

Legacy of Mercy



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BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2018 by Lynn Austin

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Austin, Lynn N., author.

Title: Legacy of mercy / Lynn Austin.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2018]

Identifiers: LCCN 2018019419 | ISBN 9780764217630 (paper) | ISBN 9780764231728 (cloth) | ISBN 9781493416141 (e-book) | ISBN 9780764233050 (large print)

Subjects: | GSAFD: Christian fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3551.U839 L44 2018 | DDC 813/.54—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018019419>

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Cover design by Dan Thornberg, Design Source Creative Services

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my family:
Ken, Joshua, Vanessa, Benjamin,
Maya, Snir, and Lyla Rose

With love and gratitude



Prologue

**CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
AUGUST 1897**

My dearest Oma Geesje,

It was hard to say good-bye to you so soon after meeting you and discovering that you are my grandmother. I wanted so much to stay in Michigan and get to know you and all of my other relatives in Holland a little better. But as you wisely pointed out, I needed to return to my life in Chicago and the adoptive parents whom I dearly love.

My brief stay this summer at the Hotel Ottawa was life-changing. I have always known that Mother and Father adopted me at an early age, but now, after living the first twenty-three years of my life with no information about my past, I was excited to finally discover who I really am. Reading the story of your life and how you immigrated to America from the Netherlands fifty years ago helped me see that I am part of a much larger story and a much larger family. And for you, dear Oma, I know that I'm the living continuation of my mama Christina's story—a story that ended much too soon.

But where do I go from here? I have returned home hoping that my faith in God will keep growing. Yet from the moment I returned to Chicago, I have been swept up in the many social events and expectations that I ran away from when I fled across Lake Michigan to the Hotel Ot-tawa this summer. I have very little time to read my Bible, let alone pray. But whenever I start to feel overwhelmed, I remember your wise words—that God has put me in this place, with the life I have, for a reason. There are lessons here in Chicago that He wants me to learn, and I know He has a plan and a purpose for me.

I'm still trying to accept the loss of my real mama, but at least I understand now that the empty place I have always felt in my heart had once been filled by her. My grief after losing her when I was three years old was always there, even though my adoptive parents filled my life with love and stability. I have also been facing the memories of the shipwreck and my near drowning—an event that has silently shaped my life, making me fearful and anxious. Now that I know the source of my fears, perhaps I can begin to change.

Father has allowed me to hire the Pinkerton Detective Agency to try to learn more about Mama and those missing years between the time she left home with Jack Newell in October of 1871 and when she died in the shipwreck in September of 1877. I am curious to learn if Jack is my real father and to discover what happened to him and Mama after they left Michigan. I will be sure to let you know what I discover, since my story is also your story. We are taking this exciting journey together, Oma.

Meanwhile, my plans to marry William are moving forward with the hope that the changes I saw in him on the night of the Jenison Park Hotel fire will prove to be

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lasting. He told me that night that he would be willing to listen more closely when I talk about spiritual things, and he said he didn't want my newfound faith to come between us. After learning how Father risked his life to save me when the Ironsides sank, I'm more eager than ever to marry William so I can help Father with his financial problems. Although I must confess that as William lays out his plans for the rest of our life together, I sometimes feel a sense of panic, not excitement. Mother calls it the bridal jitters.

Please give my greetings to Derk when you see him. He played a significant role in everything that happened this summer, and I will always consider him a dear friend. I miss you, Oma!

*With love,
Anneke*



**HOLLAND, MICHIGAN
SEPTEMBER 1897**

My dearest Anneke,

It was so wonderful to hear from you. I was happy to learn that you are well and that you are settling back into your life in Chicago.

All of the excitement in our little town of Holland has finally ended now that our town's fiftieth anniversary celebration is over. I let myself be talked into riding on a parade float down Eighth Street along with some of the other original Dutch settlers, but I felt very foolish to be on display that way. The story I wrote about how I immigrated to Michigan with Dominie Van Raalte and the

very first group from the Netherlands has been put into a book along with the other settlers' stories. But you are the only person who has the original version, where I confessed all of my doubts and fears and loves and losses. The published version tells only the facts.

My dear, I advise you not to let William or your parents or anyone else pressure you to make a decision you are not ready for. As you know from reading my life story, the results are never good when we make decisions in haste, especially with a decision as important as marriage. And as much as you may wish to help your father, I don't think he would want you to marry William purely for financial reasons.

Derk stopped by the other day to say hello and to let me know that his studies at the seminary are resuming. This is his last year there, and then he will become a minister. He said to tell you he thinks of you often and wishes you all the best.

