an accountant and in Alexa's case, a doctor. Alexa's a widow now, but she still retains all the points she got for snagging the doctor.

As for me, I went charging through the University of Ottawa and wound up with a Law degree and no man in my life but Paul, whose dead face still smiles down at me from his picture on the wall in my office, three years after the accident that changed my life.

When I was growing up my sisters used to look at me with affectionate amusement—"Oh Camille, how could you do that to Daddy's new car?" Now they pucker their perfect faces with worry and bite their Clinique-covered lower lips and try not to pester me about working seventy hours a week and forgetting to get my hair done.

My father still regards me with surprise.

But that's not the problem. The problem is he spends fifty percent of his time rescuing the children and grandchildren of old friends. People who, through no fault of their own, have fallen on hard times. Like Alvin.

"This particular boy," my father had said, meaning Alvin, "this particular boy never had a chance. Not like you, dear, with every opportunity."

I gave it my best defensive play.

"There's no space in my office for another person, Daddy. You know I just have the one room, and it's fifteen by fifteen, and it's full of files and equipment. Where would he sit?"

"That's just it, he could help with the files. Put them in the filing cabinets for you. He could answer your phone. Do the correspondence. Run the photocopier. You have a law degree, dear. Even if you insist on running this agency for victims, you don't need to do everything yourself. Give Alvin a chance. You won't even have to pay his salary. The government training program will pick up eighty per cent of it. At any rate this poor boy doesn't even want a salary, just a chance to get some experience. Having some help in the office will give you time to think."

Time to think? I definitely didn't want time to think—about Paul, about the kind of life we might have had if he had lived.

"Sorry, Daddy. No deal."

"Alcoholic father, God rest his soul, poor old Mike, and that brave little woman struggling to put all those children through university. Be a big weight off her mind. Mine, too.

You don't seem to have any life at all, dear. Which reminds me, your sisters want to have a family dinner after Mass on Sunday. I don't suppose you'd consider going to..."

By the time I had tucked my styrofoam cup and my muffin under my arm, fiddled with my key and kicked open the door of the Justice for Victims office, Alvin had started his third week on the job. He'd already told me he was looking forward to a career in the World of Art, and that office work was not his first love.

He was in fine form that morning, and the sunlight glinted off his nine visible earrings as he brushed the remains of his breakfast from my Globe and Mail and into the wastepaper basket. "The Bear", a local rock station, blasted from the radio.

"Mitzi Brochu," he said.

"Gesundheit," I told him, as I moved a stack of research notes and put down my own breakfast.



hope you're not coming down with a cold. But if you are, please feel free to stay home until you feel completely better. ~~Better yet, have you considered going home to your mother in Sydney?~~——

But this subtlety was wasted on Alvin.

“Robin Findlay called. She wants you to go with her to meet Mitzi Brochu.” The look on Alvin's face indicated this was some kind of big deal.

“Mitzi who?”

“You're kidding me, right?”

I wasn't. I scooped a stack of envelopes from the chair and sat down.

“Wow,” he said. “You got to cut down on your working hours and get a life. Everyone in the country knows Mitzi Brochu. The Sultana of Style, the Queen of Cool, the High Priestess of...”

“Okay, I get the picture.”

I remembered Mitzi Brochu, a scrawny fashion writer and broadcaster, with a poison pen and tongue like a switchblade.

The phone rang.

“Justice for Victims,” Alvin chirped. “No, I'm sorry, Mizzz MacPhee is in a staff meeting. No, no idea when. Sure, try later.”

He hung up before I could snatch the receiver from his hands.

“What meeting? What meeting am I in?”

“This is important. This woman can make or break you. Any chance you could skip home and put on your teal suit? And ditch those running shoes?”

“No, there is no chance I will skip anywhere. And, furthermore, this woman cannot make or break me. I am not trying to make a fashion statement, I am running an advocacy agency for victims of violent crime. I don't give a shit about Mitchy Bitchy.”

“Mitzi Brochu,” said Alvin. “That's too bad, because Robin said it was really important. Incredibly important. Let's see, where did I put that message?”

He rummaged through the desk drawers one by one. Five minutes later, he located the message in the wastepaper basket and wiped a coffee spill from it.

“Harmony Hotel, this afternoon at 2:30. Suite...” he held the message up to the light, “it's a bit washed out...but I think it's Suite 815.”

“Come on. I've got to get ready for Ralph Benning's parole hearing. And I'm way behind on the brief to the Department of Justice. Not to mention the membership drive...”

“Camilla, Camilla, Camilla. That's what I'm here for, membership drives and that stuff. It's called delegation, remember?”

“I do remember. I remember it was all here to do before you came and now you've been here for three weeks, it still is.”

“I'll do it. I'll do it. But first, why don't I run over to the library and get you some background on Mitzi? You don't want to put your foot in it.”

