

Happeez Girl

By Amy Lee

Samantha Jones was not a nice person. She sneered at old ladies and told new mothers that their babies were ugly. She never paid her rent on time, she stole things from her friends, and -- despite being a waitress herself -- she never, ever left tips.

One day, while walking to work, Sam Jones was hit by a runaway concrete mixer truck.

She woke up stretched out on the floor of a storage closet with an awful headache. She tried to sit up, but her head hurt too much. She laid back down and tried to remember how she got there. There was the crossing light and she remembered that she was messing with her phone as she stepped into the street. She vaguely remembered hearing shouts and a horn blowing. When she looked up to see what everyone was all wiggled out about, she saw the laughing jaw of a silver dog and "MACK" spelled out in huge bulky silver letters.

While mildly alarming, none of that actually helped her understand why she was on the floor of a storage closet.

Overhead, fluorescent lights buzzed along the ceiling. There were shelves and shelves of cheap plastic toys wrapped up in even cheaper plastic. There were plastic cups... plastic plates... paper crowns that said "Happy Happeez Birthday!" ... a box of deflated balloons....

Sam's pain-addled brain tapped an old memory and presented a kernel of a thought but Sam rejected it immediately. What on earth would she be doing on the floor of a storage closet at a Happy Happeez Playworld?

She sat up again and tried not to throw up. The headache was killing her. When she got home, she would have to steal some more of those prescription painkillers from her old-lady neighbor.

The door tore open with an explosion of light and noise.

Sam squinted up at a young man wearing a blue tee shirt with some logo on the chest and shapeless black pants. He looked more annoyed than surprised to find a woman hunched over in pain on the floor of his storage closet. He rolled his eyes and hit the black box on his belt. "Yeah, Todd? We got another one. She's in the party storage closet." He took his thumb off the box. "You OK?"

"My head hurts," said Sam. "Where the fadoodle am I?"

Sam stopped. That wasn't what she had meant to say. "Fadoodle? Funny Foo Foo? Flipping Fudgecake!" Her voice raised as the panic settled in. "What the hello is going on here?"

"Yeah," said the man. "We aren't allowed to swear here."

"Fudgesicle! Sugar! Hockeystick!"

The man sighed and started scanning the shelves. "Look honey, you can sit here all day and do this, but I've got a birthday party to set up so could you please move your fat chickensniznits somewhere else so I can get at the shelves?"

"My chickensniznits *isn't* fat," said Sam under her breath as she painfully stood up. The man just hustled around her, gathering pre-packaged goody bags and birthday crowns. "Well?" Sam demanded. "What the fruit am I supposed to do now?"

"Do I *look* like I give a hobknocker about you?"

Sam eyed him carefully. That was very close to dirty.

"I don't know," he said finally. "I've got to finish this. Go talk to The Manager."

"Thanks for all your help," said Sam sarcastically.

"Oh, go lick a duck," he said tiredly.

"Moogenschniber."

"Bee with an itch."

Sam sighed. This was getting her nowhere. She put her nose in the air and walked out, hitting the man's shoulder hard enough to knock the goodie bags out of his arms.

"*Monkey feathers!*" he screamed. Sam slammed the door on him and started weaving her way to the front doors. "I don't have to put up with this frickety frak," she mumbled to herself. "I'm going home."

She had only been to a Happy Happeez once as a poorly implemented seduction attempt of a divorced father of a young child. Samantha sighed. He had been a beautiful man but his kid was a nightmare. She looked around. All kids were nightmares.

"Home," she said. "I need to get home, put my head under my pillow, and sleep this off."

She could see the suburban parking lot through the glass of the front doors. The anger cloud that had been pressing in over her temples started to lift. Just a few more feet to freedom and her comfy bed. Just a few more feet....

"Excuse me, but I need to see your stamp."

Sam stopped short. "What the fwap are you talking about?"

A tiny young woman with "Molly" embroidered on her shirt waved an ultraviolet light gun around. "Your *stamp*?" She rolled her eyes and huffed. "I can't let you out without a stamp."

"Monkey bubbles," said Sam as she pushed past the girl.

Molly took a couple of steps backwards and shaded her eyes. Sam didn't even notice. Sam's whole focus was on getting past the dusty velvet ropes and out into that parking lot. When the bolt hit her, it took her a minute to realize what was going on. The tickle of electricity along her skin became an itch and the itch became a burn and it finally occurred to Sam that she was floating eight feet in the air surrounded by a cloud of lightning.

"*Bob Saget!*" she screamed. "Get me the shinkies out of here!"

Molly put on a pair of orange plastic sunglasses with the word "Happeez" written over their lenses. She leaned against the wall, looking up at Sam and grinning. "I told you," she said lightly, spinning the light gun by its wrist strap. "You can't leave without a stamp."

"OK! I get it! Now get me the gleeglob down!" screamed Sam. The pain was starting to sink in past her skin and into her muscles. It was getting hard to breath. "Banana shenanigans! It HURTS!"

"Sorry," said Molly, looking toward the door and not sounding very sorry. "Got customers."

