

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 jacked 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 reaaally 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?