*With love,
Oma Geesje*



CHAPTER 1

Anna

**CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
1897**

I am still in bed, languishing in that lovely state between dreaming and wakefulness, when the note arrives. Our housemaid has brought it to my bedroom on a tray along with tea and toast and a soft-boiled egg. The moment I see whom the letter is from, I am fully awake. My life is about to change. I tear open the envelope and pull out the card.

*From: The Pinkerton Detective Agency
Agents R. J. Albertson and M. Mitchell*

*To: Miss Anna Nicholson
Please be advised that we have found information concerning your mother, Christina de Jonge, that may be of*

interest to you. We await word of a convenient time to call on you to relay our findings.

I toss the covers aside and leap out of bed, causing the maid to step back in surprise. “Is the courier who delivered this note still waiting for my reply?” I ask her. I can’t recall the maid’s name. She is new and young and very skittish. Mother demands a lot of our servants, and few of them last very long. I have already seen this poor girl in tears.

“I’m not sure, Miss Anna. Shall I go and see?” She glances around as if looking for a place to set the tray. The cup rattles against the saucer.

“No, wait a moment, please.” I rummage through my desk for stationery and a pen to scribble a reply. I’m certain my social calendar is filled with scheduled events today, but I’m too excited to recall a single one. The Pinkerton detectives have a fine reputation for unearthing secrets from the past, and I have been growing impatient as I’ve waited for them to report back to me. I scribble a note to Agents Albertson and Mitchell, inviting them to come today at three o’clock, then I fold the note, place it in an envelope, and seal the flap. “Take this down to the courier right away,” I tell the maid. I grab the tray from her and shove the envelope into her hand. “Hurry!”

“Yes, Miss Anna.”

As soon as she’s gone, I remember that I have a luncheon engagement with my fiancé’s mother and sister that is certain to drag on until three o’clock. I will simply have to excuse myself early. Mother will be annoyed, but it can’t be helped. I have been waiting for weeks for news of my real mama, ever since returning from Michigan in July.

The detectives’ report is all I can think about as I sip tea and eat tiny sandwiches at the garden party later that afternoon. William’s mother has planned this luncheon to introduce me

as her son's fiancée to some of her longtime friends and their daughters. The fall afternoon is so lovely that the luncheon is held outside in the beautifully kept gardens behind the Wilkinsons' mansion. Tables and chairs dot the grass between the flower beds, and the tables are set with white linen cloths, fine china, and silverware. Maids serve the tea from sterling silver pots, the sandwiches from silver platters. It's a serene setting, with birds twittering and the air perfumed by the last of the summer roses climbing the trellises.

Mother looks as regal as a queen as she chats with William's mother. She is beaming as if she is the bride-to-be instead of me. This marriage will raise her status in Chicago society by several notches. I'm seated at a table a few feet away with William's sister, Jane, his Aunt Augusta, and two cousins. I should be filled with genteel enthusiasm as I listen to them talk about William and share some of their wedding day experiences, but I'm restless. My only role is to look pretty, make polite conversation, and enjoy the luncheon, yet I feel a lingering uneasiness, as if I'm supposed to be doing something else. I have no idea what. But something useful.

By the time dessert is served, I'm tired of smiling. I'm timid by nature and unused to being the center of attention. I can't stop glancing down at the little watch brooch pinned to the bodice of my gown—a present from Mother and Father. Time seems to crawl at a snail's pace. Mother catches me watching the time and discreetly shakes her head, a signal to mind my manners. I never had a problem following all the rules that my social position requires until I spent a week in Michigan with my grandmother Geesje in the summer and saw how liberating a simpler life can be.

Jane, who is five years younger than me, leans close to whisper something. She is slender and dark-haired like William, and her brown eyes sparkle with mischief as she discreetly gestures to

a fashionably dressed young woman sitting near the fountain. “Have you met Clarice Beacham yet?” she asks.

“Only briefly. Why?”

“William courted her for some time before he met you. Clarice was furious at being tossed aside for you.”

“I’m surprised she came today.”

“My mother and her mother are very old friends. It was their idea to pair her with William in the first place, not his.”

“I see.” Clarice is easily the most beautiful woman at the luncheon, with shining auburn hair pinned up in the latest Gibson girl style. She exudes a self-confidence that I’ve never had, visible in the way she sits and walks and converses effortlessly with the other women. Yet the word I feel that best describes her is not a kind one: *haughty*—as if wealth and luxury and privilege are her birthrights. I dare not judge her, though, because I have held the same attitudes for most of my life, even though my position in society comes through adoption, not birth.

