

GRACE WAS DIMLY AWARE OF CARS filling the street, parked in crazy angles.

She saw Gage standing protectively in front of Caro, who was now seated inside a fire truck, being examined by one of the firefighters. Other than being pale, she looked fine.

Relief made Grace giddy.

Noah pulled her against his chest. She heard the hammer of his heart, almost as loud as her own. "You're crazy brave, you know that?"

"Not brave. I was terrified," she whispered. "But I couldn't leave Bacall behind. I couldn't let her be hurt."

"Of course you couldn't. Maybe next time you could ask for help though. I can't take too many shocks like the one I had when I saw you out on that beam," he said hoarsely. "Sorry."

"To hell with sorry." He kissed her, his grip suddenly tight, his breath shuddering.

And Grace fell into the kiss, drawing on his strength and the desire that flared almost in the same breath. She wanted to stay. She needed to lean. With the danger still pounding in her blood, she needed to touch him and be touched.

But there were too many questions that remained. The earthquake could have damaged her house, the shelter, even the hospital where her grandfather was. She had to check, to be certain they were safe.

"Noah, I have to"

"I know." He smiled wryly. "You have to check on everyone else. Let's go find a car. Where to first—hospital, animal shelter or your house?"

"The shelter is on the way to the hospital. I know my grandfather will want a full report. I'll call and check on him while we drive." She looked over her shoulder at the Harbor House. A fallen tree covered the front lawn and most of the front porch. All the ornate old railing was down. Broken glass glistened over the lawn. Jilly was talking to Gage and Caro, pointing to the roof. She turned, white-faced, as if she felt Grace's gaze.

"But first I need to talk to Jilly and Caro," she said softly.

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SO MUCH LOSS.

They had invested a part of themselves in this crazy venture. They had planned and sweated to set their dream in motion, and twenty minutes of nature's fury had swept all their work away to nothing.

At least the old house was still standing.

Noah watched her walk to her friends, staying back just where he was. They needed their time to grieve and to support, to build their strength for the next battle. They stood together, silent, shoulders stiff as firefighters raced up toward the house.

Noah felt Grace's sadness seep out into the silence, joining the sadness of her waiting friends.

They were strong, he told himself. They had each other, with a bond that was nearly tangible. Proud and tough, all of them. But when the adrenaline faded and the knowledge of the loss hit hard, Noah wanted to be there to hold Grace. There would be questions to ask and answer, plans to make.

This was home for her now. He didn't want to be on the far side of the continent while she chased a dream here by the sea. He had been pondering the possibilities for weeks.

It wouldn't be easy.

Building something that lasted forever never was. And forever was what he wanted.

Noah heard Gage crunch over the fallen branches, sliding his fists deep into his pockets as he stared at the wreckage on the front yard.

"They're all safe," Noah said. "It could have been worse."

Gage nodded grimly. "I keep telling myself that. But it was too close. Too damned close. And now there will be repairs, structural damage. Who knows where it will stop, or if the whole place is even safe to repair. Maybe!" He shook his head. "I wouldn't say that in front of Caro. But I'll say it to you. I don't want them in danger." His voice hardened. "And I'll be leaving soon. Will you be going back?"

"I can manage a few more days. I'll do everything I can."

It wasn't the answer Gage wanted. They both knew it.

They stood in the slanting sunlight, and the broken windows looked like haunted eyes.

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NOAH INSISTED ON DRIVING Grace's truck, determined that she should rest.

She took quiet, jerky breaths that told him the adrenaline was still ripping through her, leaving every nerve raw. This was the dangerous transition time when you tried to fit the memories of danger back into the neat, orderly boxes of your regular life.

Most of the time it didn't work. Bad things happened then, Noah knew. He had experienced that state all too often.

So he did the only thing he could—listen. Not offering empty hope and not telling Grace that every thing would be fine. The house could be a total loss. They wouldn't know anything for sure until a structural engineer checked everything out. Noah would get a few names from a government contact back on the East Coast. He wanted the very best people to ensure the safety of the woman he loved.

Meanwhile, Grace moved restlessly in the seat. She put one arm on the windowsill, then put it down again. "Tell me again why you're driving and not me."

"So you can rest. Not that you're doing very much of it. You've been through something pretty traumatic. It might leave you with the shakes. That's what adrenaline does."

"Oh. Right. I'm talking with the adrenaline expert. Except I still don't know exactly what it is you do. I don't

know who do it for, either. I know you seem to have experience with dangerous things. No. Forget I said that. She sat stiffly, then raised a hand. "I'm not going to ask. You tell me if you want to or if you can." She didn't give him time to answer, glaring out the window. Noah saw sadness fill her face as they passed another ancient tree, now overturned, roots upended and once strong branches shattered.

