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My Sister Dilly

Maureen Lang

Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
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My Sister Dilly

Designed by Beth Sparkman

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For Kris
This book could not have
been imagined without
your help and input.
My deepest appreciation.

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Maureen Lang, 2008

PROLOGUE

RAINDROPS SPATTERED the windshield of my car, leaving see-through polka dots. Then they came down harder, each thwack pummeling any remnant of symmetrical design. Instinctively I reached for the wiper. But my hand stopped midway, almost as if it knew before my brain told me movement would be the wrong thing to do. A parked car, across from a schoolyard, with someone inside . . . lurking . . .

Even I, childless at thirty-five, knew such a scenario would attract the interest of school staff or a parent, if not outright suspicion. So what if I was a woman with no record. It wasn't as if we carried that information on our foreheads. Even a momentary misunderstanding would be embarrassing and, considering what I'd come here to do, probably make a news story or two.

Hannah Williams was questioned by police today . . .

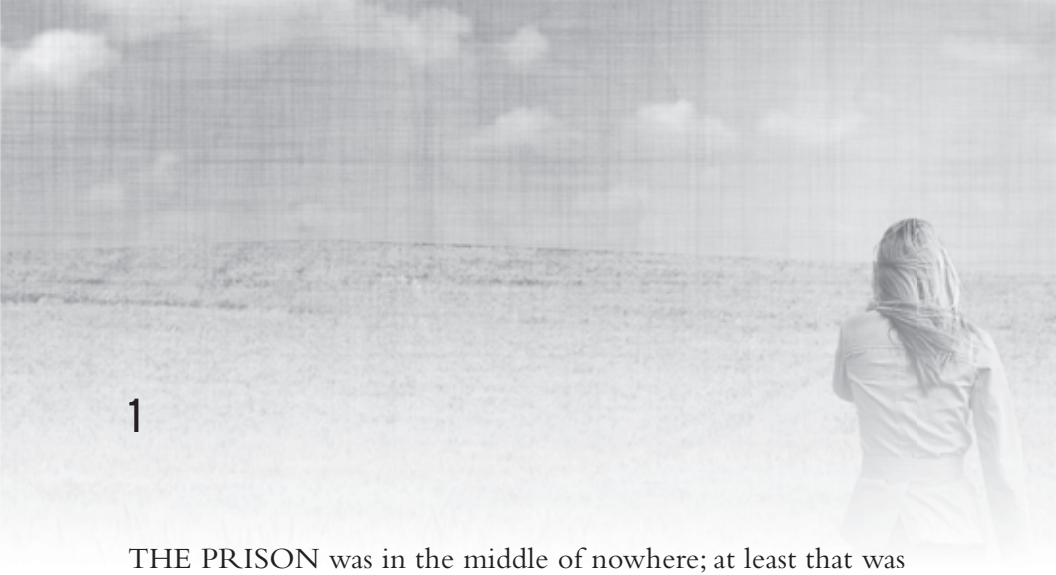
So I sat. I would have welcomed the cover of rain if it hadn't sent the kids back inside as they waited for the parade of squat little yellow buses lining up to collect them all. Most of the children, the ones who were mobile anyway, were herded inside, but several of those in wheelchairs were given shelter under a wide red awning attached to the play yard. Umbrellas appeared; hoods went up. Children were wheeled out to the ramps attached to the bus, where they were locked in, chair and all. Then the first little bus zoomed off, making room for another just like it to take its place.

I had no idea there would be so many students in wheelchairs. Rubbing my forehead, feeling the start of an ache, I acknowledged my own ignorance. But what else was I supposed to do? I had to try spotting her because I knew without a doubt that was the first thing my sister Dilly would ask. "Have you seen her?" Followed quickly by, "How did she look?"

But there were dozens of kids who each looked around ten

years old, strapped to a wheelchair with a headrest. From this distance and through the rain, I guessed the ones with pink or yellow raincoats were girls, but who knew if others in green or light blue might be girls too?

I sat there anyway until the last little bus rolled away, never sure of my target. I'd failed Dilly again.



