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Opening extract from

Allie Finkle's Rules For Girls Moving Day

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RulE #1

Don't Stick a Spatula Down Your Best Friend's Throat

I like rules. The reason why is, rules help make our lives easier. For instance, the rule about not killing people. Obviously this is a good rule.

Another good rule is *Everything that goes up must come down.* This includes helium balloons. People don't know this, but you shouldn't let helium balloons loose outside, like at weddings or the Olympics or whatever, because what happens is eventually all the helium comes out and the balloons fall down, possibly in the ocean, and sea turtles eat them.

Then they choke to death.

So really that is two rules: *Everything that goes up must come down* and *Don't let go of helium balloons outside.*

Science has a lot of rules (like the one about

gravity). So does math (like that five minus three will always be two. That is a rule).

That's why I like science and math. You know where you stand with them, rulewise.

What I'm not so crazy about is everything else. Because there are no rules for everything else.

There are no rules, for instance, for friendship. I mean, besides the one about *Treat your friends the way you'd want them to treat you*, which I've already broken about a million times. Like earlier today when my best friend, Mary Kay Shiner, and I were making the strawberry frosting for her birthday cupcakes.

First of all, who puts *strawberry* frosting on cupcakes? Especially when Mary Kay knows perfectly well one of my rules is *Never eat anything red.*

Although in this case the frosting was pinkish, so technically it was OK. But still.

Mary Kay's babysitter – who is also her family's housekeeper – Carol, was helping us, and Mary Kay wouldn't stop crying, on account of Carol letting me lick the spatula. Like Mary Kay didn't just get to lick the beaters, since it was her birthday. Did anyone hear me complain that all I got was the lousy spatula, even though truthfully I did most of the work, opening the box and all of that? No.

Also, at nine years old you shouldn't cry over things like not getting to lick a spatula.

Sometimes I don't even know why I am friends with Mary Kay. Except that she is the only girl my age who lives on my side of High Street, which I'm not allowed to cross without an adult present since that kid got hit by a car while he was riding his skateboard there.

Which reminds me. Here is another rule: *Always wear a helmet when you're skateboarding, because if a car hits you your brain will splat open and kids like me will spend their time waiting for the cars to go by so they can cross the street looking for bits of your brain the ambulance might have left behind in the bushes.*

Anyway, while I was licking the spatula, Mary Kay was all, 'She's getting more than me!' and 'I want a taste!'

I don't know what I was thinking. I was just so sick of Mary Kay's whining. I mean, half the time I don't think Mary Kay knows how lucky she is, having a babysitter who is also a housekeeper who makes cupcakes for her to take to school on her birthday. We don't have a babysitter who is also a housekeeper, so no one in my family has time to make cupcakes since both my parents work.

So for my birthday I had to bring store-bought

cupcakes from Kroger, and Scott Stamphley said he could taste the chemicals in them.

Plus Mary Kay has parents who will buy her whatever she wants, like a hamster in its own Habitrail, because she is an only child and her parents can Afford It.

Maybe that is what I was thinking about when I said, 'Here, Mary Kay,' and held out the spatula. Maybe I was thinking about how Mary Kay has her very own pet, a hamster (Sparky) with a Habitrail, whereas I only have a dog – Marvin – who I have to share with my whole family.

Maybe that is what I was thinking about when Mary Kay put the spatula into her mouth and I was still holding on to the end.

Maybe that is what I was thinking about when I kind of shoved the spatula into her mouth a little.

I meant it as a joke. A birthday joke.

And OK, I know it was mean. But I just wanted to teach her a lesson about not being so greedy. I meant it in a joking way.

But I should have known Mary Kay wouldn't take it that way. As a joke, I mean.

And I should have known she'd start crying, this time for real, because the spatula went down her throat.

But just a little! Like, it BARELY went down. Maybe it touched her tonsils. But that's it.

Still. This is not a good example of treating your friends as you would want them to treat you. Also, it was all my fault.

I said I was sorry about a million times. But Mary Kay still wouldn't stop crying. Finally I had no choice but to go home and sit in the wheelbarrow in the garage and tell myself it was all my fault; I'd broken the only rule of friendship that there is (which I didn't make up myself).

Although a part of me couldn't help thinking that Mary Kay had broken an important rule, my own rule, *Never eat anything red – but especially don't choose that colour for your cupcake frosting if your best friend can't stand strawberry*, even though I have to admit that the frosting was pretty good; it tasted more like vanilla with red food colouring in it than it did like strawberries, which I hate.

