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PICOULT

*Mercy*

  
ALLEN & UNWIN

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*For Hal and Bess Friend, my grandparents, with love.  
I could write volumes about how much you both mean to me.*





What power has love but forgiveness?  
In other words  
by its intervention  
what has been done  
can be undone.  
What good is it otherwise?

—William Carlos Williams,  
“Asphodel, That Greeny Flower”





# PROLOGUE



When she had packed all the artifacts that made up their personal history into liquor store boxes, the house became strictly a feminine place. She stood with her hands on her hips, stoically accepting the absence of old Boston Celtics coasters and the tangle of fishing poles, the old dartboard from a Scots pub, the toolbox and downhill skis, the silky patterned ties which sat in the base of one box like a writhing mass of snakes. Without these things, one tended to notice the bright eyelet curtains, the vase filled with yawning crocuses, a needlepoint pillow. True, it looked more like a scene from a Martha Stewart magazine than a home, but that was to be expected.

She packed away the matching mugs hand-lettered with their names, and the video camera they'd bought for their last anniversary, and a framed sampler some relative had stitched to commemorate their wedding. She painstakingly dismantled the frame of the big brass bed, lugging the pieces into the living room until all that remained was a thick and silent mattress.

She thanked God, and in advance, the groundhog, for the unseasonably warm day. When it hit 50 degrees in the shallows of January, people came out of their houses, and the more people to venture outside, the more people there would be for the sale. She dragged the boxes outside and turned them over and arranged the

items on top of them. She ran a line between the two elm trees in the front yard and neatly hung his clothes up, even his spare and dress uniforms. She emptied his bedroom drawers and organized the things she found in smaller cartons: socks, ten pairs, for fifty cents; sweatshirts, two for a dollar. She set the bed up behind her folding chair, where she wouldn't have to see it.

She went back into the house for a final quick check, since curious neighbors were already milling on the front lawn. The walls were bare of his ancestral paraphernalia. The living room seemed empty, now that his old leather wing chair was sitting in front of the azaleas. Overall, the house looked much like her apartment had eight years ago, before she had met him.

There was only one thing left in the house that reminded her of him. It was the panel of stained-glass, the daffodils on a blue border, that he'd given her just a few months before. She stopped in the bedroom doorway, staring as the sun filtered through it and burned the colors and pattern onto the mattress. When he gave it to her that day, she'd held it up to the light, turning it back and forth, until his hands had come over hers, stilling. "Be careful," he had said. "It's fragile. See the soft lead? It bends. It can break."

She wondered why she had not perceived that conversation then the same way she did now: as a shrill and distant warning. Instead she had only smiled at him, smiled and said that she knew this; that of course, she understood.

**G**lancing around her, she took a quick calculation of what had sold, what still remained. The strongbox in her lap held over seven hundred dollars at last count; she could easily believe that half of the people in the town had stopped by at some point to browse, if not to buy. The fishing tackle and his grandfather's bamboo fly rod had been among the first things to go. All of his suits were gone. The head teacher at the nursery school had bought every last uniform, saying the four-year-olds loved to play policeman, and wouldn't this be a wonderful addition to the dress-up corner?

The only things left were his boxer shorts—she supposed they would have to be sent to Goodwill—and a stack of travel magazines that she'd found quite by accident behind his band saw. Inspired, she stood up and took the stack, then walked to the edge of

the driveway. She handed the one on top—blue ocean, white beach, “200 Top Caribbean Hotels”—to a man with a little girl in tow. “Thank you for stopping by,” she said, offering the magazine like a theater *Playbill*, or a parting gift.

At ten past five, she sat down on her folding chair. She remembered reading once about tribal Indian societies centuries earlier, in which women had the power to divorce a husband simply by stacking his shoes outside a tipi. She pressed her knees together and tried not to think about the sun that was blinding her eyes and giving her a headache.

Her husband drove up at 5:26. “Hi,” he said. “I made good time.”

She did not say anything.

He glanced at the overturned boxes, the pile of underwear to the left of her feet, the bare strung clothesline, the box on her lap. “Getting rid of some stuff? It was a good day for a garage sale.”

She did not turn to face him as he gave her a strange look and walked into the house. She counted how many breaths it took before he thundered down the stairs and out the door, to stand in front of her. His face was red with anger and he blocked out the low sun so that the edges of his hair and his shoulders seemed to be on fire.