"Just don't tell me that we can walk away from the Harbor House, because we can't. It wasn't my idea at first. It was Jilly and Caro who had the plan." She drummed her fingers on the dashboard, frowning. "But as soon as I saw what they had planned, as soon as I realized what this place could be, I was in completely. You have to understand, it's not just a building or a café. It's a place to belong. Jilly never had a home. She grew up in foster care and had a tough childhood," Grace said quietly. "Caro, well, she lost her parents when she was young. I lost mine, too. It's been a bond that we never talk about." She cleared her throat. "I guess we're all looking for a home. The Harbor House was going to be all that and more. Everyone on Summer Island has memories of that rambling, beautiful house. It means something to anyone who has spent a summer here. Walking away from a dream like that just isn't an option."

Noah didn't answer.

Grace shot him a look. "Anything to say?"

"Nope. You've said it all right so far. Dreams don't come often. When they do, you need to reach out for them with both hands. You need to grip them tight and see where they take you."

Noah was doing that right now. Only his dream had brown hair, a stubborn nose and a body that made his heart skitter. "So go on. What are you going to do next?" She needed to talk, not to dam all her feelings up inside. Even if it was underhanded, Noah meant to make her talk. "Are you going to take time to think things over? At the very least, it's going to be expensive to make the repairs. Maybe you should walk away."

"The last thing we'll do is give up." She shot him a fierce look, and her hands locked together at her waist. All the tension of the day focused, caught in the space of her fingers. "I already told you, walking away isn't an option. Weren't you listening? Don't you understand why?" She stopped and gave him a crooked little smile. "Oh, I see. You're baiting me. Testing for a commitment. Very clever."

She drummed her fingers on the dashboard again, frowning at the coast road. "So what will we do next? We'll regroup. Analyze. Get estimates. Plan. I'm good at planning." She jammed her hand through her hair. "Probably we'll cry a lot. We worked so hard in there, Noah. All those broken dishes, ruined shelves, shattered windows. All the hours we put in, wasted. It feels like someone tore off my arm."

He reached across, rested his hand on hers. "It's going to be tough, honey. But you're tough too. And you have two strong friends to back you up. My bet's on you."

"So you're really not going to try to talk me out of this?"

"Could I succeed if I did?"

If she backed down now, Grace wasn't the woman he took her for.

"Of course I won't back down. What I meant was, aren't you going to try? You know all the clichés. Biting off more than you can chew. A house that's turning into a money pit. More dreams than common sense." She gave a tight, shaky laugh. "That's what any sane person would say, right?"

Noah didn't answer. He had to let her work through this for herself. He had to let her be strong for herself. It was the best gift he could give her.

"Of course, we're not complete idiots. If the house is ruined, then it's ruined. If there are beams missing or structural disasters, well, I guess we'll walk away. We'll turn around and close our eyes and let them bulldoze the whole thing back down to dirt. Then we'll move on." She took a deep, shuddering breath. "Oh, God, please don't let it come to that. I really, really hope it won't come to that," she whispered.

A tear trickled down her cheek. The sight of that single shining sphere drilled right into Noah's chest. He wanted to stop the car, pull her into his lap and kiss away the pain.

An ambulance raced past, siren flashing, another reminder that although the earthquake had passed, its effects were still echoing.

Grace sat stiffly. "I'm lucky to be alive. I'm lucky that no one was hurt. I know that. Whatever happens, we'll deal with it. But I can't bear living three thousand miles away from you, Noah. You're part of my dream, too." Her voice came in a rush. "I want to reach out with both hands and grip what we have, Noah. I won't walk away from that dream, either."

Noah's hands tightened on the wheel. How had she gotten out the words first? If the disaster hadn't struck, he would have already told her exactly how he felt. They would have been making plans for their future. He needed to do that now.

He was about to pull over onto the grass beside the road when Grace leaned over and gestured. "There. Turn left where the road forks. The animal shelter is right up that twisting little road." Her shoulders were tense as if she needed to prepare herself for another shock.

She pulled out her cell phone and dialed, frowning when she got an out-of-service response. "Still no cellular service. I need to call the hospital."

"Aftereffects of the earthquake. Use the landline in the animal shelter."

Noah turned up the driveway and saw half a dozen cars parked in the gravel lot, but no ambulances or fire trucks. That was a good sign. There also didn't seem to be any fallen trees or downed power lines. The building was halfway up the hill, with the ridge behind it. Maybe it had been spared.

But his personal conversation would have to wait until she had checked on the shelter.

