

Chances and Choices

A Short Story

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Kevin G., Nuñez

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By Kevin G. Nuñez

Dedication:

First God, thank you for this gift you have given me. May this work forever glorify you. Second, my family near or far thank you for your support and unconditional love. Finally, to the dreamers, remember, for your dreams to come true, you must first wake up.

The sound of the phone ringing awakened Lucy Thomas on her bedside table. "Hello," she grunted, with her eyes still closed.

"Good morning, Mrs Thomas." The man's voice on the phone said politely. "My name is Francisco Ramirez. You're about to have the worst day of your life. You will not like me, but I'm the only one who can get you through it. I just hope I don't have to kill you and your family to get it done."

There was a deliberate pause. Lucy, now propped up on her arm, could tell that he spoke slowly and simply so she would understand. "It's too early in the day for this prank-call crap! If you call again, I'm going to call the cops."

The voice on the other end interrupted. "I'm sorry to tell you this ma'am, but the police would do no good in this situation and my life would be a lot simpler if I was joking. I'm downstairs sitting on your lovely patio. I believe you bought this set three years ago, on your sister's birthday right before you took her to her surprise birthday party. It's such a shame you guys never really took advantage of it. Please take your time and come on down so I can explain everything. I'm not going anywhere. I promise I will be the only good thing in your day today." He then ended the call.

The Thomas home was a two-story house nestled in the middle of a cul-de-sac of a quiet suburban New Jersey suburb forty-five minutes outside of Philadelphia. They painted the exterior of the house Spanish olive green with bone white on the window and borders. Both the front and back yard were just the right size for this family of four. Mr. Zachary Thomas would comfortably cut the grass by himself once a week in the summer. Every decoration was in its proper place. He carefully considered the selection of every garden gnome. The children could not get lost or taken by someone with ill intentions without someone noticing from the kitchen window. The only blemish in the otherwise pristine yard was a half-made fence to prepare for a dog that would never come. As a result, Emily and Matthew rarely played outside throughout the course of their lifespan, except for a few weeks throughout the year.

The unexpected houseguest sat in his red Quantum Edge power wheelchair. The tires dulled down and the shock absorbers had taken their share of abuse, but there were no visible crumbs or stains. Ramirez was extremely careful when he pushed one of the matching chairs out of the way into a corner, using his own chair. He swung away the joystick so he could fit under the white round metal table placed just off-center of the overhang. Pushed just out of arm's reach towards the center of the table, sat a randomly selected box of donuts with three regular coffees and one hot chocolate. Pointed directly at him across the table was a nine millimeter Beretta. His Smartphone was on top of his closed laptop, easily accessible to him. The last item on the table was a blue Everlast backpack filled with essentials, just off to his left-hand side. He was wearing a gray three-piece suit with a black dress shirt from a department store. The ensemble perfectly matched the shirt, belt and shoes. Finally, he used a small American flag pin as a tie clip. With his pale skin, outsiders would never suspect that he was Hispanic. His brown eyes made it easy to see that he was deep in a maze of thoughts and calculations, trying to enjoy the last few

seconds to himself before he became a real-life ringmaster of bombs, guns, and money. “I know I am not on speaking terms with you Father God, but please don’t let me feed this family to the lions. I’m all they’ve got, and you’re all I’ve got.” He took one long exhale as the sliding screen door slammed open.

“Who are you?” said Lucy as she stepped down into the freshly cut grass with her bare feet. Her husband’s green bathrobe covered her pink pajama bottoms finished with a black sleeveless tank top. Chocolate brown-covered roots went favorably with her faded Italian skin. She was a few generations removed from her ancestors who came to Ellis Island. She ran on the treadmill at least three days a week to hide that she had a bowl of ice cream with a glass of red wine before bed at least four times a week. They celebrated her 40th birthday just two months prior. Despite her children’s best efforts, her wrinkles were far from developed. Instinctively, she took a step back as the youth reached his hand across the table as far as possible.

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Thomas. My friends call me Frankie,” he said as if he was applying for a job interview.

Before he answered, an aluminum bat was pointed at his head. “Hey Frankie, my name is Zachary and my friends call me Zack. You have about thirty seconds to tell me what in the blue moon you’re doing in my house!” The 42-year-old male had jet black hair with gray streaks running through it. His boxer shorts and black wife beater t-shirt revealed a remarkably athletic body except for the surgical scar on his left knee. A pair of hazel eyes highlighted his Caucasian skin. Opposite of his wife, his face looked tired and full of stress.

