

Don't Cry, Love

DON'T CRY, LOVE

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Boyd Thomas London

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CHAPTER 1

THE UNEXPECTED MEETING

The bell above the door of The Salty Siren chimed a cheerful welcome, a counterpoint to the gentle rhythm of the rain pattering against the windowpanes. Elara, nestled in a worn armchair by the window, barely registered the sound. Lost in her world of charcoal and paper, she was sketching the people in the coffee shop. Her brow was furrowed in concentration, her dark curls falling over her shoulder, a stray strand occasionally brushing against the page. The scent of roasted beans and sea salt hung heavily in the air, a familiar comfort in her seaside haven. She loved this little coffee shop.

A sudden splash broke her concentration. A warm, dark liquid splattered across her sketchbook, blurring the delicate lines of her half-finished seascape. Elara gasped, a mixture of annoyance and dismay. Before she could even utter a word, a voice, deep and apologetic, filled the air.

“I am so incredibly sorry!”

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Elara looked up, her eyes meeting a pair of warm hazel eyes framed by unruly dark brown hair that fell messily onto a forehead creased with genuine remorse. He was tall, with broad shoulders and a smile that could melt glaciers. He held a steaming mug of coffee, the source of the unfortunate incident, in a trembling hand. His cheeks flushed a delicate pink, enhancing the already captivating effect of his eyes. He looked utterly disheveled yet somehow even more appealing in his flustered state.

"It's alright," Elara stammered, her voice surprisingly calm despite the damp stain spreading across her work. She couldn't help but notice the faint scent of sandalwood and something else. There was something subtly spicy and alluring clinging to him.

"No, it's not alright," he insisted, his voice a melodious baritone that resonated with unexpected gentleness. "I'll pay for the damage to your sketchbook." He offered a hand, his fingers brushing lightly against hers as he helped her up. The touch sent a shiver down her spine.

"I'm Liam," he said, his smile returning, brighter this time.

“Elara,” she replied, her voice barely a whisper, her heart strangely quickening its pace. His smile widened, a genuine, unguarded expression that revealed a dimple in his left cheek. He was strikingly handsome, she realized, but it was more than just his looks that captivated her. There was a warmth in his eyes, a kind of vulnerability that mirrored her own hidden shyness.

They talked for what felt like hours, their initial awkwardness dissolving into easy laughter and shared confidences. Liam, a musician with a soulful passion for jazz, revealed his dreams of touring Europe. Elara, a budding artist with a talent for capturing the essence of a moment on canvas, shared her aspirations of opening her own gallery. They discovered a shared love for vintage films, rainy days, and the comforting scent of old books.

The coffee shop, once just a background to Elara's artistic pursuits, transformed into a stage for the unfolding of something unexpected, something extraordinary. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee mingled with the sweet scent of anticipation, a tangible manifestation of the potential that hummed between them. The rain outside continued its gentle

rhythm, but within the cozy confines of The Salty Siren, a different kind of storm was brewing a storm of laughter, shared glances, and a burgeoning sense of possibility.

The shared laughter was infectious, a bridge that spanned the initial awkwardness of the coffee spill. Liam's apologies were earnest, his concern genuine. He listened intently as Elara spoke about her art. He didn't just hear her words; he saw the passion that fueled her creativity. And she, in turn, was mesmerized by his music, his stories of late-night jam sessions, his dreams of sharing his talent with the world.

Their conversation flowed effortlessly, a delicate dance of words and unspoken understanding. They talked about their hopes and fears, their vulnerabilities. It was a conversation that revealed not just their shared interests but a surprising depth of emotional connection. In those fleeting moments, surrounded by the comforting hum of the coffee shop, Elara felt a sense of ease and belonging that she rarely experienced. She felt seen, truly seen, for the first time in a long time.

As the afternoon wore on, the initial awkwardness gave way to a comfortable camaraderie. The spilled coffee, a clumsy accident, became the catalyst for an encounter that felt destined. Liam's easy charm and Elara's quiet intensity created a dynamic that was both captivating and intriguing. The air crackled with an unspoken energy, a subtle current of attraction that neither of them could ignore.

The shared glance across the table, the lingering touch of their hands as they reached for the sugar bowl, the unspoken understanding in their eyes – these small gestures spoke volumes. It was a meeting that hinted at a story waiting to unfold, a love story woven into the fabric of a quaint coastal town, amidst the aroma of coffee and the rhythm of the rain.

As Liam helped Elara gather her belongings, a stray lock of her dark hair fell across her face. He gently tucked it behind her ear, their fingers brushing once more. This time, the contact lingered a fraction longer, a silent acknowledgment of the unspoken attraction that hummed between them.

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When they left the coffee shop, the rain had stopped, and a soft golden light bathed the coastal town in a warm glow. The air was crisp and clean, carrying the scent of sea salt and a faint trace of sandalwood – Liam's lingering essence. Elara felt a lightness in her step, a feeling of exhilaration that had nothing to do with the escape from the rain. It was the promise of something new, something beautiful, that danced on the horizon. She knew, with a certainty that surprised even her, that this chance encounter, this seemingly insignificant coffee spill, had irrevocably changed the course of her life. As they parted ways, the memory of Liam's smile, the warmth of his touch, and the melody of his voice would stay with her, a constant reminder of the unexpected joy that had washed over her that afternoon like a gentle tide.

CHAPTER 2

A GROWING RELATIONSHIP

The weeks that followed their meeting at The Salty Siren unfolded like a carefully orchestrated symphony. Each encounter with Liam was a new movement, a progression of shared laughter, whispered confidences, and a growing awareness of the undeniable chemistry between them. Their shared passions for art and music became the score, providing a harmonious backdrop to their burgeoning friendship.

