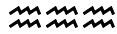


# *Shaky Ground*



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**Hadley Hoover**

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## **Dedication**

Kendall, I'm stickin' with you, Love. What a ride we're on, hmm?

## **Also by Hadley Hoover**

### The Prairie Rose Trilogy

*Uncharted Territory*

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### The Dutch Stories

*Rough Terrain*

*Unguarded Edge*

*Late Harvest*

### The California Stories

*Rogue Wave*

*Prevailing Winds*

*Miles Apart*

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Special appreciation to Barbara Kinnick for skillfully guiding me to the appropriate father-daughter musical pieces which are so vital to this story. Any musical blunders are my own—no reflection on your considerable skills, Barb!

Thanks to Nancy Harris, the Executive Director of the Mendocino Music Festival, for allowing me to insert my fictional storyline into the altogether real-and-wonderful array of superb performers at the 1994 annual extravaganza. While readers should not expect to find Bibs Johnson Whipple on the actual 1994 program, one can learn more about "the real thing" that continues every year on the edge of the continent. Check out their website at: [www.mendocinomusic.com](http://www.mendocinomusic.com).



## Part I

*If you picked up this book thinking it would be about earthquakes, I really should warn you: it's not—even though I have titled my thoughts recorded herein with the enigmatic label of "Shaky Ground."*

*I always name my journals, and there have been many over the years. Words literally spill out of me, either verbally or via my pen. But this is the first time I settled on a title even before writing a word. Other titles came easier when I filled in the last blank page and reviewed the contents. This time I knew the title before I had even paid for the blank-paged book with its lush-and-lovely burgundy leather cover.*

*As a 51-year-old former English teacher, I would be a fool to write anything remotely scientific. My relative success in the required college-level math and science courses rested on a certain engineering student's skillful tutoring. He drilled it into my thick skull; I remembered long enough to pass the tests—and then I returned the favor to him for his required English and literature classes.*

*So, if you have questions about Shakespeare or how to develop an outline, let's talk. Are you having trouble with grammar or understanding symbolism in poetry? Then I—Bibs Johnson Whipple—am your woman. But everything I know about earthquakes is pretty much what any Californian knows.*

*We Left-Coasters live with the knowledge that The Big One is right around the corner. While we don't wring our hands and whimper about it, we do tend to view our spot on the planet a bit differently, even in Mendocino County where Cory (the aforementioned tutor, and now my husband) and I live.*

*This is not a locale known for quakes, so why even think (let alone worry) about shaky ground? Ah . . . a good question, my friend.*

*While this book is not scientific, it is about the intensely personal shakes and jolts that rattle us at unpredictable times. Because, when you think about it, we all live on shaky ground in some respect, don't we?*

*I'm there now—in 1994—smack-dab in the middle of what promises to be my private Big One. We'll get to the WHO-WHAT-WHERE-WHEN details (although the WHY-aspect still eludes me), but first indulge me as I recall the tremors my internal Richter Scale revealed, had I not been blind to so many clues . . .*

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**THE RICHTER SCALE:** A mathematical calculation using a logarithmic scale to compare the magnitude of earthquakes, determined from the amplitude of waves recorded by seismographs.

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**MAY 1946:** When my Sunday School teacher with a hairy mole on her chin (how vividly *that* memory lingers, though her name has faded) told our four-year-olds' class that God keeps a record of our wrong-doings, some kids looked scared but it didn't upset me. As soon as I could spell, I intended to do the same thing—about other people!

A plan began to take shape at the San Luis Obispo Public Library the next day. My best friend, Cory Whipple, and I made weekly trips to this enchanting fortress of information and entertainment under the watchful eye of his grandpa.

Ever since I had learned how to print my name, the cards tucked into pockets pasted inside back covers of library books intrigued me. Though I couldn't read yet, I liked looking at the handwriting. I tried to imagine who wrote with wiggly letters, or what kid dared to write so big the name took up nearly six lines, or who dotted one letter so hard it poked a hole in the middle of a word on the other side.

That day, with my Sunday School teacher's startling revelation ringing in my head, for some reason I asked Grandpa John about the cards' purpose. He explained it was how the librarians kept track of who checked out the book.

*Kept Track.* Powerful words.

The day my own plan truly fluttered its wings came several weeks after the informative Sunday School lesson and Grandpa John's unwitting elucidation. I had taken a book off the shelf and extracted the card for my usual review. *Oh no!* In my consternation over my discovery, I forgot the NO RUNNING IN THE LIBRARY rule and pounded my way past several silent and now frowning readers to the Circulation Desk. In a voice spiked with hysteria, I blurted, "I want to check out this book, but the card's full!"

