

The background of the cover is a photograph of a house's entrance at night. A blue door is the central focus, adorned with a green wreath. Two glowing lanterns are mounted on the white trim of the door. The scene is covered in snow, with two small evergreen trees on either side of the door, decorated with warm white lights. The sky is a deep twilight blue.

LAREN MALLEY

A JOURNEY OF FRIENDSHIP,
FAITH, AND ETERNAL LOVE

LILLIAN'S
Last
CHRISTMAS

Lillian's Last Christmas

Karen Malley

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Dedication

In a book centered on friendship between women, I would be remiss if I didn't dedicate this book to my female friends. Thank you for standing by me through the years. From preschool through grad school, through various jobs, through church, through all my boys' activities, and as an author, I've been blessed with meeting so many wonderful women. Thank you for your love, support, and kindness!

Books by Karen Malley

The Pine Springs Series

Finding Sunshine (Free Prequel)

Following the Sparrows

A Second Chance for Grace

Sunflowers and Suspicions

The Chester County Couples Series

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Moonlight and Mystery

Recipes and Redemption

Love in a Lifeboat (coming soon!)

Christmas Novellas

Saved by a Christmas Angel

The Christmas Mission

Cactus for Christmas

Lillian's Last Christmas

1

The letter arrived on a Tuesday.

Rachel emptied the mailbox, juggled the stack of mail and takeout bags, and herded the kids into the house.

She dumped the bags on the table and turned to the twins. "Go wash your hands." She lifted her voice. "Darren! We're home! Come to the kitchen. I got takeout."

She grabbed a stack of plates with one hand, the mail still gripped in the other. She shuffled through it while standing next to the table. Grocery circulars, bills, a postcard from a realtor listing homes in the area... She stopped when she reached the last item in the stack.

The envelope was thick and luxurious. The kind you'd send with a wedding invitation. But this was no wedding invitation. Not with that handwriting.

Darren and the twins entered the kitchen.

"Mom, I'm hungry."

"Honey, do we have ketchup? There aren't any packets in the bags."

"Did you tell them to take off the pickles? I hate pickles."

Ignoring the surrounding chaos, Rachel slid open

the envelope to read the contents. The voices faded as she stared at the elegant, swooping handwriting. She hadn't heard from Lillian in months. What could be so important that she'd write a formal letter?

~*~

Triya logged off from the computer. Another long day of programming. At least she didn't have to commute. She glanced at the clock. Thirty minutes until Partha would be home. She turned on the rice cooker and set to work making a vegetable curry. As the aromas filled the kitchen, the front door opened with a squeak. There was such comfort in that sound. They'd lived in this house for the full twenty-eight years of their marriage. Every nook and cranny, every squeak and clank of the house was familiar.

Sure, the house was quiet now that the children had grown, but with Dhruv and his wife living down the street and Saritha and her husband ten minutes away, Triya couldn't complain. Especially not since Saritha was due to have a baby in the spring. Triya shook her head. A grandmother at age fifty. How was that even possible? The years had flown by. Her mind traveled to the past. A time when she and her dearest friends shared their hopes and dreams. Most of them talked of wanting homes and families. Even so, out of the five of them, Triya was the only one even close to being a grandparent. Granted, Rachel had kids so late. So many years of medical treatments. At least they finally worked, even if she had been forty-two by the

time her twins arrived.

Partha entered the kitchen holding the day's mail. "It smells divine in here." He moved across the room and took the spoon from Triya's hand, bringing it to his lips. "Mmmm. Thank you."

"Of course."

Triya spooned the curry and rice into bowls while Partha unwrapped the naan she'd baked last night. They ate their meal mostly in silence. After eating, Partha retired to the home office to catch up on emails.

Triya stored the leftovers in the fridge and cleaned the dishes, her mind once again traveling back to her college days. Why were those ladies on her mind so much this evening? She hadn't spoken to any of them in months. Some of them in years. But Lillian was always faithful. She called regularly to check up on her. Strange. When was the last time she'd heard from Lillian?

With the dishes neatly stacked in the drainer, Triya was about to flick off the kitchen light when an envelope caught her eye. She knew that handwriting. A letter from Lillian. Why was she writing a letter?

~*~

April pushed open the door of her condo and breathed in the fresh air. Hiring a house sitter was the best idea she'd had in a long time. Too many times she'd arrive home from an extended trip to find the condo stale and musty. Instead of relaxing, she'd have to run out for groceries and pick up the mail at the post

office. Not this time. Taylor had aired out the place, stacked the mail neatly on the kitchen table, and, fingers crossed... April moved to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. Yes, Taylor stocked the fridge. April had asked her to do so, but she wasn't sure that would happen. Best one-hundred dollars she'd ever spent.

