

***Dear Mr. Knightley: Alternative Ending in Letter Form***

January 19<sup>th</sup>

I can't believe I'm doing this – I'm writing myself a letter. Most likely, I'll destroy it – I'd die if anyone ever read it. But I need to write. These letters, over the past two years, have become an indelible part of me – as much as Alex has become – and they'll be hard to let go. Journal-writing. That is something I never thought I'd do; but I seemed to be “trained” in journalism and letters now. That's confusing – and ironic. And true... Just as Kyle and I worked out our pasts and our fears in writing, I work out my daily life much the same way...

I went to New York. It took every ounce of courage I possessed and I almost backed away as I stepped out of the cab. New York Presbyterian Hospital loomed in front of me. The street was packed and noisy, but I heard nothing, saw nothing – only that hospital.

“Miss, here's your bag.” The cab driver had to shove into my hands before I paid attention to him.

“Oh, thank you.” I reached for it without looking. With all the people hustling in and out, only two men mattered – two men in all New York. First Alex. Then Mr. Knightley. I checked my phone again. No email. I wondered if Mr. Knightley was going to meet me at all. *Start with Alex. One step at a time.*

The one sound I heard was my cab pulling away. My escape, bright yellow and blaring its horn, pulled into traffic and disappeared. I forced myself to breathe. *One. Two. Three. I can do this. Just be honest. Don't look at his face. It doesn't matter what he thinks. It matters what I do.* I have never talked to myself so much in my life. In fact, some of it on the plane was aloud before the woman next to me asked, "Are you okay?" *NO I AM NOT!* I didn't say that. I kept that one, and all future musings, to myself.

But there I was, in front of the hospital, and it was time for action – not thoughts. I tried to step forward, but I couldn't move. *I'm made of more than this. I can do this.*

"Ms. Moore?" I heard a voice.

"Yes?"

A petite woman stepped forward. She looked a few years older and a few inches shorter than me, with straight blonde hair, cut neatly below the chin. She looked chic in her black slacks and crisp black wool coat. I'd like to look like that. I think that's what Mrs. Walker calls "presence."

She stretched out her hand. "I'm Laura Temper. Mr. Knightley asked me to meet you and escort you upstairs."

"He's here? I expected an email. Is he with Alex?" I put my hand to my throat. It felt tight. *Breathe.*

"I don't know. I was simply told to meet you."

"Sorry." I shook my head, clearing my scattering thoughts. I was acting distant, rude. "I'm nervous." I admitted as I pulled my shoulders back. Sometimes physical motions give me an emotional boost. "You're Laura. I'm pleased to meet you. Thank you

for all you've done for me these past couple years. Did he...? Did he show you my letters?"

"Never."

"It's been quite a ride." I tried to smile. "Thanks for the trunks."

Laura smiled back. "No thanks necessary, Samantha. That was a fun day." She considered me for a moment. "While I haven't read your letters, I know they please Mr. Knightley. It's obvious."

I nodded, unsure I could speak. Instead, I looked back to the building. It was time...

Laura caught my glance. "Shall we?" She turned and pushed her way through the revolving door. I followed.

Laura's heels made staccato taps on the stone floor. She offered no conversation and found myself mesmerized by the *click, click, click* of her step. Thoughts flitted through my brain, but none stuck. *Breathe. I'm okay. I'm not okay. Have they met? Does Alex know? There goes my chance. I should've stepped up earlier. I'm hungry. I'm doomed...*

The ride to the sixth floor was too quick for me to draw any conclusions – not that I could have with an hour ride. And as the elevator opened onto a small lobby, coherent thoughts fled completely. Mom and Dad stood in tense conversation and my heart dropped. Dad sounded angry. Was it grief? *Alex is dead.* That's where I landed. Laura stood behind me, silent, so I couldn't retreat. There was only forward. I took a step.

“Darling!” Mom noticed me first and ran across the lobby. Dad trailed. “Laura told us she was going down to meet you.” Mom pulled me into a tight hug. *Can I stay here?*

No. Mom pushed me to arms length. “He’s okay. The fever broke yesterday afternoon and he’s doing well now. He’s going to be fine.” Mom beamed. And, while I was glad – I was elated – I had bigger issues. Mr. Knightley was here – somewhere.