“Clarice has been keeping a close eye on you for months,” Jane tells me, “waiting to pounce if things between you and William don’t work out.”

I’m wondering why Jane would confide in me this way. As if reading my thoughts, she adds, “I’m only telling you this so you’ll be careful what you say around her. Clarice would do anything to get William back.”

I’m unnerved to know that I have a rival, let alone a beautiful, ruthless one. “I see. Thanks for the warning, Jane.”

“You’re welcome. I like you a lot better than Clarice. I hope we’ll become friends.”

“I do, too.” I reach to give her hand a squeeze. How I have longed for a close friend!

The maids glide around the garden in ruffled aprons, refilling teacups, holding out trays of delicate tea cakes. I glance

down to check the time again, and when I look up, Clarice is walking toward me.

“Congratulations on your engagement,” she says with a smile. She sits down in an empty chair beside mine as the other guests begin to rise from their places to mingle.

“Thank you, Clarice.”

“William’s mother tells me you have recently returned to the city after being away for a few weeks this summer.”

“Um . . . yes.” I wonder if Mrs. Wilkinson also told Clarice that it was because William and I briefly ended our engagement before reconciling again. “Mother and I spent some time at a resort in Michigan,” I tell her. “It was lovely and relaxing.”

“What made you decide to leave Chicago?” It is very brash of her to keep probing for information, and I’m grateful for Jane’s warning.

“Chicago can be so hot during the summer months,” I say with a little wave of my hand. “Were you able to escape the city at all?”

“I wouldn’t want to. There are so many exciting things to do that I would be afraid I would miss something. Besides, if I had a fiancé as handsome as William, I wouldn’t leave his side for a single day.” I have no reply to that. “Listen, Anna,” she says, resting her hand over mine. “We don’t know each other very well yet, but I hope we can become friends. My family and William’s have been friends for ages, so you and I will be almost like sisters now that you’re marrying him. When might you have a free afternoon so you can join me for lunch? We can get to know each other a little better, just the two of us. Please say you’ll come.”

“That’s very kind of you. We’ll have to arrange a time very soon.” I wonder what she is plotting. I’m relieved when Mother joins us before Clarice pressures me to choose a date. Mother has more experience with scheming women than I do. As she and

Clarice talk, my thoughts drift to my meeting with the Pinkerton detectives in another hour, wondering what they might have discovered. Any news about my real mama will be welcome, but I'm also hoping to learn who my biological father is. According to my grandmother, Mama had been madly in love with a man named Jack Newell, and they ran away together the day after a fire destroyed most of Holland, Michigan, including the factory where Jack worked. The two were headed for Chicago and didn't know that a huge fire had also destroyed much of the Windy City on the very same night. I have read firsthand accounts of the Great Chicago Fire and wonder where Mama and Jack would have found work and a place to live after such devastation.

It's half past two when Clarice finally wanders away. I rise and tell Mother I would like to leave. Her serene façade vanishes. "We can't leave now," she whispers. "It would be rude."

"Some of the other ladies are leaving," I say, nodding toward two departing guests.

"But you are the guest of honor!"

"You may stay longer if you'd like, Mother. I'll send the carriage back for you."

The color rises in Mother's cheeks. It's hard to tell if she is furious with me for wanting to leave early or for daring to defy her. Perhaps both. I start to walk away, but she stands and grips my arm, holding it in her firm grasp to keep me from leaving. "What is this all about, Anna? Are you unwell?"

I could lie and pretend to be sick, but it would be wrong. "The detectives Father hired are coming today at three o'clock. They have news about Mama. I need to leave."

I can see she is torn between staying so she won't miss anything and going with me to keep an eye on me. She decides to accompany me, and as we thank our hostess and politely take our leave, I brace myself for the lecture that is certain to come. We climb into our carriage to start for home and she doesn't

disappoint me. “When your father and I agreed to help you hire the Pinkerton detectives, we never imagined it would interfere with your life this way.”

“I’m sorry. But I forgot all about the luncheon when I told the detectives to come at three o’clock today. Besides, the luncheon was nearly finished anyway.”

“That’s no excuse. As the guest of honor, you should be among the last to leave, not the first.”

“I’m hoping that the detectives have information about who my real father is.”

Mother purses her lips as if it will help hold her anger inside. When she finally speaks she sounds calm, but I know she’s not. “Isn’t it enough to know your mother’s story and how she died? You need to leave the rest of it alone, Anna, and get on with your life.”

“But I’m curious about my father, too. If he really is Jack Newell, I would like to know what happened to him and why I don’t remember him at all.”

“You may learn something very unsavory. It’s a stone best left unturned.”

