

THROUGH MY EYES NATURAL DISASTER ZONES

series editor Lyn White

LYLA

FLEUR BEALE



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Crows Nest NSW 2065
Australia
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100
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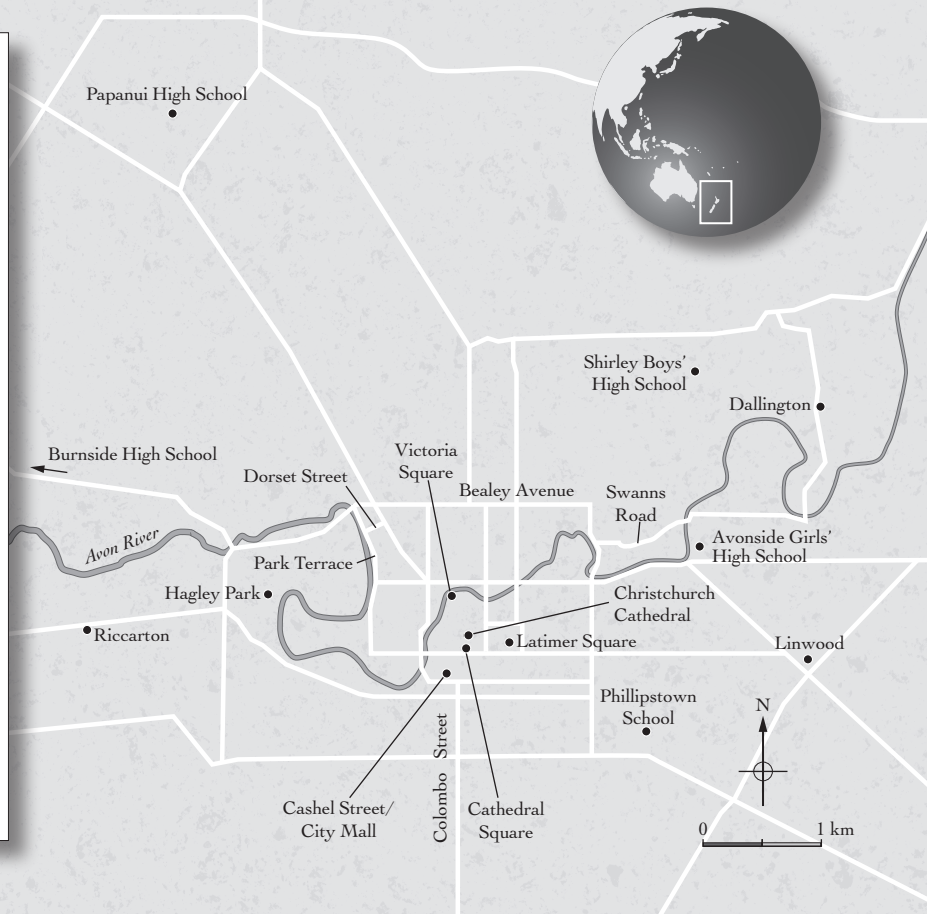
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One



School was out, the sun was shining and I didn't have babysitting duty until six o'clock. Hmm, I'd better remind Shona and Katie not to go home without me. I grabbed my phone.

Meet you outside GG Block.

Other people called it Main Block but we called it GG Block in honour of my great-grandmother because she'd been head girl at Avonside Girls' a million years ago. The building was like a symbol of endurance for me because the big September earthquake hadn't killed it thanks to the strengthening done at the end of last century. True, the whole place was a bit broken and we weren't allowed inside until more work was done, but it for sure wasn't busted. She was a red-brick, two-storeyed grand old lady, gracious and tough.

It had survived the zillions of aftershocks since September, too. Can you call buildings resilient? Yeah, why not? The whole country kept saying, *OMG those Christchurch people, their city is munted but look*

at them – they're so resilient. GG Block wasn't munted; therefore it must be resilient. Good logic there, Lyla!

But I was sick of being resilient. In my opinion, the resilient-sayers should try living here in Christchurch, City of Shaky Ground. My message to the God of Earthquakes was: *Hey, Rūaumoko! It's February now and you've been shaking us for five months. Enough already! Go back to sleep. Please.*

Ugh! Quake memories. Quick! Think of something else. Yes! Saved by an incoming text from Katie.

C U in 5.

