

Alex, voice a little too cheerful: Zoe! Um... hi. Happy Valentine's Day?
Ugh, sorry that's lame.

Listen, I know you're really mad at me now, and you have every right to be. I also know this probably isn't how you imagined first hearing my voice, but... there have been some ... extenuating circumstances. I'll get to the long version in a minute, but the short version is...

[Alex pauses, clearing his throat]

I broke my wrist. I know, I know, and I'm sorry! I've been trying for at least a week to figure out how to let you know, and it took me forever to come up with a viable idea. I could have sworn you gave me your phone number a while ago, so the first thing I did was ask Emma to skim through your letters and find it for me. I told her not to actually read them, because there's personal stuff that she doesn't need to know, but I figured a phone number wouldn't be that hard to find. She says it's not there though.

I had her go pick up the letters you left, and I don't know what happened, because the baristas were supposed to tell you that I was okay, just physically could not write, and I was working on it. The message must not have gotten around to everyone or something.

I was going to try to type, but, well, with one broken wrist and the other sprained, typing is incredibly painful. I thought about having someone take dictation like you did, but I don't trust any of my immediate family, and I get the feeling Emma-

[Alex trails off, clears his throat, then rushes through the next part]

I get the feeling Emma is jealous of you. Or rather of our ... friendship. Which is silly, it's not like I'm going to just ignore her now that I'm friends with you. But for some reason, whenever I talk about you she rolls her eyes and gets into this really annoying mood, and I don't want to deal with all that through a multi-page dictation. It took me another two whole days to come up with this idea, and then even more time while I found software and set up the program, and... well... figured out what to say.

[Long pause]

Sorry. I don't really know how to edit this, so there's going to be pauses while I'm figuring things out. If I didn't have broken bones, I'd write out what I wanted to say before I recorded it, but if I didn't have broken bones I wouldn't be recording, so...

[He trails off and pauses. Suddenly he starts again with a deep breath.]

Right, you need to know what happened. I told you in my last letter that Emma dumped Derek, right? And that I was taking her out to the movies to get her mind off of it. I let her pick the movie - some chick flick that I barely even remember, because I was... well, that's not important. Anyways, after, she said she had to go to the bathroom, so I said I would go bring the car around while she did, and as soon as I stepped out of the theater, I noticed Derek and a couple of his friends coming in. I kept my head down and tried to pretend I didn't notice them, but one of Derek's friends pointed me out. Derek made a beeline for me, but I pretended not to notice, hoping he would go away. He didn't.

He got really close and then started slinging insults, accusing me of stealing his girlfriend, which is completely not true. I said so, but he wouldn't believe me, and it just escalated from there. Eventually he got so mad that he... he pushed me. Not hard, more of just a warning. It wouldn't have been a problem, only I was standing right in front of the curb. He pushed me into it, and I fell hard, catching myself with both hands. That must have scared him, because he ran off. Seconds later, before I even had a chance to get myself up, Emma came out.

[Sound of door opening]

Girl's voice: Did you need something?

Alex: Uh, no, I'm okay.

[Clink of glass being set down]

Girl: I brought you a glass of water.

Alex: Thanks Emma.

Emma: It's just, I thought I heard my name.

Alex: It's nothing. I'm just recording a letter to Zoe.

Emma: Oh. Well, if you need anything...

Alex: Thanks, I'll let you know.

[Door clicks shut.]

Alex: Sorry about that. Anyway, Emma came out of the theater. She wanted to take me to the ER, but I didn't think it was that bad, just that I had landed hard. Two days later my wrist had swollen double, and was completely black and purple. Then we had to go to the ER. Fractured Distal Radius in my left, so absolutely NO handwriting - I've told you I'm a leftie, haven't I? - until the cast comes off. Normally that would be six weeks, but

the doctor wants to leave it eight, because I didn't come in right away, and the X-ray looks like I may have jostled it a tiny bit out of place before they got it set. They checked the right, and luckily it wasn't broken, just sprained.

By the time I got through all the doctor's visits and came down from all the pain meds they put you on when you break bones, it had been almost a week since my letter. I knew - well, okay, I hoped... *Dios*, that sounds worse, ignore it - I knew you'd be worried, and I did try to get a message to you, I - I swear I did. Most of the baristas at Cuppa Joe's apparently aren't as invested in our experiment as Andi and Eddie are. I'm just a little helpless right now. You don't know how much you depend on your hands until you incapacitate them both at once. I have to be fed, three times a day, because I can't reliably hold a spoon on my own yet. Fed. Like a two-year-old! Do you know how humiliating that is?!