“Good morning, Mr. Thomas, my apologies for intruding on your home so early on a Sunday morning. How’s your knee? According to my findings, you were one of the top 100 baseball prospects out of high school. I believe you had a contract with the Atlanta Braves. You played just over a year before they replaced your knee.” He gave a sarcastic smile, raised his hands above his head and continued. “The reason I called your landline was because I knew your wife would think I was her sister. They usually go to brunch before shopping at the outlets on nice spring days just like this. I go to school with your daughter, Emily. She doesn’t know I’m here. I promise. However, she is my chief priority. Can you please call her down so she can vouch for me?”

“What the fuck! Zach, call the cops, I don’t care if you are in a wheelchair. Don’t you dare say another word!” Lucy grabbed for the firearm. Her hands shook as she raised it at the intruder’s head. Zachary moved towards the aforementioned door.

“Easy Lucy, the fifteen rounds in that gun are the only conventional weapons we have. You don’t want to go wasting one bullet on me. I’m here because I have a job to do and in order for me to do my job, I need to know everything about you and your family. You guys are not bad people, you just got in over your heads with some terrible people. Now call Emily and sit down and have a donut. We don’t have a lot of time.”

Mrs. Thomas reluctantly obliged and called her daughter. Immediately Frankie backed away from the table and snapped his joystick back into place, and put his body in full view for the first

time. He could not have been over 5 ft tall with a bony frame. His upper body seemed normal enough with the irregularity of his left arm, which seemed to be locked into place against his stomach. His hips were firmly up against the back of the chair, although slanted to the right. His legs were obviously fighting atrophy as best they could, but slowly deteriorating. He pulled a small piece of cloth from his backpack and cleaned his glasses. By the time the first footsteps had come within earshot, he had placed his glasses back on his elongated face full of dimples with a powerful jawline. Finally, he wiped his sweaty hands on his pant legs as the final footsteps approached.

Zach and Lucy stood firm as she still pointed the gun at Ramirez. The husband had dropped the bat to his left side, but did not loosen his grip. "What's going on?" Explained a young lady's voice just beyond the threshold outside the view of the eager visitor.

"Hey pretty lady. Could you please tell your parents I'm a cool guy before I get my head bashed in?" he asked.

"Frankie!" A tall, fit young woman with long extremities stepped on the grass, matching hazel eyes from her father, and her mother's chocolate brown hair. Emily Thomas was wearing a red pair of shorts with an oversized blue t-shirt and plain ankle high socks. Disregarding the weapons in her line of sight, she ran over and gave the gentleman a kind embrace. "Mom, what's going on and where did you get the gun?" she said.

"I kind of gave it to her. "He said with a smirk. Frankie pulled her in for a second hug and whispered, "Go change your clothes and tell your friend upstairs to sneak out the window." She instantly pulled away. He grabbed her hand before she could do so. "Hey, you know you can trust me. Make sure you wear jeans though, today's not a good day for one of your sundresses." looking straight into her eyes.

"I don't know what's going on, but I know he will not hurt us. Wait here, I'll be right back." she said before running up the stairs.

"I don't suppose you'll tell us what that's about, Francisco." growled Zack.

"Of course I would. It does me no good to lie to you. Only that was not my secret to tell. That's something you have to ask your daughter at a later date. For now, all I can say is that it's about limiting collateral damage. The coffee and donuts are fresh. "I beg you, let's sit down and wait for your children, including little Matthew. We all have to work together today."

Less than ten minutes later all four members of the Thomas family were around the patio table wondering what their guests would say. The six-year-old sat in the chair that was removed earlier that day, devouring a jelly donut and hot chocolate. His hair and eyes were identical to his mother's. His Superman pajama set was tarnished and about one size too small for him. Freaky introduced himself long enough to give the boy's mother a chance to put the weapon inside her pajama bottoms outside of everyone's viewpoint. She tied a knot in her robe rope as one last measure of security. She stood with her arms folded across her chest, guarding her son. Zachary was at the other end of the table now, leaning up against the bat. On his way back downstairs, he

grabbed a pair of navy blue sweatpants to protect him from the early morning breeze. Hesitantly sitting next to Frankie was Emily, wearing a simple pair of jeans and a plain green t-shirt. “What’s this all about, Frankie?”