I wandered through the crowd of girls milling around on the big lawn at the front of the school where we always met up, trying to decide where to park myself. Nobody seemed to be in a hurry to get home. A group sprawled under one of the trees, others gossiped at picnic tables. Joanne from my class waved me over. 'Lyla, Mum can pick us up from Swanns Road bridge tomorrow if you like.'

'Tell her she's a star! You sure you don't want to come into town with us?'

She shook her head. 'Love to, but Mum's dragging me to the eye-man. I won't be out of there until about one-thirty.'

'Want some help choosing new frames? Just in case your mum thinks granny glasses are the way to go.' Joanne's mum wouldn't, though. I'd known her forever because they lived in Linwood not far from us, and she was one styly woman.

Joanne suddenly looked a lot more cheerful. 'That'd

be awesome! Then I can escape and hit town with you guys.'

I put the appointment details in my phone.

Katie and Shona appeared only two minutes after they said they would – a record. Shona was stomping her way across the grass and venting about something, judging by the way she was tugging at her frizzy hair – trying to untangle the hair band from her ponytail would be my guess. Katie, as always, looked put-together and unruffled. It could have had something to do with being constructed along model lines, plus the fact that she liked her hair to know its place, which was pretty much always in two long plaits.

'Why aren't you at kapa haka practice?' Katie dumped her bag on the grass and slid in beside me.

Shona snapped, 'Cancelled till next week. She told us that already, just like she told us about no sprog-sitting.'

I grinned at her. 'What's got your knickers in a knot? Don't tell me drama sucks!'

She shook her head. 'No, drama's great. It's Greer. I just wish she'd finish her wretched thesis and go flatting. My sister the stress queen. Take a look at this!' She held out her phone.

Katie and I bent over it, shading the screen to read the text that had thrown Shona into grump-land. *Get me another USB. Urgent!! I'm depending on you. Don't let me down.*

'Oops!' I said. 'That's Blake's fault. He told her having only two back-ups for something as important

as her PhD thesis was just asking for trouble.’ He was totally OTT about it even though she had everything backed up on a separate hard drive and another back-up on a USB she wore round her neck including when she went to bed. My bro was in his second year at uni studying computing, so figured he was an expert.

Shona heaved a sigh. ‘He’s right, I guess, and I wouldn’t mind, but that text is so rude. *And* she threw a *fit* at me this morning.’

Katie stood up. ‘We’ll be grateful to her when she invents some amazing sustainable house and saves the planet. But for now, anyone fancy a snack at mine?’

That would be yes. Katie lived just across the Avon River, and Shona and I always left our bikes at Katie’s house so we could all walk to school together. We took our time; it was pretty by the river. But when we had to cross the bridge we didn’t linger – it was closed to traffic since it got damaged in September but was safe enough for pedestrians, so they told us.

‘Is Greer worried she’s going to fail?’ I asked once we were back on steady-ish ground.

Shona shrugged. ‘Yeah. She won’t, though. She’s been getting really positive feedback from her supervisor. An eco house-building firm read an article she wrote and wants to interview her, too. But her thesis is due in really soon and she’s driving Mum and me crazy.’

‘She’ll calm down once she’s handed it in,’ I said. Greer was cool. She’d often hung out with the three of us, ever since we were about eleven and didn’t need a babysitter but our picky parents wouldn’t let us be on

our own. ‘But speaking of annoying things, I’ve got to move into Blake’s room for an entire week.’

Katie tipped her head to one side in her Query Pose. ‘Wellington grands, or Queensland?’

‘Wellington. It’s Mum’s fortieth tomorrow.’ I was actually looking forward to spending the week with my grandparents – it would be perfect if I didn’t have to share room space with Blake.

Shona, still snippy, said, ‘Betcha Blake won’t be doing any of the adrenalin stuff you’ve got planned.’

‘Not my bro,’ I said. ‘He says he’s going to take snaps of the grands’ faces when Mum’s teetering up on the high ropes.’

Blake wasn’t into adventure, but nothing much bothered him either. He was very Zen about the earthquakes, too, even though the big September one had thrown him out of bed. He just said that’s what can happen when you live in a city built above a fault line and it decides to do a bit of stretching and bending.

Myself, I blamed Twitchy-Earth God Rūaumoko for all the damage to my city. You can talk to a god, but a fault line – not so much.

Katie unlocked her front door. There was a note on the floor. *Katie, be an angel and collect the kids from school. And if you can find my phone I’ll love you forever.*

Neither of those requests was unusual. Katie backed out the door saying, ‘Make the toast. Unless you’d rather have yesterday’s bread.’

