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opening extract from

# Allie Finkle's Rules for Girls: Stage Fright

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# Rule #1

## It's Important to Try to Make Your Friends Feel Good About Themselves as Often as Possible. Then They'll Like You Better

What's amazing is how you can be a normal kid one day and then something happens that completely changes your life.

I mean it. One minute you're just an average, ordinary kind of girl . . . not boring, of course, because you're good at maths and science and an excellent big sister to two pretty horrible little brothers – not to mention a really good owner to a kitten, because you want to be a veterinarian some day – but not particularly amazing either . . . and then something comes along that changes everything.

Not like aliens coming down in a spaceship and telling you that you are their long-lost queen and they've been combing the galaxy looking for you for

years and that that weird freckle on your elbow is actually a homing beacon and proves you're one of them.

And then they ask you to come back with them to Planet Voltron, where everything is made out of candy and you will be the Voltrons' leader and you'll have a pet unicorn with wings and get to be a veterinarian without actually having to go through four years of college plus four years of veterinary school plus an additional three- to four-year residency, the amount of time it takes to become a board-certified veterinarian on Planet Earth.

Although that would be very, very cool.

But I mean like your mom suddenly becoming a TV star.

And OK, my mom isn't exactly a TV *star*.

'I just got a part-time job as the movie reviewer for that local cable show *Good News!*,' she explained that night when she got home from her other part-time job as a college adviser (she advises college students what kind of classes to take. For instance, computer classes, which is what my dad teaches at the same college).

At first there was stunned silence when Mom said this. Because none of us even knew Mom was trying out for the job of movie reviewer on *Good News!*, which, by the way, is super famous. Not in the whole world or anything. I mean, Grandma had never heard

of it when she came to visit. *Good News!* is only on our local cable channel 4.

But still, it's super famous in our town. My best friend Erica has even been on it. *Good News!* came to her gymnastics studio once and filmed everyone doing their routines before the big statewide gymnastics championship (which Erica wasn't in, but they showed her giving chalk to a girl who was practising for it and who came in twentieth).

And Erica's big sister, Missy, has been on *Good News!* lots of times, because Missy is a majorette in the marching band at the middle school, and *Good News!* is always showing stuff like the local marching-band competitions, and once even the pie-eating competition at the county fair, which Erica's older brother John was in (only he got disqualified when Erica's mom found out and told the judges he had a wheat-gluten allergy).

*Good News!* comes on right after the regular news. It even stars one of the same newsreaders as the regular news, Lynn Martinez. She just takes off the glasses she wears while doing the news, changes into a more sparkly shirt, messes up her hair and, suddenly, the regular news turns into *Good News!* at seven o'clock. So you can forget all about all the bad news you just heard, and concentrate on the good news Lynn is about to tell

you, like about what restaurants are opening up in town, or what new plays you can see at the community theatre, or h:ow somebody's cat is nursing a poor orphaned baby deer back to health, or how somebody else is having a sneaker drive to raise sneakers for poor people in Africa who can't afford their own sneakers.

See? It's all *good news*. That's why they call it *Good News!*

And my mom was going to be on it! The best show on TV!

I know. Is that fantastic or what? I am the daughter of a celebrity.

'Elizabeth,' Dad said, looking proud but a little surprised, 'I had no idea you were interested in tele-journalism.'

'Oh, well,' Mom said, fluffing her hair out after taking off her coat, 'I saw the ad in the paper and I thought it looked like it might be fun, so I applied. You know I reviewed films for our school paper in college. It's going to be a little different reading them on camera, but the idea's basically the same. I'm excited to get back to reviewing.'

And OK, maybe Mom's not a celebrity exactly, because *Good News!* isn't shown all around the whole country.

But it still seems pretty obvious that because of

Mom's new job my life will never be normal again. It won't be long before the paparazzi start showing up at our house. Maybe we'll even have to get bodyguards! I mean, when your mom works for *Good News!*, that is a very big deal.

'The truth is, I suspect I'm the only person who tried out,' Mom said, 'because they hired me as soon as they saw my audition. I have a feeling this town isn't exactly crawling with wannabe local-cable-news-show film reviewers.'

Except that this isn't true. The reason my mom got the job is that she's the coolest, most beautiful mom there is. I know this because I've met a lot of other kids' moms.