Now back in his original place, he cleared his throat and began. “Zach, you’ve been laundering money for the local chapter of the Russian mob and you stole \$50,000 of their money. The police might get here before the Russians do. But, then they will just kill you in prison, anyway.” He spoke in a soft but authoritative tone and said, “Four months ago the CIA recruited me as an analyst and to provide technical support to their high valued assets.”

Emily popped up from her chair and said, “What? My dad owns a bar, he’s not a mobster! Who put you up to this sick joke? I know you. We’ve been in school together since the fifth grade. You were one of the smartest kids in the school. You’re not a spy, you had a school aide for Christ’s sake!” The youth said nothing in response. Instead he just motioned at her father. Zachary was sitting straight as an arrow, glaring daggers at the stranger before slamming his bat on the table. He continued without hesitation. “He opened the bar ten years ago but started washing the money six years ago when your brother was born with all those heart defects. Private businesses and health insurance don’t really mix. You’re going to go to college in the fall. The business was on life support, especially after the pandemic two years ago.”

Lucy then blindsided Frankie with a slap across the face. “Shut up, you! Emily, take your brother and go inside. Your father and I will handle this.”

“Come on Matt, I’ll take him inside, but I’m coming right back out!” she proclaimed.

Smashing his mouth back-and-forth Frankie struggled to say, “You’re not understanding this, killing both of you will not give them back their money. Only your son and daughter can do that in the right marketplace. Matthew’s childhood is going to end today. For that I am truly sorry, but it makes no sense to hide things from him. Please let me help you,” he begged once again.

At that moment the phone rang. The woman rolled her eyes and said, “I’ll call my sister back later. I don’t know why she never just texts me.” After a reluctant breath, Lucy took a seat where Matt was and placed him on her lap. She said, “Okay, the floor is all yours, but if anything happens to my kids, I will kill you myself.”

“Let’s try this again,” Ramirez announced while pulling up his glasses. “I’m going to be giving you two options to avoid the most certain death that would befall all of you if we don’t intervene. They are both bad. There is no peaceful way out of this. Shortly after sunset, people will come here to kill you. Sunset is at 7:24. At 7:40, an anonymous phone call will be made to the police. The enemy is time. The only way we can hope to survive any of this is by preparing for it.” At that moment he pulled out two sealed manila envelopes marked with a red letter A and B, respectively. He laid them on top of each other and folded his hands over them both before he continued. “Before I give them to you, you must go inside. After I’m done speaking, discuss it among yourselves - no matter what I have said. Thanks to that step I cannot go inside your house. It’s your lives that are going to change. I can only assist you as best I can. The choice must be yours and you must all agree to it. You will have exactly one hour to review all the

documents to make an informed decision. Within that hour each one of you can come outside once and talk to me for five minutes. No more, no less. One at a time. Am I clear?"

Matt was the first to answer with an energetic "Okay, I guess."

A heard a sigh from the voice next to him, "That makes sense."

"Lucy mumbled, "Whatever, as if we have a choice."

Pacing back and forth, the patriarch of the family said, "Just hurry and spill it egghead."

"Very well," Frankie acknowledged.

"Option A is simple enough in concept," he said, as he slid the manila envelope across the table to Mr. Thomas. "We kill you. I make a call and four dead bodies arrive. We prepare the bodies and we detonate the house just as the Russians show up and the police arrest them. Two hours later, I'll change the dental records. Then, I move you to a suburb just outside Cincinnati, where I disappear forever. But I will know every single move you make. I'll even manage and create your new social media profiles with your new identities. You will never come back to New Jersey. You will never say goodbye to your family. You will never see your friends again. You will be dead. I cannot move you if you are discovered."

He specifically reached over Matthew and handed the envelope with the letter B to Lucy.

"Option B is much more colorful. We turn this house into a real-life Home Alone." Matthew interjected, "Let's do that!"

Frankie gave a smile and then answered, "I'm sorry, my friend. If we do, no one will laugh after ninety minutes. We have to do something so vile that the entire Russian mob will never mess with you again, and it has to be convincing enough for the police to believe it was self-defense. To top it off, we can't actually kill anyone because one man coming here is the grandson of one of the key guys back in the motherland. He's untouchable." He saw the surrounding reactions.

Emily looked away, half confused and disgusted, not recognizing the man next to her. She walked over and stopped her father from pacing. "Easy Dad, let's go inside to figure this out."