“I’m sorry,” she said coolly, coming to her feet. She gestured gracefully around the lawn. “There’s nothing left.” Clutching the strongbox beneath her arm, she walked down the driveway and into the street. She put one foot mechanically in front of the other in the direction she knew would lead to the center of town, and she did not allow herself to look back.





## PART I

Who will not mercy unto others show,  
How can he mercy ever hope to have?

—Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*

A man gazing on the stars is proverbially  
at the mercy of the puddles on the road.

—Alexander Smith, *Men of Letters*

After a while, I couldn't remember whole pieces of you, as if part of the punishment was a recollection through a filter that grew hazier with time. On certain Sunday mornings when I dreamed you, I could not picture what your teeth had looked like, or the exact curve of your jaw where it fit in my hand.

I used to imagine us sitting down for a drink at a bright little restaurant, maybe one of those specialty coffee shops that have become so popular. I swear I could smell the blended beans and the starch of the white napkins, even the milled soap that you would have used that morning. I was able to see your easy smile, which always seemed to startle it's way across your face—your smile, but not your teeth—and the way your fingers tapped a light tattoo against the mug. I did not give us conversation: no You look great, no What have you been up to? no It has been hell. Like your teeth and the line of your jaw, this part was unclear to me. I was not sure if there was a protocol to follow when I welcomed back from hiding my other half.

# ONE



**I**n the moments before, she laid a hand on his arm. “No matter what,” she said, giving him a look, “you cannot stop.”

He turned away. “I’m not sure I can even start.”

She brought his hand to her lips, kissed each finger. “If you don’t do it,” she said simply, “who will?”

For a long while they sat side by side, staring out a streaked window at a town neither of them knew very well. He watched her breathing pattern in the reflection of the glass, and tried to slow his own heart until they were equally matched. The quiet dulled his senses, so that he became fixated on the clock beside the bed. He would not blink, he told himself, until the next minute bled into the last.

With a fury that surprised him, he turned his face into the bow of her neck, trying to commit to memory this softness and this smell. “I love you.”

She smiled, that crooked little curving of her mouth. “Now,” she said, “don’t you think I know that?”

In the end, she had struggled. He wore the scratches like a brand. But he had held the pillow to her face; calmed her by whispering in her ear. *My love*, he had said, *I’ll be with you as soon as I can*. At the words her arms had fallen away; then it was over. He had buried his face in her shirt, and started himself the very slow process of dying.

For the hundredth time that day, Cameron MacDonald, Chief of Police in Wheelock, Massachusetts, closed his eyes and dreamed of the Bay of Biscay. If he got it just right—the thrum of silence in the station, the afternoon light dancing over the corner of his scarred desk—he could make himself believe. There *was* no Smith and Wesson jabbing into his side; there *was* no mountain pass outside the window; hell, maybe he wasn't even Cameron MacDonald anymore. He opened his mind as wide as he could, and let himself tumble into the beautiful blue of it.

He blinked his eyes, expecting the bobbing shoreline of Prest, or the sweet scent of the Loire Valley that you could carry in your pocket when you were within a reasonable distance, but he found himself staring at the pale, pasty face of Hannah, the secretary at the police station. "Here's the file," she said. "He was indicted." She turned to leave, but stopped for a moment with her hand on the door. "You sure you're not coming down with something, Chief?"

Cam shook his head, as much to clear it as to convince Hannah. He smiled at her, because if he didn't, he knew she'd be on the phone with Allie and within a half hour, his wife would have him drinking a tea made of nettle roots and feverfew.

He put the file down, glancing longingly at *Gall's Buying Guide* catalog for public safety equipment, inside which he'd stuffed a *Travel* magazine. Hannah was right—there *was* something wrong with him. It was the same thing that happened every year since he'd returned to Wheelock, as was expected, to become police chief after his father's death. He was suffering from wanderlust, complicated by the tension of knowing that he was rooted to this town by something as simple as his name.

Wheelock looked like other small western Massachusetts towns: the center consisted of a simple white church and a lending library, a joint building for fire and police, the local coffee shop, and a dotting of old men who sat on stone benches and watched their lives slouch by. But what made Wheelock different from Hancock and Dalton and Williamstown was the fact that had it not been for a twist of fate, nearly every family in Wheelock would still be living in Scotland.