“I can’t leave it. I want to know.”

“Listen to me.” She grips my arm again and hushes her voice as if she doesn’t want anyone to overhear, even though the only person near enough is our driver—and he would never tell family secrets, would he? “It’s entirely possible that your parents never married, Anna. If that turns out to be true, we would be obligated to make William and his family aware of it.”

“Of course I’ll tell William. He’s going to be my husband. He’ll want to know who I really am as much as I do.”

“That isn’t true. You are the only one who is obsessed with this. William and his family would prefer not to know.”

I stare at her in surprise. “Did they tell you that? William never mentioned it to me.”

“His mother let me know in a very delicate way that they would be happier not to have the past exhumed. Most of Chicago society has no idea you’re even adopted, let alone what your background is, because frankly, it’s none of their business. William’s mother and I both feel that the past should remain buried. As William’s wife, you must be above reproach. We cannot allow any unsavory details about your parents to taint your reputation.”

“I promise that no one outside our family will ever know what I discover. But I have to keep searching until I learn the truth.”

“Once it’s out of the box, the truth can rarely be concealed. The harder one tries to hide it, the juicier the gossip becomes. And you also must think of your children. Anything you learn about your past becomes part of their past, too.”

“I’m not ashamed of my mother. She died saving me.”

“And your adoptive father put himself in danger to rescue you. Don’t forget that. You owe him a measure of discretion, too.”

I know she’s right, but I still can’t contain my curiosity. I remain silent for the rest of the drive home, promising myself that I will listen to the detectives’ report and let that be the end of it. When we arrive home, a small carriage is parked out front, and our butler tells me that the two Pinkerton agents are waiting in the front parlor. I pluck off my hat as I hurry inside to greet them. After the preliminary niceties, Agent Albertson hands me a typewritten report, and we take our seats on the sofas to settle down to business.

“We found a record of marriage in your mother’s name. Christina de Jonge married Jack Newell in October of 1871.”

My heart leaps in my chest. “They did get married!” I look up at Mother and can see that she is relieved to learn that my birth was legitimate. I’m relieved, as well. I silently rehearse my real name—Anneke Newell. “Were you able to find any more information about Jack?” I ask.

“We’re following up on some possible leads. You told us he was a laborer, so we’re searching through membership lists of various trade unions for his name. I’ll let you know as soon as we find something.”

I look down at the report again. “According to this, they were married two weeks after the Chicago fire,” I say. “That’s two weeks after running away from home in Michigan.”

“Yes. The ceremony was performed by a justice of the peace in the village of Cicero. Since the fire destroyed central Chicago and all of the city records, most legal transactions in the city were disrupted. That’s why we decided to comb through the marriage records in neighboring towns, which is where we found it. You told us that Christina and Jack came to Chicago to find work, and there were plenty of construction jobs after the fire, but housing was scarce. You’ll see that Christina listed an address in Cicero as their place of residence.”

“Did you go to that address? Is the house still there?”

“We did. It’s a boardinghouse that has been in operation for some thirty years. We spoke with the landlady, Mrs. Marusak, and from our description, she thinks she may remember your mother.”

I leap up from the divan, too excited to remain seated. “I want to talk to her. Can you take me there?”

“Certainly, if you’d like.” Agent Albertson rises, as well.

“Anna, dear. Are you forgetting that you have plans this evening?” Mother asks, pretending to be calm. “I’m afraid there won’t be enough time for my daughter to travel all the way to Cicero and back with you this afternoon,” she explains to the agents.

“How about tomorrow?” I ask.

“That won’t be possible, either,” Mother says. “Your calendar is quite full, dear, for the remainder of this week.”

“But there must be an afternoon when I can get away. Can’t

we cancel something?” After consulting the calendar that she meticulously keeps, Mother informs me that with our multiple social engagements and two important dress fittings, the earliest opportunity to travel to Cicero will be a week from tomorrow. I don’t know how I’ll be able to wait that long. I remember my silent vow to abandon this search, but my curiosity outweighs any fear I have about what I might discover about my parents in Cicero.

I show William the typewritten report when we meet for dinner later that evening. “It was such a relief to know that my birth wasn’t disgraceful,” I tell him. He nods but shows little enthusiasm, briefly scanning the page before folding it in half and laying it aside. We are in the elegant dining room of the private men’s club that he and Father belong to, in the only area where women are allowed. The plush surroundings and hushed atmosphere make me feel as though I must whisper.

“Shall I order for both of us?” William asks when the waiter appears.