Mrs. Thomas stood up. "What a shit sandwich we created for ourselves, Zach. And to think this crippled boy is the only hope we've got."

Grabbing the box of donuts, the little boy said, "This sucks." Once again heading for the door, Mr. Thomas grumbled, "Okay, let's go inside. We have got a lot to talk about."

Clearing his throat, Frankie said, "There's one last thing you should know. For doing this, I have one simple request. Two weeks from now, after we have settled everything, a car is going to come to pick up your daughter. I want her to spend thirty days with me by herself. I promise you Emily will be well looked after. She's over eighteen, so she can make this decision on her own. She will have her own space. I can't and couldn't pressure her to do anything she does not want to do. I'm looking for a chance of companionship." As he said this, all four snapped back. He pulled out one large horizontal digital clock and placed it where the donuts once sat facing them. The large block numbers read 10:05 a.m. "That's it folks, time starts now. Remember, we have

an accord. So, go inside. I'll be right here when you guys are ready to talk. Who wants the first five minutes?"

It was 10:25 when the screen door opened once again. Frankie did not notice. He was focused on his laptop. The butt of the gun was bashed into the side of his head, causing his glasses to fly off his face and onto the grass. Zachary was standing there, holding the pistol inches away from his face. "You sick son of a bitch. You're a dead man! Not only do you want me to give you my daughter so she can suck your dick and wipe your ass, but you want me to mutilate another man!"

Feeling the bump that had instantly formed, the young man looked up at the firearm and said, "Hello old friend, If you're gonna kill me, make sure you stick it right under my jaw so it looks like suicide. Your five minutes starts now."

This caused the father to take a step back. "What's wrong with you?" he asked.

Ramirez chuckled in response "Physically, Cerebral Palsy. You don't know this, but your daughter saved my life first. So today I'm really just trying to return the favor. Do you know what it's like sir not only being one of the smartest kids in school but being the only disabled kid in school? No one invited me to the parties. I got tired of being turned down by girls, so I simply stopped asking them. On the day I was planning to use that thing on myself, I was sitting at a lunch table by myself and your daughter bought me a cookie and talked with me for five minutes. Sex is not what I'm looking for. So please tell me what I can say to make this easier on you."

The able-bodied man slumped back in one chair. "My wife opened up her packet first. Obviously she likes that one because we don't have to leave our home. Tell me about Option A and don't leave anything out. This is my mess. I need to know everything I can in order to clean it up." He went over the plan as much as he could in the allotted time.

Before allowing Mr. Thomas to leave his sight, he made sure he gave him a top-of-the-line electric razor, still in its packaging from his backpack. "I figured I owe you one. It's not a lot, but at least you can look your best on the worst day." Zach accepted it without saying a word, only nodding his head in respect.

Lucy passed her husband as she stepped back onto the grass. "Jesus, Zach! What did you do? I don't like him either, but kicking his ass does us no good."

With a hiss of pain, he responded. "It's all good. It was just a little male bonding." Zack had no choice but to laugh as he continued inside.

Her motherly instincts kicked in and she ran back inside and put some ice in the towel. She shoved it in his chest. "I guess, it's my turn now. I just have one question after that. You can go to hell for all I care. Why did they send you?"

Breaking up the ice on the side of the table and placing it on the side of his head - "No one sent me; I'm here on my own. Four months ago your husband's name appeared on my desk for suspected mob ties. After it was determined he was not a direct threat to National Security, no action was required and the case was to be closed."

She moved around the patio frantically. "How can you be so calm?"

He cut her off, putting his chair directly in front of her pathway. Frankie handed her a pack of cigarettes. She opened them immediately. "You don't have Jason Bourne or James Bond here to save you. All you have is me, and all I have is you guys. Everybody wants to be a hero, but sometimes the hardest part is just showing up. I'm not going anywhere today." He unbuckled the seat belt and forced his feet out of the footrest, accompanied with a small sound of pain. He pushed a series of buttons on the joystick. The base and the wheels remained still, but the seat itself reclined back with the sound of hydraulics. "Relax, I can't fall, there's a sensor that won't allow the chair to go back that far. I'm just trying to stretch out my body." She looked on nervously as he slowly came back down into place.