[Alex takes a deep breath before continuing]

So, Zoe, there you have it. My excuse for not writing to you for ten days. I'm sorry, I really am. It's not a great excuse, admittedly, but you have to admit, it's better than, what was it...Me being 'a vindictive, callous jackass just trying to punish you.' Really, Zoe? After all that we've been through, that's what you thought this was? **[his voice is tinged with laughter and sadness]** I had hoped you would think better of me than that.

[Pause]

I apologize: I have no reasonable scenario 5 for you. This falls firmly into the 4 category I think.

Okay. Well, now that that's over with, shall I get on with replying to your letter?

I apologize again: I didn't think of the other possible interpretation. I just-- you expressed a love of childhood a few letters ago, and climbing trees is one of the big things I think of when I think of lost childhood activities. I mean, how many adults do you know who still go out and climb trees? It was in that spirit that I sent you to climb one. Not because I was being, as you call me, a jackass. A term that you seem to have firmly connected to me, if incorrectly, in two different circumstances since my last letter. Is that really what you think of me, Zoe? 'Potential' only counts for so many uses of the word, don't you think?

[Pauses, reading through the letter. Laughs quietly.]

Climbing trees as punishment? I wonder what you would have done if I really had assigned you banana peppers...

I've played chess, and pinochle, and lost both to Emma. I do have a fairly good poker face. I gave Emma a run for her money the time we tried it, and with very little use of my hands, we've been playing card games a lot, so I'm in practice. Emma's been really great this whole time. I think maybe she saw more than she's letting on, and feels bad that it was Derek who caused this. She's been here almost every day after school, writing out my homework, copying notes from my classes since I can't write to take notes myself, playing games with me so I don't get bored... she's even read to me some, since turning pages is surprisingly difficult with your dominant hand in a cast. It's been fantastic having her here to help me through this - I don't know what I would do without her.

[Brief pause]

Hmmm, let's see. Lissa does have a point. **[pause]** About Kevin, I mean. And it's not that I want you two to hook up or something, I- I don't! Wait, that sounds wrong. It's not that I don't want you to get together... I- I don't care what you do! I just ...find it ...interesting that the ...strong, stubborn, opinionated, and articulate Zoe is suddenly so flustered that she can't form complete sentences.

[Another pause]

I don't guess I have that much to add to the, um, physicality discussion. You seem to know a lot more about it than I do. I just, it seemed wrong to dump someone because they 'won't touch you' and that means they don't like you, you know?

Okay, I see your point about dreaming big, but... I don't know, I feel like the kind of dreams you have can tell you something about what you want to be. I mean, there was this girl in kindergarten who went around telling everyone she was going to be President of the United States, which was all well and good, but if you asked her why, you know what she said? She said she wanted to do it because no girl had ever done it before. She didn't care about politics. In fact, I'm pretty sure she hates them now. But she is one of the best scientists in our year, and it's all because she wanted to do something that women weren't 'supposed' to do. Just because it's a pipe dream doesn't mean you can't learn from it.

[Long pause]

Zoe, do you really think, even if we met, that I wouldn't keep writing to you if you moved away? Meeting isn't going to change the fact that we're friends,

or at least I hope it won't. **[Forcedly cheerful]** And -- and hey, if the meeting is a disaster, we can promise never to do it again, and just write each other letters to the end of our lives.

[Pause]

No, hang on, I'm not done with that yet. Do you remember, right as we started writing, we had a discussion about being ourselves on paper, just the same as we are in person? This is me, Zoe. Maybe a little more me than you're used to **[breath of laughter]**. Meeting me isn't going to change who I am, because you already know me, the real me, more than anyone else in my life. So why can't it work the other way around for the rest of the people in your life? Are you afraid that they won't be 'real' on paper, or won't be themselves? Because I guarantee you they will, Zoe. They know how amazing you are, and they will be with you, whatever you choose to do. On the phone, in person, or in writing.

[Pause]

Okay, I think that's it. Your other two letters were mostly just, uh, worrying, so there's not much there to reply to. I'm sorry, again, I really am. I'll have Emma write my phone number on the CD so that if this ever happens again, you can call, or something, and then we'll drop it off first thing tomorrow morning, on the way to school. Again, I know this isn't ideal, and it's not very puzzle-like, although I did try to stick with the Alice theme, did you notice?

So ..yeah. Bye?

Wait, how do I turn this—