Their conversations were a lively exchange of ideas, a delightful sparring match of intellect and opinion. They debated the merits of different artistic movements, dissecting the nuances of musical composition with the same playful intensity that marked their earlier encounters. Yet, beneath the surface of their intellectual exchanges, a deeper current flowed – a silent acknowledgment of the unspoken attraction that lingered between them.

Art exhibitions became their shared sanctuary, a place where they could lose themselves

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in the vibrant colors and emotional depth of the artwork displayed. They would spend hours discussing their favorite pieces, analyzing the artist's intent, sharing their own interpretations with a level of intimacy that spoke volumes about their growing connection. The hushed reverence of the gallery, the soft glow of the spotlights, the shared whispers of admiration – these details enhanced the unspoken love between them, painting a vivid picture of the emotions that were slowly but surely blossoming.

Beyond the shared artistic experiences, their conversations delved into the deeper aspects of their lives. They spoke about their childhoods, sharing memories filled with both laughter and sorrow. There was a comfort in their honesty, a trust that allowed them to unveil aspects of themselves that had previously been hidden behind a veil of shyness and apprehension. Elara discovered that Liam's seemingly carefree demeanor hid a quiet strength, a depth of feeling she found incredibly endearing. Liam, in turn, was surprised by Elara's quiet intensity, a passion that burned brightly beneath her reserved exterior.

One evening, after a particularly engaging open mic night, they found themselves walking along the beach, the rhythmic crash of waves against the shore providing a soothing counterpoint to their conversation. The moon cast a silver glow on the water, its light dancing on the surface like scattered diamonds. The cool sea breeze ruffled Elara's hair, and she shivered, a small sound that caught Liam's attention. He removed his jacket, the familiar scent of sandalwood filling the air, and gently draped it over her shoulders. The simple gesture, a tender act of unspoken care, sent a wave of warmth through her, intensifying the already palpable connection between them.

On a rainy afternoon, they found themselves curled up in Liam's cozy apartment, the sound of the rain a comforting backdrop to their conversation. They shared old vinyl records, immersing themselves in the music. The intimacy of the moment was palpable, an unspoken understanding hanging in the air shared by them. As Liam reached out to adjust the volume on the record player, his fingers brushed against Elara's hand. The brief contact sent a ripple

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of electricity through her, a silent acknowledgment of the unspoken attraction that was no longer subtle.

One evening, the air heavy with the scent of salt and sea breeze, the moon casting an ethereal glow upon the gently lapping waves, Elara and Liam walked in comfortable silence, the rhythmic crash of the ocean a soothing counterpoint to the unspoken emotions swirling among them. The previous weeks had been a whirlwind of shared laughter, whispered confidences, and a growing awareness of the undeniable spark that crackled between them. Tonight, however, felt different. They reached a secluded cove, the sand soft and cool beneath their feet. Liam turned to Elara, his eyes reflecting the moonlight, a depth of emotion visible in his eyes that she hadn't seen before. He reached out, his hand brushing against hers, sending a shiver of anticipation through her. The touch lingered, a silent question hanging in the air between them. Elara's heart pounded in her chest. She met his gaze, her own eyes mirroring the emotions that surged within her – a mixture of excitement, apprehension, and a deep, undeniable yearning. Their eyes locked, and the world around them seemed to fade away. The sound

of the waves, the feel of the sand, even the gentle sea breeze—all became secondary to the intense connection that pulsed between them.

Liam leaned in, his breath warm against Elara's cheek. The scent of sandalwood, his signature fragrance, filled her senses, enhancing the already intoxicating moment. His touch was gentle, reverent, as if he were handling something precious and irreplaceable. He brushed a stray strand of hair from her face, his fingers lingering on her skin, sending shivers down her spine. It was a kiss that whispered of shared dreams, unspoken desires, and a future yet unwritten. Their bodies clung together, the warmth of their embrace a stark contrast to the cool night air. Elara's arms wrapped around Liam's neck, her fingers tangled in his hair drew her closer, further into the intoxicating embrace. Liam's hands rested on her waist, his touch gentle yet firm, a reassuring presence that calmed her racing heart. The kiss lasted for what felt like an eternity, a timeless moment suspended in the midst of the pounding waves and the starry sky. When they finally broke apart, breathless and flushed, the world slowly reasserted itself. The sound of the waves, the scent of the salt

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air, the moon's gentle glow – all returned with renewed intensity, painting a vivid picture of their shared moment. Their eyes met once more, and in the depths of their gazes, they found a reflection of the profound connection that had just blossomed between them.

Walking back along the beach, the sound of the waves a constant backdrop, they were no longer just friends. The evening had marked a significant turning point, a passage from a budding friendship to something deeper, richer, and far more intimate. The tentative steps they had taken in the preceding weeks had culminated in this single, transformative moment. Their first kiss had been a testament to the powerful connection that bound them together, a promise of the countless kisses yet to come.

The cool night air still carried the salty tang of the ocean, but now, it also held the lingering sweetness of their shared passion, an intoxicating blend of emotions that permeated their senses. Their hands remained clasped, a subtle reassurance, a silent acknowledgment of the change that had taken place. The silence between them was no longer empty but

rather filled with the unspoken language of love, a shared understanding that transcended words.

As they approached Liam's apartment, the city lights blurring in the distance, Liam turned to Elara, his eyes shining with the afterglow of their kiss. He gently tilted her chin, his thumb brushing against her lower lip, the tender gesture a lingering echo of their passionate embrace.

"That was..." he began, searching for the right words to capture the intensity of the moment, "amazing."

