



THE RULES

a.k.a. sam's INFALLIBLE GUIDE

- 1) Stay cool. Never let girls see you jonsing. Especially if you want to get them back to your place.
- 2) Never take them back to your place. Ditching them will be harder by a billion and make you look like an asshole. Good times, happy parting.
- 3) "Friends with benefits" is the greatest phrase ever invented by a guy. Enough said.
- 4) Never refuse sex when it's on the table. Life's too short. There is no such thing as "I have a headache" for guys.
- 5) Desperation is ugly, man. Girls like cool moves, not filing restraining orders.
- 6) Never get caught up in that love crap. It will just wreck everything. Trust me.

I. sam

Like other chica chasers of the grade twelve persuasion, I've got my preferred player strategy: hit 'em with a killer charm offensive, rock the pleasure palace, and everyone gets respected in the morning.

Though it's harder when pushing a giant broom, dressed in a blindingly turquoise T-shirt with *Come see stars at the Galaxy* written in gold like a shooting star on it, courtesy of my lame job at the movie theatre.

There's supposed to be this other dude, Todd, helping me but he's busy bragging to the concession guy about feeding string to some stray cat hanging around the parking garage. And since nothing says psycho like hurting animals, I decide it's not worth the potential carnage to try and get him to do his job. I can't wait to get "promoted" to front of house where at least I get to upgrade from janitorial bottom feeder, cleaning up random sticky liquids I can only pray are pop.

So when I hear my name called by a familiar, sexy voice from across the lobby, I shove the broom behind a giant cardboard movie ad and take a sec to re-rumple my dark hair in the "I don't even bother with it" way that is Kryptonite to females before I turn around with my most charming grin. Not ideal but the best I can do right now.

It's the super hot Cass, nineteen and naughty in her barely there miniskirt, from the perfume store across the mall. Come back for her fourth visit in as many days, which I figure means something good. My player strategy guiding rule number one (stay cool) is firmly in play and now it's time to jack it up to rule two so we can get to the excellence of rule three.

Cass tucks her jet-black hair behind her ear before holding out a small square of paper to me. "Smell."

I take it from her.

"What do you think?"

I shrug. "Eau de cardboard?"

"Funny boy." Cass holds up her wrist and wafts it under my nose. "How about now?" she asks, all flirty.

"You smell how happy feels," I tell her. Because she does.

I'm rewarded with a big smile.

"Is it your break time yet?" Cass looks hopeful.

I hate to disappoint her. "Sorry. Another half hour."

She pouts. "Could you switch? I reeaally need some help jump starting my car."

I'm a sucker for a damsel in distress, so I grab my gray and black striped sweater to cover the hideous work shirt and follow her out of the theatre.

Cass leads me to her sweet sports car out in a deserted corner of the underground parking garage and unlocks her door with a click.

She notices my admiration for the wheels. "Daddy bribed me with this, thinking it would get me to behave," she laughs. I'm betting he regrets having spent the cash.

"Okay. Let me pop your hood and see what's going on." I reach for the driver's side door but she stops me, directing me to the back seat instead.

Inside, Cass stretches back against the seat, propped on her elbows, and stares up at me

through half-closed eyes. "It's not the hood I need popped."

No dead car battery? I smile. "You lying little minx."

She cocks an eyebrow at me.

"While I'm all about the blatant invitation, maybe we could move this somewhere less public? Away from the security camera?"

Cass pulls a condom package from her skirt pocket and flicks it at me. "Let them watch."

Looking at Cass lying there all "do me", I see she is the definition of "a hot mess." However, if that's why I'm about to get unexpectedly laid, then go "team crazy" and security cameras be damned.

Rule four, kids.

I'm in.

And out in about ten minutes. But I *am* in a car on my break, so cut me some slack.

"Short but sweet," Cass sighs happily, as we stand back up.

"I aim to please. Even on a tight schedule." I hand her a chocolate bar I snagged for her back at the theatre.

She takes it and with her other hand twines her fingers through mine. "What do you feel like doing, Sam?"

"I have to get back to work."

Cass wraps her arms around me and pulls me toward her. In a death grip. "Tonight, dummy. Where should we go on our date?"

Just like that, Cass morphs from rebel delight to buzzkill destructo, coiling herself around me like a metal snake as she spouts off about connections. Bad emotional ones; not good, blow-my-mind ones.

"We just had sex in your car."