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THE PRISON was in the middle of nowhere; at least that was how it seemed to me. Not many property owners must want a facility like that in their backyard, even one for women. So there were no crops of housing developments taking up farmland around here the way they seemed to everywhere else. Not that I thought much about farmland, even having grown up in the middle of it. The only green cornfields I'd seen since I'd left for college were from an airplane as I jetted from one end of the country to the other.

"Are you here for the Catherine Carlson release?"

I looked up in surprise as not one but a half dozen people seemed to have appeared from nowhere. I'd noticed a couple of vans and cars farther down the parking lot but hadn't seen any people until now. My gaze had been taken up by the prison, a forlorn place if ever I saw one. Even the entire blue sky wasn't enough to offset the building's ugliness. Block construction, painted beige like old oatmeal. If the cinder walls didn't give it away, the lack of windows made it clear it was an institution. The electric barbed wire fencing told what kind.

Two men in my path balanced cameras on their shoulders, and in front of them a pair of pretty blonde journalists shoved microphones in my face while another thrust forth a palm-sized recorder. One on the fringe held an innocuous notepad.

My first impulse was to run back to my car and speed away.

But Dilly was waiting. I clamped my mouth shut, gripped the strap of my Betsey Johnson purse, and walked along the concrete strip leading to the doors of the prison. There was an invisible line at the gate that not a single reporter could penetrate. But I knew they'd wait.

At the front door, a woman greeted me through a glass window. Dilly was being "processed," she told me, then said to have a seat. I turned, noticing the smell of inhospitable antiseptic for the first time. Hard wooden benches were the only place to sit. Evidently they thought the families of those in such a place needed to be punished too. I'd have brought a book if I'd known the wait was going to be so long; there wasn't even a magazine handy to help me pass the time.

Only thoughts. Of how I would make up for my failures. I'd told Mac, my best friend—and somehow it seemed he'd become my only friend—that this was the first step in fixing things. Keeping a broken past in the past. Dilly's . . . and mine.

I remembered the day our parents brought my sister home from the hospital just after she was born. The excitement was as welcome as the warmth of the sun shining through the bare trees that early March afternoon. Everyone smiled, and even though Mom was moving kind of slow up the stairs to our farmhouse, she smiled too. It was the kind of excitement you see when there's a new and hopeful change, like at weddings.

I was five, and even at that age I knew my parents had waited a long time for my sister. I heard Mom say once that she'd envisioned a houseful of kids, but the Lord hadn't seen fit to bless her with a productive womb. I think I wondered what my mother would have done with a bunch more kids when I seemed to be in the way of other things she did: lunches with friends she'd known all her life; making decorative quilts and pillows she sold at fairs; canning fruits, pickles, and jam; or endless work on the farm. In retrospect maybe it was a surprise they'd even had me and Dilly; she must have been so tired at the end of the day.

I wondered later if everybody was happier because things you

wait for seem better once you finally get them. But in recent years I thought everybody in town might have been relieved there weren't a whole slew of kids born into our family.

"Go take a seat, Hannah," Dad had said to me after Mom told us I couldn't hold the baby unless I was sitting down.

I skipped over to Aunt Elsie on the couch and hopped up next to her, holding out my arms as my mother made the careful transfer. It wasn't like holding one of my dolls, even though the blanket was made of the same soft material my plastic babies enjoyed. Unlike my dolls, my sister was warm and squirmy. Dad told me not to hold her too tight, so I put her on my legs and pulled back the cover to get a good look at her.

Her eyes were closed, and she wore a pink cotton bonnet. Even then, the straight lines of her brows had been drawn, which later filled in so well. Her cheeks were splotched red and white, and her arms and legs moved in four different directions. When she opened her mouth, I saw her flat gums, no hint of the teeth to come someday. I thought she was the prettiest thing I'd ever seen.

"She's a dilly," I whispered to Aunt Elsie, who'd taught me her favorite word for the things she liked. It came from a song called "Lavender Blue," and while my parents spent so much time at the hospital in those last couple of days, that was what my aunt and I had been doing—going about farm chores singing of things being dilly.

