



# Charlie's Hamsters

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My name's Samantha, but they call me Charlie. Samantha comes from my mom's name, except she is Sam, of course, because it's trendier. She loved herself so much she decided to make a clone. Fortunately for me, that doesn't extend to my personality. She got divorced three years ago from her third husband (my father having come between the first and second) and spent the time since then buying clothes from the junior's sections of department stores, getting her nails done in salons, and hitting on college guys. Did I mention that she's forty? Though she likes to claim twenty-nine (making her about thirteen when I was born, nice math, mom). Her last boyfriend was a recent graduate from Boston College, but I'm pretty sure he learned more in four days with "Sam" than he did in four years there. I know; I shared a wall with her. She wore my clothes more often than I did, complaining that her butt won't fit in capri pants. I've decided to switch to baseball tees and baggie jeans.

Charlie comes from my dead dog, Chuck. He was hit by two hopped-up metal heads in a pickup truck. They were racing by on my nothing suburban street and aimed for him, actually aimed for my dog. And because I witnessed it, and they were too drugged up and paranoid to realize that there's no law against canine-icide, they took me with them. Jesse kept looking over his shoulder thinking there was someone behind him (actually it was just his collar rubbing against his neck, moron), and Fred, the obvious leader, shoved me in the back of the cab. They called it kidnapping. I called it a free ride out of town.

Fred and Jesse were headed to Atlantic City, where they had a score to settle with some dude named Tom. Apparently they had never actually met or seen Tom; he was like this great legend in the rap-rock/hash world. It didn't take a genius to figure out he was playing them, but hey, in a way, so was I.

Their story was they'd traded a pregnant Dalmatian hamster named Magdalena for three ounces and a gig at the Livingroom in Providence. However, when they got to the club, they found no one inside but the bartender, and upon smoking up for comfort, realized all they'd gotten was the contents of a spice rack, oregano and dill weed. They'd been had, which isn't all that surprising considering what losers they are. But it made them determined to find the ring leader of their demise, Tom, and settle the score. They wanted the

hamster back, and all her babies. This I had to see. Besides, "Sam" wasn't exactly gonna file a missing persons report.

Now the ride itself could have been enjoyable except I had to sit behind Fred in the extended cab, and he was eating Taco Bell at every rest stop. I think I broke a record for time spent holding one's breathe. Jesse, on the other hand, was working on improving the contrast of the track marks on his arm, so I didn't hear a whole lot out of him, except occasional offers to give me my first shot free. I declined, content with the forty I found under the seat. To tell you the truth, I haven't got a clue what was in it, but either way, it made breathing a little easier, and allowed the hours to pass in a relative blur.

When we arrived at the boardwalk, I expected to go on a search for the elusive Tom, but Jesse was set on playing some skee-ball instead, and hey, who was I to say no to that? However, after missing the ramp a few times and tossing his ball at an old lady playing the slot machines (who consequently came up with three matching cherries), we were asked to leave. And we may have spent the day wandering the boardwalk (as they attempted to hit on girls about my age, not realizing I might be of use in meeting some of them), but as luck would have it, a small black and white rodent ran by me and up Jesse's leg. After screaming like a girl and jumping all over the place trying to get it off of him, Fred plucked the hamster up by the tail and, with a look of recognition, stuck it in his pocket.

"This is one of Magdalena's bastards. Tom must be close by." He paused. "Hey kid, you go look for him, I gotta piss."

The fact that they, much less I, had no idea what Tom looked like didn't disturb me nearly as much as Fred heading toward a port-a-potty stroking his pocket with the pink tail sticking out. Jesse was still brushing at himself frantically, not realizing the descendant of his former pet had been removed. But rather than calm him down, I opted to go see if this Tom guy actually existed.

With this aim, I walked into the nearest bar (curiously requiring no form of ID) and asked the bartender if he knew of a Tom.

"Oh, you wanna talk to 'Tom', huh? How much you got?"

"Ah, actually it's a little more complicated than that...he's my father." A quick little lie, and he was on the phone, talking in low tones, sounding somewhat doubtful and a little scared. Sucker.

A few minutes later, after having my choice of drinks on the house (Stoli on the rocks with a twist), two large men in sunglasses came in. The bartender gave a slight nod toward me, and the men approached, didn't say a word, but convinced me to accompany them nonetheless. This wasn't too hard, since it was my idea to find Tom in the first place. When we walked outside I saw Jesse, now rolling around on the ground in a fit of paranoia. I ignored him and walked by with my escorts, down the boardwalk, into a shabby looking warehouse. Inside, however, it was a plush setup: red velvet couches, black marble tables, a personal bar with only top shelf alcohol, nice pool table, even a foosball table. But we walked right past everything to the back, where there lay a huge plastic tank with tiny tunnels running throughout, crawling with little black and white, brown, gray, blonde, and every other colored hamster.

Suddenly, from a corner near the tank, in the shadows, came a voice.

"Sam's kid, right?"

Now I was freaked out. But not as much as when Jesse, totally sobered up and cool, stepped out from another shadow.

"We call her Charlie." Which they hadn't once, but apparently he'd read the tag on Chuck's collar.

"What happened to Fred?" I asked, the first question I could come up with.

"That deadbeat? Who the hell knows, he's got a hamster back for his fetish, he should be off our backs for a while." It seems I had misjudged; Jesse was the man with the plan, and Fred was his pawn. And they had, in fact, been aiming specifically for poor Chuck. Then Tom snapped from the corner and everyone else disappeared up a hidden staircase. A light over his table came on out of nowhere, and there he was, in the flesh.

"I hear the rumors, word gets around. Sam's no good for you." Something was starting to give me the impression that maybe he wasn't the mobster his setup suggested. "From now on, you'll be Charlie, you'll live here and waitress in one of my clubs. But if you don't mind, just call me Tom."

"So you're the guy, huh? The one between husbands one and two?"

"I'm the guy. And no, I'm not a mobster. I breed hamsters. And one day, this will all be yours."