There was only one place where I wanted to put my foot. I thought about it. Sure would be easier to breathe in the minuscule office without Alvin. And easier to think without his radio. Really, that's the way I had set it up. To work alone, long and hard. The three visitors' chairs were just enough for the devastated crime victims and their relatives who found their shaky way to the office. The rest was a

business. Phone, fax, photocopier and mile-high files. I loved my mingy little office—when Alvin wasn't in it.

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He stuck his head through the door just as I was enjoying the foot thought.

“By the way, your sister called.”

I forgot the foot. “Which one?”

Alvin shrugged before he closed the door. “I can't keep them all straight.”

I knew it didn't matter which order I called them in, it would be the last one who left the message. The other two would have plenty to say. Sure enough, it was Edwina with an invitation.

“Why don't you come for lunch on Sunday? Frank will pick you up.”

Lunch with my family comes off the time you have to log in purgatory, but no one wins arguments with Edwina, so I didn't bother. I was just finishing up with her when Alvin got back.

He tossed a pile of magazines on the desk. All back issues of *Femme Fatale*. All with the Ottawa Public Library stamp still on them.

“There you go, here's the sort of thing our girl Mitzi's written in the last two years.”

“Alvin. The library doesn't lend these magazines. How'd you get them past the security system?”

“It's easy when you know how.”

“Well, I can't survive without using the library for research. Don't get me into hot water with them.”

I got up and stuck my nose out into the hall to see if any librarians had tracked Alvin back to the office.

He took advantage of my move to reclaim the chair at the desk. “Take a look at them. You'll get a better idea about Mitzi, anyway, before this afternoon.”

The Benning hearing was supposed to occupy my mind that morning and it did. I pored over the transcript of Ralph Benning's trial and the newspaper reports of the same. I reread notes from my interviews with Myra Anderson, the victim, and worked on a strategy for the hearing. I made a note for myself to talk to the prosecutor of the case. But it was hard to concentrate.

“Do you mind not whistling while you type?”

“What, I'm just a happy guy. It's better than you, grunting and snarling to yourself over those files.” Alvin tossed a pile of envelopes into the wastepaper basket.

“What's wrong with those?”

“Mistakes on them.”

Since Alvin's arrival our garbage rate had soared. We had become a fifteen foot by fifteen foot four-basket-a-day office. I rescued the envelopes from the garbage.

“Put labels over them. If you can't think cheap, can you at least think green?”

“Sure.”

Alvin flicked his coal-black ponytail over his shoulder and turned back to the typewriter. I pretended I didn't hear his next little remark about hormones.

The rest of the morning yielded little. By noon, I was hungry and faced with a pile of paper with Benning doodled on it over and over, surrounded by meaningless squiggles, crosses and puffs of smoke.

On a normal day, I like to eat a sandwich for lunch in the office. But Alvin was there, and I wanted

to get away from him. He handed me the pile of *Femme Fatale* issues as I headed out.

"I can't take those," I said. "They are clearly marked Ottawa Public Library."

Rip. Slap. The covers landed in the overflowing wastepaper basket.

"Happy lunching," said Alvin.

As I walked away from the door, I heard him answer the phone.

"Sorry," he said, "I have absolutely no idea if or when she'll be back."

\* \* \*

Elgin Street was showing the first signs of spring. Lily white, bare arms were sticking out of short sleeves everywhere as I shlepped along several crowded blocks to the Manx Pub. Time to get out the summer clothes. That shouldn't be hard, since I hadn't had time to pack them away over the winter.

I snagged the last table for two in the Manx and wiggled right in, spreading my coverless magazine out on the other side. I ordered the pasta special and began checking out the samples of Mitzi Brochu's style. Her prime targets were overweight celebrities and royalty ("Porky Princess Should Shun Public Participation"). The Princess was lucky enough to hightail it back to Europe after Mitzi skewered her. The media people were not so fortunate. Mitzi liked to take aim at the fashion foibles of television personalities too. "Dump the Frumps—Ship Media Fashion Losers Back to the Boonies" targeted female news anchors and talk show hosts across the country. One of our local news anchors, Jo Quinlan, got it right between the eyes with the headline "From the Barn to the Big Time". The caption under her photo shrilled "Beefy country look is out: time for a makeover, Jo-Jo."

Every now and then, Mitzi scored a double play: "Fat and Frumpy—Dual Deficit Puncturing Polyester Politicians". The rear view shot of local political mover and shaker Deb Goodhouse bending over probably would have cost the photographer his life, if she'd caught him snapping on his wide angle lens.

Two minutes into the first article and I knew one thing: I had no desire to meet Mitzi Brochu.

*Femme Fatale* was reputed to be outselling *Chatelaine* and *Canadian Living*, the former leaders of the field of women's magazines. I was astonished that people paid to read it.

"Oh God, look at that," said my waiter as he deposited my plate on the table. "Mitzi Brochu, isn't she wicked? My favourite one was her TV piece on 'Ban the Bum'. A lot of people are still blushing over it."