The name on my sister's birth certificate was Catherine Marie Williams, but neither Catherine nor Cathy nor even Marie ever stuck. She was Dilly from that day on.

Nearly thirty years later, here I was, ready to bring Dilly back home to our farmhouse.

Finally I heard something other than the distant sounds of an institution. Closer than the clatter of plates somewhere, something nearer than the echo of a call down a corridor. I heard the click of an automatic door lock, followed by the swish of air accompanying a passage opening.

Dilly. Instead of prison orange, she wore regular street clothes.

Was it possible she was taller? Did people grow in their twenties? She was still short, having taken from the same gene pool I'd inherited, but I was barely an inch taller now. Spotting me right away, she dropped her black leather suitcase on the floor. For a moment the case looked vaguely familiar, but that thought was lost when I noted a shadow of someone standing next to Dilly. My eyes stayed on my sister. She flung herself at me before I had the chance to go to her.

"Thanks for coming," she said, and her voice was so wobbly I knew she was fighting tears. I choked back my own.

"Thanks?" I repeated. *Thanks?* How could I not come?

"It's a long way from California."

I laughed. "Yeah, another galaxy."

The woman beside Dilly stepped closer and I couldn't ignore her any longer. She was tall and thin, dressed in jeans but with a more formal black jacket that somehow didn't look misplaced over the denim.

I pulled myself away from Dilly and accepted the woman's handshake.

"I'm Catherine's social worker, Amanda Mason. We just finished our exit session and she's all set to go."

Dilly held up a folder. "Probation rules, contact names, phone numbers."

"Formalities, Catherine," Amanda said. "Nothing out of the ordinary."

It was always something of a surprise to me that others outside of our hometown knew my sister by any name but Dilly. She certainly looked ready to go home, wearing a spring jacket I hadn't seen before, carrying a suitcase I now recognized as one I'd left behind when I headed to college so long ago.

"I didn't know you'd have luggage," I said when she picked up the black leather case. I didn't know what else to say.

"The women are allowed to purchase certain necessities during their stay. Clothes, mostly."

I knew that, because Mom had told me I could send Dilly

money—no cash, just cashier's checks or money orders, no more than fifty dollars at a time—but somehow I never connected that money with actual purchases. It wasn't like there could be a regular store inside a prison.

"Socks," Dilly said with a grin. "My feet still get cold."

When we were little, we shared a full-size bed, before our parents finally bought a set of twin beds. I still remember her icicle feet in winter. "You have a suitcase full of socks?"

"Just about. They never let me keep them all in one place till today. Guess I didn't know I had so many." Then she turned to the other woman and set the suitcase down again. "Thanks, Amanda. You—" Something caught in her throat, and she stopped herself. "You did so much for me." She put both of her hands on the woman's forearms, and the social worker didn't even flinch.

Amanda shifted her arms to take Dilly's hands in hers. "I haven't done enough," she said. "Not nearly enough."

They hugged and I watched, wondering if the prison movies I'd stopped watching since Dilly's arrest had given me the wrong impression. No hint of inmate animosity toward those in power here.

"Keep praying, though, will you? I won't stop needing that."

"You don't even have to ask."

Then Dilly slipped away and I had to turn and follow her or be left behind.

Prayer. That was what Dilly had asked for. All our life we'd been told to pray. On our knees, right after we got up, right before going to bed, and as often as possible in between. I might have had faith as a child, but by the time I was in high school, I began wondering what I was praying to. Some light in the sky that saw all the suffering in this world and didn't lift a finger—a supposedly all-powerful finger—to do something about it?

I'd given up prayer years ago; spiritually, long before I left home for college. Physically, once I stepped foot outside my parents' home. I eyed Dilly, trying to see if she'd been serious about the request or said it because that was what the other woman wanted to hear. But Dilly was looking ahead, walking out the door.

The reporters were still there when we stepped outside. I meant to warn Dilly, to make some sort of plan about getting to the car as fast as we could, telling her in advance which way to go.