But still. The rule I broke was the more important one, the *Treat your friends the way you'd want them to treat you* rule. I certainly wouldn't want someone to shove a spatula down *my* throat – even if it was just a little. I pretty much deserved not to be Mary Kay's best friend any more. Especially since, clearly, I didn't know the first thing about the rules of friendship.

That is when it became clear to me that I needed to write them down. The rules, I mean. Because there are so many to remember that sometimes even I forget them. And I'm the one who's making them up.

So I found a spiral notebook in a box near the Christmas ornaments that Mom had marked SCHOOL SUPPLIES. Then, using one of her permanent markers that she saves for writing on her home-improvement tools and told us kids especially not to use (except that this was an emergency, so I knew she would understand), I wrote ALLIE FINKLE'S RULES FOR GIRLS across the front of it.

Then I wrote KEEP OUT IF YOU ARE NOT A GIRL (I wrote that because I have little brothers who are always butting into my business. I don't need them knowing my rules. They can make up their own rules if they're that interested).

I was sitting back in the wheelbarrow, writing out the rule about remembering to wear a helmet while skateboarding on High Street, when Carol surprised me by coming into the garage and asking me to come back to Mary Kay's house. She said Mary Kay was crying even harder because I'd left. Also, she said that I probably hadn't done any permanent damage to Mary Kay's uvula or tonsils.

I got out of the wheelbarrow and went back to

Mary Kay's, even though I didn't really want to. I did it because that's what friends do. When I got there, Mary Kay hugged me and told me she forgave me and that she knew I hadn't meant to hurt her.

I was glad Mary Kay had forgiven me, but secretly I felt a little mad too. Because of course I hadn't meant to hurt her. I swear, it's a total burden having a best friend who is as sensitive as Mary Kay. I always have to be super careful around her not to say or do the wrong thing (such as accidentally touch her uvula with a spatula) because Mary Kay is an only child and used to getting her way.

And if she doesn't get her own way, like if we're playing lions (her favourite game. NOT mine. My favourite game is detective. Not that we ever get to play it) and I say she should be the male lion for a change because I have rug burns from crawling around doing all the hunting, and I want to lie around with the cute cubs (even though in the wild the female lions do all the hunting, not the male lions, as I know from my extensive reading on animals), she just starts crying.

Or if I get to lick the spatula and she wants it.

Still, I showed her my notebook – the one in which I was writing the rules. I thought maybe if she saw the rules, she might actually try following them

for a change, especially the *Treat your friends the way you'd want them to treat you* one.

First I made her swear not to tell anybody about it though. I explained to her that I was going to hide the notebook in a special place under the slats beneath my bed so my brothers wouldn't find it. I thought this actually might make her interested in reading it.

But it didn't. Mary Kay just yawned and asked if I wanted to play lions.

Which is too bad, because if anyone could use some help with the rules of friendship, it's Mary Kay.

I'm starting to think I could use a new best friend. A different, non-crying best friend. Just for a change.

It's kind of funny that I was thinking this, because when I got home from Mary Kay's that night, Mom and Dad told us we were moving.

RulE #2

Don't Get a Pet That Poops in Your Hand

It wasn't the hugest surprise that Mom and Dad said we were moving. Mom has been wanting a new house to test out her home-improvement skills for a while. Mom doesn't like our house because it doesn't need any home improvements. It's a contemporary split-level in Walnut Knolls, which is a housing development.

Mom wants an old falling-down Victorian house in town that she can restore to its former glory. She and Dad just bought an already finished house in a housing development because it was the only kind of house they could afford right after Dad got his teaching job.

My dad teaches college. What he teaches is computers.

Dad has been teaching computers for a while now

and recently got a chair. When you're a professor, getting a chair doesn't mean that you finally get to sit down at work. It means that you get more money. Also, my littlest brother, Kevin, started kindergarten, so Mom went back to work as an adviser. She advises college kids on what classes they should be taking (such as computer classes).

So we are getting more money because of that too.

Since both Mom and Dad will be at the college all day, they want to move closer to it – also to an old house, which Mom can have fun fixing up in her spare time from advising.

Only, I don't see what's so fun about fixing up an old house. I don't see what's wrong with staying in the house we have now, which doesn't need fixing up and has wall-to-wall cream-coloured carpeting, except in my room, where the carpeting is pink.