“Yes, but nothing too heavy. Your mother hosted a luncheon for me today.” William orders, and the waiter leaves. “Some days it seems that all I do is climb in and out of my carriage, change from one dress to another, sip tea, and politely nibble my way through a series of extravagant meals. When I stayed with Oma Geesje in Michigan, we once ate a dinner of fresh tomatoes from her garden with cheese and bread. It was a wonderful meal.”

William offers me a patient smile and reaches for my hand. “I wanted to dine alone with you tonight because we have so much to talk about. It seems there is very little time to converse about important things when we’re together at social functions.” I glance at the detectives’ report that he has set aside. That is what is most important to me at the moment, but I can see that William isn’t interested.

“You’re right,” I say. “We hardly ever dine alone. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“We still haven’t chosen a date for our wedding. Mother tells me that you ladies need plenty of time to make all the preparations, but how much time, exactly?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never gotten married before,” I say with a teasing smile.

William leans forward to cup my face in his hand, caressing my cheek with his thumb. “I want so much to begin living my life with you, Anna—not the two separate lives that we live now, lives that barely intersect. I need you as my partner and my most charming asset in this crazy world of finance that I’m part of.”

I think of how tightly Mother currently controls my social calendar, filling it to the brim with activity, and I wonder if my obligations as William’s wife will keep me even busier. I begin to feel trapped—which is silly, since my life has never been my own to do with as I please.

“In fact, I would be happy if we could be married tomorrow,” William says. “Is four months enough time? We could be married as we usher in the New Year.”

I reach to take his hand, squeezing it. “We can get married whenever we want. It’s our wedding, after all. Our life. Starting the New Year together sounds wonderful.” My words please him, and he lifts my hand to his lips and kisses it.

“You’re so beautiful, Anna.” I know he means it, but I can’t help picturing Clarice Beacham and her glorious auburn hair. Compared with her, I am merely pretty.

The waiter returns with William’s drink and the first course of our meal—asparagus soup. For some reason, I think of the Dutch pea soup that Oma Geesje made, and I remember how Derk and I had laughed and laughed as we ate it—although I can’t recall why. I miss Derk. He and William are as different as salt and pepper. William is handsome and elegant, a

proper gentleman in his tailored suit and starched white shirt. He keeps himself as tightly locked as his father's bank vault, and it would be so out of character for him to laugh out loud over a bowl of soup. Derk, on the other hand, is as simple and unsophisticated as salt, as honest and open as the blue sky above Lake Michigan. It's as natural for him to share his thoughts and feelings as it is to breathe.

"We need to decide where we'll live after we're married," William says, breaking into my thoughts. I scold myself for comparing the two men. After all, I'm going to marry William. "We need to decide if we're going to build a new house or renovate an existing one. Either way, it will take time and planning, so the sooner we begin the process, the sooner our home will be ready. Although I doubt if any home will be ready by the time we marry in January. What do you think?"

Some women may care about details like silk draperies and Turkish carpets and crystal chandeliers, but I'm not one of them. The very thought of deciding how to fill room after room of an enormous mansion with furnishings makes me feel as though I can't breathe. I lay down my soup spoon and push away the bowl. "I think . . . I think I would prefer to let you make all the decisions about the house. I trust your judgment completely." I hope my answer pleases him, but I can tell by his furrowed brow that it doesn't.

"I thought choosing a house was something we could do together."

I search for the right words and get a reprieve when the waiter appears to remove our soup bowls and serve the fish course. The fillet has a strong, fishy smell that catches in my throat. "It's all too much for me to think about right now," I say when the waiter leaves again. "I have so many wedding plans to make, and I'm right in the middle of learning about my real parents' past and finding out who I am." I gesture to the detectives' report.

“Is your past as important as who you are right now? And who you’re going to be very soon—my wife? Why should the past matter at all when we’ll have our entire future together? Besides, it isn’t even your past. You grew up here in Chicago, with the Nicholsons—the parents who raised you.”

I can see he is growing irritated, as Mother had earlier today. I need to be careful not to allow this obsession, as Mother called it, to come between me and the people I love. “You’re right,” I tell him. “If you already have some houses or building lots in mind, maybe we could drive past them on Sunday afternoon and at least see them from the outside.”

“I would like that,” he says, smiling. I’m struck all over again by how handsome William is, and I recall Clarice Beacham’s remarks from this afternoon. She might still be scheming to win him back, but William is mine and I am his. The thought brings a smile to my face.

William wraps his arms around me on the carriage ride home and holds me close. Did my mama feel happy and content when she was with Jack Newell? She loved him enough to run away from home with him and marry him. Once again, my thoughts turn to the landlady who thinks she remembers my parents. How will I ever wait until next week to meet her and learn more?