Grace barely waited for him to come to a halt, jumping down and running over the gravel. As soon as he turned off the motor, Noah followed. He heard the frenzied sound of barking.

By the time he got to the door, Grace was talking with a lanky young man who looked harassed, gesturing toward the back of the building. Everything was clean and neat. There were no fallen shelves, no broken furniture. Noah followed Grace down the hall, listening to the noise grow louder. The man Grace called him Andy "glanced at Noah.

"Why don't you give us a minute or two? You're a stranger, and right now every animal in the place could use a jolt of valium. We don't want to add to any stress."

"No problem. I'll be right out here."

Grace gave him a grateful smile and then pushed the heavy door. The sound of barking and shrill meows grew deafening. She and Andy joined four other people who were moving from cage to cage, checking locks and security of the wooden structures. One Chihuahua threw itself wildly against the mesh door of the cage in a panic, and Grace knelt down. Noah could almost hear her speaking with quiet reassurance. Andy reached into his pocket and gave her a dog treat, which she maneuvered through the holes in the cage.

The little dog stopped barking, and treats were dispensed all along the row. Blessed silence returned. At the far wall Grace sat down and opened a cage, gently lifting out a collie puppy who appeared to know her well. As Grace spoke, the little tail began to wag. The dog licked her face furiously, gobbling down two treats.

Noah saw her gesture to Andy and say something that Noah couldn't hear. The young man opened two more cages and two more dogs, no longer panicked but ecstatic, raced around Grace in wild circles.

Noah decided he would vanish for a few minutes and do a quick structural check on his own. In his line of work, he had been taught to look for major warning signs of damage, cracks or sagging that dictated an immediate evacuation.

He found a flashlight and took his time circling the building, leaning down to check every inch of the foundation, pulling aside bushes so he wouldn't miss any cracks. He found no shattered windows or broken cement.

The building seemed to have been spared. Of course, they would need a real analysis by an expert. That should go to the top of their list. But for now, Noah felt more optimistic after what he had seen and what he hadn't seen.

When he walked inside, Grace was waiting for him in the hallway. The collie puppy nestled in her arms, tail wagging. "Everything looks good in here. Some traumatized animals, but they're calming down. You want to take a quick tour?" "Sure." Noah noticed the natural way she held the dog, the way she spoke calmly while her fingers moved with slow reassurance through the dog's fur.

Years of experience in each touch, he thought. She had watched and learned well. Yes, her grand father would be very proud of her.

"Andy, meet Noah. He's visiting from D.C. I hope we'll be seeing a lot of him here."

"Nice to meet you, sir." Andy raised an eyebrow but asked no personal questions. "Oh, I almost forgot to tell you, Grace. Caro's grandmother called from the hospital. She said their phones have been down, but things are fine. She was going to take your grandfather down to the cafeteria for some ice cream. While I had her on the phone, I spoke to Dr. Lindstrom and gave him a full report on the animals. He was worried that some of them might have been hurt. He was worried about you, too, Grace. I told Morgan that you'd call soon."

"My cell phone's out. Is the phone still working here?"

"We got power back right before you arrived. Be my guest. I'm going to finish checking the cages in the other room. Then chow time." He slanted Noah a thoughtful glance. "If you're in the mood, I could use a hand back there."

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THE ADRENALINE WAS FINALLY wearing off.

Noah had been right about that. He had been right about a lot of things.

Grace put down the phone, glad that she was sitting down. Her knees felt weak and shaky, and she would have killed for a cup of coffee. But she had managed to reassure her grandfather about her own safety and the state of the animal shelter. Despite the earthquake tremors he had felt, he was calm, and Grace knew much of that calm was due to Morgan, who had been there to distract him during the ordeal.

He had asked her about the Harbor House and whether it had been hurt. Grace had tried to be reassuring. But now that the call was over, the anxiety returned in a flood. What would they do if the repairs were too expensive? And what if it was beyond repairing? What if?

No.

Grace closed her eyes. She had meant exactly what she had told Noah. They would plan and analyze, then face the realities. And if one dream ended, another dream began somewhere else. Her grandfather's accident had taught her that much.

But right now she wanted a puppy in her arms. She wanted to feel a wagging tail and the lick of a warm tongue. She wanted comfort in a restless body.

She wanted

Her breath caught.

Noah was flat on his back in the middle of the floor, surrounded by barking dogs. Andy had opened the cages of some of the more docile dogs and half a dozen of them had raced out to explore. Noah was holding a package of dog treats up in the air, laughing as a German shepherd sat down in the middle of his chest, barking noisily.

Noah just kept laughing and the fight for the treats continued.

As she pushed open the door, Noah's eyes met hers, glinting with humor and intelligence and more than a little mischief. Grace felt the emotion build, felt the love sweep over her and overwhelm her.