"Hmmm," I said, only partly because I had a mouthful. And partly because I was asking myself what kind of person took such obvious pleasure in holding other people up to ridicule.

\* \* \*

Even on the walk to the office, I kept asking myself why Robin Findlay, my oldest and closest friend, the most sensible person in the world, who dreamed about picket fences and children, slept in blue flannelette nighties and doted on her six cats, would want to see Mitzi Brochu.

When I opened the door, Alvin was pointing to his watch. "Robin called in a panic. You just missed her."

I made room on the desk for the pile of *Femme Fatale* and dug out my briefcase.

"Better hustle," he added. "It's a hike over to the Harmony. And she sounds like she's going over."

the edge. Oh, and don't give another thought to your threads, maybe Mitzi will keep her eyes closed.

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\* \* \*

Alvin was right. It was a hike to the Harmony. I clomped along Elgin Street and snapped left Laurier West, not giving a glance to the hundred thousand tulips in the park. People jumped out of my way as I plunged along the sidewalk. I'm told I get this look on my face when I'm concentrating. So of a short, square Terminator.

What was Robin upset about? Was Mitzi Brochu planning an article on creeping polyesterism in the legal profession? "Lumpy Lawyers on the Loose?" or "Barristers: the View from Behind?" That wouldn't have bothered Robin. From kindergarten through law school, she never worried about fashion or appearances at all, just went through life being her serene, reliable self. And it would take more than a mean-mouthed pseudo-celebrity to make her panic.

I was running through the fourth or fifth scenario (Robin had a client who wanted to sue the sidewalk underwear off Mitzi the Mouth) when I passed the National Parole Board Office on Laurier West.

"Sorry," I said, without sincerity, to a man who had misjudged my velocity.

"Camilla MacPhee," he said, stepping back on to the sidewalk.

I looked at him, trying to remember who he was.

"Ted Beamish, remember me?" he said. "You were a year behind me in law school. I was a pretty good friend of Paul's."

"Right," I said.

"It's good to see you. I almost didn't recognize you."

"It's the running shoes."

He blinked. "No, something else."

I didn't want to dwell on this theme. Ever since Paul was killed, people keep telling me I look different. It bothers them.

"I can't quite put my finger on it. Maybe it's the way you..."

"So, Ted, what have you been doing with yourself since Law School?" Men always like questions like that.

"I'm at the Parole Board now. What are you doing?"

"While you try to make sure they get out, I try to make sure they stay in."

He flushed. A deep, mottled red clashing with his coppery hair. Then he plunged on. "Everyone deserves a chance."

"Tell that to the victims."

"Oh yes," he said, with the flush up to his cheekbones and rising, "I remember hearing you were heading up an advocacy group. I guess you have your reasons. Well, I have mine, too."

"Sure," I said, tapping my foot. Two-thirty was coming fast.

"Listen, you got time for a cup of coffee?"

"Late for a meeting."

"Some other time then." The flush flamed past his ears and kept going to the top of his head. And you could see it right through the thinner bits of red hair in front.

The Harmony had been designed back when people thought the nineties would be a time of tranquillity. Soft aqua shades on walls. Deeper turquoise in the carpets. Mountainous silk flower arrangements backing onto mirrors. The lighting was misty and indistinct, and generic music was oozing out of the walls. I tried to remember the Harmony Hotel slogan. What was it? Oh yes. “Harmony Hotels, where the client never has to worry.”

There was no sign of Robin. I checked the slip with the phone message, but it was hard to read under the coffee stains.

At the registration desk, I asked for Mitzi Brochu’s room.

“I’m sorry, I can’t give you that information,” the little trainee with the big hair trilled. Her braided name tag said Stephanie.

“She’s expecting me.”

“Well, I can put you through by phone. She can give you the room number herself. Sorry, it’s company policy.” She handed me the house phone.

It rang and rang until I slammed it down. I gave Stephanie a dirty look and stalked over to a cluster of love seats.

I sank into the turquoise and silver striped upholstery to wait for Robin. I hoped she wasn’t expecting me in whatever the suite was. But she wasn’t. I spotted her capturing an elevator.

“Robin!” I bellowed, dashing for the elevator, but the door had already closed.

I got to the eighth floor without looking at myself in the mirrored walls but not without asking myself if the Mormon Tabernacle Choir could possibly have recorded their own version of “Satisfaction”.

The eighth floor was done in shades of peach and gold. It would have been very relaxing if I hadn’t been so revved up. I fished out the message again. Suite 8 something something wasn’t going to get me to Mitzi, but I held the paper up to the light just in case.

One door stood open, with a maid’s cart heaped with fresh towels and toilet paper and all those little bottles they put in bathrooms.

“Hello,” I hollered into the room. “Halloooo.”

A dark-haired woman in a uniform popped out of the bathroom and stared.