At first you wouldn't notice. But then you'd see that the town restaurant served its specials on "ashets," not plates; that its serviceable stocky white china was decorated with the fat square rose of Bonnie Prince Charlie. You'd attend a marriage at St. Margaret's, and realize that the ceremony still ended with a blood vow. You'd drive through the winding side streets and see the name *MAC-DONALD* painted on an alarming number of mailboxes.

And if you happened to travel to the Scottish Highlands, you'd notice that a small town called Carrymuir on the banks of Loch Leven was an uncanny twin to Wheelock, Massachusetts.

In the 1700s, the Clan MacDonald was the largest and most powerful clan in Scotland, spread from the western isles through the main Highlands. One particular sect of the clan lived in Carrymuir, a small town north of Glencoe which was nestled between two jagged crags of mountains. In spite of the rampant clan warfare in Scotland, Carrymuir had never been defeated, built as it was in a natural, easily defended fortress.

*Clann* was the Scottish Gaelic word for children, and a clan was made up of relatives, some more distant than others, who happened to live on a given piece of land. The clan chief, or laird, had the power of life and death over his tenants and tacksmen, but the authority wasn't quite as one-sided as a king's. After all, the chief's subjects were his brothers and nephews and cousins, and the trust and respect they offered up to him came at the price of his protection and his promise to care for them.

Cameron MacDonald of Wheelock, Massachusetts, had been named for his great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, a legendary soldier who had fought in the battle of Culloden, where the English routed the Highlanders. Cameron had heard the story over and over as a boy: When his namesake realized that Bonnie Prince Charlie's Highland army didn't stand a chance against the English soldiers, he tried to save his clansmen from being killed in battle. He secured their honorable discharges by promising, in exchange, his own remarkable skill in a fight to the death against the British. But he hadn't died, as he had expected. And after Culloden, when the victorious English came through Scotland burning towns and slaughtering livestock and raping village women, the first Cameron MacDonald realized he had to again save his clan.

So while he went to jail as a Jacobite prisoner, he arranged for the families of Carrymuir to leave, one by one, on packets bound for the American colonies. Which explained why, when most Scots were being hanged or sold as indentured servants to the West Indies, this small sect of Clan MacDonald remained intact and resettled in the wilderness of Massachusetts.

They found a spot that looked like home, with a brace of rolling mountains and a narrow body of water that was more of a pond than a lake, and sent word back to Scotland about this place. *Wee loch*, they wrote. *It's set by a wee loch.*

And eventually, the laird and his family came over too, leaving a trusted uncle to watch over the land in Scotland. They traded the comfortable kilt for trousers; they proudly flew the Stars and Stripes; they accepted the Americanized name of the town. And as a natural extension of inbred responsibility, the man who was the figurehead of the Clan MacDonald also became Wheelock's police chief.

In 1995, that position belonged to Cameron MacDonald II, having been handed down from his great-grandfather to his grandfather to his father, passing along the same line of succession as the honorary title of clan chief. He'd be the first to tell you that things had changed. Obviously, although he was considered the chief of a clan and duly noted in the Scottish records, he was no longer directly responsible for the welfare of the townspeople. At least three-quarters of the town had never even seen the lands in Scotland that technically belonged to them. Hardly anyone spoke with a burr; fewer still knew more than a smattering of Gaelic.

On the other hand, old habits died hard. There was no tarnished silver bowl or royal edict that proved that Wheelock was MacDonald land, but it was theirs just the same, in the way that their ancestors had laid claim to that narrow pass in the Scottish Highlands. It was land, quite simply, they'd lived on forever.

At age thirty-five, Cameron MacDonald knew he would stay in Wheelock for the rest of his life; that he would be the police chief until he died and passed the office to his firstborn son. He knew these were things he did not have a choice about, no more than he had a choice about tossing off the choking obligation of being the current laird. Sometimes, in the very still parts of the night, he

would tell himself that an honorary title did not mean today what it meant two hundred and fifty years ago. He'd reason that if he picked up his wife and moved to Phoenix for the climate, everyone would take it in stride.

Then he would remember how Darcy MacDonald, his third cousin's daughter, had tripped right on Main Street when Cam was no more than three feet away, talking to the town barber. She'd had seventeen stitches in her knee because he hadn't moved quite fast enough, or been in the right place at the right time. In fact, some days he felt that every arrest, every conviction, was a reflection of something he'd done wrong as a leader.

He'd press up against the soft, snoring curl of his wife, Allie, because she was as solid as any truth he could spin. And he'd try to push himself back into sleep, but his dreams were always of chains, link after link after link, which stretched across the vast Atlantic.