Her half-brother and sister were five and almost seven, quite cute and quite loud. There would be the

usual mayhem when they arrived home in a race with Katie, which she sometimes made them lose – to show them life was a struggle.

She let them win today. We put toast in front of them so it was almost quiet when we heard the dull roar of an earthquake. If we'd been by ourselves we'd have waited to see if evasive action was needed, but we weren't by ourselves so we slid under the table with the kids. The house shook. The five-year-old yelled, 'Do the turtle! Keep safe!' Both of them curled up on their knees, one hand protecting their heads and the other clutching a table leg, foreheads resting on the floor.

'It's stopped now,' Shona said. 'I'm guessing a three point eight.'

The Christchurch guessing game: *what's the strength of the aftershock?*

The kids guessed five point one, and four point five.

Katie ruffled their hair. 'Let's see what the computer says.' She checked the geonet site. 'Shona, you're spot on.'

We were all fed up with playing Rūaumoko's guessing game. How many more times was the earth going to shake?



Two



When I got home Mum greeted me with a hug – and a not so subtle reminder that I'd be sharing with Blake. 'I've made up all the beds for tomorrow, Lyla.'

'So kind! But I'm not sleeping in Blake's room tonight. Nana Kiri won't mind.' My grandmother always slept in my bed and she wouldn't mind day-old sheets. She was very Zen about things, just like Blake.

Mum waved a hand. 'Fine by me.'

I took myself off next door to my babysitting job. Henry, aged six, and Leo, eight, weren't bad kids, but they were pretty spooked these days by the shaky earth. Their mum, Natalie, tilted her head towards the boys. Uh oh, the spooked-kids tilt.

I gave her my competent child-carer nod and she left after a kiss for each of the boys. She was a receptionist at a medical centre, and evening shifts were only a problem when her hubby Don was travelling like he was right now, doing agricultural advising.

'Show me where Dad is today,' I said to the kids.

They raced to the map on the wall. Henry plonked a finger in the middle of South America. ‘Here.’

Leo landed on Buenos Aires. ‘Mum says we can get out of school and go to the airport to meet him.’

‘Yeah,’ Henry said. ‘He’ll be here in four more sleeps.’

‘How about we make him welcome-home cards?’

It was a good idea – they hardly noticed a minor shake happening among the glue, glitter and spelling glitches.



They were in bed all tucked up and asleep by nine o’clock – something of a record these days. Well done, Lyla! I was deep into my homework when a text arrived from Nana Kiri. *Would Clemmie like a replacement china shepherdess for her birthday? I’ve seen the exact same one!!!*

Clemmie being my mum, who reckoned the only good thing to come out of the September quake was the shattering of that stupid statue. For a second, I thought about texting back *She’d be thrilled!!* But no, I couldn’t be that mean – mainly because I’d have to live with Mum’s reproachful sighs forever after.

Truthfully, not her thing. She needs trainers, size 39. Keeps borrowing mine.

I added a link to shoes I’d be happy to own if Mum didn’t like them.

Thanks, Lyla. See you tomorrow. We get in at 2.30. Remind Clemmie!!! Xxxx

Nana Kiri always said that, ever since Mum didn’t

pick them up on time years ago. I forget the reason, but it would have been a valid one – a gunman on the loose, or maybe a lost toddler. I could have gone to the airport with Mum to meet them, but I had other plans for the afternoon, thanks to school finishing at midday so that all secondary teachers could have a union meeting. Go, unions!

Pops and Nana Kiri didn't usually fly down from Wellington for Mum's birthday, but apparently turning forty is huge. So on Tuesday the twenty-second of February we'd booked a posh restaurant for a family dinner in town. The rest of the birthday celebrations had already been organised by super-planners Dad, Blake and me, even though my bro and the grands wouldn't be doing any of it. They preferred to keep their feet on the ground.

I often looked at my grandparents and couldn't figure out how two such gentle people could produce an adrenalin junkie like my mum. It was a mystery – and I knew they worried about her being a cop.

Dad was a trauma nurse in Christchurch Hospital's emergency department, so pretty much into the adrenalin too. And I got Blake's share of that gene as well as my own.



Breakfast Tuesday morning with both parents taking the day off was an Event. Dad made fritters from the frozen whitebait he'd secretly thawed overnight. I made pancakes. Blake got out of bed in time to join

in the eating part, but I guess he'd have got up anyway because lectures had started for the year.