'But, Allie,' Mom said, trying to explain. 'The new house is so much bigger than this one. Mark and Kevin will be able to have their own rooms, so they won't fight as much. Won't that be nice?'

I know I am supposed to love my brothers, and I do. Like, I wouldn't want either of them to be hit by a car and have their brains splattered all over High Street.

But I don't particularly care if they have their own rooms.

'But what about my canopy bed?' I asked. Because I just got a canopy bed for *my* ninth birthday (I am older than Mary Kay by a month. Possibly this is why I don't cry as often as she does, because I am more mature. Also, I am more used to hardship, not being an only child).

'We'll take your canopy bed to the new house,' Dad explained. 'In the moving truck.'

My brother Mark was very excited to hear about the moving truck. Mark is in the second grade, and all he thinks about are trucks. Also, bugs.

'Can I ride in the moving truck?' he wanted to know. 'In the back, with all the furniture?'

'No,' Dad said. 'Because that is against the law.'

'The new house is much closer to where Dad and I work,' Mom went on. 'So we'll be able to spend more time with you kids because we won't have to drive so far to get to the office.'

'What about my rock collection?' I wanted to know. 'I have over two hundred of them now, you know.'

I know rocks might sound like a very boring thing to collect, but I select my rocks very carefully and keep them in paper grocery bags on my closet floor.

Each one of my rocks is, in its own way, extraordinary. Most of my rocks are geodes, which if you don't know, are very average-looking rocks – on the *outside*.

Inside, however, they have crystals that sparkle like diamonds. In fact, if you didn't know better, you might actually mistake a geode for a diamond.

You can't really tell just from looking at a rock whether it is an ordinary rock or a geode. Well, I mean, you can, but it takes practice.

Also, geodes are not easy to crack open to get to the crystals inside. To crack them open, you either have to throw them very hard against the sidewalk or driveway (which I would not recommend doing, because they leave marks on the driveway that sometimes won't wash away for up to a year or more, as I found out the hard way) or hit them very hard with something metal, such as a hammer. I learned from experience that your dad's golf clubs are not very good for this.

I found most of my geodes while scavenging in the many home-construction sites in and around Walnut Knolls. Even though Mom and Dad say we're not supposed to go walking around construction sites, the truth is you can find many amazing things in the dirt piles bulldozers have made.

'Ten large grocery sacks of rocks,' Mom said, 'is simply too many, Allie. Especially considering the fact that you've never even cleaned your rocks, nor do you take very good care of them.'

'They're not rocks,' I informed her. 'They're geodes.'

'Whatever they are,' Mom said, 'they just sit in those sacks, cluttering up the floor of your closet. You can pick out three or four special rocks to take along. But the rest you're going to have to put back in the dirt where you found them.'

I couldn't help letting out a really disappointed cry at this. Because, seriously, I have put a lot of time and work into my rock collection. Sure, maybe I haven't cleaned them. But I love them, just the same.

But then an even worse thought hit me.

'What about school?' I asked. 'If the new house is close to your work, that means it must be really far from school. How are we going to be able to walk that far and still get to school on time?'

'Well,' Mom said, 'you'll be going to a new school, because we'll be living in a different school district. But Pine Heights Elementary is right around the corner from the new house. In fact, you'll be able to walk home for lunch if you want to! Won't that be fun?'

But I didn't think that sounded fun at all. I thought that sounded terrible, actually.

'I don't want to go to a new school!' I cried. Really cried, on account of, well, I was crying. I may cry less often than Mary Kay does. But I still cry sometimes. 'What about Ms Myers?'

Ms Myers is my teacher. She is the best teacher I ever had. She has hair that is so long she can sit on it.

'I'm sure you'll love your new teacher too,' Mom said. 'We'll go over and meet all your new teachers before you start at the new school, so you'll get a chance to know them. How does that sound?'

'That sounds good to me,' Mark said, chewing. He was eating fish fingers with ketchup, despite my advising him never to eat anything red.

Mark, it was clear, didn't care about moving – except whether or not he got to ride in the back of the moving truck with the furniture. He didn't care about having to start a whole new school and make all new friends.

'Shut up,' I said to Mark.

'Don't tell your brother to shut up,' Dad said. When Dad tells you not to do something, you stop doing it. That is also a rule – and one Mark and Kevin actually follow.

