



MAUREEN LANG



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

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The Oak Leaves

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Designed by Beth Sparkman

Edited by Kathryn S. Olson

Published in association with the literary agency of WordServe Literary Group, Ltd., 10152 S. Knoll Circle, Highlands Ranch, CO 80130.

Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lang, Maureen.

The oak leaves / Maureen Lang.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4143-1345-0 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 1-4143-1345-4 (pbk.)

I. Title.

PS361.A554O15 2007

813'6—dc22

2006033334

Printed in the United States of America

13 12 11 10 09 08 07

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*Sorrow is a fruit.
God does not allow it to grow
on a branch that is too weak to bear it.*

VICTOR HUGO



*To my son Kipp and his wife, and to their children and
children's children in America,*

*I can think of no better way for you to know me than to share
with you my journal from the time in my life that revealed
God's plans for me—plans far different from my own.
This is my legacy to you.*

*I assure you each word is true. If you inherit anything
from me, may it be the knowledge that love is stronger than
fear, especially with faith in the One who is love: "Jesus
Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever."*

—Cosima Escott Hamilton, 1874



The dull hum of the garage door sounded. Luke was home. Talie looked up from the books and papers spread across her kitchen table. She might have been tempted to stay up all night reading, but not now. Welcoming her husband home was the only thing she liked about his occasional business trips.

As the door from the garage opened, Talie stood to greet her husband. “Welcome home!”

He moved to put his briefcase in its usual spot, but finding the table covered with the memorabilia Talie had been studying, he settled it on a nearby chair.

“Hey,” he said, taking her into his arms and kissing her.

Amazing how even after four years of marriage her heart still twirled at such a thing, especially when he gazed at her afterward. She read nothing but pure love in his lively blue eyes.

“Good to be home.” He scanned the adjacent family room.

Talie guessed he was looking for the baby. “I tried to keep Ben awake, but he crashed about twenty minutes ago.” She grinned. “You can probably get reacquainted around two in the morning, though.”

“Has he been up a lot while I was gone?”

She nodded.

Luke shrugged broad shoulders out of his suit coat. “I’ll look in on him when we go up.”



“How did everything go on your trip?”

“Better than I expected. They offered me the job.”

“They did!” Talie hugged him, then pulled away. “Why didn’t you tell me when you called earlier?”

“I wanted to see your face.” He kissed her, studying her again afterward. “And it was worth the wait.”

Pride for him mushroomed from deep inside, spreading up and out through her smile. Once, before she’d met Luke, before other dreams had taken its place, she’d had a career vision of her own. Going up through the ranks of the education trail, from teacher to department head to curriculum director, from assistant principal to principal and on to superintendent. Now, seeing Luke’s dreams going forward, she tasted vicarious living but, amazingly enough, didn’t miss those old aspirations for herself. She was living a new kind of dream, one she wouldn’t trade for anything.

“Congratulations, Mr. Architectural Engineering Director. When do you start?”

“Right away. I move into my new office tomorrow. They want me to restructure the department, so I’ll probably have to hire a couple of new people.”

“We’ll have to celebrate. Get a babysitter, out to dinner—the works.”

Luke loosened his tie and went to the refrigerator. As incredible as he looked in a suit, she knew he far preferred jeans and a T-shirt. He grabbed a Coke. “What went on around here while I was gone?”

“Jennifer down the street is starting a playgroup for the kids in the neighborhood. I’m taking Ben tomorrow.”

“Sounds good. How many kids?”

“Five—all of them born last year like Ben.”

He took a gulp of soda. “Did you have a good time at your mom’s? Get a lot done?”

Talie turned back to the table. “The garbageman is going



to hate her on Tuesday, but the house looks great. I think she'll be ready to list it any day now. Look here. . . ." She held up the family Bible she'd been looking at before he arrived. "This is the treasure we found among all the trash."

"What is it?"

"A Bible that belonged to my dad's grandmother. I have a whole box of things that must have been hers. The letters are wonderful. Letter writing is a lost art now that everyone has e-mail. And look at this. I think it's a journal."

She picked up the smooth, leather-bound book. It was tied closed with a ribbon. "I'm almost afraid to touch it—the binding is cracked. It's all so incredible." Talie sighed, looking at all of the things strewn on the table. "This is like a call back, Luke."

He looked from the journal to her. "Call back?"