Mum opened her present from Dad, Blake and me – vouchers for a gliding trip and a high ropes course, although to be honest that was because I wanted to be up in the treetops on a skinny rope high above the ground. For a second she just stared as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing, then she leapt to her feet. 'I'm going gliding! I really am! Wow, you fantastic, wonderful people. It's the best present. I absolutely love it!'

Dad leant towards me and Blake to stage whisper, 'Do you think she likes it? Is she just pretending?'

Mum didn't even hear – I reckon her head was already somewhere up in the stratosphere.

Blake asked, 'So what are you guys going to do with your day off?'

Dad nodded towards Mum. 'Jean Batten there is meeting up with a couple of old school friends this morning. Some fancy café in town.'

I reached across the table to prod his chest. 'Which leaves you free to drool over fancy cars in Fazazz. Right?'

He grinned. 'I might take a bit of a look. Just for ten minutes.'

More like ten hours – Dad'd live at Fazazz if he could. Mum came back down from the stratosphere. 'What are you doing with your free afternoon, daughter mine?'

I gave a summary of my plans. 'Catching a ride into town. Hitting the mall. Hanging out.'

Mum fixed me with a glare. 'Who's driving you? What type of licence is she on?'

Oh, the joy of having a cop for a mother. 'Joanne's mum. Sorry, I should have asked her for a photo of her licence.'

She patted my head and grinned.

'But I won't be biking, so I could use a ride to school, Mummy dearest, Daddy darling.'

Blake made puking noises.

Dad regarded me across the table, his face wearing a suspiciously calculating look. I beat him to it. 'Okay! I'll do the dishes if you'll take me to school.'

He laughed. 'Deal. And it's cooler today. Dress appropriately.' Dad in Health Monitor mode.

Peace, harmony and happy birthday-ness. All we needed now to make it perfect was a whole day without earthquakes.



Three



We got to the designated pick-up point just as Joanne's mother pulled up. 'Colombo Street lights okay, you lot?'

'Sure. Great. Thanks.'

Joanne spent the trip swivelled around helping to plan what we'd do once she was free from the eye-man.

Her mother dropped the three of us off at the lights. I pointed ahead of us to Victoria Square. 'Look – they're putting the Chinese New Year lanterns in the trees.'

We watched for a minute or two before wandering on to the centre of town where Cathedral Square still had displays from the Festival of Flowers. A couple of tourists knelt behind an elephant made of wire and greenery, trying to get a picture of it with the cathedral in the background.

'Sweet,' Shona said.

'Lots of tourists around,' Katie said. We scuttled out of the way of a Japanese man with a thousand cameras round his neck lining up a shot of the cathedral. He

looked to be having trouble getting the spire and the rose window in the same shot.

‘I hope they fix it soon,’ Shona said. ‘It’ll be good to be able to go inside again.’

I laughed at her. ‘And you were such a regular churchgoer!’

She gave me a shove. ‘You know what I mean. That cathedral – it’s the heart of Christchurch.’

Katie started walking. ‘Yeah. True. But I need food. Let’s do it.’

She towed us down High Street until I hauled her to a stop. ‘Not the food hall.’ I waved my hand at the sky. ‘The sun’s out. It’s a sit-outside day, not a food hall day.’

‘There won’t be any empty benches,’ Shona said. ‘Look around you, Lyla. The whole city’s in town today.’

‘Fine! You go to the food hall. Come and find me on my sunny bench.’ We kept walking and arguing – food hall or sun. Sun or food hall.

But we didn’t get to the food hall. We were still walking down the mall when the world around us shook itself to bits.



We were used to aftershocks. This time when the shaking started, for a nanosecond we thought it was just another one – nothing to worry about.

It wasn’t just another one. The shaking knocked us off our feet before we had time to panic, yell or think about what we should do. We huddled together as much as we could with the ground going crazy beneath us.

I don't remember hearing screaming. I had no breath for screaming. I remember jagged thoughts – *it's never going to stop. We're going to die. Stop. Please. Just stop.*

But the ground didn't listen to prayers or pleas or screams. It just kept on bucking and buckling and heaving. So much noise. Earthquakes are loud. The earth shrieks as it tears itself apart. Buildings moan before they give up and crash to the ground.

This time the noise and shaking seemed to go on forever. Fifteen seconds felt like fifteen years. And when it did stop we were in an alien place full of chaos.

For seconds after the ground quieted we waited, not believing it was over, before we clambered to our feet. I didn't trust the ground. I expected it to go crazy all over again. We looked at each other and maybe my eyes were wide and shocked just like my friends' were. I wiped at blood on Katie's neck with my finger. 'You okay?'