Elara nodded, unable to find the words to express the torrent of emotions swirling within her. The simple word amazing seemed insufficient to encapsulate the profound experience they had shared, yet it perfectly captured the essence of their first kiss – a moment that had reshaped their reality, changing the trajectory of their relationship forever.

The following days were a blur of stolen glances, lingering touches, and a deepening intimacy that permeated every aspect of their interactions. The comfortable camaraderie they had previously shared was now laced with a new layer of romantic tension,

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an unspoken understanding of their budding romance. A shared cup of coffee became an opportunity to brush hands, a fleeting touch that sent sparks of electricity through their veins. A walk in the park became a chance to steal a kiss beneath a sprawling oak tree, the rustling leaves a gentle serenade to their newfound love. The city, once simply a backdrop to their lives, now became a stage for their blossoming romance; its bustling energy mirroring the intensity of their emotions.

The days following their first kiss were a mix of exhilaration and blossoming love, but problems were coming. Liam's long-awaited career opportunity, a prestigious position in San Francisco, loomed large. The city, a beacon of opportunity, was also a chasm that threatened to separate them. While Elara rejoiced in his success, a cold knot of dread tightened in her stomach at the thought of the distance. The miles stretching between them wouldn't just be geographical; they were a measure of the sacrifices they might have to make. The news hadn't been delivered as a bombshell but rather unveiled gradually, woven into casual conversations

over steaming mugs of coffee and late-night walks under a star-studded sky.

Liam reached for Elara's hand, his touch gentle, reassuring. "I got the offer," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "It's everything I've ever wanted."

Elara squeezed his hand, her heart a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. "I'm so happy for you, Liam," she whispered, her voice choked with emotion. The words were genuine, heartfelt, yet they couldn't fully express the turmoil within her.

A long silence followed, punctuated only by the relentless rhythm of the waves. The air hung heavily with unvoiced anxieties, the unspoken fear of separation. Finally, Liam spoke, his voice laced with a vulnerability that tugged at Elara's heartstrings.

"But..." he began, hesitation evident in his tone, "I don't want to do this without you."

The unsaid question hung in the air – what were they willing to sacrifice for their love? For Liam, it was a choice between a dream he had chased for years and the woman who had unexpectedly stolen his heart. For Elara, it was a choice between

supporting his aspirations and risking the potential loss of their burgeoning relationship.

The ensuing days were a blur of intense conversations, late-night phone calls, and heartfelt discussions that stretched late into the night. They explored every possible scenario, every conceivable compromise. The idea of a long-distance relationship, initially terrifying, began to feel less daunting as they talked through their fears and concerns. They vowed to make it work with video calls and a mutual commitment to nurture their love despite the distance.

Elara, also a successful freelance writer, realized that her work could be adapted to a remote setting. The flexibility of her profession allowed her the freedom to travel, to close the gap that threatened to separate them. The days melted into weeks, each one a delicate balance between the excitement of Liam's new life and the growing anxiety of their impending separation. The city of San Francisco, a shimmering beacon of opportunity for Liam, felt like a distant star to Elara, a celestial body beautiful to behold but impossibly far to reach. They talked, endlessly, their conversations a tapestry woven with

threads of hope and fear, of dreams and anxieties. They spoke of Skype dates under the California moon and weekend getaways, of shared playlists and virtual movie nights, of the countless ways they would stay connected across the miles.

Liam, ever the pragmatist, began to lay out a detailed plan, a meticulous roadmap for navigating their long-distance relationship. He spoke of video call routines. He detailed spreadsheets of communication strategies and shared calendars his words a testament to his commitment to bridging the geographical gap that threatened to separate them. He spoke with a passion that bordered on desperation, the words tumbling out in a rush, each one a pledge, a promise. He spoke of a future where distance was merely a physical reality, not a barrier to their love. He painted a picture of their future together, a masterpiece built on determination, resilience, and unwavering love.

Elara listened, her heart swelling with a mixture of admiration and apprehension. She saw the depth of his commitment, the unwavering strength of his love, and it covered her with a sense of reassurance and profound gratitude. She saw the

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meticulous planning and the carefully considered strategy, and it filled her with a sense of security that soothed the ever-present fear lurking in the shadows of their impending separation. His words weren't just words; they were a promise, a testament to the depth of his feelings. They were a lifeline in a sea of uncertainty.

Yet, even as she felt reassured by his pragmatism, a profound sadness settled within her. The beauty of the sunset, the calming rhythm of the waves, couldn't mask the bittersweet reality of their situation. The miles that would soon stretch between them felt immense, a chasm that threatened to swallow their love whole. She saw the dedication in his eyes, the unyielding determination in his voice, and she knew she had to do everything in her power to keep their love alive. Finally, she spoke, her voice soft yet clear, carrying the weight of her emotion.

"Liam," she began, her voice tinged with a bittersweet sadness, "I've never loved anyone the way I love you. The thought of being apart from you is terrifying, heartbreaking, even. But your dreams, your aspirations, they are as important as our love." She looked into his eyes, seeing the reflection of her

own apprehension and the depth of his unwavering love. “I wouldn't trade a moment of this for anything,” she continued, “but I can't stand in the way of your success. Your happiness is my happiness, and seeing you achieve your dreams, that's a dream I cherish as much as my own.”

Liam pulled her closer, his arms enfolding her in a warm embrace. The setting sun cast long shadows, turning the world into a kaleidoscope of deepening hues. The waves rolled against the shore, their rhythmic sound a hypnotic lullaby to their anxieties. In that moment, surrounded by the raw beauty of nature, their love felt stronger than ever.

“We'll make this work,” Liam sighed, his voice filled with a newfound certainty. “We'll find a way. We'll make it work, no matter what.” He squeezed her hand, his touch a silent promise.

