

Praise for *Shades of Mercy*

“Shades of Mercy transports you back to a simpler time, idyllic Maine backdrops, and all **the complications of racial tension and forbidden love. You’ll cheer for the heroine and fall in love with the hero**—a perfect recipe for a sweet, enduring read.”

—MARY DEMUTH, speaker and author of *The Muir House*

“A glorious coming-of-age tale that captures the scenic beauty of Maine as well as the ugly underbelly of racism. **I felt transported but saw a mirror of our current day.** You will adore this tenderly told love story—a love story expressed on many different levels.”

—CHRIS FABRY, bestselling author and radio personality

“The human dynamics in a small town American community with a racially diverse population can be challenging. Some people walk with blinders on; others turn a cheek to the problem of social injustice. . . . Racism is often not easily identifiable or understood. *Shades of Mercy* **highlights problems of the past that in some cases still exist but also presents hope for a better future of understanding.**”

—BRIAN REYNOLDS, Tribal Administrator, Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians

“Through the vivid lens of two lives set in small-town America, Anita and Caryn capture the heart of one of our biggest pieces of unfinished business: our relationship with First peoples. Anita and Caryn create with pitch-perfect detail the struggles and triumphs of the Maliseet people caught in a world of bigotry, suspicion, and ignorance—and just enough nobility to keep hope alive. **A book that both instructs and entertains, but above all inspires.**”

—MARK BUCHANAN, author of *Your Church Is Too Safe*

“*Shades of Mercy* is a re-creation of small town America complete with its warmth and innocence and a frothy brew of secrets. **Tough moral and spiritual questions are faced head-on in this sweet tale of love and friendship.**”

—DONNA VANLIERE, *NY Times* bestselling author of *The Good Dream*

“With an intimate, engaging voice, a budding young woman named Mercy extends compassion for the vestiges of the once proud Maine Maliseet, a Native American tribe short on resources yet long on wisdom and appreciation for beauty. **A heartwarming tale—of the real meaning of grace**—that stays with you. We need more stories about the intersection of Christianity and Native Americans, and this one is dignified and wonderful.”

—LINDA S. CLARE, author of *The Fence My Father Built* and *A Sky without Stars*

SHADES OF MERCY

A MAINE CHRONICLE

ANITA LUSTREA
CARYN RIVADENEIRA

MOODY PUBLISHERS
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ANITA'S DEDICATION:

To my family and friends from Maine. You have brought my life so much joy and entertainment (especially my favorite cousin) and I am forever indebted.

CARYN'S DEDICATION:

To my mom. Thanks for being a reader and modeling a love of books and for every single time you told me I could do anything.

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Remembering

The letter shook a bit in my hand. For a moment, I worried it was me, finally giving in to the “old age shakes,” as Ellery used to call his tremors. But it wasn’t me. It was only the breeze that had picked up, from somewhere. I looked up from my hand—and the letter it held—past the wrought-iron tables and plastic chairs of the coffee shop in which I sat and took in the stir of early morning Manhattan.

How good it would be to have Laurel joining me here. Tomorrow, already!

Though she had visited me in New York many times in the years since they moved to Los Angeles, this time would be different. Laurel was no longer content to take in Manhattan as a tourist. Laurel had no interest in Bergdorf’s or the Frick. Nor did she care much about the Statue of Liberty or the Empire State Building. Certainly she’s stopped caring about tossing bread to the ducks in Central Park. It almost hurt to think she was too grown to care about that.

No, Laurel had written—a real letter! on real paper!—to say she’d like to spend her time learning the New York her grandfather and I first lived in all those years ago, when her grandfather’s graduate work brought us to Columbia University and the start of our lives together.

My fifteen-year-old granddaughter misses her grandfather. (So do I.) And she believes that being in New York and seeing the places where his ideas gained steam and his marvelous career took shape will reconnect her to him. And it will, I suppose.

But what I really want to tell Laurel, is that if she wants to understand her family and what makes our people great, we shouldn’t

be staying in the city. I should be picking her up at La Guardia, and we should be driving up the I-95, stopping at Mystic Seaport in Connecticut, circling the Portsmouth roundabout in New Hampshire, even taking in some of the beautiful sites on the coast of the fair state of Maine. Pemaquid Point, Rockland, Camden, picture postcard worthy, all of them. Yes, we should be going to Maine. To Watsonville, Maine. That's where Laurel's grandfather became the amazing man he was; that's where her great-grandfather wove *justice* into the DNA of this family; and that's where I lived the summer that would change the course of my life.