When Allie Gordon was in high school, she was not the most popular girl in her class. She was nowhere even close. That honor belonged to Verona MacBean, with her cotton-candy puff of hair and her Cover Girl mascara and her pink mohair sweater molded like skin to what the boys referred to as the Hoosac Ridge.

And today, fifteen years out of nowhere, Verona MacBean herself stepped into Glory in the Flower and ordered three large centerpieces for a library luncheon to be given in her name.

"Verona!" Allie had immediately recalled the name. There was something disconcerting about seeing her classmate dressed in a severe beige suit, her hair scraped into a knot at the back of her head, her cheeks flat beneath a sheer layer of foundation. "What brings you to town?"

Verona had made a little clicking noise with the back of her teeth. "Allie," she said, her voice just as thin and breathy as it had been in high school, "don't tell me you're still here!"

It was not meant as an insult, it never was, so Allie simply shrugged. "Well," she said, drawing out her words and savoring them like a fine French delicacy, "since Cam's here to stay . . ." She let her voice trail off at the end, peeking up at Verona from the order form she was filling out. Then she stared her in the face. "You *did* hear about Cam and me, didn't you?"

Verona had walked over to the refrigerated case, as if inspecting the quality of the flowers she had already commissioned. “Yes,” she said. “I seem to recall something about that.”

A few minutes later Verona had left, specifying the *exact* time for the centerpieces to arrive (it was an author’s luncheon; it wouldn’t do to have wilted roses for an author who, as she put it, was just coming into bloom). Allie had walked to the back room of the flower shop, where she kept her foam and moss and desiccants, her raffia and wire. She stood in front of the tiny mirror over the bathroom sink, assessing her complexion. Then, rummaging through a bookshelf, she found her high school yearbook—kept solely for putting together names and faces that walked into the shop. She let the book fall open to Verona’s page. It was much easier to believe that she, Allie, had grown older and wiser, while Verona MacBean, in glossy black and white, was trapped in time. It did not matter that Verona had gone on to Harvard and then to Yale, that her first book—philosophy—was the talk of the town. It only mattered that in the long run, Allie Gordon had married Cameron MacDonald, which no one in Wheelock would have guessed on a long shot.

On the other hand, it was no great surprise when Verona MacBean became Cameron MacDonald’s steady girlfriend in the fall of 1977, although Cameron was a high school senior and Verona was a freshman. They were both undeniably beautiful, Verona in a collectible doll sort of way, and Cam towering over nearly everyone else in the school, his wide, strong shoulders and bright shock of hair always easy to spot.

Allie fell in love with his hair first. She used to sit in the school library bent over a slim volume of Plath’s poetry, waiting for him to come through the double glass doors that blocked off the bustle of the hall. He came in every day during the period she worked at the counter checking out books for the grateful, understaffed librarian. She’d straighten the shelves behind the spot where he sat down, imagining her fingers weaving through that hair, separating it so the strands that looked like fire prised off into reds and rangy yellows. At the end of the class period, she would pick up the books he’d left behind and tuck them back in their Dewey decimal places, trying to hold on to the heat Cam’s hands had placed on the protective plastic covers.

The truth was that Cameron MacDonald did not know Allie Gordon existed for most of the time they had lived in the same town. She was far too quiet, too plain to attract his attention. There was only one incident in high school where Cam had ever truly come in contact with her: during a blood drive, they had been lying beside each other on the donor tables, and when she sat up and hopped from the stretcher to get her promised juice and cookies, the world spun and went black. She awakened in Cam's arms; he'd jumped off his own table to catch her as she fell, unintentionally ripping the intravenous from the crook of his elbow so that when Allie went home that afternoon, she realized that Cam's blood spotted the back of her blouse.

Allie had trouble convincing herself that the reason they had gotten married years later did *not* have to do with the fact that after college, they were two of the few who had come back to Wheelock. Cam had returned because it was expected of him, Allie because there was nowhere else she really wanted to be.

If she stood on the bottom ledge of the refrigeration unit for the fresh flowers and craned her neck in a certain way out the window, she could see Cam's office at the police station, even make out his shadowy form hunched over his desk. It was the reason she'd chosen this particular real estate space when she opened the flower shop eight years ago.