“We'll build bridges across the miles,” Elara responded, her voice firm and unwavering. “We'll nurture our love, even from afar. We'll make it work, together.”

The next few days were a flurry of activity. They planned their communication strategies with

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military precision, scheduling video calls, phone calls, and even virtual dates. They created shared online spaces, a digital sanctuary where they could share their daily lives, their thoughts, and their dreams. They discussed every conceivable contingency, every possible scenario, and they did so with a quiet determination that calmed the storm of anxieties within them.

CHAPTER 3

NAVIGATING DISTANCE AND DOUBT

The first week felt like an eternity. The vibrant energy of their shared life, the constant touch, the easy laughter that flowed between them – all of it felt impossibly distant, replaced by the sterile hum of the phone and the flickering image on the laptop screen. The initial excitement of Liam's new beginning in San Francisco had quickly faded, replaced by a gnawing loneliness that settled in Elara's heart like a persistent chill. The three-hour time difference became a cruel joke, turning their late-night conversations into fragmented exchanges, a hurried goodnight before sleep claimed one, then the other.

Liam, ever the optimist, insisted on daily video calls, creating a carefully orchestrated schedule around their differing work routines. He'd meticulously plan his lunch break around Elara's early afternoon, their screen-shared lunches a strange yet strangely comforting ritual. They'd eat their

salads and sandwiches, their faces illuminated by the bright glow of their laptops, their virtual presence the only company they had in that moment. Yet, it wasn't the same. The shared laughter felt forced, the silent moments punctuated by the awkward pauses and the occasional lag in the video stream, the ever-present reminder of the chasm separating them.

Elara found herself staring out the window more often, her gaze lost in the drifting clouds, the empty expanse mirroring the hollowness she felt inside. She missed Liam's warmth, the comforting weight of his arm around her, the familiar scent of his cologne. The silence of her apartment felt deafening, the echoes of his absence a constant, painful reminder of the void in her life. She filled the emptiness with work, her freelance writing tasks a desperate distraction from the gnawing loneliness that threatened to consume her. But even the words, which usually flowed so freely, seemed to falter, the joy of her craft dimmed by the shadow of their separation.

Liam, too, felt the weight of the separation, though he tried to mask it with forced cheerfulness during their video calls. The vibrant energy of San

Francisco, the bustling crowds, the endless opportunities – all felt muted, lacking the vibrant hue of Elara's presence. He'd search for solace in his work, pouring all of his energy into his new role, a desperate attempt to distract himself from the aching void that had opened up in his life.

But despite the challenges, their love persisted. It was not merely a fragile flame flickering in the face of adversity but a resilient ember burning steadily through the storm of their separation. Their conversations, though fragmented by time zones and digital glitches, were infused with a depth of emotion that only intensified their bond. Each phone call, each video chat became a cherished ritual, a sacred space where they could share their hopes and fears, their dreams and anxieties. They built a digital sanctuary, a carefully curated space filled with shared playlists, online photos, and virtual dates. They'd watch movies together, their screens reflecting the same light, their laughter echoing across miles, their smiles connecting despite the distance.

One evening, while sharing a virtual movie night, Liam confessed his fears. His voice, usually so

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full of optimism, was tinged with a vulnerability that touched Elara deeply. He spoke of the moments of crushing loneliness, of the times he felt overwhelmed by the immensity of their separation, the relentless pressure of his new job amplifying his anxiety. He missed her, he said, in a way he never thought possible, a profound realization that struck him with the force of a physical blow.

Elara listened intently, her own heart aching with empathy. She understood his feelings. She knew what he was experiencing. She felt his pain as if it were her own. She shared her struggles, her days of lonely isolation, the constant weight of anticipation, the almost unbearable longing for his touch, his presence. They spoke for hours, their words a balm to their wounds. In that shared vulnerability, their bond deepened, strengthened by the shared experience of their separation.

The weeks that followed saw a new level of intimacy blossom between them. They explored new ways to connect, finding creative solutions to bridge the physical gap. They sent each other care packages filled with small tokens of affection – a favorite book, a handwritten letter, a favorite snack. They

planned virtual game nights, their shared laughter echoing across the miles. They sent each other voice notes throughout the day, little snippets of their lives, little reminders of their love. They shared photos, their digital scrapbook a testament to their daily lives, their ups and downs, the ordinary moments that showcased the depth of their connection.

The fragile peace of their carefully constructed digital world shattered one Tuesday afternoon. Elara, engrossed in a particularly demanding writing project, received a text from Liam. It was a simple message, a quick update on his day: “Long day at the office, but the view from my window is amazing. Thinking of you.” Attached was a photograph – a breathtaking panorama of the San Francisco skyline bathed in the golden light of the setting sun.

The image was beautiful, captivating even, but it was the accompanying text that set off a chain reaction. Elara, her mind already frayed from the pressures of her deadlines, read the message with a critical eye. “Thinking of you,” she mused, feeling a twinge of unease. It felt distant, somehow impersonal. It lacked the warmth, the intimacy of his

usual messages. The “long day at the office” felt like an excuse, a justification for his lack of engagement, a stark contrast to the late-night conversations they'd once shared.

The feeling of inadequacy gnawed at her. Was he losing interest? Was this new, exciting life in San Francisco eclipsing their relationship? Her insecurities, fueled by the distance and the isolation of their long-distance arrangement, rose to the surface, swirling into a tempest of doubt. She responded with a curt message: “Glad you're enjoying the view. Work's been crazy here too.” The brevity of her reply was a reflection of her simmering frustration.