But there were still things they had to discuss.

"Well, I've got more calls to make. Catch up with you later." Andy cleared his throat and left, closing the door carefully.

She sat down on the floor next to Noah, pulling the big dog from his chest. "We need to talk. I want to make plans. And I can't when I'm worrying about you." She took a short breath. "I can't stand not knowing if you're safe."

Noah sat up and cupped her face with hands that weren't quite steady. "I'm careful. I'm trained, honey. Somebody has to do the job. But it won't be for much longer." He brushed the tear from her cheek and kissed her, whispering her name. "I was going to tell you this morning. I thought maybe" Noah smiled as the collie puppy tried to burrow between them, looking for more treats. "I thought you might come visit."

"Transferred where?"

"To Paris, for three months. Then I can consider other options here in the States. Probably most will be administrative. While I'm in France, I was hoping you could come and show me the ropes. Versailles. The Louvre." His hands tightened.

â€œIâ€™ll only be there a few months. And after thatâ€™weâ€™ll work out the rest. I love you, Grace. I donâ€™t want to live three thousand miles away from you, either. I want us to make this work.â€

Her hands slid into his hair. â€œSay it again.â€

â€œVersailles. The Louvreâ€”â€

â€œNo. The part about loving me. Iâ€™m listening with all my heart, because itâ€™s whole again, Noah. And Iâ€™m feeling the kind of love Iâ€™d given up on, the one that lasts through six kids, twelve grandkids and a house you grow old in together. But say it again first.â€ She looked down, laughing as the collie wriggled into her lap and licked Noahâ€™s chin wildly. â€œWe both want to hear you say it.â€

â€œI love you. I loved you from the moment I saw you rifling through that Dumpster. I love how you didnâ€™t care that you ruined your coat and shoes to do the right thing.â€ His mouth curved. â€œI even loved you when you cheated.â€

â€œWait. I didnâ€™t cheat.â€

â€œSnow down the collar. A definite foul. Then you tripped me during our snowball fight.â€

Her eyes glistened. â€œI didnâ€™t trip you.â€

â€œYes, you did. You knocked my feet right out from under me. I went down hard for the count and never got up again. I was a broken man.â€

His easy grin told a different story.

â€œYou didnâ€™t act broken.â€ She traced his cheek.

â€œFunny thing, I discovered I liked it. I wanted you to keep on kicking my feet out from under me.â€ Noah scooped the puppy up and rested him on his shoulder. The dog barked once and then sat happily, watching the activity from his perch.

Feeling safe, just the way Grace felt safe.

Noah scratched the dogâ€™s head, his smile fading. â€œI was going to wait for a better time. I wanted candlelight and a few dozen roses to say this!â€ He took a breath, his eyes very dark as he dug in his pocket and took out a small velvet box.

â€œWill you marry me, Grace? It may be too soon or too much to think about now, butâ€”â€

He opened the box. A ring of twisted silver with three yellow diamonds gleamed against the velvet. â€œIt was my grandmotherâ€™s. Iâ€™ve been carrying it around with me, trying to find the right time to ask you. But it never came.â€ His eyes turned grave. â€œOf course if you donâ€™t like the setting, we couldâ€”â€

â€œYes.â€ She took a shaky breath and leaned closer. â€œYes, of course Iâ€™ll marry you. And I love the ring,â€ she whispered. â€œItâ€™s perfect just the way it is.â€

Weâ€™re perfect together just the way we are, Grace thought.

Noah didnâ€™t mind the dog hair or the puppy breath that surrounded them. He looked as if he was having the time of his life.

So did the dogs racing around him.

You could always tell about a person by the way animals reacted, Grace thought. They knew who was a friend. They knew whom they could trust.

A giddy feeling filled her chest. She had been in stage three of infatuation before. Now in one smooth movement she had soared all the way to stage ten. The real thing.

He slid the ring onto her finger. â€œYouâ€™re sure?â€ he asked.

She pulled him down and kissed him. â€œI love you. Iâ€™ve never been more sure of anything in my life.â€ Hearing the break in her voice, the puppy barked and leaned over Noahâ€™s shoulder, licking her face.

Noah slid the puppy gently to the ground. â€œI told you I wouldnâ€™t make it easy to forget us. How we felt together.â€ His arms slid around her waist. â€œHow well we fit.â€ He pulled her closer and kissed her with aching tenderness. â€œLike this.â€

Grace felt her heart dive straight to the bottom of her chest. â€œProve it,â€ she whispered, enjoying the glorious danger of throwing her heart into his keeping.

Knowing there was no safer place on earth than right here in his arms.