“Where is he?”

“Room 607, about five doors down on the right.” Mom put her hands on both my cheeks, forcing me to focus on her. “He’s fine, Sam. Breathe.”

I let out the breath and smiled. “Forgot that.”

“Breathing helps, dear. Now go see Alex.” Mom turned to Laura. “Thanks for waiting for her, Laura.”

“You know each other?” I looked between them. No one spoke, but Mom nodded. “Is Mr. Knightley here now? He’s with Alex?” My voice sounded shrill in my ears.

Mom paused and glanced at Dad. “He’s in there too.”

“Frances.” Robert scolded her.

“Well, he is.”

“But that doesn’t…”

I didn’t hear another word as I walked away. Room 607. The world felt a little foggy as I approached the doorway. *It doesn’t matter they’ve met. It changes nothing. I’ll say what I came to say.* I reminded myself of all I have laid down and how far I have

come and knew I couldn't take any of that back – ever. I'd even called Father John the day before.

“I called to ask for your forgiveness.”

“For what, Sam?”

“I was cruel. I told you I'd never forgive you for forcing me into journalism. I was wrong – and not because it's turned out okay. I was just wrong. I'm so sorry.”

“Are you okay, Sam? Have you been crying?”

“Yes, but I'm okay. I'm getting better at least... Do you forgive me?”

“Of course, my dear. There's nothing to forgive. You were hurt and rightly so. Perhaps I did overstep. I meant well, but some—”

“Please don't say anymore. Don't doubt yourself. You were right.”

“Do you forgive me?”

I recall smiling through my tears. What a mix of emotions. Even tinged with the sadness of Alex's injury, that moment felt light. I'd love more moments like that one. “I forgave you long ago, Father John. Before I knew what forgiveness was.”

“And you know now?”

“I'm learning.”

We talked a few more minutes, but I cut our call short. I couldn't explain it all to him – not without talking to Alex first. Father John, as usual, forgave me and hadn't minded my cryptic answers.

“When you're done with whatever's going on, I'd love to sit and chat – like we used to.”

“Me too... I love you, Father John.” My words met silence. “Father John?”

“I love you too, Sam.” His voice cracked and I knew – Father John had started to cry. “God bless you, my dear.”

I shook my head. It was time to see Alex, not dwell on Father John. *Stay focused.* I stopped outside Room 607 to gather a last ounce of courage. I then rounded the corner and tears sprang to my eyes. The vibrant man I’d come to love lay in a hospital bed, attached to more tubes and monitors than I could count. Alex was propped up on pillows with bruising across his face, pain etched in his eyes and deeper lines across and around his mouth than I remembered. But he was awake – awake and staring straight at me.

“You’re here.” He smiled and grimaced with the effort.

“I am.” I hesitated and looked around the room. “You’re alone?”

“I am.”

“But Mom said Mr. Knightley was here.”

“Yes. But you must understand, Sam, *I cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the look, or the words, which laid the foundation. It is too long ago. I was in the middle before I knew I had begun.*”

“*Pride and Prejudice.* Too easy, Alex, but not now.” I canvased the room again.

“You know, Sam. Like Emma, you called me ‘George’ only once.”

“Yes, yes. *Emma.* Enough with the game – wait. How do you know that? That’s true. Mr. Knightley told you that?” I stopped.

In my perfect stillness, the fog lifted and I zeroed in on Alex. “No more quotes, Alex. No more games.” I paused and drew the question out slowly because I knew something was wrong. I felt it in my chest – tight and pressing. “How do you know that?”

Alex scooted over in his bed, stifling a gasp. He patted the empty spot next to him. “Please. Please come sit, Sam.” He held out his hand.

“Alex?” I tentatively reached towards his hand and sat. He cringed at the fear my voice conveyed – not a good sign. *What is this?* I held my breath and waited. It was that moment again – the one where the adult shatters the kid’s hopes and dreams.

“I’m so sorry, Sam. I’m screwing this up; but I’m scared. Now I’m the one who can’t find the words.”