But when Dilly came upon them, instead of hustling past, to my amazement she stopped. For a moment she looked to the ground, then to me, and I thought I saw a hint of uncertainty before she took an audible breath. "I just want to say one thing." Her voice trembled slightly, and she paused long enough to look down at the sidewalk again, then at each one of the reporters.

"When I did what I did so long ago, I didn't have any hope. When I stepped into this place, I didn't have hope. But that's all changed now because of the Lord Jesus."

I stared, aware of the silence that followed as the reporters waited to see if she was finished. But that wasn't why I couldn't find words or even the gumption to pull her along to the car. What was she *talking* about? Between this obviously rehearsed statement and the request for prayer, it was as if she'd "done found Jesus," as Grandpa used to say.

A barrage of questions shot from the reporters.

"Are you going to see your daughter?"

"Are you going to try to regain custody?"

"Has your husband forgiven you for what you did?"

Dilly didn't answer a single question. Instead, she looked at me, then toward the parking lot. It took the briefest moment for me to realize she didn't know where to go, which car was mine, so I led the way. I pressed the keyless remote to unlock her door before she reached it. She struggled a moment to get her bag into the rear seat, then settled herself just as I slid behind the wheel.

One of the reporters, the one I'd mistakenly believed harmless because the only technology he held was a pad of paper, had followed us to the car. He tapped on the window. I saw Dilly reach for the button, but quicker than her, I touched the window lock.

"I was only going to crack it," she said.

"Do you really want to hear what he has to say?"

He was yelling now, his young, impassioned face nearly pressed

to the glass. "Did it take prison to teach you you're not the one to take matters into your own hands? that your daughter's life is just as important as anyone else's?"

Dilly and I exchanged glances. I put the car in reverse; there was something militant about the young man that made me want to get away from him, spare Dilly from anything else he had to say. I'd seen judgment in people's eyes before and I was sure Dilly had too. This guy might be a reporter, but he wasn't an unbiased one. If such a kind existed.

Dilly stared at him, the brows everyone noticed on her, so thick, so dramatic, now drawn. A moment ago she'd found the courage to speak about something most people kept to themselves: faith. Now she looked like the Dilly I'd known when we shared the same roof. Timid, malleable. Maybe hoping I would take her away as fast as I could.

I backed out of the spot even as a thousand questions came to my mind too. I wanted to resist asking, though, unlike the guy with the notepad. His emphasis had been all wrong. He'd asked about the effect of prison, unconcerned about what Dilly really believed these days.

I still felt awkward after being away from her so long. But even that wasn't enough to keep me quiet. Once an older, wiser sibling, always so. I figured it gave me the right to be nosy.

"Did you mean what you said back there?" Since I was navigating out of the now-busy parking lot, I had to focus on driving, avoiding the need for eye contact.

"About Jesus?" She looked behind us at the reporters now packing up. "Wouldn't have said it if I didn't."

"What did you mean?"

"Just what I said."

I didn't know how to rephrase the question to get an answer I could understand, so I found the silence I probably should have stayed with. Once we pulled away from the prison grounds, Dilly touched my forearm much as she had the social worker's. I spared a quick glance, keeping both hands on the wheel.

"I've changed, Hannah. God changed me."

I wasn't yet sure I believed her. I wasn't the only one who'd grown up in a house where rules were more important than people, work more important than any kind of play, keeping up an appearance of holiness more important than living a holy life. We'd both vowed never to set foot in a church once we moved out of our parents' house, and I'd kept my end. I thought Dilly had too. I knew she'd stopped going to church after she got married. But lately . . . Did they even *have* church in prison?

"Since when has God done anything for either one of us, Dil?" I asked.

"I wanted to write you, tell you all about it—"

"Right." Even I heard the cynicism. I'd received exactly three letters from her the entire six years she'd been in prison, despite the hundreds I'd written. Well, one hundred, anyway. That first year. After that I just sent money orders as I made my plans. True, I'd made those plans without input from her, but I'd made them to benefit both of us.

Her eyes, brown like two spots of oversteeped tea, shone with sudden, yet-to-be-shed tears. "You know me, Hannah. I'm a talker, not a writer. I tried a thousand times to write, but every time I did, my brain froze. I can't explain it on paper. It's something I wanted to tell you in person."