And OK, my ex-best friend Mary Kay Shiner's mom had a very fancy job at a law firm and was always saying things into her cellphone like, 'Nancy, I needed those depositions yesterday!'

And my other ex-friend Brittany Hauser's mom has a show cat named Lady Serena Archibald and very fancy high-heeled shoes with feathers on them.

But neither of them is as cool as my mom, who is restoring an old house to make it nice again (even if she's taking a really long time about it, if you ask me. Though my room is the nicest room of all my friends', and when they come over and see it for the first time

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they totally freak out over my wallpaper and lace curtains).

So, you know.

'That's not true,' Dad said about Mom's joke that no one else had applied. He was setting out the takeaway pizza Mom had brought home for dinner to celebrate her new job. The pizza came from Pizza Express, which happens to be where my Uncle Jay has a job. Even though Uncle Jay's girlfriend, Harmony, didn't think so at first, being a delivery man for Pizza Express has turned out to be the best job ever for Uncle Jay. He gets to eat all the pizzas they give him the wrong addresses for – for free!

Only tonight, even though Uncle Jay had come over for dinner, we were having pizza we had actually paid for, since it was a special occasion.

'I'm sure a lot of talented people applied for that job,' Dad told Mom. 'You just happened to have had the best audition. The reviews you wrote in college were wonderful. You've always had very keen insight into the world of media and entertainment.'

'Yeah, Mom,' I said, scraping the tomato sauce off my pizza slice from underneath the melted cheese. Because one of my rules is, *Never eat anything red.* Frankly I prefer white pizza, but since I'm the only one in the family who does, I only get that kind of pizza

when Uncle Jay delivers one to someone and it turns out Pizza Express messed up and it's not the kind they actually ordered. 'You always have a lot to say about *Hannah Montana*.'

'Well,' Mom said, 'I guess you might be right.'

'What's the first movie you're going to review?' Uncle Jay wanted to know. Uncle Jay doesn't live with us, but he's always hanging around, even though he has a girlfriend and a job and studies at the university.

Mom looked at the paper the people at *Good News!* had given her. 'Something called *Requiem for a Somnambulist*,' she said.

'Ouch,' Uncle Jay said, I guess because *Requiem for a Somnambulist* didn't sound so good to him. It didn't sound so good to me either, to tell the truth.

'Wow,' Dad said, 'I'm sure you'll have plenty to say about that one.'

'Are we going to get to be on TV too?' my little brother Kevin wanted to know.

'Why would *we* get to be on Mom's show?' My other little brother, Mark, was chewing with his mouth open, as was his custom. Also speaking with his mouth full of food, violating two of my rules, *Don't chew with your mouth open* and *Swallow what's in your mouth before speaking*. Having two little brothers who won't

follow the rules of common courtesy at meal times makes my life a constant trial.

'Lots of times the kids of movie stars get to be on TV,' Kevin said. 'Like when they go to movie premieres.'

I hadn't even thought about movie premieres! But obviously we were going to get to go to lots of those. Movie critics always get to see movies before anyone else does. They have to. How else are they going to warn people not to see the bad ones? We were probably going to meet tons of stars. Such as Miley Cyrus.

'I'm not going to be invited to movie premieres, honey,' Mom said. '*Good News!* is not that big a TV show. It's just on the local station. And besides, most movie premieres are held in Hollywood, and we live very far from there.'

This was really disappointing to hear. Because the truth was, I was totally thinking, just like Kevin was, that I might get to be on Mom's TV show too. Or that at the very least my whole life would change now that I was the daughter of a famous TV film critic, and not simply the daughter of a college adviser and a college professor.

Not that there is anything wrong with those two jobs. It's just that they are sort of boring compared to being a TV star.

When I went to bed that night, I told my kitten, Mewsie – who is actually growing really fast and weighs six pounds now, which is exceptional for his age according to our vet, Dr DeLorenzo – that it looked like our chances of hitting the big time were pretty much zero.

'Guess you're just going to be plain old Mewsie,' I told him as he lay purring on my chest, his nightly routine. It's very hard to sleep that way, but it's still nice. 'Instead of Mewsie, Celebrity Kitten.'

But when I told my best friends, Erica, Sophie and Caroline, my mom's news on the way to school the next day, they all had a different opinion about it.

'I bet she'll have you on as a guest,' Sophie said. 'Like when she reviews kids' movies.'