But Laurel arrives tomorrow. There's no time for a change of plans now.

Instead, as she and I walk past 606 West 114th St., the first apartment her grandfather and I lived in, as we pass the newsstands where her grandfather bought his morning paper, as we stop in at the hospital where her father was born, I'll tell her the story of that summer in Watsonville, all those years ago, when I was her age.

PART ONE

*“When you’ve been given much,
much is expected.”*

Chapter One

EARLY JUNE 1954

I shoved *The Catcher in the Rye* between the mattress and box spring when I heard Mother yell up the stairs, although I probably needn't have. When I asked Mother for money to buy the book, she made it clear that it wasn't one Mr. Pop would condone. But she gave me the money anyway.

I figured a book tucked below the mattress, hidden by a stack of quilts and under a layer of ruffles, was one Mr. Pop would not find. And, therefore, could not disapprove of my reading.

"Mercy," Mother called again more insistently, this time from the landing, halfway up our staircase.

I cracked the door open—enough to poke my head out and let the cat in—never letting go of the glass knob. "Be right down."

"Please hurry. You need to get something in you. Your father wants you to go get Ansley and Mick."

I couldn't hide my smile.

My mother smiled back, shook her head, and waved her dishrag in the air. I watched her walk back down the stairs. Watched her graceful hand, still lovely after all that hard work, as it glided along the polished oak banister.

I closed the door and leaned for a moment against its dark panels. My smile spread wider across my face. Plenty of fifteen-year-olds would've balked at the idea of a drive into town, to where Ansley and Mick and all the Maliset lived in the Flats, built over trash in our town dump. But not me. I'd go anywhere, do anything to be with Mick.

Though, of course, Mr. Pop didn't know this. He couldn't know this.

To him, sending me—"You're as good as any son, Mercy"—was simply prudent. I was a good driver, able to navigate the long road into town in any weather. And I was fearless. Unafraid of pounding on the plywood doors of the Flats, unafraid of pushing them open, stepping over and between bodies that huddled together or crisscrossed on the cold floors. Unafraid of clapping my hands, of announcing myself, even of shaking Ansley, Francis, Newell, and Clarence awake if I had to.

I suppose I should've been afraid, should've been more aware of the dangers that a teenaged girl stepping into a shack full of passed-out men might have presented. But these men wanted work, needed work. My presence was their manna. My knowledge of that kept me safe. Well, that and knowing Mick made these rounds with me.

I slid my nightgown off my shoulders and grabbed my shirt and blue jeans from the back of my desk chair. My flannel sleeve slid across the top of my desk and Lickers leapt toward it. She pinned the sleeve like she had a mouse's tail. Her claws dug into the slick-stained wood and dragged back.

"Lickers! No!" I swept my arm across the desk. Lickers leapt with a meow. *No*.

I ran my finger over the scratch and shook my head, tried not to cry as I thought back to what it took to get this. All last harvest, I'd worked for this desk. And even before with all the rock picking, clearing the fields of rock so the plows could ready the ground. Then I'd spent so many hours, days, weeks bent and sore picking potatoes out of the hard, dry earth. Filling the basket, emptying it into the barrel, filling the basket, emptying it into the barrel. On and on. The repetition might have made me lose my mind were it not for our farmhands Bud Drake and Ellery Burt and their encouraging banter.

But besides the long, hard hours, I got tired of being alone. Even though I was with a crew, no one else filled my barrels. When encouraging words failed to do the job, Bud's comments turned harsher toward us: "You're too far behind." "Your barrel isn't full enough." "Don't forget to put a ticket on your barrel when it's full."

You'd think we'd never done this before the way he nagged. Then again, Bud was only trying to please Mr. Pop. As was I.

Plus, I was focused on a goal: my new desk. So I put up with nagging and hard work and then the waiting—through the end of last October and first half of November—for the Sears truck to deliver this next piece of furniture to the farm. The one I'd longed for more than even the dresser or the bed, which I'd worked for the previous harvest.

The desk represented so much of what I'd wanted. A space to keep my pens, my journals, my books, and my sketch pads. And the mirror above it—the place I could sit and not only feel like me—the real me—but also *see* me: the young (was I also smart? Maybe even pretty?) woman looking back at me in that mirror. Instead of the sturdy farmhand Mr. Pop apparently saw.

