

Chapter 1

The Quake Hits

January 7, 1984

The day is appropriate for this kind of happening. The sky is gray, and it is raining. Not dramatically pouring down with clapping thunder and sizzling lightning, mind you. Just raining. It is a numb, cold, miserable gray drizzle. It trickles down the window-pane and mirrors the rain trickling from my eyes and dropping off the end of my nose as I sit immobilized in a sobbing silence. So. He is gone.

I sit staring at the note he left me. "I hope I can see you sometimes. I love you. Here are some things you might want." A hand-made Navajo mission bell, a red plastic paper clip to keep my thoughts organized, a book of famous quotes. The words from his telephone call tonight echo in my throbbing head. "Take care of everyone. Remember, you're the strong one."

Today was so strange. I waited at my father's office after school with my brother and a puppy-dog of a guy who followed me everywhere. Mama came - finally - and took me into a conference room. "Dad left today." Well, it finally happened. I'd been my mother's confidante for years. I knew it was coming. So what? So my world has partly crumbled down, that's what.

We took the puppy-dog home, and he chattered all the way about meaningless things. Who cares about Mary Lou Retton and school and how neat Sally's hair looked today? My father's gone! How dare you insult me with your shallow whirlpool of words. Shut up! I want to listen to the silence.... But he doesn't know my father is gone. And I'm sure not going to tell him. I hate the curious stares that I've seen on people's faces before. I don't want an audience that delights in dirty laundry.

And so my mother drove, biting her lip to keep back the tears. My brother rode in the back, blissfully unaware, and I joined the foolish world in pretending I didn't hurt....

Everything is blurry, lost in a haze of inner tears. Disjointed thoughts and conversations float around in my memory. My heart does crazy things, as if it can't see through the tears. It bounces wildly - like a ball in a pinball game - from relief to sorrow to numbness.

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In a way, I am terribly relieved that it is finally over. Our family was like a boil, where the pressure builds and builds until it finally explodes. We were the sort that kicked each other all the way to church, and then got out with angelic smiles and our arms around each other. Eventually we couldn't stop kicking. That's all there is to it.

"No!" my mind screams. "That isn't all! There were times when we went to the beach and played 'tickle-bug' with the lights out and went to softball games with milkshakes from the Dairy Queen. Don't you remember the Christmas packages wrapped in plain white paper with funny cartoons drawn on them? The backpacking trips, jillions of slides, rides in the back of the truck on starlit nights, polka records on Sunday mornings were all part of our family life too. Can you have forgotten the rides down the road with the windows rolled down and Dad singing loudly in a ridiculous falsetto while you crawled under the seat? What about all the bedtime stories about old Mother West Wind and Johnny Woodchuck and the Merry Little Breezes and Mr. Sun? Or the games of chess and Parcheesi, the hilarious laughter over a Charlie Chaplin movie, the all-absorbing browses through a museum? And then there were the holidays: a harrowing version of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* on Halloween, the house overflowing with cousins at Thanksgiving, reading the Christmas story from Luke and putting up the manger scene the Friday night before Christmas, Easter egg hunts when we forgot where we hid the eggs and found them a year later in a rose bush, Fourth of July picnics and fireworks.... Remember how you and Dad celebrated your birthdays together, because his was the day before yours? The discussions of life from a literature book, the Indian forts and pirate ships he helped us build, the cannon made out of a piece of pipe that shot marbles and was run by a firecracker, the stories made up to accompany classical overtures, the poems composed on the spur of the moment...."

No, fighting wasn't all to our family. There was laughter. There was happiness. There was love. To have it all crushed in the fist of reality, like one of those hollow, painted eggshells, is devastating in its sadness. But, as I say, it is relieving. I've waited so long for the eggshell to shatter that, even though it's devastating, at least the waiting is over.

My heart doesn't make sense. How can I be relieved and yet devastated at the same time? How can I have an overriding feeling of numbness and still hurt so badly? I mean, life goes on. After we got home today, I finished my schoolwork, went to the grocery store, smiled at the clerk, did the dishes. Life is so utterly normal. One part of

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me is very calm and relieved and in complete control. This part accepts what has happened with Novocain serenity. Its congeniality with heartache is akin to someone whose foot has just been run over by a car saying reasonably to the driver, "Well, yes, that's understandable. Perfectly all right."

Another part of me is incredulous that the sun still comes up in the morning and the world still spins and the house is still standing and I look the same as I did when everything had some semblance of normality.

How can I have so much, and so little emotion at the same time? It is nonsensical, illogical, but somehow appropriate for this kind of happening.

February 7, 1984

Well, it's been four and a half weeks now. In some ways, it's a little easier. In others, it's harder. But at least we're surviving.

My mind drifts back to the sketchy memory of that first weekend alone. Church that week was... interesting. We probably wouldn't have gone, except for the fact that I had to play the piano for special music. I called my best friend the night before, and he played his flute with my piano. It felt so good to lean on him, to see the understanding in his eyes. As I think of it, tears spring to my eyes, for now he is gone too. About two weeks after my father left, he moved away. Well, Jesus, it's you and me.

I remember that after church, a lady came up to me and anxiously inquired, "Where's your dad?"

"He couldn't be here this week," I flatly replied.

"Well, I wish he were here. I really have to have him critique my poems," she rushed on, thrusting her bucked teeth in my face.

"I'm sorry."

"Well, will you tell him to call me? I really need my poems back. I'm very upset that he wasn't here today."