“Hello,” I said. “Can you help me? I’m meeting my friend Mitzi Brochu here and I can’t remember which room she’s in.”

“Sorree. Not speak mooch Engleesh.” She smiled and shrugged her shoulders. Fine.

The next step was to pound on the doors of every suite on the floor. Not so bad. The suites would be in the corners, four to a floor.

No answer at the first door. The door of the suite across the hall stood open. This must be it, I thought, starting towards it.

“May I help you?”

I spun around. A man had appeared out of nowhere behind me. He was tall, thin and very good looking, with a slash of grey at each temple. And he scared the bejesus out of me. Until I saw the little brass tag that said Richard Sandes, General Manager.

I exhaled. In my line of work I deal with too many women who have come off second best in chance encounters with strange men.

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“I’m looking for Mitzi Brochu. I have an appointment with her. Can you help me find her suite?”

He shook his head. “Sorry. We can’t give out the room numbers of our guests. I’m sure you appreciate that when you’re staying in a hotel. But we can connect you with her on the house phone.”

“Tried that,” I said. “Wait a minute. What’s...”

I heard Robin cry out from the suite and I started to step through the open door into a little antechamber.

“You can’t just go in there!” Richard Sandes yelled as I elbowed him out of the way.

We both recoiled as a long gagging shriek tore through the air and Robin stumbled out into the hallway, her eyes rolling back into her head. Her mouth opened and shut and opened again. A moment without a word. She clutched at my skirt with her bloody hands as she slid to the floor and passed out on the peach carpet.

Someone had hated Mitzi. Hated her enough to tie her arms to the curved ends of the brass bedposts, gag her, and stab her through the heart with a sharpened stake. Hated her enough to write a poem on the wall over her head. In blood.

*Here she dies  
Full of lies  
Hell will be her  
Well-earned prize*

My stomach lurched as the still-red letters dripped on the wall. Mitzi's open, staring, dead eyes seemed to carry traces of the terror she must have felt as she died. Don't be stupid, I told myself, she's dead. She can't feel anything.

I concentrated on Robin, who was babbling and weeping. And throwing up.

The police should be able to help, I thought. In this case, I was off the mark. The troops were led by Detective Connor McCracken, sizeable, cool, and, under normal circumstances, probably quite good-natured.

This time, he and his fellow detective kept asking all of us, but especially Robin, probing questions in that monotone they must learn in police college. If they'd had any training at all, they would have noticed Robin alternating between deep flush and dead white. Her hands shook during certain parts of her story. I knew what that meant, and I hoped the detectives didn't.

"You can't be here, you're also a witness," he said.

"Like hell," I said, "I'm her lawyer. Race you to the Supreme Court."

Detective Conn McCracken shrugged, sat Robin down in a chair and walked her through the evidence in Mitzi's suite. He was large, late forties, and looked like he might coach little league on the weekends. He smiled at Robin and even patted her hand. The good cop. Soften up the suspect before you turn her over to the bad cop.

The bad cop was called Mombourquette. He had a rodent's face and mean little eyes to match. He was just waiting for a chance to take a bite out of Robin. I kept flicking my eyes from Robin to McCracken to Mombourquette to make sure everybody behaved.

When McCracken asked for the third time what Mitzi had wanted and Robin started to shake all over again, I put my foot down.

"Can't you see she's in shock?" I said. "She needs a doctor, maybe even a hospital. You guys push her around any more and I'll file a complaint with the Police Commission and you can read your names in the newspaper. Look at her. You can see her again when her doctor says it's all right."

"We need a bit more information," said Mombourquette, showing his sharp little teeth.

"I saw nothing," Robin said. She looked at me when she said it.

"What else do you need to know? She's already told you Mitzi Brochu, a well-known writer . . ."

women's magazines, invited her up to the suite. She didn't know why she was invited and when she got there the victim was dead. She didn't see it happen and she didn't see anyone leaving the room. She touched the body to see if there was still a pulse, and that's how she got blood all over her. And now, as you might expect, she's in a state of shock. Tell me, boys, would your mothers or sisters have behaved any differently?"

"Good enough," said McCracken, disappointing Ratface.

I decided that Robin would be better off with her parents than alone in her townhouse. I got up and called them, telling them to get the family doctor *mondo quicko* and suggest this would be a good time for a house call.

Of course, I knew Robin was lying to the police. I just didn't know why.

They say everybody is capable of murder under the right circumstances. But it would have taken a lot more than Mitzi with her trendy vindictiveness to turn Robin into a killer. And she never would have been able to tie those knots. She couldn't even manage that for her Brownie badges.

Conn McCracken took me aside, just before I bundled Robin into a blanket.

"You're Donald MacPhee's daughter, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Jeez, I remember him from St. Jim's. And Alexa's your sister, right? I used to date her a bit. You were just a little kid when I saw you last. So, um, how is she?"

I found it hard to drop my antagonistic mood. "Alexa? So so. Her husband died last fall and she's still getting over it."

