

[On the outside of an envelope attached to a wrapped Christmas gift:]

!!!!DO NOT OPEN UNTIL CHRISTMAS!!!!

Seriously, Alex. Santa is watching.

Alex,

You may not be fond of presents, but you're getting them anyway because it's Christmas. And this isn't me trying to fill a void or say what I can't say in words. This is me giving you something that I want you to have because I think you need it. Don't worry – I spent absolutely no money on you. My gifts are remarkably simple, but I hope they are well received.

First, my list of why you are an amazing friend. This was, perhaps, an unfair assignment to give you; I acknowledge that. But that's why I put so much effort into mine. I want you to see the value that you have.

Second, this mason jar. Now, you might be wondering, "Why on earth is Zoe giving me a mason jar covered in more ribbon and tinsel and jingle bells than the average Christmas tree?" Well, I was just gonna give you the mason jar, but my family insisted on decorating it, and I let them. Okay, fine, I helped. Of course I did. It's Christmas!

You might also wonder why the jar is empty, and the answer to that is: it's not. When we decorated the house for Christmas, all eight of us singing carols and baking cookies and trimming the tree and just reveling in cheer and merriment, I set this mason jar, open, in the middle of the room. This jar is full of that happiness, Alex. So whenever you need some holiday cheer, you can touch this jar and soak it up. And don't worry about it escaping – that's the kind of thing that lingers.

Merry Christmas, Alex.

10 Reasons Why Alex Carter is a Kickass Friend

1. He's honest. Alex says the things that need to be said, and he doesn't beat around the bush when it's important. Yes, he can be blunt, but he has a way of pointing out the truth that makes it impossible to ignore, and that's important because friends are honest with each other, about the good and the bad.

2. He's loyal. Win Alex's friendship, and you win someone who will stick up for you no matter what. On your own personal quest to Mordor, you have his axe and bow and sword. He's on your side, and everyone needs someone in their corner.

3. He's a defender. He's got your back, and once that loyalty is given, it takes a hell of a lot to lose it. Like a mama bear with her cubs (though he probably won't appreciate the comparison), he will be right there between you and danger, or unpleasantness, or discomfort, and that makes those things easier to face.

4. He's protective. He cares about his friends. He wants what is best for them. He wants them to go after the things that make them happy, even if that goes against their first inclination. He looks out for the people in his life, especially the ones who maybe don't always look out for themselves.

5. He listens very well. You feel like you can tell him anything: news of bad days, good days, and advice both solicited and unsolicited. He asks questions and wants to know stories and allows the friendship to be two-sided. He never makes you feel like what you have to say is silly or shameful.

6. He's perceptive. He figures out the things you don't tell him, and hears what you don't always have the words to say. He understands, sometimes more than you want him to, but you'll take the tradeoff, every time.

7. He's communicative. He tells you things, and he's easy to talk to. You never feel like you're trapped in a one-sided conversation. He listens to you, and he responds to what you've said. This is not a skill everyone has mastered, and it is an incredibly refreshing one to find.

8. He's fun! Alex will make you smile and laugh. He teases, oh good gracious, yes, but you never mind. It's kind of nice, actually, because teasing is a sign of closeness, of not-strangers, of real, honest friendship. Alex is a guy you want to spend your time with, in whatever way that's possible.

9. He's compassionate. Alex is a genuinely good and thoughtful person. He cares about his friends. And knowing that somebody out there in the world cares about you can keep you going through the toughest days. He drops compliments without even thinking about it. It's not flattery, it's not him trying to ingratiate himself; it's just Alex.

10. He's easy. Alex is easy to be friends with. There are people in the world who are just plain hard to get along with, because they're selfish or self-centered, abrasive or incessantly melancholy. Alex isn't one of those people. He is honest and loyal and protective and perceptive and communicative and fun and kind and compassionate and easy to be friends with. Alex is easy to like.

Alex Carter is an absolutely amazing friend, and I'm glad he's mine.