Liam, oblivious to the storm brewing on the other end of the text exchange, was startled by the coldness of Elara's response. He'd meant the message to be a simple gesture of affection, a small token of his thoughts amidst the chaos of his new life. But the detached tone of her reply stung him. He'd been working incredibly long hours, pushing himself to the limit to succeed in this new chapter of his career. He'd been sacrificing his own personal time, missing out on evenings and weekends, all in the hope of

building a secure future for them. He felt overlooked, misunderstood.

His reply came a few minutes later, laced with a defensive edge: “Is something wrong? You seem a little short.” The innocuous question ignited the tinderbox of Elara's anxieties.

The ensuing exchange was a flurry of accusations and hurt feelings. Elara, her emotions raw and exposed, lashed out, her words sharp and cutting. She accused him of neglecting her, of prioritizing his career over their relationship, of being swept away by the allure of his new life. She questioned his commitment, her words fueled by the loneliness and gnawing insecurity that had been growing since his departure.

Liam, in turn, defended himself, his frustration growing with each barbed remark. He explained his long hours, his dedication to his work, his commitment to their future. He argued that he was trying his best, that the distance made it difficult to maintain the same level of intimacy, but that it didn't diminish the depth of his feelings for her. He

accused her of being overly sensitive, of reading too much into a simple text message.

The argument raged for hours, unfolding over a series of increasingly heated texts. They traded barbs, their words becoming weapons, each sentence a blow to the other's fragile emotional state. They traded accusations, each feeling unjustly accused, misunderstood, and deeply hurt. The virtual distance between them felt vast and impenetrable, mirroring the chasm that was rapidly growing between their hearts.

The silence that followed was heavier than the constant barrage of messages. Both were left reeling, the weight of their argument settling upon them like a thick blanket of despair. Elara stared at her phone, the light reflecting the unshed tears in her eyes. She felt a profound sense of loneliness, a crushing weight of isolation. The distance between them, once a physical separation, had become an emotional abyss.

Liam, in his San Francisco apartment, felt the sting of her accusations. He understood her perspective. He knew how isolating the distance

could be, but he also felt the injustice of her assumptions. His heart ached with the pain of their conflict. He'd pictured her reaction to the photograph – a shared moment of wonder, a connection across the miles, a testament to their enduring bond. Instead, it had become a catalyst for conflict.

The following days were excruciating. The silence between them was punctuated only by the occasional hesitant text, each one filled with unspoken apologies and unresolved hurt. The cheerful virtual rituals they'd established – the shared lunches, the movie nights, the playful banter – felt tainted, overshadowed by the shadow of their argument.

The weight of their misunderstanding hung heavily in the air, a palpable tension that threatened to unravel the delicate threads of their relationship. The once-bright flame of their love flickered, threatened by the gale-force winds of doubt and insecurity. Yet, beneath the surface of their conflict, an ember of hope remained, a testament to the enduring strength of their feelings. The possibility of reconciliation, though uncertain, lingered, a faint glimmer in the darkness.

The next evening, Elara found herself reaching for Liam's old sweatshirt again, the familiar scent a source of both comfort and pain. She considered sending him a simple text, a heartfelt apology, a tentative step toward healing. The words lingered on the tip of her fingers, hesitant, uncertain. Would he respond? Would he accept her apology? The uncertainty was as painful as the conflict itself.

The following morning, Liam sent a voice note, his voice hesitant yet filled with a genuine regret. He confessed his own mistakes, admitting his clumsy attempt at affection and acknowledging the impact of his long hours on their relationship. He apologized for his defensiveness, for not fully understanding her perspective. His voice, though wavering with emotion, was filled with sincerity and a deep-seated love. The weight of the past few days seemed to lift a bit, replaced with a fragile hope of mending their wounded bond. Elara listened, tears streaming down her face. His words were a balm to her wounds, a lifeline in the stormy sea of their separation. A reply followed a longer voice note in turn. It wasn't just an apology but a raw, honest outpouring of her own feelings – the fear, the

insecurity, the intense yearning for his presence. They spoke for hours that day, their voices a bridge across the miles, a testament to their enduring connection. The road to reconciliation was long and winding, but the first steps had been taken, their shared vulnerability paving the way for a stronger, deeper bond. Their love story had been tested, bruised, but it was far from over. It was, in fact, only just beginning to show its true resilience. The distance, for now, remained, but the emotional chasm that had opened between them, thanks to a simple, misinterpreted text, was slowly, painstakingly, being bridged.

Elara found herself replaying their conversation over and over in her mind, each sharp word a fresh wound. She'd said things she deeply regretted, fueled by her insecurities and the loneliness of the distance. The beautiful San Francisco skyline, once a symbol of Liam's exciting new life, now felt like a cruel reminder of their separation.

Liam, too, wrestled with the aftermath of their fight. He'd intended his message to be a simple expression of affection, a tiny bridge across the

miles. The fact that it had ignited such a firestorm left him feeling bewildered and deeply hurt. He understood Elara's anxieties, the loneliness that distance could breed, but her accusations had stung. He felt misunderstood, unjustly accused of neglecting her, a charge that cut him to the core. His long hours weren't a choice, but a necessity, a sacrifice he made willingly to build a secure future for them both.

A glimmer of hope arrived unexpectedly, in the form of a simple, handwritten letter. Elara, unable to bear the silence any longer, decided to put her feelings into words, bypassing the potentially volatile medium of text messages. She poured her heart onto the pages, confessing her insecurities, her fears, her overwhelming loneliness, and, most importantly, her deep and unwavering love for Liam. She acknowledged her own mistakes, her sharp words, and her quick judgment of his seemingly simple text. She admitted how her own anxieties had magnified his actions, turning a simple message into a symbol of his neglect. The letter wasn't just an apology; it was a vulnerable unveiling of her soul, a raw expression of her love and her fear of losing him.