To my consternation, the librarian merely rolled a crisp blank card into the boxy black typewriter and rhythmically pecked out mysterious details along the top edge. Sliding the curled new card across the counter, she said with a pleasant smile, "Here you go, Bibs," and handed me a pencil.

"But . . ." I protested, "I'm not the first person to read the book!"

"No, but you can be the first to sign this card."

Though she wasn't the woman *In Charge* of the library, she was an *Adult* and I was a *Child*. The *Adult* was obviously waiting for the *Child* to do what was required *Without Making a Scene* so the *Adult* could get back to doing important adult things.

Heart aquiver beneath my cotton pinafore, I bit my lip to keep it steady, gripped the pencil and printed my name—not the everyday BIBS, but the full and formal BARBARA JANE JOHNSON (which took two lines). Without another word, I returned the card to the librarian. I found Cory exploring bookshelves in search of new treasures, and hissed near his ear, "Don't pick a book if the card's almost full!"

He looked understandably alarmed at my words and pulled me down beside him. In frantic whispers, I brought him up to speed on the situation. Within minutes, I had a convert whose fervor and horror regarding such shabby practices matched my own.

Trudging home behind Grandpa John with the California sun turning our bodies into long silhouettes, Cory and I abandoned our usual game of stepping on shadows in favor of a lively discussion on honesty and full-disclosure. Granted, our terms for such lofty concepts ran more along the lines of "something's fishy," but our passion was strong as we stewed and stormed our way through the moral dilemmas inherent in the library's casual stance on record-keeping.

I don't recall Grandpa John's comments. Likely he only listened, which would have been in keeping with his broad-minded stance that it was good for children to work through some dilemmas without adult intervention.

On our next trip to the library, I was pleased to see the Head Librarian on duty. Perhaps *now* I could get action of a more responsible nature. I grasped the edge of the counter and stood on tiptoe to position myself more within her view. Choosing a conciliatory approach rather than outright accusation, I asked politely, "Excuse me? What happens when the card inside the little pocket in the back of a book gets full of names?"

"Why, we just type up a new card and toss the old one," the woman replied, her vivid blue eyes twinkling at me through wire-rimmed glasses.

My gaze would have withered a person of lesser fortitude than she innately possessed. "You throw them away?" I gasped. With my eyebrows furrowed into angry inverted V's, I added sternly, "I don't think you should do that. You should save them."

"If we did that, we would soon have no room for new books, Bibs!" Her chuckle faded in direct proportion to my increasing glare.

"God *Keeps Track* of what we do, you know," I retorted. "I think you should keep those cards." I landed back on my heels with a thump

and stalked away, determined to find all the books with only one blank line remaining and hide them so the cards could never get full.

Alas, my walk-around revealed few places safe from eagle-eyed librarians and the sun that illuminated every corner so I reluctantly abandoned the idea. However, all that thinking was not wasted: I had formulated a method for keeping tabs on those who wronged me—a problem that had been percolating in my head long before my Sunday School teacher's timely disclosure about God. Unfortunately I needed to involve at least one of my parents to carry it out, and I resolved to do so at supper that very evening.

We Johnsons have never been a noisy family—not compared to the Whipple household next door. In fact, unless Dad was playing the piano or listening to radio news with Edward R Murrow or Mom was using the carpet sweeper or beating eggs for a cake, our house was so quiet a person standing on the porch might think no one was home. But at Cory's house, someone was always laughing or calling up the stairs or humming a lively tune or teasing. Sometimes in the summer when windows were open we could hear their frivolity, even from next door. That amazed me, but made Mom and Dad shake their heads in inexpressible disgust.

Birdie, the Whipple's housekeeper whom Cory and I adored, loved us right back "somethin' fierce," as we heard her say often, as in: "I love you two hooligans somethin' fierce, but you'll be the death of me yet, if'n you don't quit sneakin' up and 'boo-ing' me like that." Birdie's sense of pitch was cock-eyed, but she and Grandma Letty sang along with the radio while they cooked and baked or cleaned silverware together.

On some songs, they would wipe their hands on their aprons and reach out for Cory and me (who, on baking days, were predictably underfoot) and the four of us would dip and spin around the room in a giggling frenzy that always ended with hugs all around and samples of whatever was baking that day or already in the cookie jar.

When we sought out Grandpa John, we could follow his whistle to find him weeding the garden, or in the garage where he hammered and sawed, built and repaired. Or he might be on a ladder filling the birdfeeders with sunflower seeds from the Jack-in-the-beanstalk-sized plants that lined the back fence. He rarely just *sat*, but even when he did so and fell asleep, his snores signaled his spot in the house.