"Look, I'm sorry to say this, but someone has too. You have a condition. Clearly you need someone to help you. Isn't there something else you can do? Just go home, kid. I'm really glad my daughter was nice to you, but you need to know she's in a serious relationship. So, please just go home and let my husband and I figure things out."

He struggled to get his left foot back to where it belonged. "Mrs. Thomas. Yes, your daughter is involved with a good man. She wants to love him. But the fact remains she does not love him. I'm not saying I'm the answer, I'm saying I could at least help not repeat the same mistakes. I already told you this morning that you would not like me, but I would get you through this."

Lucy's face went flush with fury. She grabbed Frankie by the shirt color and tossed him to the ground with every ounce of power she could muster. "You bastard! Don't you dare say a word to Matt." Lucy was shaking and she slammed the door behind her.

Francisco was still coughing and checking his lip for blood when the youngest member of the family mysteriously made way to the backyard. Ramirez could prop himself up against the fence, doing his best to clean his glasses with his tie.

"Oh man, my mom really kicked your ass, didn't she? I think you need this," he said, handing Frankie the cloth from the table.

Thank you, my little friend; you really shouldn't use that language. Your mother wouldn't like that. Any chance you saw what time it was?"

Matthew quickly glanced back and said proudly, "10:39 a.m. I don't know what you said, dude but now dad's upstairs yelling at mom. Tell me, which plan would you choose?"

Putting his finger to his lips, he whispered, "You don't have to worry about that right now. Matthew, I'm sorry you're going to grow up a lot today and that's not fair to you. Just promise me

you won't forget to have fun every once in a while. As for the choice your family makes, that's not what matters. What matters is what you do after that."

Matthew simply shrugged his shoulders, "Okay."

Pointing back to his blue backpack, Frankie said, "I have the latest copy of MLB The Show just for you. Go get it now and go play." The boy ran over as fast as his legs could carry him. He reached in and pulled out the black and white plastic bag. He opened the bag slowly, saw what was inside, and rushed into the house without looking back.

Frankie was lying on the grass with his hands clasped on his stomach and his eyes closed, listening to nothing. Despite having both earbuds from a white cord attached to a first generation smartphone, carefully placed. The phone itself was rising and falling peacefully with each breath. He felt a slight tap against his left foot. Emily was standing over him with her hands on her hips, feet spread wide apart. "What do you want from me? You barely know me. How long have you been stalking me?"

Still rubbing his eyes and slowly propping himself back on his elbows, the disabled man said, "Whoa, take it easy, babe. I didn't really get a lot of sleep last night." Glancing at the time on his phone he said, "10:45, cutting it pretty close, huh?"

"Screw you and your clock. I'm not leaving here until I get the answers I want!" Motioning for her to sit down Frankie asked, "That's what I'm here for. What are your questions again?"

With little patience, the young woman repeated herself. "Well, let me start with the easy one. Like I told your mother, I started doing my research on your family just over four months ago when your dad's name was highlighted for suspected mob ties. I promise I've never invaded your privacy."

Emily shouted back at him, "Liar! How else could you have known that Brad was in my room last night? I didn't even know he was coming."

He corrected her, "You don't have to be a spy to figure that one out. The first nice day of the summer, after a friendly date earlier that night, I would have done the same thing."

She rolled her eyes and groaned toward the sky, "All boys suck." Ramirez blasted a single laugh.

"As for everything else, I want a chance for you and me. Just one chance out of a billion. You're right, I don't know you. We only spoke a few times, and you always copied my Biology notes. I just want to see if there's more. You're the only person who's always been real with me... not just focusing on getting their paycheck at the end of the week or patronizing me like I'm a little kid. I'm scared. I'm terrified!"

Now bending over with her hands on her knees, "What do you mean? Why can't you just ask me to dinner or something? Why do you have to take it this far?" Reaching out his hand, he carefully pulled her towards the ground until she was sitting on her ankles with her knees bent.

“I will do everything I can to protect your family. They don't deserve this. This is more about me than it is about them. Try to understand me,” he whispered. As a single tear escaped from his eye, “I'm not scared of dying tonight. I'm frightened because I never lived life to begin with. Emily caressed her hand against his cheek. He turned his body towards her, putting all his body weight on one elbow. “Do you know what they call me at home? Drew Barrymore, because no one has ever kissed me. We graduate high school in less than three months and I know the actual world is tough, but I don't know how much fight I have left in me. People complain about bullying. There's something worse than any of that being ignored. Best-case scenario, I'm going to spend the rest of my life analyzing data in a lab making less than \$35,000 a year, secretly saving Americans from problems they don't even know exist and with no one to share it with. I know that's a lot more than most, so I probably shouldn't complain. So now I'm frustrated on top of everything else.”