She shook her head. 'Yes. No. I'm still alive. I think.'

'It's foggy,' Shona said. 'Why is it foggy?'

We couldn't see much through the swirling fog but we could hear buildings all around the mall collapsing and dying, their bones shattered. Car alarms and building alarms shrieked, all adding to the racket.

'The buildings. They're falling down.' Shona scrambled for her phone. 'I've got to call Greer. Mum'll be okay, but...'

'There'll be aftershocks.' Katie grabbed our hands. 'Let's get out of here. Greer will be fine. It won't help if you get yourself killed.'

Mum? Dad? Blake? Was Joanne okay?

We stumbled along over the uneven road. There were sirens now. I tasted grit. The white stuff in the air wasn't fog, it was dust. I looked around. There were lots of people.

So much dust. It swirled and lifted in great clouds. Sheets of paper from shattered offices flew and fluttered. I couldn't see up or down the street, but the dust didn't hide the destruction on both sides of us.

Katie headed towards the square. 'Come on.'

It was what we'd been told, time and again: *head for open space away from buildings.*

Shona was crying. 'There must be people under the rubble.'

The Japanese man? The giggling couple behind the elephant? How many others? Were they hurt – or worse?

A woman holding a toddler's hand stumbled along through the rubble a few steps ahead of us. They were both crying. 'Why isn't she carrying him? She should be carrying him.'

Shona tried to hold me back. 'No, Lyla! We have to go home. Follow the quake plan.'

'I will. But I'll just...' I caught up with the woman and saw she was very pregnant.

I picked her kid up, tears, snot and all. She took hold of my arm too. 'Thank you. I can't...'

'It's okay,' I said. 'What's his name?'

'Eli.'

Eli put his arms around my neck and hung on. Great. Survive an earthquake and suffer death by toddler.

Up ahead, Katie stopped. Her voice floated back on the dust. ‘The cathedral! The spire’s gone.’

The air had cleared enough to give a view down the street to the square. She was right. The spire wasn’t there. It lay on the ground, just a pile of rubble now.

I couldn’t bear to look at it. There had to be people under those heavy stones.

I led the woman to a bench. She took Eli onto her lap. ‘Thank you.’

‘Will you be okay? D’you want...’

‘We’ll be all right now. My husband – we’d arranged to meet here at one o’clock.’ She pulled out her phone. ‘It’s nearly that now.’

But it looked as though she was only just holding it together. Her face was pale and strained. It was the tear tracks through the dust on her cheeks that got to me. She shouldn’t be by herself.

‘I’ll wait with you.’ I took out my own phone.

‘The network’s jammed.’

‘Like September.’ I sent texts to both parents and Blake. *I’m ok. You?* It could be hours before they got them and hours before I got theirs. If...*don’t go there.*

The square was a mass of people, ghostly shapes in the dust. I couldn’t see Shona or Katie. A man stood near us, his hands over his face and blood pouring down his fingers. I jumped up and ran to him. ‘Come over here. Sit down.’

He came with me, as if on automatic pilot. The woman patted the bench beside her. ‘Sit with us.’

Weird. It seemed to help her, being able to do

something for somebody else. He peered at me through bloody fingers. ‘Thank you, young lady.’

He wasn’t doing a good job of stopping the bleeding. Even less when he dropped one hand to steady himself on the bench. The woman took it. She didn’t seem to mind the blood and she didn’t seem to understand he needed more help than just having his hand held. I’d have to do it.

Apply pressure to stop a wound bleeding. But if I put my hand over the cut, germs would get in. Both my hands felt gritty from the dust, and they sure hadn’t been sterile before the earth moved. But he was going to bleed to death if somebody didn’t do something. The woman – if she’d had a nappy bag for Eli once, she didn’t have it now. There was nothing I could use for a dressing.

‘Move your hand,’ I told him. ‘You need more pressure on that.’ He dropped his hand and blood spurted. The cut was jagged and it looked deep. *Please, don’t let him die.* I pressed my palm over the wound, then wriggled around to stand behind him. ‘Lean back. It’s okay. I’ve got you.’

At a rough guess he was in his seventies – about the same age as Grandy. How much blood had he already lost? I wanted Katie and Shona. We needed help, but nobody seemed to see us. I looked towards the police kiosk – it seemed undamaged and people were milling around it, but nobody even glanced at us.