She saw that he was in, not out on patrol, and decided now was as good a time as any to bring him his arrangement and tell him about Verona. She crawled down from the ledge, rubbing her hands against her knees to warm them up, and closed the sliding glass door of the cooler. Absently, she ran her fingers over the sweet chestnut and barberry foliage that made up the greens in the piece she would bring over to Cam.

Allie knew the language of flowers—the idea that every bloom stands for some quality of human nature. Bouquets sent from the shop for the arrival of a baby were stuffed with daisies, for innocence, and moss, for maternal love. Valentine's arrangements had roses, of course, but also lilies for purity, heliotrope for devotion, and forget-me-nots for true love. To Cam, she often sent designs that were full of messages she knew he could not understand. She eyed her latest work critically, nodding over the tulips

which made up the bulk of the piece. In Persia, a man would give a tulip to his betrothed to show that as red as the flower was, he was on fire with love; as black as its center, his heart was smoldering like a coal.

She filled out the vase with Michaelmas daisies, China asters, and fire thorn. And then, as she always did for Cam's arrangements, she added as many sprigs of purple clover as she could without making the lines of the flowers seem overblown. Clover, which simply meant, *Think of me*.

When she walked out the door to take the flowers to Cam, she did not bother to lock it. Very few people would try to rob the wife of the Wheelock police chief.

Hannah was on the telephone when she walked through the door of the police station, but waved her toward Cam's closed office door to tell her he wasn't in a meeting. "No," she was saying firmly. "We don't use psychics, but thank you."

Allie set the tall vase in the center of the main desk, where bookings were done, and then walked to Cameron's office. She gave a quick knock and pushed the door open with her shoulder before Cam could tell her to come in. He was asleep, his head pillowed on his arms on top of his desk.

Smiling, Allie crept around behind his chair, running her fingers through the hair at the back of his neck. She bent close to his ear to whisper. "While justice sleeps," she teased.

Cameron came awake with a start, snapping his head up so abruptly he clipped Allie's chin. Allie staggered back, seeing black for a moment, until Cam grabbed her and pulled her down onto his lap. "Jesus, Allie," he said. "You scared the hell out of me." Allie rubbed her jaw, testing it gingerly by setting her teeth. Cam's fingers came up to brush her throat. "You okay?"

Allie smiled. "I brought you your flowers."

Cam rubbed his hand down his face. "I told you you don't have to do that."

"I like to."

Cam snorted. "This is a police station, not a hotel lobby," he pointed out. "People who are arrested aren't much interested in interior design. They don't even notice."

"But *you* do," Allie pressed.

Cam looked up at her wide brown eyes; her hands, gripping each other. "Sure," he said softly. "Sure I do."

He glanced out the open doorway to the front desk where Allie's latest arrangement stood. She was an artist; he told her that often. The mixtures of reds and blues, of stark lines and soft curves, and the overall whimsy of her floral designs gave her creations a comfort and an ease that did not exist in Allie herself. Once he had peeked at her personal journal when she was at work, hoping to find a layer to his wife that she didn't have the courage to reveal. But there had been no racy thoughts or dreamy recollections, just a review of how she had acted and what she had said to Cam, and then notes on what she might have done differently.

Sometimes he woke up in the middle of the night, sweating, worried that after years of marriage to Allie he, too, would wind up editing his life, instead of simply living it.

"Guess who came into the store today." Allie moved off his lap to sit on the corner of the desk, swinging one leg.

"Am I supposed to go through everyone in the town?" Cam asked.

"Verona MacBean." Allie frowned. "Well, I don't know if it's MacBean anymore, but she's here, all the same. She's a famous writer now. They're doing some hotshot lunch for her at the library."

"Verona MacBean," Cam said, grinning. He tipped his chair onto its two rear legs. "Good old Verona MacBean."

"Oh, cut it out," Allie said, lightly kicking him in the leg. "She's pinched and pruny and her boobs don't look nearly as big now as they did when she was sixteen."

"Probably grew into them."

Allie picked up a catalog and whipped it at Cam's head. A glossy travel magazine fell onto the desk between them. Her eyes widened at the white spray of beach and the weaving red sloop splayed across the front cover. She picked it up and curiously thumbed through it. "Well, at least it's not *Playboy*," she said. She skimmed a list of all-inclusive resorts, and peered closer at an advertisement depicting a tastefully nude sunbather.

Cam reached across the desk and plucked the magazine out of Allie's hand. His face felt hot, his collar too tight; he didn't want Allie to know what he spent his time daydreaming about.