"Sorry to hear that," he said, not looking sorry in the least.

"Well, tell her I said hi."

"Sure."

\* \* \*

As we left the Harmony Hotel, escorted by a pair of police officers, the flash bulbs went off in the lobby and the TV cameras homed in. Jo Quinlan, strapping and capable news anchor, barred our way holding her microphone, telling her viewers everything she knew about Mitzi's death.

The cameras got some nice footage of Robin looking like Bambi on speed.

Robin didn't say a word in the cab. She seemed to have crawled up inside herself and shut the rest of us out. Only the pressure of her hand clutching mine told me we were still connected. I was relieved when we got to her parents' home and found Dr. Beaver all ready for us. Her father and I slid her into her old bed and Dr. B.'s hypodermic did the trick. Even her mother ripped herself away from *The Young and the Restless* and stood there, wringing her hands.

"Robin's in shock," Dr. Beaver said. "Just shock. She'll be fine."

He hovered over her as she twitched and moaned in her sleep. He offered the same kind of down-to-earth advice we'd had from him as children, scared to get vaccinations. We'd always relaxed and giggled around him because he had huge buck teeth and looked like he'd be at home in a pond.

"You heard Dr. B.," I said to my unconscious friend. "You'll be fine."

She opened her eyes wide and squeaked, "The cats! What will happen to the cats?"

Oh no. Not that.



“She means her cats, the six she keeps,” her father whispered. “They can’t come here. Mrs. Findlay’s allergic to cats. Oh my God, now Robin’s going to fret about them.”

I didn’t need anyone to tell me what she meant. I am no fan of cats, and this particular six irritated me every time I dropped in to see Robin. But this wasn’t the right moment to mention it.

“Don’t worry about the cats,” I said, feeling a sudden, regrettable largeness of spirit. “I’ll make sure they’re all right.”

I gave Robin’s hand a little squeeze and felt her squeeze back, just as her eyes closed.

Once Robin was out cold, Mrs. Findlay slipped back in front of the boob tube and lit up a cigarette. As long as I can remember, she’s been addicted to soap operas. Once Robin told me her mother had been at the grocery store with a long lineup at the cash. When she realized she might miss *Another World*, she left her groceries and hightailed it home.

Robin’s father and I just kept bumping into each other and not having anything to say. What could you say? I didn’t want coffee. I didn’t want a drink. I didn’t want to try the lemon poppyseed muffins which were still cooling on the counter. Neither of us mentioned the police and their questions. We both knew Robin’s troubles were just beginning.

“Don’t worry, there’s no need for you to hang around, chewing your nails. Thank you for helping. There’s nothing you can do right now. You go home, and I’ll let you know when she can talk,” he said. “Camilla’s leaving now, dear.”

Mrs. Findlay butted out her latest cigarette and tore her eyes away from a blonde woman and a dark-haired man who were engaged in some kind of wrestling match under a sheet. And in the afternoon, too.

“God almighty, those two scamps, eh?” Mrs. Findlay lit another cigarette and pointed to the TV with it. But it was too late, an ad for detergent which would get your sheets sparkling clean replaced the wrestling scene. “That Nina. If they’re not careful, her husband will catch them. Then there’ll be hell to pay.”

“I can imagine,” I murmured.

“You just try and relax,” said Mr. Findlay as he opened the door for me.

\* \* \*

Just relax. Sure. You can picture just how relaxing it was at my place once my nearest and dearest got a gander at Robin and me on the six o’clock news. Hot and cold running relatives, everywhere you looked.

“Would you like a martini? Some warm milk? Toast? A nice boiled egg? Something else? Although there’s not much in your fridge.” That was Alexa. She believes in the efficacy of food and drink in the face of any disaster.

“Not really hungry.”

“Would it help if I did a bit of this laundry?” Donalda. She’s only comfortable in a well-administered household. Whenever she visits me, she perches on the edge of the sofa and stares in the kitchen at the dishes in the sink. “I could wash up those dishes for you, if you’d like.”

“Sure, anything you want.”

“I think your home would be much improved by the addition of some dining room furniture

Nothing too avant-garde, just a couple of nice chairs and a good table. I don't know how you can stand to have a desk in there. Why don't you spend a little of your money on fixing it up? You could even get a pretty desk and put it in the living room." Edwina. *House Beautiful* has always been her bible.

The burbling of decorating tips was drowned out by the squeal of the blender in the kitchen and the roar of the vacuum cleaner around our feet. Robin's cats took refuge in my bedroom. My father sat in the armchair in the corner and studied me with keen interest.

No one mentioned the murder. And I sure wasn't going to.

"Something else? What about a nice little rum and coke to settle you down?" Alexa never forgot our Nova Scotia roots.

To tell the truth, it felt rather good to have them bustling around, dispensing elbow grease and unsolicited advice, their voices blurring. Usually I protect my territory and independence and try to keep a handle on their surplus domesticity.