"Yeah."

"And that means we go on a date *why*?"

She waves the chocolate bar at me. "You bought me candy."

Oh come on.

"That's not some Willy Wonka loophole to what was so obviously on the table." I give a good wrench and manage to fling myself backward, out of her hold.

Cass sends a furious glare my way. "You are such a dick."

While unfair and undeserved in this situation, I can't argue with the truth of it. Teenaged bros are dogs. We're walking, talking, idiots driven by sex and food. We bow before girls' much more complicated minds and don't get why they keep holding our nature against us.

But that argument won't get me anywhere. Believe me. I've tried. It's my fault. I need a better exit strategy because it's the rare gazelle who enjoys the bounce then throws you your pants with a "don't let the door hit you in the ass on the way out."

I try reason. "You faked a dead battery to trick me into coming out here so I would have sex with you."

"Well, it's not like you said 'no,'" she retorts.

"Because I'm male and breathing. If there were going to be other conditions on this offer you should have shown me the small print. Beforehand."

"If I'd done that, you would have freaked out."

And there you have it, boys and girls. The place where my rules, carefully constructed to

ensure a mutual good time, fall to shit.

The fundamental problem between the sexes.

You girls keep screwing up the game plan with relationship crap.

I mean, I try and take precautions. I stay away from my female high school classmates. Those red flags of puberty induced insanity and jailbait awkwardness? Back away. Quickly.

But Cass is an entry-level college girl, high on freedom and experimentation. So you'd think she'd know better.

I throw Cass my most charming grin but it fails to remove her scowl. Her eyes narrow. She leans forward, arms out to grab onto some part of me, but I'm faster: the gold medalist of the morning-after dash.

I fly through the parking lot, trying not to pay too much attention to the stream of impressively foul names she's calling me, which echo off the walls.

It's a bummer but kind of a rush. Can I escape the garage without getting caught?

Some QB-type opens his car door, hears a particularly inventive phrase from Cass, and smirks at my predicament, throwing me a look like I'm some loser who can't handle himself.

Suck it, monkey. What happened to solidarity?

I round the corner to the lower level and slow down, pretty sure I'm safe. Feeling stoked, I strut across the cement because until she went postal it was a hot time. I'm still riding high off it when I trip over something that doesn't like being tripped over, because it attacks.

I check my ankle and find red scratch marks from a gray, collarless kitten, who hisses from a few feet away. It's the kind of furball you could stuff a stick up its butt and use as a mop, it's so fluffy.

Whatever. I've got to get back to work, so I step over her but she snags her claws on the hem of my jeans, refusing to let go, even when I try and shake her off. That's when I notice the string hanging out of her butt, killing her cute factor but marking her as Todd's furry victim.

Just because I'm a dog, doesn't mean I'm cruel to cats. Especially scared little ones.

Gingerly, I pick her up. She barely weighs anything. I gently flick her ear and am rewarded with a lazy bat of her paw before she snuggles into me and purrs. *Soft and cuddly, just like a girl*, I think fondly. Her claws come out again. Yeah. Definitely a trend.

Just then, Cass peels around the corner, gunning for me with her car. As I jump the kitten and myself out of the way to safety, an age-old question pops into my head:

Why the hell can't chicks be more like guys?

And what am I supposed to do with a cat?

2. ALLY

My boyfriend's head smells like cheese. Jeremy is completely brilliant though and can be forgiven for the occasional shampoo lapse. That's not the weird part.

What is weird, is that he also smells like that disgusting body spray pimped out to teen boys, like that's going to miraculously eradicate their natural musk of feet and pit. Just take a shower.

Which Jeremy is actually really good about, so the body spray is a puzzle.

I remove my arms from around his neck, where I've been hugging him from behind, and slide in next to him at our usual table in the dusty back corner of the public library.

This morning's agenda? Finishing our essays for our twelfth grade Honors Environmental Science class. I push my glasses up, button my plaid hemp shirt up over my "Animals are friends, not food" T-shirt because of the wicked AC chill, and take my books out of my backpack.

Jeremy has that adorable look of complete concentration on his face that he gets when he's working out a problem. I watch him, noting absently that he's gotten a haircut. His ginger 'fro-like hair is mostly tamed and shaped.

He's in his favorite green bamboo skater top with a picture of the Flying Spaghetti Monster printed across it. My guy is wiry but he towers over my five-foot-five self, so there's enough of him for me to feel girly.