Allie raised her eyebrows as a blush crept across Cameron's face. "I'll be damned," she said. "You're trying to keep a secret." She leaned close to Cam. "Not that it's up to me or anything, but I'd rather go sailing than skiing." She hesitantly moved forward an inch, keeping her eyes open, and touched her lips to Cam's.

For a moment, Cam let her breath brush his mouth and then he kissed her quickly and pushed her back. "Not here," he murmured.

"Then where?" Allie whispered, before she could stop herself.

They both looked away, remembering the previous night. Allie's hands had stolen across the bed, slipping under the blue T-shirt he was wearing, moving in quiet circles. That was her invitation. And Cam had simply turned toward her, his eyes setting a distance, his fingers staying her own.

"Oh," she had said, her hand dropping away.

"It's not you," he'd explained. "I'm just exhausted."

Allie wondered where the myth that men wanted to make love more than women came from, since in her experience it was always the other way around. She did not like being less beautiful than her husband, or being the one who always made an advance. Sometimes Cam did not even bother to tell her he was tired. Sometimes he simply pretended to be asleep.

She questioned if it might have been different if she were a classic beauty, or if she were sexy. She told herself that she'd lose ten pounds and cut her hair and mold herself into someone irresistible, and then when Cam came grabbing for her she'd simply turn away.

Maybe she'd find someone else.

And then she'd laugh at the very thought of letting anyone touch her the way Cameron MacDonald had.

As if she had conjured it, Cam reached for her wrist and began to stroke it with his thumb. He did not know what else to do. There were some things he just could not tell Allie, not even after five years. There were some times he needed to be alone with thoughts of what he might have otherwise done with his life, and unfortunately that was often in the hollow of the night when Allie needed more from him. But in spite of what she thought when he rolled away from her, there was never any question in his mind about his feelings for Allie. Loving her was a little like taking the



same seat day after day on a commuter train—you couldn't imagine how it might feel to be in the row behind, you could swear that the dimensions and hollows of the seat were made just for you, you came back to it repeatedly with a whoosh of comfort and relief that it was still available.

Allie was staring at him. If only she'd stop looking at him like that, her eyes catching his excuses and throwing them to the wind. He wished he could make her happy, or even spend as much time trying to as she did for him. Cam dug his thumbs under the loops of his heavy ammunition belt; out of the corner of his eye he saw a two-page spread of Acadia National Park. "I'm sorry," he said.

*No, Allie thought, I am.*

The woman stood behind the counter of the flower shop with her hands flying over a mix of fan palm, angel wings, bells of Ireland, gaultheria, oats, and milkweed. Cuttings carpeted the Formica and the black and white tiles of the floor. For a moment, Allie stood shocked in the doorway of her own store, watching a stranger do her job. Then she focused on the arrangement to the right of the cash register.

It was bell-shaped and quiet, a delicate arch of every shade of greenery that Allie had stored in the refrigerated case. At two spots, a splash of bright red caladium peeked from behind feathers of grass, shocking as blood.

Allie took a step forward, and the woman jumped, her hand at her throat. "You're in my place," Allie said.

The woman smiled hesitantly. "Well, then . . . I'll move." She hastily gathered up the tools she'd filched from the back room, and in her hurry dropped a pair of shears on the floor. "Sorry," she murmured, dipping below the line of the counter to pick them up. She stepped around the counter and handed them to Allie like a peace offering.

It was the most presumptuous thing Allie had ever seen—some stranger walking into the store and making her own flower arrangement—and yet this woman seemed to blend into the shadows, like this had all been a mistake and out of her range of control. Allie glanced at the plum beret on the woman's hair, the nails bitten to the quick, the heavy knapsack slung against her right foot. She was about the same age as Allie, but certainly not from

Wheelock or anywhere nearby; Allie would have remembered someone with eyes the wet violet color of prairie gentians.

Allie walked up to the counter, letting the softer greenery graze her palms. "I thought you might be looking for an assistant," the woman said. She held out her hand, which was callused at the fingers from florist's wire, and shaking slightly. "My name is Mia Townsend."

Allie could not tear her eyes away from Mia's arrangement, which brought to mind rolling fields and nickering horses and the hot, heavy press of a summer afternoon. She knew it had nothing to do with the actual flowers and ferns Mia had chosen, but rather the skill of the placement and the thoughts that had gone into it.