She nodded, her heart twisting from missing her dad. "When I was a kid our family would take driving vacations. On that first day we'd get up at three in the morning to miss rush hour traffic around Chicagoland. We'd all fall back asleep, but that's what Dad liked—to drive in the quiet. Sometimes, though, I'd sit up front with him. He used to say I was helping by keeping him company. I knew he didn't really need help. He just wanted me to feel useful."

Unexpected tears welled in her eyes. "He liked it when he could see taillights ahead. Not too close, just up the road." Instead of the kitchen table in disarray she saw a pair of round, red lights gleaming from an invisible dark road ahead. "He used to tell me that was his *call back*. The car ahead called back that the road was still there, free and clear for him to follow."

She blinked, seeing again the items in front of her. "These are like a call back. Seeing what's gone before can help us know what to expect from life. It's especially meaningful when it's your own family history."



Talie returned her attention to the Bible, opening it to the names and dates that went back to the eighteenth century.

“Is your name written in that Bible?” Luke asked.

She scanned the list toward the more recent additions at the end but then shook her head. “No, but my mom’s is next to my dad’s, with their anniversary date. So many names! For our next baby we can pick a name from the family. Like . . . Josephine or Sarah or Emily. Or here’s one I really like: Cosima. We could call her Sima.”

“What, no men in your dad’s history? Aren’t there any boys’ names?”

“We already have a boy, silly. We need to hope for a girl next time.”

“Fifty-fifty chance of it going either way, honey. Let me see.” He took the Bible from her. “Matthew would be good. Or . . . wait. Branduff? Seamus? Sounds like a bunch of Irishmen. I thought your family was German and English.”

“The German is from my mother’s side. I guess I’ll find out more about my dad’s family from these names. But something awful must have happened in 1848. Five deaths are listed on the same day.”

“Hmm . . . 1848. Ireland had a potato famine around that time, I think.”

“That’s probably it,” Talie said with a nod. “Isn’t it amazing that they couldn’t feed themselves yet they kept birth records all the way back to the century before?”

Luke smiled. “I’m sure you have quite some family history there.”

“And look at this. Dad really did have an Aunt Ellen. Ellen Dana Grayson, his mother’s sister. But I’d rather not show this to Dana.”

“Why not?”

“Because she’s named for the mysterious Aunt Ellen. Her



full name is Ellen Dana, only my mom liked Dana better so we always called her that.”

“So why is this aunt mysterious, and what difference does it make if Dana knows about her?”

“Look here.” Talie pointed to an entry. “*Ellen Dana Grayson, born 1910, died 1941*. She never married, and she died in a place called Engleside. Sounds like a rest home, but she would’ve been too young for that. She must have been sick. I don’t want Dana knowing she was named for some sick, lonely relative who never got married. You know how Dana is. She already thinks she’s an old maid and she’s not even thirty yet. She’ll think history is bound to repeat itself just because of a name.”

Luke shook his head. Talie had seen that look on his face before, the one that said she was being overprotective again. She was willing to concede she wanted the best for her younger sister, but that’s how big sisters were *supposed* to be. She wasn’t about to shirk her duty, even on a small point like this.

Luke was still studying the names listed in the back of the Bible.

“If I draw a rough draft and put all the names and birth dates in order, could you make a family tree?” she asked. “We could hang it in the study.”

“Sure. Just birth dates, though? You’re going to avoid anything morbid like when they died, even though that’s the most interesting part?”

Talie hesitated.

“It’s that date, isn’t it?” He was watching her closely. “May 16, 1848.”

“I know it’s probably nothing more dramatic than the potato famine, but I guess I’d like to find out what happened before we advertise on our walls that five members of my family died on the same day.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Talie. I love a good mystery. But I don’t

think something that happened more than a hundred and fifty years ago can make much of a difference in our lives. Now let's go upstairs and peek in on that baby up there. And then—"he set aside the Bible and pulled her into his arms again, nuzzling her neck—"you can welcome me home as if I've been gone a lot longer than a few days."



Talie left their bed, knowing from past experience her movement wouldn't disturb Luke. His steady breathing said it was true again tonight.

She went downstairs to the kitchen table, where she'd left the dilapidated journal. It was old and stiff, the satin ribbon faded.

Touching one of the shamrocks engraved on the front, she untied the ribbon and opened the soft leather cover. The pages proved to be remarkably free of damage despite their apparent age. No water spots, no mold, just clear handwriting on thick paper that had barely yellowed through the years. Maybe it was a good thing her father had been so disinterested in the past; storing the items in the dry darkness of their attic hadn't done the collection any harm.

