

March 22

Alex,

I'm just gonna copy this down for you. Because I have no freaking idea what to do with it, and maybe you will.

“Zoe,

I know that I am not perfect, and I know that I let you down. I have known these things for years. But not until our conversation did I truly begin to understand how badly I did by you. I am so sorry. No apology can make up for it, nothing that I say or do can give you, in retrospect, what you deserved at your birth, or what you deserve now after all you have done for us since November.

Zoe, you are an extraordinary person, and I cannot lay claim to any of it. You are what you are on your own merit, and your mother's, and your father's, and in spite of my actions and choices.

I know that nothing I can do or say can make up for what I took away from you. I know that nothing I can do or say can make me into any sort of father to you. And I know, too, that making amends and earning forgiveness are events of the distant future, if they are events on my horizon at all. I accept this, and I regret it, but I know that it is my own doing.

Nevertheless, it is my hope that you will allow me to give you what most estranged biological fathers don't escape having to give, to use however you decide. This is not an attempt to buy your forgiveness or to place you in my debt in any way. The debt is mine, Zoe. Michelle and

I discussed this before she died, and we agreed that we had to give you the chance to accept it.

The choice to do so or not is yours alone. The check will be voided in 60 days if you ignore it, and this will be the last you hear from me on anything not concerning Lissa unless and until you say otherwise.

Thank you for being a sister to my daughter. Thank you for making these last few months easier on her, on Michelle, and on me.

Thom Eisso”

Alex, he gave me \$75,000 dollars.

Seventy-five thousand dollars.

I have no idea what to do.

I told Mom, and I showed her the letter and the check and I said that I didn't know what to do with it. She was stunned, but she started talking about opening up a savings account or putting it into a mutual fund, and I had to stop her and clarify that it's not that I don't know what to do with the money. I don't know what to do with the check.

How do I accept this? For one thing, accepting it is acknowledging that there's an inescapable tie or a debt or whatever between me and Thom, regardless of what he might have to say about it, and for a second thing, shouldn't this be going to Lissa, and for a third thing — I can't remember the third thing, but I'm sure there is one!

Mom looked at me like I was absolutely batshit insane when I said I didn't know if I could accept the money. She said when someone offers you something like this with no strings attached, you don't turn it away. She said it's a couple years at college or a new car or the down payment on a house or a trip to Europe, but I don't want those things to come from him. As stupid as it sounds, I don't want those things to be tainted. Like, he can frame it any way he wants, and Mom can agree with him until the cows come home, but it will still feel to me like I'll owe him. Maybe not very much, but a space in my life at the very least. And I'm not ready for that.

Any thoughts at all would be appreciated.

On to your letter.

~~I don't   It's not   Just because I~~

I don't like your new rule, Alex. I don't like not being able to apologize. And my comment about apologizing becoming my default setting was intended to be rhetorical. I didn't expect you to truth bomb all over it.

I never decided I didn't deserve to be friends with you, Alex, and it's not that I think I have to apologize for being me, it's that I have to apologize for being a nuisance, you know? For being burdensome. I didn't lose my confidence, I just lost my self-sufficiency, and I've become so damn needy. That's what I'm apologizing for -- for not being strong enough to push through my problems on my own. For being so weak and unable to cope sometimes that I have to unload onto you, asking you to deal with all this crap that you never signed on for. You've been great about it so far, but someday I'm gonna shove too

much at you, and maybe by apologizing, I can hold that day off a little longer, you know?

It's good to hear you say that you think I've been a good sister. I mean, I got thrown into it, and I was making it up as I went along, but I do feel like I've helped. And I got a pretty good sister out of all this, too.

She and I are hair twins now. I texted you a picture. I hope it made you smile.

I'm glad you liked this mix better. Making it inspired a few other playlists designed to help get me out of the dumps, and they seem to be helping.

Oh, and "I'll Make a Man Out of You" is the best song Disney has ever written, and I gave you 24-hour access to it. That's what the "you're welcome" comment was about. Because whose immediate action wouldn't be to thank me for that on bended knee? :P

Yes, Gabe and Lissa are taking me prom dress shopping this weekend, and I'm pretty sure they're conspiring. I'm a little scared. All Gabe will tell me is that he and Lissa have "plans for the weekend," whatever that means. Should be interesting, at any rate. :)

How dumb do you think I am, Carter? I can think of worse ideas than personally giving you access to Gabe, but not many of them. You two gang up on me enough as it is, without direct means of communication! You think I'm going to actively facilitate scheming and plotting against me? Dream on. You want to talk to Gabe, you're gonna have to find him on your own.\* :) (\*The asterisk is to indicate the overall

teasing tone of this paragraph, but I'm also dead serious. You're not getting any phone numbers out of me)

You folding yourself into a backpack is absolutely a gift that keeps on giving if I pull out my phone and film it . . . :)

Happy as I am to hear that punching the wall was not premeditated, I'm still going to have to insist on you not doing things like that. Knowing that you hurt yourself over me and my situation? I hate that, Alex. I hate thinking that I caused you pain, even indirectly.

I know how frustrated you are – I felt the same way spending week after week in that goddamn waiting room. But you have to let yourself rely on other people. And you have to remember that you weren't helpless. You weren't, Alex. Do you honestly not know how much you helped me during this whole thing with Lissa? You let me vent and cry and rage, you let me call you at three in the morning, you supported me, and listened to me, and encouraged me, and even when you didn't have any advice to offer, just being there was enough. Knowing that I could talk to you, knowing that you made time for me and recognized when I needed you, that was enough.

Honestly, Alex, I thank you as much as I do because I think, on some level, you still don't get how extraordinary a friend you actually are. All the things that you have done for me over the past few months have been monumental acts of friendship, and you should be thanked for them. I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but there are too many people in your life who take you for granted, and I'm simply not going to be one of them. It kills me to know that you are so unaccustomed to being thanked that you get embarrassed when I express my gratitude. That's not okay in my book. And so, I will

continue to thank you until you are comfortable saying “You’re welcome,” or hell, even, “Don’t mention it,” or “that’s what friends are for.” Those work, too. But you said yourself that people should spend more of their time saying nice things and giving compliments, and this is part of that. So, sorry, but I’m not going to stop.

Don’t feel bad about making me cry, okay? Not all tears are bad. Sometimes they help a lot. It’s cathartic. Also, this bit? About absolution and deserving and not deserving, and it being there for me whenever I’m ready to accept it? Thank you. (Yeah. I did it. I went there.) I am thanking you for those words because they are exactly what I need to hear, even if I’m not quite ready yet to take what you’re offering. Those are not things that just anybody would say.

Alex, you have four younger siblings. I don’t have to tell you that all kids are psychopaths. Who among us does deserve the love we get from our mothers? Seriously, it’s not your fault, not any of it. Your mom isn’t blaming you. So why are you blaming yourself?

As I write that, it occurs to me that I’ve probably given you advice in this letter that I ought to follow myself. I have no doubt you’ll point out to me exactly what it is.

That’s all from me for now. Talk to you soon.

Zoe