

Alex: Zoe's Letter, March 24th

Wow. That's... that's amazing. I mean, \$75,000? That's... Wow.

So, okay, you want my comments, I'm going to try and go through this logically. And, uh, try not to... truth bomb you along the way. **[sarcastically, and quietly to himself]** This is gonna be fun.

He says that the money isn't meant to buy you off or have strings attached. *You* say that it would feel like it does, and... okay, I get that.

Hang on, this might make more sense if I do it in response to your points. That was point one, that you would feel indebted to him somehow. Can I ask you why? *He* says there's no obligation, and granted, he could be lying, but I kind of doubt it. He's been trying to fix this between you for a while, and he was really good about giving you space during... while... while you helped Lissa. You said you wouldn't feel *much* of an obligation, so... what obligation *would* you feel?

Point two: It belongs to Lissa. Can I refer you back to the martyr comments of our last two letters? It doesn't just apply when you're in pain. Now, I can already hear you: 'But Lissa's his *real* daughter' and 'Lissa needs it more than I do.' Okay, but Zoe, your mom is a university professor, and an author, and last I checked, neither of those professions brings in tons of money. Add to that her hospital bills, and, well, I suspect you're not exactly rolling in it. **[brief pause, apologetically and nervously]** Sorry, is that overstepping? You asked for my thoughts, and I have to go on the information that I have.

Anyway, either you've never said what Thom does, or I've forgotten, but I sincerely suspect he made sure that Lissa was taken care of before he decided to hand you all his money. And, even if this means a slight cutback for her, she is *only* thirteen. You're going to college in a year. She has at least five.

Point three: You didn't have one but I do. This isn't just from Thom. If you read it carefully, which I'm sure you have, it's from Thom *and* Michelle. Both of them wanted to thank you. You said yourself that you wished you'd known Michelle better. I wish *I'd* known her, if she can take a train-wreck like Thom and turn him around. So this money isn't just his way of saying 'sorry.' It's her way of saying 'thank you.'

[pause]

It occurs to me, now that I've recorded that, that it's going to sound to you like I think the only option is to take the money. Sorry. That's not what I meant.

[hesitantly] I probably shouldn't say this, because it probably qualifies as another truth bomb you don't want, but . . . remember a few letters ago when I suggested that maybe I always knew the right thing to say because you already knew what you wanted, you just didn't know it yet? In this case, it sounds like you're saying "I don't know" but meaning "No." But . . . well, I don't think you should refuse it out of hand. I mean . . . that's a *lot* of money, Zoe."

Annnnd . . . *mierda* you're already getting too many people siding with him on this one. It's gonna be the mother hen discussion all over again. Just . . . **[to himself]** do it quick and get it over with, okay?

In the end, it's your decision, Zoe. You have to decide whether you really *will* notice every time you use his money, whether you really will find that things like college, or travel (which, from what I hear, can be the best experiences of your life) will be tainted by him. Or if, on the other hand, you'll remember Michelle, and how your stripe made her smile.

[Pause]

[Sighs heavily] Zoe, you will never *ever* have to worry about me getting annoyed with you asking for help. *Everyone* needs help sometimes, *everyone* needs someone to unload on. I don't understand where you got this idea that doing so makes you weak. Recognizing that you need help, that you can't do it alone, that makes you stronger than *90% of the population*, okay? Besides, aren't *you* the one who told me you have to let yourself rely on others?

But more than that, do you know why you'll never have to apologize? **[Pauses briefly]** Have you noticed, since this started, I- I haven't once made a joke about you leaving? Because every time you ask me for help, it's like . . . it's like you telling me that you're not going to. And then, to have you apologize for that?

[Clears his throat]

You *have* been a good sister. And if you don't acknowledge that, I'm pretty sure I can think of at least five people who would be willing to tell you so on a daily basis. Or at least would, if I could get you to tell me their phone numbers. **[Laughs]**

[Pause]

The picture did make me smile. You have a mini-me!

[Pause]

Hey, let Lissa and Gabe conspire. I'm sure they're having fun, and between the two of them, they'll make you the most beautiful girl at prom. Even if you are sitting behind a desk selling tickets.

[pause]

Wow, uh . . . you've . . . you've never called me by my last name before. Is that . . . ? Does that mean . . . ? In Zoe-speak, does that mean you're mad? I don't know what to do with that."

[Pause]

[Dry laugh] I think ganging up on you without direct contact is kind of an oxymoron, *chica*. Just because we happen to think alike . . . But you know, I *am* going to have to meet him someday. You can't keep putting it off forever! How is he, by the way? You haven't talked about him in a while.

[Pause]

Zo-ey, you *didn't* cause me pain! I caused *myself* pain when I did something stupid. **[pause, embarrassed]** But, um, thanks for saying that I helped.

[Pause]

[he seems at a loss for words] I . . . Zoe, I have said "You're welcome" or "any time," but you just . . . keep saying it. I'm

running out of . . . I don't know how to . . . I -- I'm not doing anything that a *real* friend wouldn't do Zoe. I feel uncomfortable accepting your thanks, because these are the kinds of things you're supposed to do *without* thanks. I *don't* think you take me for granted because you keep coming back and . . . and asking for help. I just . . . when you thank me, I don't know what you want from me.

[mumbling under his breath] Okay, yes, she just said what she wants, *payaso*, so give it to her.

[very hesitantly, definitely a question] You're . . . you're welcome?

[Pause]

[quiet] Oh Zoe, I know all tears aren't bad. I wasn't saying that. But . . . knowing that *I* was the one who made you cry, when I didn't even mean to . . . I feel bad about that.

[pause, a bit sad]

Listen, I gotta go, okay? I haven't done you a long letter in a while, so I'll try to do one soon, I promise. Talk to you soon, *chica*.