Talie instantly guessed it to be a personal diary. A stranger's, yes, but someone whose blood had flowed in her father and now flowed in her. She read the first page.

To my son Kipp and his wife, and to their children and children's children in America,

I can think of no better way for you to know me than to share with you my journal from the time in my life that revealed



*God's plans for me—plans far different from my own.
This is my legacy to you.*

*I assure you each word is true. If you inherit anything
from me, may it be the knowledge that love is stronger than
fear, especially with faith in the One who is love: "Jesus
Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever."*

—*Cosima Escott Hamilton, 1874*

Talie pulled out the Bible and turned to the records pages. *Cosima Escott, born in Ireland in the year of our Lord 1830, to Mary and Charles Escott. Married 1850 to Peter Hamilton.*

Born in Ireland? Talie's father had told her their heritage was English, not Irish. And the names Escott and Hamilton certainly didn't sound Irish. Pressing her finger along the records page, Talie found the year of Cosima's death: 1901. Though she'd died more than a hundred years ago, she'd lived to a ripe old age. Good for her; her years had outnumbered Dad's by almost a half dozen. Not bad for those times.

Strange that Cosima had chosen to write "love is stronger than fear" as her legacy.

Talie slid her finger down the death column again. There it was: May 16, 1848. . . .

Maybe Cosima's pages held the answer.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The Oak Leaves is a book I thought I would write “someday.” *Someday* when I’d accepted fragile X in my life, in my son’s life. *Someday* when I could find something good to say about being a mom to a permanently handicapped child. *Someday* when I understood why God allows things like fragile X.

As of today, I’ve made some progress toward that someday, but I am by no means there. As I wrote *The Oak Leaves*, I did find good things to say about being a mom to a special-needs child. Like Royboy, my son and so many other fragile Xers offer the smile of God—full of grace toward others. Without fragile X in my life I would never have written this book, never have experienced the joy of expressing some of the emotions God put in all of us—love and disappointment, hope and struggle, side by side. Of course it meant revisiting some of the painful moments in my own life to give my fictional story authenticity: the denial, the diagnosis, and the reeling from that. But it is something many have faced with me. This book is for all of us who’ve survived.

I pray anyone who goes through this diagnosis or one like it will know that joy will eventually return and that you will find a great many things to rejoice in along the journey of life. Most of all, I pray you will know you are loved by the God who created you and your child.

If you would like to know more about fragile X syndrome, please visit www.fraxa.org or www.fragilex.org. I pray for the day the “curse” in this book will be made obsolete by a cure.

Maureen Lang

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 a contract followed a year or so later for *Pieces of Silver*, followed by its sequel, *Remember Me*.

Maureen lives in the Midwest with her husband, her three children, and her daughter's dog, Bunubi.

Q & A about Fragile X

Why did you write *The Oak Leaves*?

Mostly to bring attention to fragile X syndrome and let others share in this life experience. Even though I believe one of the most difficult things in life is to face a serious diagnosis for your child, it was helpful to me to look at how it changed my life—and try to find something good to say about it. At the time of the diagnosis I questioned many things, not the least of which was why a good God would allow this to happen to those He supposedly loves (my husband, my son, my other children, our extended family, myself). Writing this book helped me to assimilate all the sermons I've heard about how God gave us free will in order to teach us to love. Free will brought all kinds of havoc—but without it, we'd all be robots without the faintest idea of what it means to love God or each other. And that would make the world a far different place than one in which we have to face evil and disease.

How much of the story is true? Did you find a journal from your family and learn that fragile X had been in your family for generations?

Although fragile X must have been in my family for at least three generations before it displayed itself in my son, the journal and everything else in *The Oak Leaves* are pure fiction. However, like Talie, I had recently found out I was pregnant again when my son was diagnosed. I went through the remainder of my third (and final) pregnancy not knowing whether I would have a healthy baby or another fragile X child. (Like Talie's son Kipp, my new baby turned out to be unaffected.)

In the story, why did it take so long for Talie to receive Ben's diagnosis?

This is where fact and fiction are more similar than you might expect. In my son's case, several years ago, it took nearly ten weeks to receive the diagnosis. The test still takes a matter of weeks, although not normally the six weeks or so that it took for Ben (and rarely as long as the ten weeks it took for my son). Not all genetic screening labs do the specific test for fragile X syndrome,