"What about last Christmas? I visited you then."

She let out something that sounded a little like a *Ha!* but not quite as cynical as me. "In front of Mom and Dad? Are you kidding? I couldn't explain it with them there." She sat back in her seat, and laughter squeezed out one tear, leaving her eyes dry. "Not that everybody wouldn't have liked to see a good argument—from Mom and Dad about what grace and forgiveness really mean and from you about . . . about *everything*. The inmates would've laid bets for a winner, except if nobody drew blood they wouldn't have been able to figure out who won."

I didn't know if she was being sarcastic or not, since our family didn't argue. We hid all our resentment and anger, especially from

each other. Even now I held my tongue. For a moment I felt like I was back home, preparing to listen to one of Dad's endless sermons at the family altar he'd set up in the corner of the living room.

I sucked in a breath. "Okay, let's have it, then."

But Dilly didn't reply. She shook her head, her whole body facing me instead of the dashboard. "I will tell you, Hannah. Everything. But not right now. Not yet. I need to know something first."

I glanced at her again, prepared for the questions I knew she'd ask.

"Have you seen Sierra?"

I nodded. "Yesterday."

"They let you? Nick's mother let you—you know, in the same room? You talked to her? How is she?"

I shook my head. "I went to her school. They wouldn't let me into her classroom, but they told me she was there. That she's all right. Then I waited outside until the buses came, and . . ." I was tempted to lie, to tell her I'd seen Sierra close enough to prove what the school receptionist had said, that Dilly's daughter was okay. "I saw all the kids get on their buses, and they looked happy."

Whatever joy, whatever light I'd seen in Dilly's eyes since the moment she mentioned her daughter's name began to fade before I'd even finished talking.

"So she wouldn't let you see her?"

There was no way I'd describe the phone conversation I'd had with Nick's mother; I didn't use that kind of language. Nick had never really taken charge of his own daughter's care, but his mother had taken full responsibility for Sierra. One thing she'd stipulated: no visits from anyone in our family.

"I've got to see her," Dilly said, so low I barely heard her.

I knew seeing her daughter was only the beginning. I knew what she really wanted, but I wasn't sure what *I* wanted. Did I really want a fight to restore everything to the way it used to be or should have been? What if we won?

But I reminded myself that when determination was greater than fear, people could do just about anything, even take charge of someone like Sierra.

All I had to do now was make sure that determination stayed stronger than my fears. All I had to do was convince myself, and then Dilly, that I wouldn't let my fears stand in the way.

Because if I knew Dilly—and I still did, even when she seemed different—my guess was that our future held three of us together. Somehow, in some way.

Me, Dilly, and her daughter, Sierra.

But not God.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

My Sister Dilly was inspired by a combination of true stories: By mothers who've been to the darkest place a mother could go, survived, and found their love survived with them. By other mothers who face each day not knowing how long their children will live and yet make it through with incredible strength. By women who feel they've let others down, not from lack of caring but rather from lack of confidence. It's been said to me on more than one occasion that God allows into our lives only what we can handle, but the truth is we can't handle anything well without Him. My prayer is that the characters in this book would be companions for those of us who've overcome hardships or made mistakes and who realize forgiveness is most relevant within the context of relationship.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maureen Lang has always had a passion for writing. She wrote her first novel longhand around the age of ten, put the pages into a notebook she had covered with soft deerskin (nothing but the best!), then passed it around the neighborhood to rave reviews. It was so much fun she's been writing ever since.

Eventually Maureen became the recipient of a Golden Heart Award from Romance Writers of America, followed by the publication of three secular romance novels. Life took some turns after that, and she gave up writing for fifteen years, until the Lord claimed her to write for Him. Soon she won a Noble Theme Award from American Christian Fiction Writers and has since published several novels, including *Pieces of Silver* (a 2007 Christy Award finalist), *Remember Me*, *The Oak Leaves*, and *On Sparrow Hill*.

Maureen lives in the Midwest with her husband, her two sons, and their much-loved dog, Susie. Visit her Web site at www.maureenlang.com.