

April 9

Alex,

I haven't heard from you yet, which I assume means you're as crazy busy as I am, but I need to get something on paper, so here we are.

I finally made a decision about the money. And, long story short, Mom and Joe are getting married.

Okay, yes. I know I can't actually shorten the story that much — it makes it sound like I'm using the money to pay for their wedding, which I'm not. I mean, I absolutely would, but I know they wouldn't let me.

Mom asked about the money today, wanting to know what was holding me back from taking it. And as you know, I've been giving it a lot of thought. I've actually been anticipating the conversation, because I know my mother. So when she asked me why I didn't want to take the money, I asked her why she didn't want to marry Joe. I know those questions don't seem to be related, but they are. They're related because both hesitations stem from Thom and what he did when he walked out on us.

I actually got Mom to talk about it. I wasn't sure I would, but I did, and she almost broke my heart. She said she couldn't do it again. She couldn't sit in a boardroom and watch lawyers weigh and evaluate and pick apart her marriage again. She said she couldn't watch herself lose the man she loved a second time,

because even though she doesn't think Joe will or would ever leave her, she didn't think Thom would, either, and look what happened there.

I told her then how scared I was to let go of hating Thom, how it had been a part of me for so long, everything I told you about it. But I also told her that I was coming to understand why I needed to let go, and you deserve that explanation, too. That kind of fear is exhausting, and honestly, that kind of hatred is, too. It's been this huge weight on my shoulders that maybe has always been there, but I never recognized it for what it was. And the struggle is, do I give up this burden for the chance to live free of it, or do I keep holding on, because it's familiar and because I'm afraid I'll float away without it to keep me grounded? Terrified as I may be, living free of it seems more and more appealing.

I told Mom that I'd let go of my burden if she'd let go of hers. I would take the money and she would marry Joe, and we would do it together, like we've done everything since I was born.

And she said yes. So she and Joe are getting married this summer, and I am several thousand dollars richer.

I'm using it to fund the backpacking trip, so I hope you've cleared your schedule, Alex. What's left over (because there will be money left over) will go to Europe. The deal I've made with Thom is that Lissa has to be allowed to come on both trips, if she wants.

I'm still navigating how I feel about all this. But with Mom and Joe so radiantly happy in this house, it's hard not to be affected by that buoyancy, too.

Still waiting for your letter, but I trust it will come soon. I just wanted to let you know about this.

Also, I have my work schedule. I work Friday the 10th, 3:30 to close and Saturday 9 to 4. Like I said last time, the shop is closed Sunday for Easter, and Mom and Joe don't have any plans beyond going out to lunch after church, so I can do Saturday evening or Sunday anytime in the afternoon.

On my end, Sunday would probably be easier for what I have planned, and there's a smaller likelihood I'll show up smelling like pickles and fryer oil. If you're doing dinner things with family, shall we say early afternoon?

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1) If you could eat only one condiment for the rest of your life, which would you pick?

2) If you had to eat that condiment with everything for the rest of your life, would your answer be different?

3) What is your favorite thing about San Diego?

4) Which sci-fi future would you choose to live in?

5) What is your Hogwarts House? (and how have we not already asked that??)

6) What one piece of advice would you give to your younger self?

7) What song is stuck in your head right now?

8) What colors should Mom and Joe go with for their wedding? (Keep in mind, please, that I'm a bridesmaid, and I look awful in yellow)

9) Cake or pie?

10) How much do you want to know what your birthday present is? I'm not going to tell you; I just want to know if I'm torturing you. :)

I'm sorry I stopped asking questions. I hope this starts to make up for it, and that there are plenty there that make you smile, and some that make you think, and even a couple that make you laugh.

~~I don't know why I stopped asking them~~

Sorry, that's not true. I do know why I stopped. I just, I've been putting on a good face, but the last couple months have been really hard. I've been trying to follow your advice, and act like myself to try

and get back to feeling like myself, and it works most of the time, but it's exhausting. And with everything else I've been dealing with, I'd get to the end of a letter and just be so tired, not from writing the letter, but from the rest of it.

I was actually kind of worried that being in a house with Mom and Joe the past couple of days would be unbearable, to see them so happy ~~when I'm~~ but it hasn't been. It's actually helped, in a weird way. Their happiness is infectious, and I want that same happiness for everyone I care about in my life, even if I'm not in a position where I have it right now.

You're right. No bush beating. I don't see the point. You deserve to be able to grab at happiness with both hands, Alex. I want that for you. I don't want you to get so caught up in what hasn't happened with Emma for so long that you don't reach for it if it's in front of you. I don't want you to miss out on that relationship just because you never thought it would happen. I want you to grab at happiness with both hands. I truly mean that.

That goes for Emma, and it goes for your future, too. I didn't read that you were thinking about counseling and hit my forehead with the classic movie, "Of course! It was staring us in the face the whole time!" But I heard a new side of you when you talked about it, focused and interested. Maybe you lacked my overwhelming enthusiasm, but you always do. You're not the bubbly type, and that's fine. You're still waters run deep, remember? Not a lot shows on your surface, but I've learned to hear it when you talk. I was excited that you found something you thought you might be good

at, because I don't hear you talk like that often enough. I didn't mean to overwhelm you, but let's be real. It is me, after all. It's kind of par for the course. :)

You sound like Allie! Yes, I know France is in Europe, and yes, I know they speak French there. But classroom French and actual French are miles apart anyway, and I prefer to learn in the environment. Throw me in the deep end, and I'll find a way to swim.

Okay. You let me know about whether Sunday works for birthday stuff, and I will give you a more specific time and location.

And thank you. It helps to know you're concerned. It helps that you notice when things are wrong, no matter how hard I might try to hide it. Sometimes you know me too well, and you catch things I wish you wouldn't, but usually, I'm grateful.

Talk to you soon.

Zoe