"A filing cabinet would help a lot. The light from your balcony would be perfect for a ficus benamina. Can I top up your drink?"

The second rum and coke hit me like a piano from a second story window. As I crawled naked into my freshly made bed and curled into the fetal position, I could hear the gentle thudding of the washer-dryer and the hum of sisters chatting. I closed my eyes. Six cats settled themselves around my feet.

All that night and into the next day, Mitzi's dead face kept flashing through my mind, with Robin's wailing voice in the background. "No, no," she kept saying, "not dead. Not like this. Please not now."

\* \* \*

"Crucified? Lord thundering Jesus," said Alvin, filled with admiration for my cleverness in finding myself in the right spot at the right time. "What did she look like?" He picked up the receiver he'd dropped on the desk as I sagged through the door. "She's here now, Mom, I'll call you back later." He hung up and looked at me with great expectation.

"I don't want to talk about it."

After a night of spinning in the sheets, fighting nightmares filled with dead eyes and silent screams, the last thing I wanted was to relive finding Mitzi Brochu. And the only way to avoid talking about it was to get Alvin out of the office. I decided the solution was a series of low-level yet time-consuming errands requiring stops all over town.

"Panty-hose?" he said, reading the list I handed him. "You want me to pick up your panty-hose? That's demeaning. It's bad enough I have to go to the print shop and the post office and the library and pick up cat food. But I draw the line at panty-hose. That's not part of my job."

"Sure it is. It's called Other Duties As Required. Take it or leave it. You can always go home to Mom."

I hoped Alvin would leave it, for good. But as a consolation prize, I hoped he'd at least be gone for a couple of tranquil hours.

In the meantime, I was counting on the Benning brief to take my mind off what we'd found in Mitzi Brochu's bedroom.

The Benning brief wasn't quite distracting enough. Mitzi, seen from different angles, superimposed herself on every page of notes. Even my endless doodles were gruesome.

And I kept thinking about Robin.

For my own peace of mind, I needed to know what Robin had been doing in Mitzi's room. And what she had meant by "not now."

The phone rang, jerking me back to the present. "Long distance, for Mr. Alvin Ferguson. Will you accept the charges?" "No, Mr. Alvin Ferguson is not here and, no, I will not accept the charges."

The operator was pretty unemotional about the whole thing, but I slammed down the phone and made a mental note to check the next bill.

I couldn't concentrate on the Benning brief. And things administrative paled next to the enormity of being involved in a murder. What made her go there? Robin, sensible, flat-shoed real estate lawyer. Singer in the church choir. Disher out of food at the Food Bank. What was her connection with Mitzi Brochu, shredder of egos?

Mrs. Findlay answered the phone in a whisper.

"No, dear, she's still out like a light. Dr. B.'s been here again to give her something. She woke up at 6 in the morning and almost gave her father a heart attack, screeching."

"What was she, um, screeching?"

"Something like, 'you can't do that to her. I won't let you do that to her.'" A little quaver sneaked into Mrs. Findlay's voice. "Oh, dear, what do you think it all means?"

"I don't know."

I didn't either. But I had to ask myself, if Robin had seen the killer, had the killer seen Robin?

Why would she deny it? Especially to me?

Thanks to the vigilance of the local paparazzi, her face and name had blasted its way into every home in the region.

What had it felt like to preside over the media interpretation of the death of someone who had humiliated you on the pages of the magazine with the widest circulation in the country? Had there been a look of satisfaction on Jo Quinlan's face?

"Don't worry, Mrs. Findlay," I lied, "just make sure she's not alone. I think that will be much better for her."

"You're right, dear. Brooke's on her way home from Toronto now. She'll be a great help, I'm sure."

I murmured soothing remarks, casually omitting agreement that Robin's little sister would be a great help. I felt confident Brooke would be the self-centred and pampered vapour-brain she'd always been. It seemed inappropriate to mention this to her mother.

\* \* \*

What the hell, I thought, I'm a taxpayer. And with Alvin out of the way, I was able to get to the phone.

"Oh, yeah," said McCracken, when I identified myself. "How are you today?"

I stopped myself from saying, "Oh, you know, the way I always feel the day after I've found my best friend *non compos mentis* in the presence of a warm corpse." Instead I said "Getting there."

"Great," he said.

"I'd like a bit of information."

"Not much I can say. Aren't you a defence lawyer?"

“Not usually. I’m an advocate for victims. My philosophy is toss the perpetrators in the hoosegow and slam the gates and turf the key.”

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“Oh,” he said, “I guess that’s good. I’m afraid I still can’t give you any information. But how’s your sister?”

“What’s it worth to you?”

“Fingerprints.”

“Shoot.”

“Nothing but the deceased, your little friend and the housekeeping staff.”

“My sister’s fine.”

“Do you think she’d mind if I gave her a call sometime?” he asked.