"I'm gonna miss you, pookie," I tell him. Jer is off to attend a big rally against a proposed pipeline through an animal sanctuary. So he won't be at my birthday lunch.

"Me too. But if we can get the authorities to listen, we can prevent a lot of damage down the road. There's no 'I' in Earth, right?"

I stiffen. I know it's not fair. I'm probably being clingy, which I try not to do, but sometimes I think maybe Jer is a little too rigid at putting Mother Earth first and his girlfriend second.

Jeremy must see the hurt look on my face because he squeezes my shoulder.

"Did you pack me cookies?" he asks.

Of course, but he doesn't have to ask me with his fake cheerful voice that he saves for children and idiots.

Deep breath. He's just stressed about saving the world. Besides, social awkwardness goes hand-in-hand with brilliance and we've had two great years together, so it's not as if I don't know what he's like.

I pull a PVC-free container from my backpack and toss the cookies with double carob chips to him. Jeremy is vegan, which means no chocolate for him and cookies that taste like, well, tree stumps, in my opinion. But as his fabulous girlfriend, I'm supportive of his choices. Get between me and my chocolate though, and I'll shoot you. This happy vegetarian ain't never giving up dairy.

As Jer opens one for immediate munching, he looks appreciative. Also, guilty. He probably forgot to get me a birthday gift.

Again.

Not that the cookies were supposed to be a guilt-out trip.

“Ally...” He pauses like he’s not sure what he wants to say next. This is unlike Jeremy, who always knows what he wants to say and never hesitates to say it.

“When I get home tonight, I want to talk to you. I’ll take you to *Grill Boyz*.”

Wow. A restaurant with real menus instead of just order boards? Jer must have something really important to say to me. On my birthday. I know, right?

I tense with excitement. Maybe he’s finally decided to stay in town for university.

But I play it cool. “Sounds good.”

Jer gathers up his stuff and, almost as an afterthought, kisses the top of my head. “See you later, *alligator mississippiensis*.”

“In a while, *crocodylia*.”

Yeah, okay. It’s geeky, but so are we. And the geek shall inherit the earth.

I try to focus on my topic of “the economic benefits of saving endangered species” but it’s not happening.

Jeremy’s best friend, Max, comes past, arms full of books. He’s bound for MIT or somewhere prestigious, where I’m sure he’ll find lots of minions to lord his dickness over.

Geeks like him should be vaporized.

“Hey,” I say casually.

He nods in equal parts restrained disdain and cool acknowledgement.

Oh, suck it, monkey, I think. “Jer left already.”

“I’m sure he wanted to be early,” he smirks.

I have no idea why he’s being more of a dink than usual. I remind myself that it’s my birthday and I could just knee him in the balls as a gift to myself, but since I’m a mature senior with an amazing life ahead of her who doesn’t want him coming out of the woodwork with evil allegations later, I blow it off and gather up my stuff.

I have a lunch to attend.

I wonder as I head over to the diner if I’m going to be too early but just being there at Delish Dish with its neon signs and retro-inspired décor, will make me happy. So it’s all good.

I pull open the door, inhale the fresh baked cinnamon buns that are today’s special and half walk, half slide my way across the black and white tiles.

I grin to find my cousin and fab friend Rachel already there with her Indo-British boyfriend, Ian, seated in our usual red leather booth.

Rach and Ian met at a burlesque show put on at their college campus. Not a shocker when you see them. Rach has flaming red hair. She is poured into this funky 50’s retro dress that fits her lush curves perfectly. Ian embodies cool in his usual black pants and suspenders, his head topped by a fedora.

“Big joy on the one-seven,” says Rachel.

“Felicitations,” Ian adds.

That’s their schtick. Works for them.

I slide in next to them with minimal squeakiness from the worn leather and happily accept birthday hugs and a much-appreciated gift certificate for my favorite bookstore.

I’m so glad they could make it. Since Rachel is in her first year of history at university—and no longer at school with me—we don’t see each other every day like we used to.

Matt, the extremely bitchy forty-something owner of Delish Dish, hurries out of the

kitchen to bring me coffee.

I check out the red, beehive wig he's randomly sporting, completely at odds with his regular uniform of jeans and a fitted T-shirt (carefully calculated to show off his perfect physique to random hot men). "When did you become a red-head?"

"Girl's night for my friend's fiftieth later. And speaking of birthdays, lunch on the house for your seventeenth, Ally," he informs me.