The letter arrived in San Francisco on a blustery afternoon. Liam opened it with trembling hands, his heart pounding in his chest. He read her words slowly, savoring each heartfelt sentence, each confession of vulnerability. Tears welled up in his eyes as he absorbed the depth of her feelings, the honesty of her self-reflection. He finally understood, not just intellectually but emotionally, the impact of his actions and the weight of the distance on their relationship. He wasn't just reading words; he was feeling her pain, her fear, her love.

He immediately responded, his own letter a mirror image of her honesty and vulnerability. He admitted his shortcomings, his clumsiness in expressing his affection, and his failure to fully appreciate the impact of his long work hours on their connection. He confessed his defensiveness, the hurt that had fueled his reactions, and the deep regret he felt for their hurtful exchange. He, too, acknowledged his role in the escalation of their conflict, admitting he should have been more sensitive to her needs and fears. He painted vivid pictures of his longing for her, his constant awareness of her absence, and his unwavering

commitment to their love. He described his own battles against loneliness in his new surroundings. Their letters became a testament to the power of vulnerability, a shared space where they could lay bare their fears and insecurities without judgment.

The power of forgiveness wasn't immediate or effortless. It took time, patience, and a willingness to understand each other's perspectives. They engaged in long, emotional conversations over video calls. Elara learned to manage her insecurities, to trust Liam's words, and to communicate her feelings more effectively. Liam learned to prioritize their relationship, to balance his demanding career with the nurturing of their love, and to express his affection in ways that were both meaningful and reassuring.

The distance between them remained a challenge, a constant reminder of the physical separation. But the emotional chasm that had threatened to swallow their love was slowly, painstakingly, being bridged. They invested in their relationship, making a conscious effort to maintain regular contact, to plan virtual dates, and to share their daily lives as intimately as possible. They

created new routines, new traditions, adapting to the constraints of distance but never allowing it to diminish the depth of their connection. They made sacrifices, understanding that maintaining a long-distance relationship demanded effort, compromise, and a constant, conscious choice to prioritize their love above all else.

One evening, as they shared a virtual dinner, a simple act that had become a cherished ritual, Elara confessed, “I never thought I could forgive myself for the things I said. For the way I reacted. For hurting you.”

Liam reached across the screen, his touch only virtual but incredibly real in its tenderness. “And I never thought I could forgive myself for not seeing your pain, for not communicating better, for making you feel so alone. We both stumbled; we both hurt each other. But what matters is that we're here, together, working through it. And that's stronger than any distance.”

Their love story was far from perfect. The distance remained a geographical reality, but their emotional connection, reborn from the ashes of their

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argument, was a powerful, enduring force. The shared experience of overcoming their conflict brought them closer, their bond deepened by the vulnerability they'd shared and the forgiveness they'd extended to each other. Their love, once fragile, was now stronger, more resilient, and profoundly more meaningful than ever before. The road ahead would undoubtedly hold further challenges, but they faced them together, fortified by their shared journey, their renewed commitment, and the unwavering power of their love. Their story, once threatened, was now a testament to the enduring strength of forgiveness and the transformative power of a love willing to fight for its survival.

CHAPTER 4

THEY MEET AGAIN

The weeks leading up to their reunion were a blur of excited anticipation. Elara meticulously planned every detail, poring over travel websites, agonizing over outfit choices, and composing countless drafts of what she wanted to say to Liam. The distance, once a source of frustration and heartache, now felt like a delicious anticipation, a countdown to a long-awaited embrace. She'd booked a charming boutique hotel in the heart of San Francisco, a place with a breathtaking view of the Golden Gate Bridge, a symbol of their journey across miles and misunderstandings. Each day felt like an eternity, yet she found herself oddly calm, a quiet confidence settling over her as she knew, deep down, that their love had weathered the storm.

Liam, too, was caught in the whirlwind of preparation. His usually meticulous schedule was thrown into disarray as he rearranged his work commitments to maximize their time together. He spent hours choosing the perfect restaurant for their first dinner, a place romantic and intimate, reflecting

the depth of their renewed connection. He practiced his words, rehearsing the heartfelt sentiments he longed to express, words that wouldn't just fill the silence but would echo with the depth of their renewed love. He envisioned the moment of their reunion, the feeling of Elara's touch, her laughter, the warmth of her embrace, a comforting antidote to the loneliness he'd endured during their separation.

The day of their reunion dawned bright and clear. The San Francisco sun bathed the city in a warm golden glow, a fitting backdrop for their long-awaited encounter. Elara arrived at the airport with a flutter of nerves and a heart brimming with hope. The journey itself felt symbolic; a passage from uncertainty and doubt into a future full of promise and shared dreams. The hustle and bustle of the airport faded into a background hum as she anxiously looked for Liam.

He was waiting for her at the gate, a familiar figure amidst the throng of passengers. The moment she saw him, a wave of emotion washed over her—relief, happiness, love so profound it took her breath away. Time seemed to stop. The noise of the airport dissolved, leaving only the two of them, suspended

in a bubble of pure, unadulterated joy. He looked even more handsome than she remembered, his eyes holding a depth of emotion that mirrored her own. The distance that had stretched between them for so long suddenly felt insignificant, a mere detail in the vast landscape of their long-lasting love.

Their embrace was a long-awaited reunion of souls. Tears mingled with smiles as they held each other tight, the physical closeness a balm to the emotional distance that had stretched between them for months. Words seemed inadequate, unnecessary, even intrusive, in the face of such a powerful, unspoken connection. It was a silent conversation, a communion of hearts, a confirmation of their enduring love.

