

March 25

Alex,

Okay, I didn't mean to totally girl out on Twitter this evening, but oh my God, this freaking GOWN!!!! I'd have included a picture, but Gabe said it wasn't perfect yet and a photo would ruin his big reveal, and normally I'd roll my eyes at that, but I can't even be exasperated because he made me a freaking prom dress, as I may have mentioned.

Sorry, I'm still on a bit of a high. I knew Gabe was planning something. He kept pushing the date back on me when I knew he didn't have anything going on! And Lissa was totally in on it!

I haven't listened to your CD yet, sorry. I need to tell you about this first. We started gown shopping at noon. We went to four different boutiques. I think I tried on twenty dresses. And I liked a lot of them, but whenever I'd say "I really like this one, what do you guys think?" Gabe would narrow his eyes and go, "Hmmm, I don't know. What do you think, Lissa?" And Lissa would grin and say, "I think we can do better, Gabe."

Finally, I was like, "Okay, enough already! Clearly you two are working from a script, but can we skip to the end?"

So they grinned at each other, and loaded me into the car again and drove me to the Rep. I was confused, but Lissa said to trust Gabe, and I always have, so . . . They took me inside, down to the costume shop, where one of the costume dummies stood covered with a sheet, and Gabe actually looked nervous, which is not normal for him.

He said that they had taken me all those other places so that if I didn't want to wear what was under the sheet, I had other options, and

that he totally understood, and I wouldn't hurt his feelings, but that he'd been working on something for me, for prom.

And then he pulled the sheet down. And this amazing, beautiful, GORGEOUS gown was on the dummy!

Do you remember, ages ago, when I was talking about keeping Gabe from burning his sketchbook? This was inspired by one of the gowns he designed and then threw out for the Witch in Into the Woods - the one I liked so much, that looked like it was made out of the night sky? He made that dress for me! I mean, with some tweaks, obviously, to make it more like a prom dress and less like a costume, but still!

I was shaking when I put it on because it was so beautiful and so perfect, better than anything else I tried on today. And I looked at myself in the mirror, and told Gabe he was nuts if he thought that this wasn't the dress I was wearing to my prom.

And he frowned. Because he's Gabe and he will go to his grave dissatisfied with his best work. He said that it was still missing something, he just didn't know what, and he actually apologized for letting me down. Like he hasn't spent the last who-knows-how-many weeks designing and sewing a prom dress for me.

He circled around and around, peering at every inch. And then Lissa said the problem was that it was too cold. She ran for a box on the far wall, full of ribbons, and she rummaged through it until she found this wide ribbon of bright, burnished golden orange. She brought it over and held it up to my waist, then looked up at Gabe, and said, "See? It's like her bedroom."

Gabe grabbed his pincushion, pinned the ribbon into place, then stepped back to take a long look. Then he grabbed Lissa in a one-armed

hug and told her she was a genius. And the smile on that girl could have lit the ball on New Year's Eve, Alex. I could have kissed him for including her in all this. (Except ew)

So. Yeah. I have a dress. And I swear I'm gonna shut up about it now, because you probably couldn't care less, but I am so freaking excited!!! This was the best day I've had in a really long time.

Okay. Done. Promise. You have a letter for me, and I should listen to it.

Okay, I know you don't want me to apologize for "being Zoe," but I am allowed to apologize if I do something thoughtless, right? "Truth bomb" was an incredibly poor choice of phrase on my part. It was easy to misinterpret, and I'm sorry. I didn't mean it as a bad thing.

You know how I said, a few letters ago, that you are allowed to spout uncomfortable truths at me because I know if you're saying something, it's something I need to hear, even if I don't want to? That's what I meant by truth bombs. I may not always like hearing what you have to say, especially when I'm still stubbornly clinging to my delusions, but I do always appreciate your direct and blunt honesty eventually. I hope you don't ever stop truth bombing my obstinately held delusions, because I need someone to force me to deal with all the shit and issues I'd rather ignore (but shouldn't!). Listen to the rational, sane Zoe asking this of you now. Ignore the short-tempered, pouting Zoe who likes to break Rule Six (listen to Alex when he's right). In other words, this is not the mother hen discussion all over again. Not even close. Okay?