Eli’s mother was talking. ‘It’s all right,’ she kept saying to the man. ‘You’re okay. You’re going to be all right.’

Another wicked aftershock hit. First the roar, then the shaking. My hand flew off the man's head. I was on my knees, and I wanted to scream and scream and never stop screaming. Eli did scream. Blood cascaded from the man's head. More bricks and chunks of concrete peeled themselves from high on buildings.

The woman was shouting. 'It's all right, Eli. We're safe. Don't cry. It's okay. We're safe.'

We weren't safe and we never would be ever again.

The man moaned. I lurched to my feet. 'Lie down. You'll be safer lying down.' I almost tugged him off the bench, slapping a hand against his wound – so much blood. I tried to wriggle out of my cardigan to make him a pillow and discovered I was still wearing my backpack. The woman pulled herself together enough to help me take it off.

A man running past stopped. 'I'm a doctor. Let's have a look at you.' But there wasn't anything he could do that we weren't already doing. He didn't have any supplies either. 'Keep the pressure on that wound. Don't let him go to sleep. Somebody'll be along eventually to take him to hospital.'

How long would it take somebody to come? I didn't want to stay. I wanted to find Mum and Dad. Blake was at uni – I just had to hope he wasn't hurt, that the shaking wasn't so bad out at Ilam. Here it felt like we were on a trampoline that just kept bouncing.

Katie and Shona would be following their family quake plans by now. *Go home. Wait there. Stay safe.* I should go home too. That's what I was supposed to

do. I didn't want to be here with a bleeding man and a woman who might give birth at any second. She shifted on the bench, wincing. 'Hey! The baby's not coming, is it?'

She gave a tiny laugh. 'No. I promise.'

Sirens. The throb of helicopters. Cracking followed by crashing as more masonry gave up and fell. Dust and grit and sheets of paper.

People walked by, faces blank with shock. A couple of boys in Boys' High uniforms ran towards each other, arms out to crush each other in a hug. Still nobody stopped with offers of help.

A policeman strode through the crowd shouting, 'Hagley Park. Go to Hagley Park. Keep going. Hagley Park.'

I ached to get up and join the tide of shocked, dusty people walking away from the desperate city. It was cold now. I wished the sun would come out again. I wished my cardigan wasn't under the man's head. His eyes were shut. The woman kept talking to him. She asked him his name.

'Ian.' Long pause. 'Ian MacKenzie.'

'Don't go to sleep, Ian MacKenzie. You're going to be okay, but you have to stay awake.'

He said something, or it could have been just a moan.

She took it for an answer. 'Good. You're doing well, Ian. My name's Selina. And this is...'

'Lyla.'

Her husband arrived. He put his arms around his family. Tears from both of them. He squatted down

to check Ian. 'I'll get help. There's triage setting up in Latimer Square.' Eli wailed as his father ran away.

Cathedral Square emptied. Eli watched the helicopters. Selina talked to Ian, nagging until he made a noise in response. I couldn't think of anything to say to him. I was so cold. A woman hurried towards us, her arms full of a pile of white hotel bathrobes. She gave us one each. 'It's getting chilly now.' She was gone before we could thank her.

Blood gushed as soon as I took the pressure off the wound. I slapped my hands back in place. Selina wrapped the robe around my shoulders and wiped blood from Ian's face with it. It made a difference, being warm.

The ground kept shaking. Selina's husband came back with men carrying a door. They lifted Ian onto it and told me to walk beside him. 'Keep the pressure on as much as you can.'

I tried, but blood ran out from under my hand. My mind kept skipping ahead. Dad would be doing triage in Latimer Square. Mum would be helping people but I couldn't guess where she'd be.

It was only two blocks from Cathedral Square to Latimer Square – but it was two blocks over broken roads filled with rubble and shocked people. Aftershocks kept the ground unsteady. I could only hold one hand pressed to Ian's head. I hoped it would be enough.

We got there. The men lowered the door to the ground. One of them put an arm round my shoulders in a brief hug. 'Well done, but you go home now, eh.'

A woman bent over Ian. 'We'll take over now. Good work.' She had an Aussie accent.

'Will he be okay?' I could only whisper.

She didn't raise her eyes from Ian's bloody head. 'Hope so. Time will tell. At least he's got a chance, thanks to you.'

He had to be all right. He had to live. I stepped away to look around me. The square thronged with people: the injured, the helpers and those like me who were searching for family. The ground rolled. People screamed.

My parents weren't there.