I cleared my throat in a meaningful way.

“We’ve interviewed all the staff and the other guests and no one saw anyone except your friend Robin enter the scene of the crime. Ms. Brochu had no apparent enemies.”

“My fanny, she didn’t. Did you ever read anything she wrote?”

“I’m telling you what the witnesses tell me.”

“Maybe you should talk to them again.”

“Maybe. But the way I hear it, your friend was upset before she ever got near the victim.”

This was true and I knew it, but I just kept silent on my end of the line. Until it was McCracken’s turn to clear his throat.

“Hard to say with Alexa,” I told him. “You better just give her a call and find out.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“No problem,” I said.

Alexa wasn’t home when I dialled.

I nibbled my nails for a long time after talking to McCracken. It sounded to me like Robin could turn out to be an easy solution for the police. I would have to make sure that didn’t happen.

I knew Robin hadn’t had enough time to kill Mitzi. But I didn’t even need to know that—I knew her.

Alvin, considerate as always, had laid out a few more issues of *Femme Fatale* with Mitzi articles for me. He’d added a note, suggesting I might find them amusing.

Mitzi, it turned out, had an annual feature, “Mitzi Picks the Glitz and Mitzi Picks the Zitz.” The issues, Alvin mentioned in his note, were hard to come by, as someone had already stolen them from the library. Lucky for me (he said) he had friends.

“Mitzi’s Glitz” turned out to be a mix of svelte men and women with impeccable style sense and a verve and hectares of spare cash for clothes. A dozen glitzers in all, but no real surprises. The wife of a department store magnate, a bakery magnate and a magazine magnate. And, of course, the magnates themselves, indistinguishable in white tie. A CBC cultural guru. A model whose furry eyebrows, pointy cheekbones, and pouty lips were on every second cover of *Femme Fatale*. A real estate developer. A classical guitarist. An actress. A former Prime Minister. Mitzi had burred on in praise of their superb taste and élan.

Who gives a shit, I thought. But the real fun stuff was reserved for the “Zitz”. Poor old Zitz. Just minding their own business and then one day, one too many cream puffs and, poof, they’ve made the

list.

Jo Quinlan and Deb Goodhouse were way down on the Zitz list at numbers 11 and 12. Still, they were on it. No wonder there weren't any copies left on the local stands.

I'm not a person who cares about appearances, my own or others, but still I was surprised. Quinlan would have let herself be photographed wearing those particular spandex shorts and the halter top. Particularly in profile. Although from the gas barbecue in the background, the tongs in her hands and the look on her face, it appeared the scene was her own backyard and the photographer had just stuck his nasty little camera over the fence.

"Massive Media Menace" was the caption over Jo's photo. Underneath it read: "Try mud-wrestling dear, you already have the wardrobe, and leave the screen to those who don't fill every inch of it."

Still, Jo Quinlan got off better than Deb Goodhouse. Or "The Goodhouse Blimp", as Mitzi dubbed her. The rear view shot of Deb Goodhouse walking up the stairs of the Centre Block of the Parliament Buildings had a cartoon string drawn around her ankle. The angle of the camera had enhanced the rear expanse. "Is our Princess of Polyester full of hot air or worse? Will she rise in the House and float through the ceiling? If looks could kill, she'd be six feet under," the commentary read.

The articles featured pictures of Mitzi too. Looking much better than the last time I had seen her. Emaciated, with blood-red lips and a crow's nest of black hair. All in black with bare shoulders, black gloves past the elbow, black hose and pointed black spike heels. The photo of Mitzi floated without background, a judge, ruling without mercy on fashion crimes.

Somebody had taken revenge on Mitzi. Just a glance at these articles told me there would be a long list of candidates. Not to mention the hundreds of others who must have suffered at Mitzi's hands. I hoped the police would do a good job of checking out Robin's competition. If not, I decided I'd have to do it myself.

Alexa was home this time when I called to warn her.

"Oh good, Camilla," she said. "I was just about to call you. Edwina wants us all to have dinner at her place. Six o'clock..."

I interrupted. "I had no choice but to suggest you might be willing to get a call from this cop you used to know in high school. Sorry. But you can always take your phone off the hook."

"A policeman? Oh, not Conn McCracken, was it?"

"Yes, look, I'm sorry...."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing much, just how were you."

"What did you say?"

"I said you were so so."

"Oh, Camilla."

"And I told him that Greg died."

"That's all?"

"What did you want me to say?"

"I don't know. Did he ask how I looked?"

"No, he didn't."

"Oh."

“Anyway, he might call you and you can tell him how you look yourself.”

“Oh, Camilla.”

“Gotta go, I hear the dreaded Alvin approaching.”

“Wait a minute. Wait a minute,” Alexa breathed. “Does he still have all his hair?”

“I didn’t notice.”

“For God’s sake, Camilla,” she said and hung up.