I still haven't decided what to do about the money. You, as usual, make excellent points, and I have to concede what you say about Lissa and about Michelle. What you said about Michelle actually really got to me.

I've been forcing myself to reread his letter as if it wasn't written to me, and wasn't written by him. Mom asked me to. I've been trying to think what I would do if a friend brought this letter to me, asking for advice.

And, I'd tell them that he sounds like he's trying. I'd tell them that it's a good letter, and it's genuine, and it really does sound like he means it. So it's not that I don't believe Thom, exactly. It's just that it's him. It's him, and it doesn't matter what his intentions are. At this point, the hesitation is because of me. Maybe taking the money won't put me in his debt, but it will open a door, and once that door is open, I don't think I can shut it again. If I take the money, doesn't that mean I'm admitting that there's a part of me that wishes things had been different? And if I admit that, isn't that some sort of betrayal? Don't ask who I'd be betraying, I don't know. But I feel like I'd be betraying someone.

I told you last letter, I've been hating him for so long, I'm not sure I know how to stop. And the idea of stopping is terrifying, somehow. Like I'm going to come out of it a completely different person because it's been part of who I am for so long. I never wanted it to be, but it was, and without it — I don't want to not know myself, Alex. I don't want to be unsure of who I am.

I don't know. I have two months to make a decision, right?

I have to ask, were you doing me there, in the middle of that? Is that what that was? You do an embarrassingly good Zoe Ballard, Alex, especially given that you've only heard my voice once. :)

I have noticed that you've been less worried about me getting tired of you, ever since, ironically, I skipped a week. It never occurred to me that my constant apologies for, well, everything, could be taken that way. I will apologize for that. I didn't realize, and I'm sorry.

Did I really call you Carter? That didn't even register! That's a thing Gabe does, when he thinks I'm being deliberately obtuse about something, or making ridiculous suggestions for the sake of being ridiculous. He calls me Ballard, and I've picked it up. I guess it slipped out with you, too. But no, it doesn't mean I'm mad at you. It's more a teasing, "You really ought to know better," type of thing. :)

You asked about Gabe, and he's good. Very, very busy, though, between this and Into the Woods and prom and his new budding romance. But we make time to hang out, and today was wonderful, like I said. Lissa is completely enamored. She is well aware of the futility of working on a crush, but I think she and Gabe could possibly take over the world with very little effort.

Indirectly, I said. I indirectly caused you pain. Don't worry, I'm not going to argue that you being stupid was the actual cause of the pain. But regardless, stop doing that.

I would like it, in the future, if your "You're welcome" came out a little bit less like a question, but well done. Solid effort. :) Next lesson: getting thanked is a cyclical thing. Like birthdays. If you keep doing things for me, even things that "any real friend" would do, I am going to keep thanking you. I don't want anything from you, that's not how it works. The fact that you aren't doing those things for the thanks is just another example of how incredible you are.

Let me thank you, Alex. I'll make you another deal. I will admit that I need your help. I will even ask you for it. But you have to let me thank you. Deal?

~~And — Alex, it would be one thing if you'd made me cry because you'd hurt me somehow. But that wasn't it at all. I was overwhelmed by the outpouring of . They were, not exactly happy tears, but~~

Please don't feel bad about making me cry. Okay? I mean, if you haven't picked up on it already, I cry at the drop of a hat, especially lately. Your kindness and support brought forth the tears, and that's not a thing to feel bad about.

Okay. We need a pick-me-up. I'm reintroducing ridiculous questions.

- 1) What is the most spontaneous thing you've ever done?
- 2) What is your favorite food (I can't believe we haven't asked this one! Though I swear to God, Alex, if you say banana peppers . . .)
- 3) If you were a ghost, where would you haunt?

I look forward to your longer letter. I feel like I've been dominating the conversation lately. So tell me. How was your day?

Zoe