April set the kettle on the stove and chopped veggies for a salad. She rolled her shoulders, stretched the kinks in her back, and sat at the table to eat. Some people would find her lifestyle lonely, but with all the traveling she did for work, there wasn't time for relationships. At least she wasn't like Heidi, who went through husbands like some women went through shoes. Or like Triya, who stuck with her husband because she had no choice. An arranged marriage. How ridiculous. At least Rachel seemed reasonably happy with her husband. Of all her friends, Lillian was the only other one who'd never been married. At fifty, it wasn't likely either of them would. At least Lillian understood. She didn't need a man to complete her.

As the thought of Lillian crossed her mind, her eyes flickered to the stack of mail. A thick creamy envelope with Lillian's handwriting perched on top. What on earth?

~*~

Heidi stepped out of her heels and slid into her slippers. She set her laptop bag under the foyer table and hung her coat in the closet. Another unfulfilling

day at an unfulfilling job in her unfulfilling life. She sighed. What was she doing wrong? Well, for one thing, she had horrible taste in men. That much was for sure. Her marriage to Steven had only lasted eight months. That was a record, even for her. Why couldn't she find the happily ever after she was always reading about? Now she was back in her generic beige apartment. Beige. Yes, the perfect color to describe her life. Thankfully, at least, she got to go into an office. She could work from home, but the idea of being cooped up in this apartment all day long was suffocating. Oh, to live in a glorious house full of people. Now that would be the dream.

Her mind took her back to Lillian's house. She loved Lillian's home. The only child of aged parents, Lillian had inherited the place about five years ago. It was a six-bedroom masterpiece, with a gourmet kitchen, an in-law suite, and a gorgeous piece of property. Best yet, she lived in Lancaster County, with its rolling hills and farmland, which made it a picture-perfect paradise.

Maybe it was time to pay Lillian a visit. Get away from the city for a while. But would Lillian even have her? The last time they spoke, it hadn't been pleasant. Heidi recalled the conversation as if it were yesterday.

Lillian laid down her menu. "Are you sure you want to get married again?"

Heidi's cheeks heated as anger boiled up. "Just because you never found the right guy doesn't mean I shouldn't be happy."

Lillian reached a hand across the table and laid it

on Heidi's arm. "I want you to be happy. But I want you to be happy for the right reasons. I'm only asking you if you're sure Steven is right for you. Have you prayed about it?"

Heidi shook off Lillian's hand. "No, I haven't prayed about it. And what right do you have to lecture me about it? What do you know about men? God doesn't care about what I do. Steven and I are great together. I'd think you, of all people, would encourage me to get married. Wouldn't want me living in sin, would you?"

Heidi cringed, recalling the conversation. Turned out Lillian had been right, after all. The wedding had been a simple justice-of-the-peace affair, without friends and family present. Maybe that should've been a sign Steven wasn't committed to her. Heidi huffed. The more obvious sign was him running off with his tennis partner. His male tennis partner, no less. Maybe Lillian had seen something in Steven Heidi hadn't.

That was what kept Heidi from returning Lillian's calls. Pride. She was too proud to admit she was wrong. And now she hadn't talked to Lillian in months. Would Lillian consider forgiving her?

Enough. Heidi needed to bake. Baking always eased her stress. Fortunately, she'd gotten friendly with the neighbors, so she had an outlet for her creations. If she ate everything she baked, she'd weigh four hundred pounds. No, it wasn't the eating part she loved. It was the baking and the sharing. She headed into the kitchen and whipped up some chocolate chip cookies. She slid a sheet into the oven and fixed herself

a plate of leftovers while they baked. By the time the oven dinged, her mood had improved. The aroma wafting through the apartment helped. She packaged up a plate of cookies and knocked on the door across the hall.

The door flew open and Heidi nearly fell over as two little arms encircled her waist. She patted the exuberant six-year-old on the head. "Hi, Fiona."

Fiona reached up to take the plate. "What did you make for us?"

Fiona's mom, Suzanne, appeared behind her. "Fiona, you need to at least say hi before taking the baked goods."

"Hi, Miss Heidi. What did you make for us?"

Heidi laughed and handed the plate to Fiona. "Chocolate chip cookies with oats and pecans."

"Oh my, you'll be the death of us." Suzanne's smile belied her words. "Won't you come in and have a few with us?"

Heidi shook her head. "No. Thanks, though. I forgot to stop at the mailbox, so I'll pick up my bills and junk mail and get in bed with a good book."