“Why? Why are you scared, Alex?” My heart shifted and broke the tiniest bit. His feelings meant more than my fears. That’s what this whole trip was supposed to be about. I let my rest settle in that knowledge and the thought that he didn’t have the power to “shatter” my hopes and dreams. They were built of sturdier stuff now. So I reached up and brushed a tear from the corner of his eye. I was there for him.

“I never meant to hurt you.” It was barely a whisper.

“You didn’t. I hurt you. I’m so sorry.”

Alex closed his eyes and shook his head. “Not that. As Mr. Knightley. I never meant to hurt you as Mr. Knightley.”

“You?”

“I’m sorry.” Alex opened his eyes and stared at me with such longing that I lost myself in the moment. Only for a moment –

Clarity shot through me and I recoiled. “You?” I popped straight up and retreated to the end of the bed, to safety.

“Come back,” Alex pleaded.

“You?” Standing across the room, I swiped at my eyes. I was wrong – he did hold that power.

“This whole time? You did that to me?” I shook my head, more frenetically, clearing my memories, my letters, my vulnerability. “Alex?” My voice broke and, perhaps, so did Alex’s heart. It should have. I hope it did, at least, because my heart lay in million pieces and streamed out into the hall. Tears coursed down my cheeks unchecked.

“Don’t cry, Sam. Please. Please come sit down. I can’t reach you over there.”

I covered my face with my hands and slowly shook my head. I then took a tentative backwards. It wasn’t planned. It was instinct.

Alex called to me in a panic, “No, this way, Sam – just a few steps. Please.”

Without removing my hands, I stood still. I didn’t want to retreat. This was my time. My time to stand on my own two feet, say what I needed to say and display the courage I always desired. Yet I couldn’t move forward either.

“Don’t retreat, Sam. Let me explain. Let me fight for us. It’s my turn now, Sam.”

I shook my head, my face still hidden. I couldn’t look at him. I feared I never could again.

“Then listen. Listen from right there.” I could hear tears in his voice. “I’m so sorry and I pray you’ll forgive me. You have to understand, Grace House solicited my foundation years ago. I funded it with my advance from *Redemption*. It’s down where



Pops and I used to play ball. You started out as just another grant. But when I read your college writing, I wanted to know you. Father John wanted to draw you out and the letter idea seemed a good extension of that. I never expected more.” His entire speech rattled out within a breath. He gasped for air.

“But you came to campus. I slammed into you.” I moved my hands down – just enough to see him over my fingertips.

“You did.” Alex smiled softly. “You barreled out of that lecture hall and into my life. I didn’t plan it. I came to campus to catch a glimpse of you, not to meet you.” Alex paused and drew a shaky breath. “Sam, I didn’t have a plan. You stepped on my foot and I couldn’t let you go.”

“How much of this was real?” One look in his eyes and I knew Alex sensed it – my fear and my retreat. “You manipulated me.”

Alex leaned forward and stretched out his hand. “No! I never did that. I stayed away. I tried to tell you. I tried so many times and I worked to never cross that line.”

“You crossed that line every day. With every letter. You can’t believe that, Alex... You betrayed me.”

“I never meant to. It went too far. I’m so sorry. Please, please forgive me.”

“I can’t. It’s too much.” I pulled my hands down and saw his eyes travel to my fists, clenched at my side. I hadn’t realized I held them so tight.

Then I did it. I turned and walked out the door. I wasn’t going to retreat, but I didn’t know what to say either. I needed time. Maybe all the time in the world. I didn’t have a plan – I needed a breath.

As I rounded the corner, I heard Alex gulp in a wrecked breath. It sounded like a sob, but I refused to consider it. I reached the hallway and my legs gave way. I slid down the wall and held my head in my hands. *He went too far. It's too much. How could he? How could he? I can't forgive him. It's over. I'm done. That's all. I'm done...* Thoughts pounded my brain.

And my legs ached. *How long have I been crouched against this wall?* I slid further down to sit. I closed my eyes and knocked the back of my head against the wall. The *thump* felt good. *Thump. Thump. Thump.*

A nurse towered above me. "Are you okay?"

I looked up and considered – too long. The nurse frowned. "You can't sit here. Are you okay? Do I need to call an orderly?"