The only good thing about being the boss is making up rules and then changing them without reason or warning as you go along. So when Alvin crashed back into the office, dropped his bags, and snarled something about how can you stand all those fucking tulips all over the place, I beamed as I picked up my jacket and opened the door.

“So long, Alvin. There’s plenty to keep you busy. I see about fifty linear feet of filing on the floor. By tomorrow, I expect to be able to see the pattern of the carpet.”

His wail followed me down the stairs. “Don’t you want these panty-hose?”

After twenty years or more, the tall respectable husbands collected by my sisters had begun to settle into middle age and to develop creeping hairlines, baby paunches, and minor peculiarities, some easier to adjust to than others. Take, for example, Donald's husband, Joe, each year withdrawing more and more into a world of his own, of golf and fishing and imaginary trophies. Or Edwina's Stan with his collection of dribble glasses, plastic dog turds and fake vomit. I wish I had some kind of coin for every time I encountered a whoopee cushion in the passenger seat of Stan's Buick LeSabre.

"Better take it easy on the baked beans," he always said.

I suggested to Edwina that perhaps Stan was developing Alzheimer's and should be locked away for his own protection, but I noticed she still kept sending him to pick me up for family get-togethers. This dinner was no exception.

A hand mirror lay on the passenger seat as I opened the door.

"Would you mind moving that?" Stan said.

As I picked up the mirror, it screamed with laughter and kept on laughing after I threw it on the floor.

"Perhaps you should get your hair done more often," Stan said, between his own screams and laughter.

"Perhaps you should get a life, Stan," I suggested, not laughing but giving some thought screaming myself.

HAHAHAHAHAHA, howled the mirror from the floor, just before I picked it up and chucked it out the window.

Stan was still sulking when we reached Nepean and pulled into the driveway, which I think Edwina vacuums twice weekly.

"Aw, Camilla, the girls would have gotten a big kick out of that at dinner," he said.

"Like hell," I told him.

If "the girls" had sent Stan to get me into some kind of a mellow mood after a distressing day spent mulling over Mitzi's death and Robin's continuing state of withdrawal, "the girls" were going to be let down.

They were hanging around the entrance, three vultures with dish cloths, when we arrived. I could tell they'd been bustling around the kitchen, discussing my mental state, when they'd heard the car. Now they were trying to look like they'd all accidentally ended up near the front door just as we got there.

They scanned my face and turned to Stan. He shrugged, before perking up a bit.

"Wait a minute," he said, flinging open the door to the basement and thundering down the stairs. "I think I have something else that might do just as well."

“Are you all right?” Edwina asked.

“Well, I’ll never look in another mirror again.”

“He’s just trying to cheer you up, dear.”

“Let’s chat in the living room,” said Donaldda, steering me, as if I hadn’t been there a thousand times.

Edwina’s entire house is picture-perfect polished mahogany, pastel brocade, flowers in silver and crystal vases. In the living room, my father glanced up from the newspaper, peering over the top of his little half-moon reading glasses. He matched the decor. Eighty-year old gentleman, distinguished, white-haired and slim, seated in wingback with matching ottoman.

“Hello, um, Camilla,” he said.

“Can I get you a little drink?” Alexa asked me. Her colour was high and she had a sparkle I hadn’t seen about her for months.

Donaldda looked at my father after Alexa left the room. “Do you think she has a fever, Daddy?”

“No idea, dear,” said my father, with a flicker of worry.

“Maybe she’s in love,” I said.

“Oh, Camilla.”

Dinner was wonderful. Edwina knows her way around a kitchen and I have to confess it’s very pleasant to sit on well-padded dining room chairs, surrounded by the warm glow of mahogany, eating good food off Minton china. She presided over the distribution of the roast lamb stuffed with spinach and chèvre with the air of an artist at a show of her work.

And, in my family, we always find things taste even better when we’re discussing people who are not present.

“She did?” said Donaldda, as we heaped the lemon rice onto our plates “Well, I’m not surprised. Do you see what she had on?”

“No wonder he practically dived down the front of her blouse,” said Edwina, passing the squash soufflé.

“Exactly,” said Alexa, and reached for the broccoli, “and I know we’re all human, but I don’t think church is the place for it.”

My father just concentrated on the food. He doesn’t approve of gossip. I concentrated on my food too, since I didn’t know any of the people whose blouses were under discussion.

When the neighbours and other parish members had been dealt with, they turned their attention to the murder. I was waiting for it. Mitzi Brochu’s murder had captured the imagination of the magazine reading public in a big way.

“A crucifixion,” said Alexa, shivering. “It’s too gruesome.”

“Well,” I said, “it wasn’t really a...”

“Somebody absolutely had it in for her,” said Donaldda.

“No kidding,” I said.

“Not surprising when you think about the sorts of things she wrote about people,” Edwina pronounced. “She literally ruined careers and brought terrible embarrassment to people, right here even in our community. People who were just minding their own business and had nothing to do with her.”



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