Allie had not been looking for anybody; in fact in a town the size of Wheelock most of her business came from the shop's association with FTD. But then again, Christmas was coming, and Valentine's Day, and she'd kick herself if she let someone with Mia's talent walk out the door before she could learn a thing or two from her.

As if she knew that Allie was equivocating, Mia suddenly reached down for her knapsack and pulled out a carefully wrapped package, which she began to unwind. Allie found herself looking at an exquisitely twisted bonsai tree; miniature, gnarled, ancient.

"Lovely," Allie breathed.

Mia shrugged, but her eyes were shining. "This is my specialty. They remind me of those babies you see sometimes, the ones with tiny little faces that look like they know all the wisdom of the world."

*The wisdom of the world.* Allie looked up. "I think," she said, "we can work something out."

**H**annah, who had a talent for eavesdropping, told Cameron that Verona MacBean had written a book on the image of hell.

"It's not like it used to be," she said, tracing the top edge of her coffee cup. "You know, fire and brimstone and all."

Cam laughed. "Don't tell Father Gillivray; he's looking forward to that stuff."

Hannah smiled at Cameron. "Verona says that instead of physical pain, it's more mental. Like, you know, if you marry this gorgeous guy only to find out in hell that he really married you for your money."

"I wouldn't worry," Cam said. "I don't pay you nearly enough."

She smirked. "And suppose that in order to marry this hunk, you gave up someone who was *really* in love with you. The pain you'd feel knowing you picked the wrong guy is supposedly what hell is like." Hannah wrinkled her nose. "Not that I can see where Verona MacBean, Wheelock Queen, would know what hell is like at all."

Cameron's full-time sergeant, Zandy Monroe, stuck his head out from the locker room. "You forget, Hannah, that Verona used to date the chief."

Cam threw a stack of mail at him. "Don't you have anything better to do?"

"That depends," Zandy said, grinning. "You taking me out to lunch?"

"No," Cam said. "I'm taking Allie out." He surprised himself; this wasn't something they'd planned when she stopped by earlier, but he knew she'd jump at the offer to spend an hour with him. He pulled on his heavy blue coat and locked his office door behind him. "If the town comes under siege," he said to Hannah, "you know where I'll be."

Walking down the half block to Allie's flower shop, he started to smile. He'd step into the store and tell her he was looking for a bouquet, dahlias and lilies in colors that called back August. He'd say it was for someone special and he'd make her play along and give him a gift card and then he'd write, *What are you doing for the rest of your life?*

Humming, Cam threw open the door of the flower shop and came face-to-face with a woman he had never seen before. Allie's name died on his lips as he stared at the tangle of hair that bobbed just to her shoulders, the soft swollen curve of her lip, the pulse at the base of her throat. She was not beautiful; she was not familiar; and still all the breath left Cam's body. As he grasped the hand she extended in greeting, he realized that her eyes were blue-violet, the shade that he'd dreamed as the Bay of Biscay.

Oh," Allie said, coming out from the back room. "This is Mia." And that was all she had time to tell Cam before Zandy Monroe burst through the door of the shop, throwing it back against its hinges hard enough to crack one pane of glass.

“Chief,” he said, “you’d better come.”

Years of instinct had Cameron flying out the door behind his sergeant, left hand trained and ready on his gun. He saw a growing crowd of people in front of the police station; from the corner of his eye he noticed Allie and Mia shivering their way closer to the commotion.

With adrenaline pulsing through his limbs, Cam stepped into the center of the group, where a red Ford pickup truck was parked. Zandy walked up to the driver’s-side window. “Okay,” he said, “this is the chief of police.” With a shrug at Cam, he murmured, “Wouldn’t talk to anyone but you.”

“Cameron MacDonald?”

The man’s voice was strong but strained; an officer with less experience than Cam might not have noticed the pain that ran ragged over the syllables. “Yes,” he said. “What can I do for you?”

The man stepped out of the car. He did not live in Wheelock, but Cam thought he’d seen him around town this past week. At the post office, maybe the tavern at the Inn. He was every bit as tall as Cam, but thinner, as if being alive had simply taken its toll. “I’m James MacDonald,” the man said, loud enough for everyone to hear his last name. “I’m your cousin.” He took a step back toward his truck, gesturing toward the passenger seat, in which a woman was slumped over, sleeping. “My wife here, Maggie, is dead.” He looked up at Cameron MacDonald. “And I’m the one who killed her.”