Later, as they sat in the elegant lobby of the hotel, sipping champagne, the city lights twinkling outside, the conversation flowed effortlessly, unburdened by the weight of their past misunderstandings. They reminisced about their shared memories, laughing at inside jokes and recounting cherished moments. The shared laughter felt like a symphony of healing.

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The dinner at the exquisite restaurant was a testament to their rekindled love. They held hands across the table, their gazes locking frequently, their silences filled with unspoken words of affection, understanding, and unwavering support. They recounted the details of their letters, highlighting the vulnerability they had both shown, celebrating the raw honesty that had been the catalyst for their reconciliation.

Their reunion wasn't just a meeting; it was a reawakening. The physical distance that had separated them for so long was instantly irrelevant; their hearts were reconnected, their souls united. The joy of being together was palpable, a tangible energy that filled the room. They spoke of their future, their dreams, their plans—their voices filled with excitement and shared anticipation. The road ahead would undoubtedly hold challenges, but they knew, with unshakeable certainty, that they would face them together, their bond strengthened by the trials they'd overcome.

The days that followed were filled with blissful exploration of San Francisco. They strolled hand in hand along the piers, the salty sea air

invigorating their spirits. They rode a cable car, their laughter echoing against the steep hills. They visited museums and art galleries, sharing their thoughts and interpretations, their minds and hearts as closely intertwined as their hands. Each shared experience, each simple moment of connection, served to reinforce the strength of their bond, their love deepening with each passing hour.

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Elara stood at the window, staring out at the rain that washed over the glass. She felt a hand wrap around her waist. The woman smiled as she leaned into the man she had come to love so much. He felt like a pillar of warmth in the storm.

“What is going through your head, my love?”
Liam asked her softly as he kissed her forehead.

Elara sighed, still looking at the rain. “The thought that all of this will be gone in a few days. Why is it that time travels so fast when you don’t want it to? And when you do need it to be fast, it takes its precious time.”

Liam, his chin still on her hair, laughed, and she chuckled as he squeezed her tight.

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“It’s interesting to see that you are mad at the weather now, my love. You truly are a unique character.”

“Hey, are you mocking me?” she pouted. She turned and playfully slapped his shoulder.

“Mock you?” He gasped, his hand flying to his chest. “How dare I mock this precious queen who stands before me? I would have to be out of my mind to mock you, a precious jewel and damsel.”

“Humph... You are on a roll, I see.”

“Well, you know how much I love you, my darling. I also cannot believe that we have to say goodbye soon. We really have not spent enough time together.”

She sighed and turned back to the window. “We just have to survive, right? We have been surviving, and I am sure that this is something we can push through, my love.”

“Yes, and it was so hard last time.” Liam voiced the thoughts that Elara had not been able to bring herself to say. “I am worried about how hard it will be this time as well.”

“I know, I know, but why bother about the unknown? What we can do is ensure that our love stands steadfast and strong. If anything, we have learned from our mistakes, right? We are definitely better and stronger. Just like the song says, what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. In this case, we are standing strong despite all the obstacles we faced. I am sure that we will be able to overcome any issues that come up again.”

“Just as we did before,” Liam said softly as he pulled Elara into a warm embrace.

“Exactly, just as we did before,” Elara said with more confidence.

She squeezed Liam’s hand and leaned into him, allowing his love to envelop her.

For a long time, the pair stood in each other’s arms, and for them, it seemed as if the world had gone still. Outside, the rain picked up tempo, but they were oblivious to it as all they knew in those moments were each other and the satisfaction they derived from being with each other. The past months had been so hard, and the strength with which they

clung to each other said all the unspoken words they felt.

Being with each other in that moment was all that mattered to them. They had overcome several obstacles and were finally together. While it had definitely not been rosy always, the pair were sure that they could overcome whatever life threw their way, as long as they were together. And true, things could be hard, but they were not worried because they had each other. They had certainly learned that overtime.

“So, what do you want to eat for dinner?” Elara started saying as she tried to get out of Liam’s hold. He was not letting her move away, and his grasp tightened around her.

Elara laughed and snuggled against him. “I take it that you aren’t hungry then?”

“No, I am not,” Liam said at the same time his stomach grumbled. He exchanged looks with Elara, and they broke into laughter.

She turned around in his arms and caressed his cheek as she said, “Come on, let’s get something to eat, all right?”

“But I don’t want to let you go,” he grumbled as he laid his head in the crook between her neck and shoulder. Elara laughed and she stroked his hair. “You are such a baby, you know that, right?”

“I am your baby,” he murmured.

Her eyes twinkling, she shook her head. “Oh dear, can you at least allow me to order us some dinner? Then you can have me all to yourself.”

“Fine,” he grumbled. He lifted his head and took her hand. A curious Elara let him lead her to the sofa. Gently, he sat her down. She took the phone that he handed to her. The next moment, she burst into laughter when he stretched out on the sofa, placing his head on her lap.

“You are crazy,” Elara managed to say after her bout of laughter.

He scoffed. “Crazy about you, you mean.”

“Yes, yes,” she murmured with a playful eye roll.

Just as she was about to make the DoorDash order, her phone rang in her hands.

“Who’s calling?” an absentminded Liam asked as he picked up the TV remote.

“Ana,” Elara replied quietly. Her brows furrowed as she wondered why her publicist was calling her. She knew that she was away on a short break, and she was not to be disturbed unless it was an emergency. She swallowed hard. Was there an issue with the manuscript she had sent just before she traveled? Ana had not had the time to get to it before she left.

“Why is she calling during your break? It has to be important then, right?”

“Right.” Elara said softly, still staring at the beeping phone.

“What’s the problem? Why aren’t you answering the phone, babe?”