But still.

'What about Mary Kay?' All of a sudden I remembered my best friend. Only I didn't remember the part about how I'd just been sort of wishing for a different, non-crying best friend. 'If we move, I won't be in the same class with her any more! I won't live down the street from her any more!'

'You can still go visit her,' my little brother Kevin said helpfully. 'You can take the bus.'

'I don't want to take the bus!' I screamed.

'Stop screaming,' Dad said. 'Nobody's going to be taking any buses. Allie, you'll still see your friend. Just not at school. You can have whatever-they're-called.'

'Play dates,' Mom said. 'Your father means we'll organize play dates with Mary Kay.'

Play dates? Whatever! I don't want to organize 'play dates' with Mary Kay. Mary Kay and I have never had to organize 'play dates' before. Whenever Mary Kay and I want to play, I just walk down the street and we play together. There's no *organizing* anything.

'I don't want to move!' I cried. 'I don't want to give up my rock collection, or go to a new school, or organize play dates with Mary Kay! I want to stay right here!'

'Allie,' Mom said. 'Your father and I were thinking. If you can show you can be grown-up about this move and give it a try and not cry about it, we might decide you're old enough to have a pet of your own.'

I was so shocked, I stopped crying. I have always wanted a pet of my own. We have Marvin, of course, and I love him very much. For instance, I am the only person in my family who brushes him, checks him for ticks and walks him (well, Dad walks him too, but only at night). I want to be a vet when I grow up, so I am also practising for when this happens.

But I have always wanted a pet of my very own, one I wouldn't have to share with everyone else, such as my brothers.

'You mean,' I said, sniffling, 'I could have a hamster, like Mary Kay?'

'No hamsters,' my dad said. Dad doesn't like hamsters or even mice. The time Mary Kay and I caught a baby mouse in the field behind her house (where they are now building a new development) and put it in my Polly Pocket Pollywood Limo-Scene, then showed it to my dad, he made us let it go in the woods behind our house (where they are also now building a new development), even though we explained to him it would probably die without us or its mother to take care of it.

Dad didn't care. He says he doesn't like animals that don't know any better than to poop in your hand.

So when I wrote that down it became the rule of: *Don't get a pet that poops in your hand.*

'Actually,' Mom said, 'we were thinking you might be old enough now to take care of your own kitten.'

I didn't think I heard her right. Had she said . . . KITTEN?

'No fair!' Mark yelled. 'I want a kitten!'

'Me too!' Kevin yelled.

She did. She *did* say kitten! How had they known? How had they known I'd been wanting a kitten for my whole life, practically?

And true, I had asked for a miniature poodle for my birthday and gotten a canopy bed instead, which isn't as good.

But it had never even occurred to me to ask for a kitten.

Until they said I could have one.

And then I knew I wanted a kitten more than I had ever wanted anything in my entire life. Kittens are way better than hamsters, who, by the way, poop in your hand.

'When you guys show that you can be grown-up enough to handle the responsibility of having your

own pet,' Dad said to my brothers, 'we'll talk. But I haven't seen either of you brushing Marvin, or taking him on walks the way Allie does.'

'I take Marvin on walks,' Mark said.

'Hitching Marvin up to the sled and trying to make him pull you down the dirt piles in the new development does not count as walking him,' Mom pointed out to Mark. 'Now, who wants to go to Dairy Queen as a treat for dessert?'

We all wanted to go to Dairy Queen, of course.

To get to the Dairy Queen from our house, you have to drive in the car. It was while we were in the car driving to Dairy Queen that Mom said, 'You know, the new house is so close to the Dairy Queen that we could walk there after supper.'

'Like, for dessert?' Mark asked. This is another thing Mark thinks about all the time. Bugs, trucks and dessert.

Also, sports. Such as football. Or anything with a ball really.

'Right,' Mom said. 'After dinner. We could just get up and take a walk to Dairy Queen.'

We all – Mark, Kevin and I – looked at each other in astonishment. Walk to Dairy Queen? Every night?

This was almost too much to believe. A kitten *and* Dairy Queen? *Every* night?

'*If* you guys finish everything on your plates,' Dad added.

'Maybe,' Mom said slowly, 'we could drive by and see the new house tonight. On our way back from Dairy Queen.'

'I don't know,' Dad said. 'I don't think these kids are really that interested in seeing the new house.'