When Aunt Fayleen and Aunt R'Lou were home (they both taught school), the Whipple house buzzed even louder. Aunt R'Lou loved to laugh—she laughed on the telephone, or in her bedroom by herself, or with her sister about secret twin-things. And she laughed

with Cory and me, seeing the humor in our cavorting and pranks and inquisitiveness—something Mom and Dad never did.

One time when Aunt R'Lou mended my pocket without a single scolding word about too many rocks ripping it loose, I squeezed her hard around her waist and whispered in her ear, "I wish you were my mother."

She just knelt beside me and hugged me back for a long time and didn't say a word. I could hardly wait to be in fourth grade and have Aunt R'Lou for my teacher, 'cept she'd have to be *Miss Whipple* to me in school—a thought which left Cory and me in stitches every time we practiced *that*.

Aunt Fayleen liked to read aloud—and she had lots of practice. At least one half hour of every week during the school year, she read what she called "The Classics" to her high school students. But during the summer, Aunt Fayleen did "Exploratory Reading" for her own enjoyment—and it became ours, as well.

Summer afternoons, while Birdie snapped beans and Grandma Letty mended, and Aunt R'Lou painted her fingernails Seashell Pink, and Grandpa John whittled sticks into intricate chains, Cory and I would curl up on opposite ends of the sofa with Tug lost in dog-dreams stretched out between us. We would all listen, a rapt audience, as Aunt Fayleen read grand stories with intricate plots and heady dialogue which Cory and I barely understood, but absorbed like the sponges we were.

Aunt Fayleen's delivery was mesmerizing and, at young ages, we plunged deep into the well of imagination—stretching words and intrigue. Best of all, she never brushed me aside if I sidled up after a day's reading to inquire, "That word in the story . . . *punc-til-i-ous* . . . what does it mean?"

Mom and Dad must have realized how boring our house was to me, but the best they could do to compete with the Johnsons was to attempt to infuse mealtimes with more than the sound of silverware on china as we three consumed our food. Even so, it wasn't like life next door.

I much preferred eating at Cory's house, especially on nights like this when I suspected the vegetable dish was covered because Mom knew I hated whatever was in it. But it was too late to wrangle an invitation next door—and besides, I had a task to accomplish.

After Dad's mumbled thanks to God for our provisions, I slipped a casual question into the mundane table conversation between my parents. "Where can I get little cards about this size?" I held up the napkin I had painstakingly folded to an approximation of the three-by-five-inch library cards.

Often bewildered by a four-year-old's wide-ranging interests, Dad gave my napkin only a cursory glance. He divided two big meatballs into bite-sized squares on my plate with the same precision he devoted to his work as a certified public accountant. "I imagine Landow's Stationery Store on Morro Street carries them, don't you think, Lorene?" He glanced at my mother for confirmation as he tipped a ladle of gravy into the well I had dug in my mashed potatoes. "But there's no need to spend money when I can bring scratch paper home from the office that will work just fine."

I watched with dismay as Dad lifted the cover off the vegetables and spooned out a veritable mountain of lima beans. He piled them next to the roast on my plate like a load of dry rocks, destroying what could have been the perfect supper if *only* the covered dish had held corn. But even the calamity of chalky limas couldn't divert me from my mission. "I want *new* paper. Your office paper always has numbers on one side and I might need both sides clean. How much do cards cost at that store?" I persisted.

Mom ventured a guess and then, hoping to forestall the inevitable clean-plate argument at meal's end, she dropped a dollop of butter on the vile beans.

"Oh," I said dejectedly, my hopes slithering away as quickly as the butter on hot beans. I was not sure how many coins Mom's estimate represented, but was afraid my piggybank would prove deficient, even with the recent addition of several birthday nickels. "That's a lot of money," I said with a sigh.

"Sure is, Bibs," Dad agreed, "especially when *my* offer is free. Might want to think about it some more, hmm?"

I lined up the dreaded vegetable like footprints—a dragon's, or maybe a hippopotamus'—around the edge of my plate. At least six beans were on the verge of shedding their skins, just like the snake Cory and I saw in the alley. *Yuck!* For the millionth time I longed for a dog like Tug, Cory's four-legged friend, who would gobble up vegetables that make me shudder. Tug even ate spinach, though Cory always had to remember to check his nose for tell-tale green slime.

As if reading my mind, Dad recounted a newspaper story about a tree-climbing dog. Usually I would have hooted over this, but between lima beans and the dismal realization that *Keeping Track* was a costly effort, I had little mental energy to spare for funny stories. By alternating lima-meat-potato, I worked my way through the meal.

Mom talked about snails attacking the garden. *Lima-meat-potato. Gag-chew-savor.*

Dad suggested getting tickets to hear a famous pianist play Beethoven. *Lima-meat-potato. Gag-chew-savor.*