

February 14

Alex,

It's Valentine's Day. Because of course it is. I'm that stupidly cliché.

It's Valentine's Day, and you are not, for some reason, writing to me. I don't know why, and it's driving me crazy, and it's making all of this that much harder.

You're never going to read this. I'm never going to send this to you, because, well, I'll get to that, I guess. But it's not like I have any other letters to write, and I've gotten used to writing things down to make sense of them, so here we are. Or here I am. Me and this hypothetical version of you that's all I have access to at the moment.

You've been heckling me about Kevin for a while now, saying I have a crush on him, and I've been deflecting and denying, because I mean, yeah, there was something there, some interest on my part, but it wasn't full-blown enough to be a crush. I knew it could get there with just a little encouragement, though. Like, I was pretty sure that we were flirting basically every time we talked, and I liked that, because I like flirting and it's been a long time since a guy has flirted with me. And while I definitely wasn't to the point where I would be heartbroken if it turned out he wasn't interested, I was to the point where if he asked me out for coffee or dinner, I'd have said yes.

But I'm so bad at telling if guys are interested. So I enlisted some help from Gabe. I convinced him to come to the HCC this afternoon under the pretense of bringing me a "forgotten" textbook so that he could watch Kevin interact with me and tell me whether or not there was anything on his end.

And there was something there, all right. As soon as Gabe walked through the door, there was something there. It just wasn't directed at me.

I suck at telling if guys are interested, yes, but I'm usually pretty reliable when it comes to gay or straight!

It was mortifying, that I'd missed something so huge and called Gabe all the way out there for so obvious an answer. I excused myself with some BS about needing to check on Lissa and hightailed it out of there and to the parking lot. I just needed to escape.

I couldn't actually escape that easily, though, because Gabe followed me and Kevin followed him. Well, no, he was following me, too, to apologize. Because as soon as I left, he put everything together.

It was not as awkward a conversation as I thought it might be. Basically, his aunt, in addition to not liking him, is a raging homophobe, and if she knew he was gay, she'd throw him out in an instant. So he's gotten in the habit of flirting with every girl who comes along to throw his aunt off the scent. He said he liked talking to me, so he may have taken it too far, and he shouldn't have let things progress the way they did, and that he was sorry he'd put me in this situation. And then he assured me that if he were straight, he'd totally be into me.

And we're okay, I think. I mean, I'm still embarrassed, but this is not the part of the story I need to work through. That happened next.

Gabe took me out to dinner, and he asked if I was okay, and the thing is, I honestly was. Like, I was a lot less disappointed than I'd thought I would be. So I was musing on the fact that maybe it wasn't Kevin so much as just the prospect of a having a relationship like that again. It's been a year and a half since my last

boyfriend and I broke up, and there is a part of me that misses having that connection with another person, and I thought that maybe I had found it again.

Well, Gabe wanted to know why, what it was about Kevin that made it seem like we had the potential for something other than friendship.

And I just started talking, about how charming he was, and how easy he was to talk to, that he was funny and he made me smile, but he also talked to me like he cared about the things I said and wanted to know more. And he always looked like he was glad to see me, and I always looked forward to seeing him and talking to him.

And then, because it just occurred to me as I was listing all these things, I said, "You know, he actually reminded me of Alex, but an Alex I could sit with and talk to, and I think that was a big part of it."

Yeah. That's what I said. Those words actually came out of my mouth, and when I realized what I was saying, I just sat there, hearing static, trying to figure out if I'd actually meant it the way it had come out.

And as much as I'd have liked him to, Gabe didn't miss it, because, you know, he has ears and a brain. And he asked the question I couldn't quite get my own brain to form:

"Zoe, do you have a thing for your penpal?"

God.

I said no. Several times. About nine times too many to be convincing to anyone. I have ears and a brain, too, you know, and, well, they're my feelings. I

don't know how I missed it this long, and honestly, I wish I could go back to being ignorant, because this is the worst possible timing.

You have a thing for Emma. You're not interested in me. You have a thing for Emma, and I don't think it's coincidence that she reenters your life, and you leave mine.

And I'm not jealous, okay, that's not what this is. I just ~~don't like~~

Hell. You're never going to read this, so I can be honest, right?

I don't like Emma, and I don't want her to be part of your life.

Ugh. How awful and controlling and love-triangle-y does that sound? Look, this has nothing to do with me and these newfound feelings, okay? I've felt this way about you and Emma for a long time. I don't want her out of your life because I want you all to myself, I want her out of your life because she is a toxic person who is using you and giving you nothing positive in return.

She knows how you feel, Alex, and she takes advantage of it constantly. She uses you as a doormat, and you let her. She is irresponsible, childish, immature — you know it, and you make excuses for her. She drinks until she blacks out, goes through guys like tissues, gets you into fights and trouble, and you don't call her to task, or reprimand her, or anything! You defend her, and it drives me crazy! She got you drugged at a party, if she didn't do the drugging herself, and I swear to God, if she has gotten you into serious trouble or danger this time around —

She's not your friend, Alex. She's not there for you, she doesn't support you, she only comes to you when she needs something. She knows you're not going anywhere, because you're so blinded by what you've felt for her for so long. She's

not your friend, so I don't know why you're still hers. She is toxic. And you won't see it. And it breaks my heart.

You know, maybe a month ago, I might have thought I had a chance. Maybe I reread some of your letters, and maybe I thought there might be something there, on your end, but now it doesn't matter. Because she's back in your life. She dumps a guy, shows up to cry on your shoulder, and you swing right back to her. You're not interested in me. So it sucks a lot that I've fallen for you. It sucks that this completely snuck up on me, and I'm in so freaking deep now that I can't just turn it off.

I don't know what to do about any of this, especially since you're missing in action, and I don't know if something's happened to you or if you're just mad at me or why you haven't gotten me any sort of message, and —

This is the last thing I need right now.

Yeah. I'm not sending you this.

I don't know what to do, Alex. And the one person I want to talk to about this most is the one person I can't talk to about it at all. I'd lose you for good if I said any of this, and I can't bear the thought of that. But I may have lost you for good anyway, and there's nothing I can do about it.

No. No, okay, no, I'm not some helpless, lovesick idiot. I'm not. I don't have to just stand here and watch this happen. That's not going to be me.

I'm finding out what's going on. I'm finding out right now.