'Wow,' I said. I had never thought of this, 'do you really think so?'

'Oh, of course,' Sophie said. 'If she's any good at her job, she'll want to get the opinion of the target audience. Obviously.' We knew all about target audiences from Erica's big sister Missy's teen magazines, which Missy never exactly let us borrow, but we snuck them from her room whenever she was away at a band competition or in the bathroom experimenting with a new pimple medication.

Sophie made me feel excited again about my mom's

new job. Even more excited than I would have been about finding out I was actually queen of an alien race. Because, Sophie said when I told her about it – and Caroline and Erica agreed – having a mom who reviews movies on TV is more interesting than being queen of an alien race. Because it's more realistic.

'You're so lucky,' Erica said with a sigh. 'I wish my mom had her own TV show. But she doesn't do anything except run her own store of fine collectables.'

'What about my mom,' Caroline said with a sigh. 'She's only dean of a women's college. In *Maine*.'

We all agreed this was a terrible occupation compared to my mom's new job.

'Maybe my mom will have all of us on her show,' I said. I was just saying this to be nice. I didn't really believe Mom would have me and all my friends on her TV show some day. *It's important to try to make your friends feel good about themselves as often as possible. Then they'll like you better.* This is a rule.

'When I go on Mom's TV show, I'm going to wear velvet pants,' Kevin said. I have to walk Kevin to school every day (and home from school too) because he's only in kindergarten and I'm the oldest. It's OK though, because all the fifth-grade girls think Kevin is really cute, so having him around has helped me to look cool in front of them.

'Whatever, Kevin,' I said. He doesn't even own a pair of velvet pants, though he begs for them all the time. The closest he's come is corduroys, which he pretends are velvet.

'We should start planning what we're going to wear though,' Sophie said, ignoring Kevin, 'just in case. I have some totally cool leggings with silver spider webs printed on them left over from Halloween, which would go great with your twirly plaid skirt, Allie –'

She said this as we stepped on to the playground, which was soggy from last night's rain. As our feet sunk into the inch-deep mud, we noticed a car pull up to the sidewalk next to the school. The passenger-side door opened, and Cheyenne O'Malley, the newest girl in our class (she's here from Canada while her dad is on sabbatical), popped out, wearing a bright pink raincoat and holding a matching pink umbrella, in case it rained later. She closed the car door behind her and, as she went by us on her way to meet her friends Marianne and Dominique, who were waiting for her over by the swings, she put her right foot, in a rain boot with pink hearts printed on it, down in a big puddle on the sidewalk, splashing water all over us.

On purpose.

'Oops!' Cheyenne said, laughing as we looked down at the dirty water stains all over us. 'Sorry! I

guess that's what happens when your parents make you walk to school instead of giving you a ride though.'

Then she ran over to 'M and D' (which is what Cheyenne calls Marianne and Dominique), who let out screams of laughter at the hilarious trick she'd played on us. Cheyenne screamed politely back. Then they started talking about what happened last night on *America's Next Top Survivor* or whatever.

'You know, Allie,' Sophie said thoughtfully as she tried to rub the dirty puddle stain out of her coat. 'having a mom who is on TV is only going to boost your popularity at Pine Heights Elementary. No one else has a parent who is a celebrity. Not even Cheyenne, and she's the most popular girl in the whole school.'

'Cheyenne's not the most popular girl in the school,' Caroline pointed out. 'She's just the loudest.'

'*Popularity isn't important,*' I said. '*Being a kind and thoughtful person is.*' That's a rule.

'True,' Sophie said. 'But it can't hurt, is all I'm saying. When is your mom's first show going to be on?'

'Um,' I said, 'Thursday night, I think. So people can tell what movies to go see for the weekend.'

'Perfect,' Sophie said. 'So by Friday morning you'll be the most popular girl around here.'

'Do you really think so?'

Not that being popular was important of course.

But suddenly I thought of how cool it would be to show up to school a different way instead of squishing through the mud with my little brother's hand all hot and sticky in mine. What if Erica and Sophie and Caroline and I showed up to school in a pure-white stretch limo instead of walking? What would Cheyenne and 'M and D' say if they saw *that*?

If you asked me, this really would be better than aliens showing up and whisking me off to live on a planet where I got a winged unicorn as a pet and everything was made out of candy.

But was it really going to happen?

I guess I was going to have to wait to find out.