

# The Nature of Fragile Things

by Susan Meissner

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## About the Book

**April 18, 1906: A massive earthquake rocks San Francisco just before daybreak, igniting a devouring inferno. Lives are lost, lives are shattered, but some rise from the ashes forever changed.**

Sophie Whalen is a young Irish immigrant so desperate to get out of a New York tenement that she answers a mail-order bride ad and agrees to marry a man she knows nothing about. San Francisco widower Martin Hocking proves to be as aloof as he is mesmerizingly handsome. Sophie quickly develops deep affection for Kat, Martin's silent five-year-old daughter, but Martin's odd behavior leaves her with the uneasy feeling that something about her newfound situation isn't right.

Then one early-spring evening, a stranger at the door sets in motion a transforming chain of events. Sophie discovers hidden ties to two other women. The first, pretty and pregnant, is standing on her doorstep. The second is hundreds of miles away in the American Southwest, grieving the loss of everything she once loved.

The fates of these three women intertwine on the eve of the devastating earthquake, thrusting them onto a perilous journey that will test their resiliency and resolve and, ultimately, their belief that love can overcome fear.

From the acclaimed author of *THE LAST YEAR OF THE WAR* and *AS BRIGHT AS HEAVEN* comes a gripping novel about the bonds of friendship and mother love, and the power of female solidarity.

## Discussion Guide

**Note to reader: Many spoilers lay ahead! Please consider reading the book before looking at this guide.**

**1.** What do you think of Sophie's decision to answer Martin's newspaper advertisement? Do you think that her decision

to move to San Francisco was foolishly risky, or was it in fact her best opportunity to get out of a tight spot in the tenements?

**2.** Talk for a moment about the relationship between Kat and Sophie. How would you describe the health of their relationship before the earthquake? How about afterward? How might Martin's parenting styles affect the way Kat approaches new relationships?

**3.** A major theme in this story is the power of female solidarity. Sophie develops great affection for Belinda and Candace despite the unfortunate circumstances that bring them together. How does Libby's shallow acquaintance with Sophie further outline the importance of genuine female friendships, especially considering the women's circumstances at this point in history?

**4.** Do you think Kat is fully aware of the peculiar connection between Sophie, Belinda and Candace? Why do you think she is instantly enamored of her infant half sister?

**5.** Beyond their ties to Martin, what else do Sophie, Belinda and Candace have in common?

**6.** Sophie explains to Candace that Martin was moving to attack Belinda before Kat pushed him down the stairs. What do you think Martin's plan was? What do you think was running through Kat's mind in that moment?

**7.** In chapter 25, as Sophie surveys the rubble that was once their San Francisco home, she notes that "It is the nature of the earth to shift. It is the nature of fragile things to break. It is the nature of fire to burn." What is she referring to when she says "fragile things"?

**8.** Sophie speaks twice about not saving either of her husbands when it had been in her power to do so. She believes Martin died inside the house where she left him unable to escape, and Colm drowned right in front of her after she hit him with an iron skillet. But she says killing a person and letting someone die aren't the same thing. Is she right? What would you have done in her shoes?

**9.** Though Sophie and Candace both love Kat, they have very different relationships with her. How has this book changed your understanding of motherhood?

**10.** Near the end of the book, Sophie remarks, "What a beautiful family Martin has made of us, despite himself." What is she saying here? How did it make you feel when she said that? What made the family she is talking about beautiful?

**11.** In chapter 32, Deputy Logan releases Sophie, and even allows her to keep the records from her sister's death to protect her false identity. He says, "I believe in justice, too, but I know that sometimes it is not delivered in the way it should be. Sometimes it is not delivered at all, and the evil man walks free.... I believe in justice, but I believe it is best administered by those commissioned by the rest of humanity to give it." Discuss what this means to you.

**12.** Do you think that in the end, Sophie, Belinda and Kat had happy lives? Why? How do you think each one was changed by what they collectively experienced?

## Author Bio

Susan Meissner is a former managing editor of a weekly newspaper and an award-winning columnist. She is the *USA Today* bestselling author of *A MAP TO PARADISE*, *ONLY THE BEAUTIFUL*, *THE NATURE OF FRAGILE THINGS*, *THE LAST YEAR OF THE WAR*, *AS BRIGHT AS HEAVEN*, *A BRIDGE ACROSS THE OCEAN*, *SECRETS OF A CHARMED LIFE*, *A FALL OF MARIGOLDS* and *STARS OVER SUNSET BOULEVARD*, among other novels.

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