'*I* am,' Mark said, leaning forward in his seat. '*I'm* interested in seeing the new house.'

'I want to see the new house too,' Kevin said.

'How about you, Allie?' Mom asked. 'Are you interested in seeing the new house too?'

I had to think about that. On the one hand, I was interested in a new kitten. I was interested in Dairy Queen every night and in getting a new best friend.

On the other hand, I was not interested in starting a new school or in getting rid of my rock collection.

Still, if the new house was really that close to Dairy Queen . . .

'Well,' I said. 'I guess it wouldn't hurt to *see* it . . .'

It didn't seem like the Dairy Queen people could make our ice-cream cones fast enough. It seemed like it took them *forever*. And all we got was our usuals – chocolate-vanilla twist chocolate dip for me, vanilla twist cherry dip for Mark and vanilla twist

butterscotch dip for Kevin, a diet root-beer float for Dad and a sugar-free Dilly Bar for Mom.

Still, it seemed like it took *two hours* for them to get our order ready, and for Dad to pay, and for Mom to get enough napkins from the dispenser in case somebody spilled in the car (I said somebody, but Mark is always the one who spills, usually all down the front of his shirt), and for everyone to get back in the car and to get their seat belts on without spilling, and for Dad to go, 'Is everybody ready? Does anybody want to drive by the new house?' and for us all to go, 'YES!' and for him to go, 'OK! Here we go.'

And then we were turning around the corner – right around the corner! That's really where the new house was, right around the corner from the Dairy Queen – and Mom was going, in an excited voice, 'There it is, kids, there it is, right there on the left, see it? See it?'

And we all looked at the new place where we were going to live.

And I don't know about everyone else, but I for one nearly threw up what I'd eaten so far of my ice cream.

Because the new house was not very nice-looking.

In fact, it looked the opposite of nice. It looked very big and creepy sitting there on the street. All the

windows – and there were a lot of them – were dark and sort of looked like eyes staring down at us. There were a lot of big trees around the house too, with twisted branches that were swaying in the wind.

There are no big trees in Walnut Knolls. That's because only nine years ago, when I was born, Walnut Knolls was all fields and farmland. None of the trees the developers planted have had a chance to grow much yet.

'Mom,' I said.

'Isn't it *great*?' Mom said, all excitedly. 'Look at the gingerbread trim around the front porch! And how exciting is the fact that we even have a front porch where we can sit outside and enjoy the summer breeze?'

'And have ice cream,' Mark said. 'Right? We can sit out there and enjoy ice cream.' Because ice cream is all Mark thinks about. Besides bugs and trucks and sports.

'We sure can,' Mom said. 'And see that bay window on the third floor in the front? That'll be your room, Allie.'

My room looked darkest and creepiest of all.

'Those trees sure are big,' Kevin said.

'Those trees,' Mom said, 'are over a hundred years old. Just like the house.'

Which, looking at it through the car window, I could totally believe. Our new house looked more than a hundred years old. It looked so old that it was falling apart, practically. It looked like all those houses on those TV shows my mom likes to watch, TV shows called things such as *Please Come Fix Up My House* and *My House Is Really Old. Won't Someone Fix It, Please*?

Only this wasn't a TV show. This was real life. And no nice team of carpenters and pretty designers was going to come and fix it up. My mom was going to have to fix up our house – with Dad's help, I guess – herself.

I don't mean to sound like a spoilsport, but the truth is, I really didn't think she was going to be able to do it.

Because the house we were sitting in front of looked beyond fixing.

Also, the house we were sitting in front of looked something else. I didn't want to mention it in front of Mark and Kevin, because one of the rules – which I was going to write down as soon as I got home – is that *You shouldn't scare your little brothers* (unless they've done something to deserve it, of course).

But the truth was, that house looked haunted to me.

Suddenly I didn't want my ice cream any more.

Also, I was pretty sure I didn't want to move any more, even if it *did* mean Dairy Queen every night, a new, possibly non-crying best friend and a kitten.

Instead, I wanted everything back the way it was, before Mom and Dad said I could have a kitten, before they said we were moving and before I'd accidentally touched my best friend's uvula with a spatula.

Only that turns out to be one of the hardest rules to learn of all: *You can't go back.*

But even though you can't go back, you *can* keep things from changing more. If you try hard enough.

And I knew then that that was what I had to do.

I just didn't know how. Yet.