So once again, I looked in that mirror and took a deep breath. Now wasn't the time to cry about a silly scratch. Not with Mother waiting to fill me with biscuits and eggs and fresh milk. Not with Mr. Pop waiting for me to bring back his workers. Not with Mick waiting just for me.

I put arms through sleeves and legs through pants. Pulled my hair back into a ponytail and gave Lickers a final glare. She licked her leg. She never noticed me.

* * *

"Morning, Mercy," Bud said, scraping his fork against the plate. "Truck's all gassed up and ready for you."

"Thanks. And morning to you both." I latched my hand around the porch post and swung a bit as I balanced on the top step, like

I did every morning when I stopped to talk to Bud and Ellery, farmhands so trusted they were like family. Family that ate on the porch, that is.

I turned and raised an eyebrow at Ellery, wondering if his standard reply to Bud's greeting, usually some silly adage passed down through five generations of solid Maine stock, would make sense this morning.

"When all is said and done, Miss Mercy, don't let the door hit ya where the good Lord split ya."

Ellery shoved another biscuit into his mouth, and I laughed. This old chestnut even got a snicker out of Mr. Pop.

"So, Ellery, Mother put the last of last night's cheddar in those eggs this morning. What'd you think of it?"

Publicly, he'd eat anything. But privately, this man with the joke had quite the sophisticated palate. Sure, he'd eat anything. But knew what he liked.

"Wicked good," he said. "Butcha know, that creamy Kraft cheese melts smoother than the cheddar. Wonder if she might try that sometime."

I shrugged. Ellery slurped his milk and continued: "Hey, watcha think of them wax cartons they're puttin' the milk in these days? I want the glass bottles back. This'll be a fad, you just wait."

"I'll mention it to her next time she places her order with Mr. Callahan," I said. "You should've been a chef, Ellery. Could've been the new chef at Nelson's. I hear they're hiring."

"Nah," said Ellery, "I'd've missed all this."

I followed his arm as he waved it out across the farm. This place was beautiful. Not just the house and the porch that Mother had made so lovely and welcoming, with tidy and warm places for anyone and everyone to sit and feel at home. But the land. It wasn't an easy land to farm, with its hard-packed rocky soil and short growing season, but Mr. Pop always reminded us that it was the best. It was the very hardness of this place that made it so amazing,

he said. The blessings of this place came right out of its trials.

Mother pushed open the screen door. "Mercy, honestly. Have you still not gone? Stop bothering Bud and Ellery and get on your way."

"She's no bother, ma'am," Ellery said and winked at me. "We're just talking about your delicious eggs."

Mother smiled, lowered her eyes, and stepped back inside. She let the screen door slap closed behind her.

"I'll see you in a bit then," I said and hopped down the stairs, landing hard on my sneakers. "Wait. Mr. Pop said to ask you where you'll be when I get back with the Maliseet workers."

"Oh, I suppose the three-acre field would be best to drop them off. If you manage more than five of them this morning, bring half down back and the others to the three acres, off the back road."

"All right. See you when I get back. Want me to feed the chickens and let the pigs out into their pen after that?"

"No, I'll send Bud out to tend to the animals this morning."

Mr. Pop loved his animals. He might act annoyed with Lickers, but he loved seeing her pounce on mice in the shed or in the barn. And the pigs, well, we only had four, but he had them named before they'd been in the pen ten minutes. There was Gracie, after the beautiful and elegant movie star Grace Kelly, then Dorothy, named after Uncle Roger's wife, Dot. I'm not sure how I'd feel having a pig named after me. Aunt Dot just laughed. I guess Mr. Pop knew she'd respond that way. Then there was Gertrude. Mr. Pop never said, but I always believed she was named after the most annoying woman on our party line, Mrs. Garritson. If you ever needed to place a call, you were almost guaranteed to be thwarted by Mrs. Garritson yapping on the phone. George rounded out the pigs, and no one knows where that name came from. Mr. Pop just pointed out that "He looks like a George!"

We had twenty laying hens that we simply referred to as the

“girls.” Keep the girls fed, safe, and happy, and you’ll always have plenty of eggs. That’s what Mr. Pop said.