"Sounds like a great idea. Thanks for the cookies. You really should think about going into business, you know. You have a gift for baking."

Heidi smiled. "Thanks, but I'd never make a living at it. Nope, I'll stick with my day job." Her super boring day job. She waved to Fiona and Suzanne and made her way to the mailboxes. Her box contained one envelope. One cream-colored envelope with familiar handwriting. Lillian. Heidi's breath caught. She hadn't

answered Lillian's calls, so it seemed she'd resorted to writing. Heidi debated opening the letter in the mailroom, but took it back upstairs.

Back in beige-land, Heidi fingered the envelope. She ran fingers over the carefully scripted letters. The letters that spelled out her maiden name. Realization hit. Lillian sent the letter here, to her apartment, to her maiden name, which meant Lillian knew her marriage fell apart. April must have given Lillian her new address. The address that signified yet another failure in her life. Did she really want to read Lillian's 'I told you so?' Or worse, her sympathy?

Curiosity got the better of her and she tore open the envelope. She unfolded the single sheet of paper and read.

Heidi,

It's been far too long since we've all seen each other. I have something significant to share with you, but I need to do it in person. It's important to me to have the Fabulous Five together again. Please join me at Ralestad Hall the week of December 19th. I have room for all of you to stay the week and would love to spend Christmas with you. I sincerely hope you can make it. It would mean the world to me.

Fondly,

Lillian

PS — If you arrive on the 19th, we can celebrate Triya's 50th, the final one of us to reach the half-century milestone.

Heidi re-read the message. Lillian was crazy. She expected to get all the girls back together again? For Christmas week? Not likely. But oh, how much fun it would be. It had been years since they'd all been

together. Here in Philadelphia, she was less than ninety minutes from Lillian, but April traveled all over the world, and Rachel had ended up in New Jersey. Triya was fairly close, but still. Christmas time? People were bound to have family plans.

Heidi settled on the sofa with the letter. Triya and her family were from India. She'd have off from work, but didn't celebrate Christmas. Rachel was Jewish, so she didn't celebrate Christmas, either. April was always traveling, but even she usually was off then. Was it possible? Could the Fabulous Five actually get together again? Would they even want to?

2

Lillian sipped from her mug, her hands shaking as she nearly splashed tea down the front of her blouse.

Maria was quick to take the mug from her. "Are you nervous about your friends coming?"

Lillian gave her a wan smile. "I am. What if they don't all come?"

"They will. For you, they will. What friends wouldn't come in this situation?"

Lillian pushed away her plate. "I didn't tell them why I needed them here."

Maria pushed the plate back towards Lillian. "You need to eat. You've already lost too much weight. Why didn't you tell them?"

Lillian sighed. "Because I didn't want them to come because they felt sorry for me. I wanted them to come simply because I asked them. Because they're my dear friends." She took another bite of her lunch and set down the fork. "I'm not hungry."

Maria fixed her patient gaze on Lillian. "I understand. But you'll need your strength for this week. You want to be at your best for your friends, don't you?"

"Yes, you're right. You're always right. I don't know what I would do without you."

"I'm here for the long haul. As long as you need me. You're certainly paying me enough."

Lillian laughed. "True. But you deserve it, for all I'm asking of you to do around here."

"You're not much trouble. You're wonderful company, and since you eat like a bird, you're very easy to feed."

"Ahh, but we'll have four guests arriving this afternoon. Are you sure you can handle the meals for everyone while still taking care of me?"

Maria patted Lillian's hand. "You seem to forget. I raised five children while working full time as a nurse. This is a vacation for me. Having one patient—one good natured patient at that, and preparing meals for five adults for a week? No problem. When are your friends supposed to arrive?"

Lillian turned her gaze to the front window. "I'm not exactly sure. But they said they'd be here today. I hope they follow through."

"I'm sure they will. Tell me about them. It will keep your mind occupied while you wait."

Lillian turned back to Maria. "You're a godsend. Yes. I'd love to tell you about them. But let's move to the parlor where it's more comfortable."

Maria frowned. "Take two more bites, and then you can leave the table."

Warmth flooded through Lillian. Having Maria take care of her was the right choice. God knew she needed someone like her. She raised her eyebrows. "My mother has been gone for quite some time. And even when she was alive, she hadn't told me what to

do in many years. But for you, Maria, I will do my best." She forced down the food and pushed away from the table.