"That's nice. The senior's special."

I twist around at the voice of my best friend, Sam. He's at his laid back finest today, in a cool gray and black stripey sweater and jeans, his dark hair flopping over one eye. I swear he trained his hair to grow that way because girls like it.

I pretend to be annoyed. "Dude, I'm four hours and thirteen minutes into my birthday. Where's my adoration and glad tidings?"

"Sorry. I had to deal with a cat."

"Is that a euphemism?" Ian asks.

I muffle a laugh, then cock an eyebrow expectantly at Sam because of course that was a euphemism. But his sex life stopped being new and exciting years ago, and besides, there are birthday rituals to attend to.

Sam fixes me with a glare. "Hat. Now."

"I lost it."

"You want presents?"

That's a big no kidding, so I pull a tattered, garishly decorated, kid's birthday hat out of my backpack and stuff it on my head.

It's horrible but it's the price I must pay for gifts.

Ian peers at the monstrosity as if he's trying to figure it out.

"It's the magic birthday hat," Sam says as he places a large bag on the black "marbled" Formica table and scootches in beside me.

"Sam made it for my birthday when I was seven. I've worn it ever since."

"What makes it magic?" Ian asks.

I laugh, despite looking like a big ole dweeb in it. "Because if I wear it and look like an idiot, I get presents. Sam is a cruel, cruel boy."

"Aww, you look cute in it," Sam enthuses while shaking his head in a "No, she doesn't" way at Ian.

"Presents," I remind him with a nudge.

"Alison Klinger, most fabulous best friend, I am humbled and honored to share in this glorious day of your birth," Sam intones gravely.

Rachel snorts. "Goofs."

I turn to her with mock severity. "For that you get thrown in a volcano."

Sam shoots Rachel a smug grin.

"Don't count yourself safe yet, buster," I caution. "Bestow offerings."

Sam rifles through the bag to hand me a gift of promising size. I rip it open and my eyes widen in glee. "Oooh. So worth the shame of the hat," I say as I pull out the Blu Ray box set of the *Planet Earth* documentary series.

"There's one more." He pulls out a smaller box, which I rip into. It's a pooping penguin chocolate dispenser.

“This may be the greatest gift ever!”

“I know.” Sam is as excited by it as I am. “You wind him up and he waddles while dropping chocolate shit out his ass.”

“I’m speechless with amazement.”

“I’m kind of at a loss for words myself,” Rachel says dryly.

Sam and I exchange pitying glances for my poor cousin who just doesn’t get the hilarity of poop.

“Oh-oh, Rach,” Ian warns, “they’ve turned their Wonder Twin faces of condescension on you.”

“Save me. I’m melting.” She swoons into his arms.

Sam steals a sip of my coffee in its heavy, white mug. He makes a face, adds sugar and takes another sip. I smack his hand but that doesn’t deter him from the continued pilfering of my beverage.

I watch Sam convince some lady at the next table into handing over the creamers she was so obviously going to use and I’m once more amused at how he charms his way through life.

My theory, after years of in-the-field observation, is that it’s some kind of coping mechanism brought on by his mom’s death when he was just a kid. And in anyone else, it would annoy the crap out of me, but it’s Sam and we’ve been best friends since our moms met in baby group, so whaddya gonna do?

Sam’s a dog, and like all good pet owners dealing with that embarrassing leg-humping issue, I just spray him down from time to time and love him anyway.

That is, until he brings out a photo album which he drops with a heavy thunk on the table.

Ian leans over, intrigued. “What’s that?”

A nightmare in glossy color.

“Tradition,” Sam says. “Started to annoy Al, now an ode to her aging.”

“Really? Insults on my birthday?”

“And a way to capture a lifetime of our excellent friendship,” he finishes, smoothly.

“Better.”

Rachel flips the book open for Ian.

I shoot her a “You traitor” glower, because she knows how much I hate that thing, but she just smiles perkily, flips her hair out of her eyes, and begins to explain the photos.

“Brilliant!” Ian enthuses as he sees the first picture.

Yeah, right. Basically, it’s Sam and me together at various ages. Pick a date, any date, and I’m there all awkward. Bad haircuts, super skinny, and flat-chested—I rocked all the best looks, while Sam was always inherently tall, dark and handsome, flashing his damn charming grin.

I slam the book shut. Stupid boy.