"No. Yes. I'm fine." And there it was... *I'm okay.* It surprised me. "I am. I'm okay." I took a deep breath and knew it was true. I was still standing – so to speak.

I slid up the wall to stand. "I'm okay. I *am* okay." I smiled at the nurse. "Thank you."

The nurse narrowed her eyes and walked away.

I stood there. "*I don't like to disappoint people, Sam. I let things go on too long and get too complicated because I fear the way they'll look at me when it's all done.*" Alex's words sounded as clear to me as if spoken aloud. *That's what he feared? He was afraid of hurting me?* Alex's other comment flashed before me. "*I let things go on too long and get too complicated because I fear the way they'll look at me when it's all done.*" He did that – he had let it go to far.

*But what about me? What scared me?* The answer struck me – *I was afraid to be less. I was afraid for me.* – as small and selfish. I took a deep breath and knew more needed to be said. I couldn't leave Alex like that – I didn't want to. I even knew, on some level in that moment, I didn't want to leave Alex – ever.

I turned the corner and watched him for a moment. He held his fists pushed into his eyes. His chest rose in an exaggerated fashion with each breath, as if it was difficult to draw air. Then I noticed. Alex's mouth was clamped shut, his jaw flexed with tension and pain. *How is he getting any air?*

I then admitted the truth. *I know this man. And I can do this. What he did changes nothing. Nothing that, in the end, matters. I'm okay. I can forgive him.* I took a deep breath. *I do forgive him.* Another breath. It was the feeling I always got around Alex – a deep breath, something new and good, was next.

"I forgive you." I couldn't move from the doorway, but the words needed to be said.

Alex dropped his hands. "I thought you'd left. I thought you hated me. I thought you—"

"I know. I thought all those things too."

"You're back."

"I..." I stepped into the room. "I'm hurt, Alex. I don't know what to think. Part of me understands why you didn't come clean; but another part feels really betrayed." "I know."

"I don't know what's real."

“It’s all real. If anything, you should know that. I’ve seen you from the very beginning. I almost wrote you back last year. Remember when you asked?” Alex leaned forward, then drew in a sharp breath.

His voice came out tense, breathless. “It would’ve ended this – us – but it would have been honest. Maybe I should have written you. But I couldn’t do it. I thought you needed Mr. Knightley and I wanted you to be sure.”

I shook my head, confused. “That was right. I needed him – you.” I pressed my hands to her eyes. “I don’t know... I don’t know what to do.”

“Come here.” Alex whispered. “Just come here and talk.”

I stepped forward.

“Will you sit?” He patted the bed next to him.

“That’s awfully close.”

“I’m not the enemy and I won’t bite.” Alex’s small smile compelled me take the last step. I sat on the edge of his bed and stared at my lap. I saw his hand reach as if to touch my fingers, then it withdrew. I made no gesture to help him as I counted the checked panes on his blanket.

“I don’t know who you are.” I finally whispered.

“You know me. That’s why this hurts so much. I was Mr. Knightley. I am Alex. And I love you. You need to know that too. That’s where it all got so complicated, Sam. I fell in love with you. I didn’t mean to and,” Alex blew out a sigh, “when I replay my proposal to you in my head, it was very Darcy-esque. Sorry about that.”

Alex reached out and tentatively touched my hand. “But there was some truth to it – I don’t think he necessarily wanted to love Lizzy at that point in their story just as I tried hard not to love you. Because loving you hurt you. Because I knew how you’d feel. Betrayed.”

Alex squeezed my hand, “But this time, I played the Simone role. I caused all the pain. See why Cole and I aren’t cut out for this? We’re a mess. I’m so sorry.”

I tried to laugh, but ended up sniffing and adding a very embarrassing snort. “You’ll both be fine.” I sat silently fiddling with Alex’s fingers, unaware I even touched him until he squeezed my hand. “I’d like to go running right now.” I smiled through my tears.

“I wish I could join you. Six miles and we could work this out.”

“It’d only take three.”

“What do you mean?” Alex’s eyes lit with hope.

“I mean I believe you. I do, but I don’t know how to let go. How to not be hurt anymore. Two miles would probably sort it out. But on my own... here...” I glanced around the room, fluttering my hands.