Elara sighed and shook her head. “If there is an issue with the manuscript, if adjustments need to be made, it’s going to completely ruin our time together. I really don’t want to think about any work, and that’s exactly what answering this call will do.”

“Possibly, but we will make it work, all right? You can’t just ignore her, especially when you know that she is very responsible and wouldn’t call without an important reason.”

Elara rolled her eyes and nodded. “Fine, fine.”

She swiped to answer and said softly, “Hello?”

As Elara spoke to her publicist, Liam pulled out his phone to make the food order instead.

“Hey, Elara, I am so sorry that I’m calling so abruptly. I know you are on a break and the last thing you want is a work call,” Ana started.

“It’s fine, Ana. I know you wouldn’t call if it wasn’t important.” Elara turned to Liam, who had just tapped her shoulder lightly. He showed his phone to her so she could see the menu of a restaurant.

“Chicken or beef?” he mouthed.

“Chicken,” she mouthed in reply.

He planted a soft kiss on her cheek and turned back to his phone. Elara turned her attention to her

call just in time to hear the tail end of Ana's statement.

"...so, he'll be taking over."

"I'm sorry, I didn't get that, Ana. Could you repeat what you just said?"

"Oh, I said I have to go on maternity leave quicker than I intended, so Mackenzie will be taking over my workload. He will be in charge of your work as well."

"Oh, are you okay, Ana? Is the baby well?"

Liam looked up from his phone, his face a mirror of the expression on Elara's. He mouthed, "Is everything okay?"

"It's ok," Elara whispered.

"Yes, please don't worry. My OB has advised me to stay on bed rest till I give birth, so for the next few months, I need to take it easy, and that means, I need to go on leave."

"Ana, I hope it all goes well. Please don't hesitate to let me know if you need anything."

"Of course, thank you very much for offering, Elara. So, Mackenzie will be taking care of

you now, all right? I sent an email with his contact information and also included him in the email.”

“Yes, yes, I know you’ve definitely taken care of all of that. And I thank you for that. But now it is time to take care of yourself, all right? Regarding the leave, I hope it won’t be an issue. I know how hard it is to get paid maternal leave.”

“Indeed, indeed, I am certainly lucky that our company is an Australian company, and they don’t really ascribe to the US concept of what maternal leave is, and I am able to get proper paid leave.”

“Well, I am glad to hear that. This is just another assurance that I picked the best company to publish with.”

Ana chuckled. “That is true.”

“I’ll come visit you when I’m back, all right? Please take care of yourself. And say hi to Key from me.”

“Sure, Elara. And thank you. Do take care of yourself. I already told Mackenzie not to expect a response from you till after your break. You deserve the rest.”

“Thank you, Ana.”

Elara set her phone down to find Liam looking at her expectantly. He quirked a brow as he said, “Well? What is it? Did something happen to Ana and her baby?”

Before becoming her publicist more recently, Ana and Elara had been friends for several years, since their college days. Liam had had the opportunity to meet Ana several times before he relocated.

“She’s fine. The doctor just recommended that she be on bed rest for the rest of the pregnancy. You know how hard she works.”

Liam squeezed Elara’s hand and said softly, “I’m sure she’s going to be fine, my love. She just needs to follow the doctor’s instructions. Please don’t worry about it.”

“I’m not worried,” Elara replied quietly.

Liam smiled and gently poked between her forehead. “The crease between your eyebrows says otherwise, love.”

Elara sighed and ran a hand through her dark hair. “I don’t know? Bed rest is never recommended if there is no risk. I cannot help worrying.”

“And it is a good thing you were able to hold back your worries when you were talking to her. She needs to know that she has people around to support her. Now you are with me, you can tell me exactly how you feel, my dear. You do not need to pretend with me or act strong if you feel down. I’ve got you. Let me be your pillar to lean on.”

Elara smiled softly. She patted his cheek gently as she said, “I am glad that I have you in my life, Liam.”

“Same here, my love. Same here. Now, please do not worry. I am sure she is going to be fine. Yes, bed rest might not be a good sign, but it also shows that the problem, whatever it is, is being tackled.”

Elara nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, yes, you are right about that.”

“I know I am.” He grinned. “Now, please stop worrying. Our food should be here in...” He

turned to his phone, and his eyes scanned the screen.
“...ten minutes.”

“Oh, that’s nice.” Elara offered a small smile. “I thought it was going to take a long time because of the rain.”

“True, but I ordered from a place that’s pretty close by. Normally, it usually does not take as long.”

“Oh well, at least we were able to get something. With the rain and it being past 7 p.m. already, it can get quite difficult.”

Liam kissed her forehead and nudged his head toward her phone. “I presume then that Ana won’t be able to take care of you for some time, right?”

“Yes, that’s actually why she called. She has handed me over to another publicist, Mackenzie.”

Liam nodded slowly. “This Mackenzie better be as good as Ana. I really do not want anyone to stress you out.”

She chuckled and shook her head. “I hope so, my love. Time will tell.”

“Well, if Mackenzie decides to be a nuisance, you can always let me know. I can talk to Mackenzie.”

“Like a parent warning his child’s bully?” Elara laughed.

“Call it whatever you want to.” Liam chuckled. He squeezed her hand and turned her to face him squarely. “You will tell me though, right? Whenever you are having a hard time, you have to tell me. Don’t feel like you have to carry everything by yourself. You are not alone.”

“I know; I know I have you. And the same goes for you. Don’t keep anything from me, okay?”

“Okay.” Liam grinned just before he kissed her.

Her hands raked through his hair as he pulled her closer. They basked in the warmth of each other, feeling at peace and as one. Everything else around them seemed to fade away.