

The Big One

by Marilyn Reeves

I placed a marker in my book and walked barefoot across the carpeted living room of my friend's Oakland apartment headed toward the kitchen for a glass of water, when suddenly my body swayed a little and I thought, Am I feeling woozy? But then it happened again and I heard the sound of glass tinkling in the cupboard. 'Oh my gosh, I wonder if that's an earthqua...' then all hell broke loose! The ground shook violently, cupboard doors banged open spilling their contents out onto the floor, lamps tipped over and furniture started jitterbugging across the room! My first instinct was to get under something and I knelt down to crawl under the overhanging breakfast bar when something struck my shoulder, hard! I fell to the floor and hit my head on something on the way down.

The next thing I became conscious of was that I couldn't breathe. The air I was trying to suck into my lungs was filled with such thick dust that it felt like I had a wool sock wrapped around my face.

I opened my eyes and only a dim light illuminated my surroundings. Unfamiliar looking objects – broken, scattered and ominous – surrounded me, and my leg was pinned under ... something. I couldn't see. When I tried to move, white hot pain shot through me. Another deep rumble set the whole world shaking again, and still more objects crashed around me. Chunks of mortar came raining down from the ceiling. 'Oh God,' I thought. 'I'm going to die! Here I am a thousand miles from home and I'm going to die here and no one will ever know what happened to me.'

In the distance I could hear the sound of sirens wailing and people shouting – some of them screaming! The world was falling apart! I must have lain there for hours, drifting in and out of consciousness, too weak to call for help, so thirsty my mouth was sealed shut by my swollen tongue.

Then I heard a voice close by hollering, 'Anybody in there?' I couldn't answer, but I was frantic to let my presence be known. My hand fell upon a broken wine bottle and, ignoring the blood that poured from a gash in my thumb when I grasped it, I began hitting the bottle against the steel base of a bar stool. *Tap tap. Tap tap tap.* I repeated this rhythm over and over until ... thank God! the voice replied, 'I hear you. Stay still, I'm coming to get you.' I could hear furniture being scooted aside and debris being thrown out of the way, as oh-so-slowly footsteps approaching closer and closer to where I was lying. Finally, the heavy weight that lay across my legs was lifted, and a pair of hands gently grabbed me, but as the man tried to turn me over I somehow managed to find my voice and scream when my shattered leg was twisted in the maneuver.

'I'm so sorry, Ma'am', he said, 'but I've got to get you out of here.'

I was kept in a makeshift clinic in the Oakland High School gymnasium, surrounded by a thousand other people laid out side by side on floor mats, for a couple of weeks before I was well enough to be moved. My son flew out from Denver to bring me back home, and I eventually learned that a massive section of southern California had fallen into the Pacific. The San Andreas had finally given way and all those lovely people and their homes – including many of the Hollywood celebrities that we all knew and loved – were now lying in watery graves at the bottom of the ocean.

The massive quake was felt as far north as Juno and as far east as Kansas City, but I was one of the lucky ones. I survived the Big One and lived to tell about it.