He always treated his farm animals well. They had names, a good place to live, and good food to nourish them. We all knew they’d be food on our table one day, and he wasn’t afraid to slaughter them, but he treated them with dignity and respect all of their living days. I can’t tell you how many times I heard Mr. Pop say, “Beware the farmer who treats his animals poorly. You could probably make a case that he doesn’t treat his family all that well either.”



The truck rumbled past the buttercups and clover down low on the roadside and the devil’s paintbrushes and lupine in little patches here and there. I never tired of driving into town alone. It gave me time to think. Going the main road meant I could keep the windows wide-open and catch the breeze. The main road was one of the few paved ways to get into town. There was great beauty in the back way, either the Ridge Road or the Border Road, but the dust from the gravel made you close the cab up tight. Today I enjoyed the wind in my hair.

Mr. Pop had taught me to drive when I was eleven—four years before. It was standard practice for fathers to teach their sons to drive at that age or even younger. Teaching daughters was something of an anomaly. I’m sure plenty of the folks in town—and even on the surrounding farms—raised their eyebrows a bit when they first saw me at the wheel, bouncing and lurching down the back farm road as I learned to work the clutch on the old Ford potato truck. Who knows what they must’ve thought hearing those grinding gears halfway into town, watching me slide around corners in the muddy buildup at the end of the potato rows. However, the people of Watsonville, Maine, were plenty used to Mr. Pop telling them I was as “good as any son—if not better” and had been used to seeing me raised as the son he never had.

And certainly by now the sight of me, Paul's daughter, in that old potato truck was a regular one. I waved at Pastor Murphy and Mrs. Brown chatting in front of Fulton's on Main Street, knowing that the place I was headed, and what I was off to do, still offered plenty of fodder for gossip.

It had become clear enough by last summer when I was fourteen that I was no son. And that Mr. Pop still sent me and my "budding womanhood," Mother called it, to round up his Indian workers left many people shaking their heads and clucking their tongues.

If it had been any other father besides Paul Millar sending his daughter, it'd have been an uncontrollable scandal, boiling over the entire town, through the farms, into the logging camps, and even across the border into New Brunswick. It'd happened with other stories.

But Paul Millar was a trusted, esteemed man. A true man of God and of honor. Although many folks questioned his decisions regarding me and the people he chose to hire, no one could question his heart and his mind. He was a good man. And everybody knew it. Everybody liked him.

Which meant that when Mother took me shopping in town—stepping into Fishman's and Woolworth's, our favorites for a chocolate soda and to look at magazines, pens, and diaries, or into the Chain Apparel and Boston Shoe Store for school clothes and shoes or browsing the beautiful dresses in Woodson's that sometimes made Mother tear up as she rubbed her fingers against the fabrics—no one dared ask the questions they were desperate to. When we stopped into the IGA Grocery Store, Miss Maude's checkout line would grow uncharacteristically quiet. She may have started her gossip about us the moment the bells jingled behind us, but at least she didn't pry for information. Not the way she did with other people.

* * *

I slowed the truck.

“Molly! Molly Carmichael!” I yelled and waved out the truck window. But Molly just grimaced and waved me on. I stopped the truck midstreet to watch her kick off into a run. I hadn’t gotten a chance to talk to Molly much since school let out a few weeks ago. And I missed that. Molly was the only one I could talk to about Mick, the only one who understood. Molly’s older sister Marjorie and Glenn Socoby had been seeing each other on the sly since last Easter. Glenn was a Maliseet, like Mick. I was tempted to turn the truck to follow her, find out what was up, but Mr. Pop would’ve had my hide. I’d have to catch her another time. Mick, Ansley, and the others were waiting.

The truck croaked and lurched forward, causing heads to turn again on Main Street. But I kept my eyes on what lay ahead: the stately Second Baptist Church. I always wished we went there. Not just because our friends the Carmichaels were members, but because of its ivory steeple cutting into Maine skies, its creamy columns standing firm in front of scrubbed-each-summer clay bricks, and its English-born-and-bred preacher, Second Baptist breathed sophistication. Even though my family’s First Baptist had beaten Second Baptist to the punch years ago and won the Baptist Church Naming War, somehow our little country church, tucked back among potato fields, seemed like the loser.

Especially since Second Baptist got its new sign—the one Ellery called a “braggin’ sign.” Today it read: “Sunday at 9 a.m. Love Thy Neighbor.” I’d have to tell Mr. Pop this one. I knew what he’d say: “Better we love our neighbors all the time, Mercy. Not just nine o’clock on Sundays.”