“What can I do? You know I'm dating Brad. This is not fair.” Frankie pulled away.

“I know how the world works. Quasimodo does not get the girl at the end of the movie. I'm not asking you to spend 50 years with me, just thirty days for something to feel real. Brad is not a bad guy. He will not cheat on you. He might come home drunk after a night with the boys every once in a while, but that's about it. He's a nice guy. I can't drive it all. He's on the varsity basketball team; I can barely win a game on Xbox. In a few years he can give you a beautiful son or daughter. If I get you pregnant, the amount of scrutiny you will get is unfathomable. My family has high expectations, to say the very least. If you meet them, you will need a priest before and a psychologist afterward. You will have a good safe life with Brad. All I can give you is me and the total package that goes with it. I don't have all the answers. I can promise you unconditional love and support. Every day will be a new adventure filled with both good times and bad. My hands will be sweaty, but it will always be there for you to grab. I know it won't be right for me to wake you up at three in the morning because my legs are having spasms, but I will be there when you have a bad day at work and you need to vent. I'll never be the best-looking guy in the world, but you know I will give you the most pleasure in bed ever.”

Emily flirtatiously pushed him onto his back. “You're going to give me agita. You don't have to be so overdramatic. Just be yourself and have faith in people. Brad only plays off the bench. Did you forget that I'm also a straight-A student? So there was never any need for me to copy your notes. Your timing is horrible. You just totally messed up my entire life. I have so much to think about,” she said strongly, wiping her own tears away. She popped up and went over to the empty wheelchair. She carefully had a seat and drove it over to him. “Alright then. Let's get you back in here. Ramirez slowly instructed her how to get him into a standing position. His legs could not fully straighten, so he was just supporting his own weight. Emily was stabilizing him. He put his arms around her neck and she gripped him by the wayside. His body shook like a baby rabbit. “Hey, I got you,” she whispered.”

The gentleman planted a quick, respectful peck on the lips before instantly pulling away. “I'm sorry. I know I don't deserve that. I just didn't think you'd let me do it later.”

The lady answered in a disappointing tone. “You are absolutely right. You don't deserve that. You deserve this.” She gave him a firm, tender smooch. “Not bad. There's potential, Frankie. There's one last thing I need to know. Can you dance?” Frankie was clearly confused. She reached into his pocket and pulled out the old phone. “You gave everyone else a gift. I assume this one was for me.” She put one string earbud into his ear and put its twin into hers. As the music played, she swayed them both back and forth.

The deadline was now five minutes away. Francisco was back where he had originally begun, in absolute silence. “God, thank you for not abandoning me despite all my bitterness and anger. With you by my side, I know I can do it. Thank you for showing me there is still some kindness in this world.” Just like before, he took a final deep breath as the screen door opened.

This time Zack stepped through first and found his original seat across from Francisco, plopping Matthew firmly on his lap. “You're an asshole, but you're our asshole,” The youth nodded with the same respect.

“How did you get back in the chair?” asked the boy now wearing a clean pair of jean shorts with a red t-shirt adorned with a Phillies logo over the heart.

“Ramirez gleaned like the Cheshire cat, “Ask your sister.”

His mother scuffed as she placed the weapon in the exact center of the table. She was standing diagonally to the wheelchair. “Look, I understand what you were trying to do here and I'm not saying we don't need your help. I'm still coming to terms with all of this. I've worked hard for twenty years to build this life and you're going to destroy it in less than 24 hours. I will accept it one day, but not today. Today, I blame you for everything. So I guess I'm saying, “Sorry, not sorry.”

He extended his hand once again to shake it. “That seems fair to me.” Lucy reciprocated the gesture.

Finally, Lucy stepped out wearing a black sundress with red flowers. “My head is going in a thousand different directions. I will not guarantee you anything after these next 24 hours, but if you're willing to go through all this, then I can at least keep an open mind. “You'll never get to tell me what I'm wearing ever again.”

“You look amazing,” he said simply.

“Lucy snapped her fingers to break his gaze. “Okay, Zach. Tell him what you chose.”

Frankie interrupted him, “Wait, there still 90 seconds left.”

THE END