Alex smiled. He knew my “tell” for nerves. He knew and knows me as well as I know him. He reached for them and pulled me closer.

I looked at him surprised because that felt awfully close. *I’m okay. I’m okay.*

“I’d like to kiss you. May I do that?”

“Why?” *I’m okay.*

“Because I love you.”

I nodded.

“Thank you.” He moved his hands to the sides of my face and gently pulled me towards him. He kissed me softly. The kiss felt laced with reverence. “I love you.” He whispered again.

I bit my bottom lip. Questioning the kiss? Savoring it? I still don’t know. It was quite a kiss.

“What do we do now?” I whispered.

“Get to know each other – as Alex and Sam.” Alex used his thumb to brush a tear from under my eye. He didn’t let me go. “We can’t start over, but I don’t want to. All this is a part of us. Maybe this is the only way our story could happen.”

I smiled. There was some truth in that. How else do two such dysfunctional people ever come together? Ever hope to stay together? I think God can only arrange this kind of crazy stuff.

Then I shuddered with a new thought. “Mom and Dad? Are they in on –”

Alex chuckled that self-deprecating laugh I knew and loved. *I know this man.* “I told them last night and Dad is furious with me. Rightfully so – I’ve hurt his daughter. Mom M’s disappointed; but she’s a romantic at heart. Five minutes into the story and I could see her wheels turning.”

“Her wheels?”

“She wants to plan a wedding, Sam.” Alex eyes searched mine for encouragement.

“Do you?”

“Want to plan our wedding?” Alex chuckled. “With every fiber of my being. No more lies, Sam, and no more letters. All I want is to be with you. Be with you completely, intimately, passionately and forever.”

“That’s a lot.” I leaned back.

“I’ve been in love with you for a long time, but you’re fairly new to our story. I can be patient. I’ll let you catch up.”

I nodded and closed my eyes. *I’m okay. I can breathe. I feel... I feel... joy.* I opened them and smiled. Alex caught the expression.

“What?”

“I love you.” I took another deep breath. “I don’t think it’ll take long for me to catch up.”

Alex smiled at the new softness in my eyes – the beginnings of surrender – even I could feel it.

“Come here. I’ll help you.” Alex closed the gap between us, pulling me across his chest. I fit perfectly.

*As Mr. Knightley could not impute to Emma a more relenting heart than she possessed, or a heart more disposed to accept of his,* he knew I forgave him and loved him.

*And me? Who had been only daring to hope for a little respite of suffering; - she was now in an exquisite flutter of happiness* and I finally knew what it felt like to be Emma.

After a few moments, Alex held me inches away. He seemed unwilling to let me go any farther.

“What did that kiss say?” He whispered.

“Oh, no.” I laughed. “We do not have a new game. You can’t quote my letters like we do books. We may not be able to do that for a long time.”

“Fair enough.” Alex hesitated, unsure. “Will you still tell me?”

“It said nothing, Alex.” I watched his face drop, and I relished this new and exciting – and flirtatious – power I held with him. One I will never abuse. “It was a *completely, perfectly and incandescently happy* moment.”

“Ah, so we do have a new game. That’s from the Keira Knightley movie, my darling Mrs. Darcy.”

“Yes, it was.”

This time I closed the gap.

A few minutes later... We started to talk. It was a wonderful and honest hour before the nurse kicked me out. And, while much was said, I don’t remember it all. I remember feeling increasingly comfortable and, by increments, free.

Writing it down helps. I’ve gotten to relive it – and what a wonderful moment it became – and I’ve gotten to process it. I’ve also come to learn, through recording this, that Alex only has the power in my life that I give him. And if I want to make a relationship work – a marriage work – I need to trust him, forgive him and put him ahead of me, each and everyday. I know he pledges to do the same. – because I know who he is and what he wants from a relationship. I know Alex.



What an amazing thought – to be that important to someone and to be cherished by them. Mom and Dad talk about each other that way – they talk about God that way. It's time I listened more – really listened – because it matters. It's everything foreign, everything scary and everything necessary.

Maybe that's what I was to learn from Edmund Dantes all along. It isn't about cold, calculated revenge executed with impeccable sophistication. It's about forgiveness – as he himself found – it's all about *Wait and Hope*.