Hot anger washed over me and caused my limbs to quiver. Words rose to my throat. "Lady, do you know what it's like to have your family cry three times a day, to see traces of your father through the house, but never him? Do you know what it's like to fix a car yourself? To see cherry cordial wrappers (his favorite candy), Kleenexes, and mechanical pencils in his drawers, but no clothes? Do you know what it's like to have your family torn apart? Don't talk to me about your

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poems! I wish poems were all I had to worry about!” But, choking back the words, I said he’d call if he had time.

It seems so strange to have our family in this state. We were always the family that was complete. Sure, we fought a lot. But at weddings, Dad would tell us, “When you get married, Mama and I will be there together to give you away.”

I remember, as a little child, feeling as if I were standing on an earthquake. As I grew older, the feeling grew stronger and stronger. That it finally crumbled and caved in was no surprise - I guess. But I couldn’t have known how much it would hurt....

Once again, I am awash in a sea of memories, but not unpleasantly so, because I do understand. I’m not shouting, “Why me!” I know that, no matter what, Jesus is in control of me. He sits next to me, wiping off my tears, while His own run down the smile lines in His face.

A person develops and grows only in pain, and I need to do some growing. I’m not as sensitive to other people’s hurts, or as empathetic and understanding as a Christian ought to be. I don’t trust Jesus in uncertainty as much as I need to. So He lets me be in positions where I trust Him out of necessity. I smile through my tears at the love of a God who would bother to explain why. Although my mind is in terrible pain, I feel so close to God that it’s worth it. Crazy? Maybe it’s the peace that passes all understanding. Yes, we’re lonely here at home. But now we laugh together. We cry together. United, we can face the world together instead of fighting among ourselves. But it still hurts. Oh, Jesus, it hurts.

Sometimes it’s hard to see the bitterness of some family members - the anger and conviction that they are the only lonely ones. “Oh, if you only knew!” I think to myself. “You’re not the only ones! We all hurt very much. I would tell you, but I learned not to talk to you about feelings when I was little. So many times you kept doing chores or reading the paper or telling jokes when I was explaining the secrets of my heart. You have been my teachers, but not my confidantes. We’ve laughed together, played together, and I’ve learned so much from you. But I can’t talk to you very well, because I don’t know you. I can’t tell you this, of course, because it would hurt you. But I know you tried, and in some ways you succeeded. Thank you for trying. I love you.”

Now that our time together is more limited, we all spend it more carefully. But I wish that we had treated our time as precious when we were still a family. I wish that we had listened to each other from the

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beginning so that now we would know each other. I wish we could have learned before it was too late.

But as I sit amid the wash of rain and memories, I realize that for me the best part about this whole misery is that Jesus is carrying me through this “growth spurt.” I know that when I finish writing in this journal, I will open my Bible to a well-worn passage. I will read: “The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer... in whom I will trust” (Psalm 18:2). “He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters. He rescued me from my powerful enemy, from my foes, who were too strong for me. They confronted me in the day of my disaster, but the Lord was my support. He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me” (Psalm 18:16-19, NIV).

From January 1984 on, I have decided that with Christ’s help, I will grow. The fabric, the security of my life has been so beaten and battered that it will be softer, more pliable in His hands. Yes, it will ache, it will sting, it will hurt like any growth spurt does. But through it all, I will hang on to Jesus as my fortress in uncertainty. It will be easier later on to make my emotions and my brain coincide. On rough days, knowing that, in time, it will get easier is the only thing that will get me through. But even though sometimes I wish I could be transported back to childhood, when I had a safe, secure world, most of the time, I eagerly look to the future with my God as the guide.

OK, so your parents have separated, are in the midst of it, or are thinking about it. Your world is turned upside down, and you don’t see why life has to be so rotten, right? Some of you let out your frustration by rebelling at school or work, or in anger to your friends and family members. And some of you are like me - you do all your hurting on the inside, and nobody even knows what’s happening to your family because by all appearances, you’re like you always are - fine. You may even feel sort of numb about it all, like I did. You know you hurt, but at the same time it doesn’t seem so bad, after all.

At any rate, I know how you feel. My parents got divorced three and a half years ago. I remember that friends had quite a bit of counsel and sympathy and understanding for my parents, but they really didn’t say very much to my brothers and me. It wasn’t that they didn’t care; they were just embarrassed to tell us anything, because they didn’t know what to say. They didn’t know how we felt. But I remember how I felt. And, being a person who likes to write, I have journals and

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diaries to remind me of things I might have forgotten. So, I know pretty much how you feel. It's not fun, is it?

Unfortunately, there's no magic cure for divorce. Reams of material have been written about it; many people have spent years trying to avoid it; psychologists and psychiatrists have done study after study to try to prevent it. Yet it still exists. In light of all that evidence, I'm not going to try to cure divorce in this book. I hate it. I want to avoid it. But I'm not striving to cure it. This book will try to help you, the children in the family, to survive it.

Much as you might not think so now, there are ways that you can deal with problems related to this catastrophe that make them easier to bear. There are things you can learn from the split-up of your family. And, much as you may laugh at me for saying this, you will realize that it does get easier as time goes by. This book is about how to learn those things, how to understand those facts, how to pick up the pieces and put them back together again.

Life has its nasty moments. The sooner you realize that, the better. No one ever said it would be easy. You are going through one of those nasty moments now, but I just want you to know that I understand. I care. I went over the same bumps in the road and lived to tell about it. So will you. I promise.