Maria whisked away the dishes. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

Lillian took slow, careful steps as she made her way into the parlor, stopping to glance at her reflection in the mirror over the loveseat. She'd applied foundation to cover the dark circles under her eyes and brighten her pale complexion. It appeared to be doing the trick. Satisfied, she settled on the loveseat and waited for Maria to finish with the dishes.

Maria entered the room with a fresh cup of coffee and settled her ample frame into the chair opposite the loveseat. "Now. Tell me about all of your friends."

Where to start? "That could take a while."

Maria chuckled. "I have all day. Well, at least until I need to prepare food for these ladies. But please indulge me, so I know what I'm in for this week."

Lillian settled back against the loveseat. "We all met in college. We lived together in the dorm freshman year. Heidi was my roommate, Rachel and Triya were roommates, and April lived with a girl who transferred to another school at the end of freshman year. After that year, we got an off-campus house and the five of us lived together for the next three years. We were inseparable. We called ourselves the Fabulous Five."

Maria's lips curved upward. "The Fabulous Five. I like it. Did you all have similar interests?"

"Oh, no. We were so different. Heidi was the wild one. She had a new boyfriend almost every month.

She's the one I was closest to. Because her home life was challenging, she came home with me many times on breaks. She loves this house."

"As do you, I believe."

Lillian smiled. "Yes. There's nowhere I'd rather be. Especially now." Lillian lifted a blanket from beside her and draped it over her lap. She rubbed the gooseflesh on her arms. It was hard to stay warm, even with the fire burning hot in the fireplace.

Maria stood and stoked the fire.

"Let's see. Who's next?" Lillian chewed on her lower lip. "Triya is a first-generation American. She studied all the time. Education was very important to her parents because they sacrificed a lot to bring the family to this country. She obsessed about grades, but Rachel helped her loosen up.

"Rachel was the prankster. She continually played jokes on the rest of us. Good-natured jokes. Never anything hurtful or dangerous. Just funny."

"What sort of jokes?"

Lillian couldn't help grinning. "Once, she filled Triya's closet completely with packing peanuts. She waited for over an hour for Triya to open the closet, but when she did, she captured the moment on film. That's still one of my favorite pictures from college. Poor Triya, with packing peanuts showering her. And then the picture of her whirling around and throwing handfuls of the peanuts at Rachel. The day Rachel got her film developed, I never laughed so hard." Lillian adjusted the blanket. "Another time, she took every single writing implement from the house and hid

them. The only thing we had to write with was crayons. I remember borrowing pens and pencils from the neighbors because I didn't want to hand in my physics homework in brown crayon. But it wasn't just pranks. She came up with the most exciting things to do."

"What sort of things?"

"Like mattress racing."

Maria raised her eyebrows. "What?"

Maria's expression caused a bubble of laughter to burst out of Lillian. "She pulled the mattress off her bed in the dorm and rode it down the stairs. She turned it into a competition, timing everyone to see who could get down the stairs the fastest."

"Sounds dangerous."

"No, it was harmless. Rachel always wanted everyone to have fun."

"What about the last girl?"

"Rounding out the bunch was April. She was the diplomat. With our distinct personalities, someone was always upset with someone else. April's parents divorced when she was young, so I think she was sensitive to conflict. She stepped between Rachel and Triya more than once. She never married and travels extensively for her career. I wasn't sure she'd be able to make it, but she assured me she'd be here."

"It sounds like you ladies have quite the history. It's wonderful you've kept in touch so well all these years."

Lillian tucked her hands under the blanket. "I don't think they have. I've kept up with all of them,

but they're not always in touch with one another. That's one reason I want to bring them all together this one last time. I want to remind them of the special bond we had." She gave Maria a sly smile. "Plus, I want to have fun this Christmas, and the best way I can think of is to spend it with my dearest friends." She turned her gaze to the massive tree next to the fireplace. "Have I told you how much I adore the tree?"

Maria smiled. "You have. But all I did was order it. The company I contacted delivered and decorated it."

"It doesn't matter. The room is festive now. It reminds me of the happy times when my parents were alive." A pang of grief shot through Lillian. "They were wonderful people. You would have loved them."

"I'm sure I would. They must have been amazing parents to raise a woman like you."

Lillian waved a hand. "Now, now, none of that. Yes, they were amazing parents, but I'm nothing special."

Maria let out a snort. "I'm sure all your friends regularly drop everything to spend Christmas with people they don't care about. No. They are coming because you are special to them."

"They're special to me, as well."

"I can tell." Maria's voice was gentle. "When will you tell them?"

Lillian frowned. "When the time is right. I want to focus on the present, not the future. Let me have some fun with my friends while I can."

"Are you sure that's a good idea? They'll want to