A tired-looking woman shepherded five kids toward the velvet rope. The kids were dancing and whooping. Molly put the light gun into a little podium and picked up a rubber stamp. "Everyone gets a stamp," she said, efficiently grabbing the hand of the nearest kid. "OK. Now you can go in. Have fun!"

Sam tried to scream, but she couldn't make her muscles do what she wanted.

The four other kids all stuck out their hands, still dancing and whooping. "Kids!" shouted the tired-looking woman as they all scattered in different directions. "Wait! You need tokens!"

They were gone.

The woman held out her hand to be stamped. Molly smiled. "They'll find you when they want to play the games," said Molly. "You can get the tokens and order some food over there."

"Thanks." The woman hesitated. "By the way, why do we get our hands stamped? It's not like there's an admission fee or anything."

Molly shrugged. "I just do what they tell us." She glanced up at Sam, writhing in pain against the ceiling, and winked. When the tired woman moved on, Molly traded the stamp for her light gun and pointed it at Sam. Sam saw a flash of purple and fell to the floor.

"Ow," she said, rolling over and staring at the ceiling for a minute. "Ow."

"I *told* you," said Molly.

"Fine," said Sam, getting to her feet. "Then give me a narfing stamp."

Molly sighed heavily and rolled her eyes again. "You should talk to The Manager."

"Give me the stamp, you slime sucking fart sack!"

Molly suddenly moved like nothing Sam had ever seen. Actually, Sam thought as Molly twisted gracefully and hit the major nerve clusters of Sam's torso with quick, efficient jabs, maybe she did see someone move like this. On TV... in slow motion... with some kind of screechy Asian music playing in the background.

Sam was on the sticky floor again and everything hurt. "Son of nutcracker," she mumbled. When she finally got up again, she kept a respectful distance from the diminutive Molly. "Where's the snagglefraggle manager?"

Molly hooked a thumb over her shoulder. "Behind the cash registers."

The Manager's tiny office was memorable only in its extraordinary neatness. Every single thing in the room had a place and every single thing was in its place. That said, there was nothing personal. It looked like the office wasn't actually being used by anyone. The stuff on the desk was all edged in silver and looked expensive. Sam's hand reached out for a fancy fountain pen in a square Chinese porcelain vase. Classical music was playing off the computer and the place smelled floral -- like those little plug-in things.... Sam looked along the baseboard. Ah. There is was: Garden of Eden Mist.

There were also two manila folders on the desk, both with her name on them. She reached for them, but stopped when the door opened and the Manager came in.

"Oh my sainted trousers," breathed Sam, staring.

The Manager was seven feet tall and pastel violet from the tip of his twitching ears to, presumably, the ends of his designer-shod toes. He had a normal human male body, but it was topped with a cartoonish hippo head.

"What," asked Sam, moving in for a closer look at the massive snout, "the flippin' flippidity flip are you?"

"Your boss," said The Manager in a fancy British accent. The flexibility of his hippo lips were unnatural, thought Sam. How can he form words around those ridiculous teeth? And his skin... it was perfect. She could see every pore. It was so purple.....

"Sit down, Samantha Jones."

Sam shrugged and sat in a nearby chair. The Manager pushed his way to his own chair and sat, putting his violet, manicured hands on the two folders. "Ms Jones, we need to discuss the terms of your employment here."

"I don't plan to work here. I just want to get the narfing stamp and go home."

The edges of The Manager's mouth tweaked up and his eyes narrowed. Sam had the overwhelming feeling that she was about to be eaten.

"Ms Jones," said The Manager pushing one of the folders toward Sam, "you may want to consider what the alternative is."

Sam took the folder and opened it. Instead of the typewritten forms she was expecting, there was an 8 1/2" x 11" window into what looked to Sam like the wet undulating gullet of some monster. As she stared, the window grew, swallowing up her peripheral vision until she was inside the gullet. It was hot and wet and smelled of blood and rot and shit and -- as she hovered there in the darkness -- her hand began to melt. Her skin dripped from her fingers until she could see the bones. She screamed and scream was swallowed up by the darkness below her. Then something touched her -- something terrible....

The Manager slammed the folder shut and Sam was back in the neat little office. That awful smell lingered. The Manager pulled another Garden of Eden Mist out of his desk drawer and plugged it in.

"I *do* hate the smell," he mumbled.

"What was that?" asked Sam.

"That was your alternative to a voluntary and enthusiastic employment here at Happy Happeez Playland."

"It looked... *biblical*."

The Manager sat back in his chair. "It was... 'biblical'."

"I don't understand."

The Manager touched the mouse next to his computer and glanced at the screen. "You are dead, Ms Jones. You have been judged."

"Judged?"

The Manager sighed folding his hands in front of him. "Yes, Ms Jones. Judged and your soul was found to be... lacking. You were a bad person while you were alive, but not evil. An evil person would have gone straight to the place represented in this folder. A bad person has the potential to grow into a good person and so he or she is given another chance. Fail at this and you go," he pointed at the folder, "here. If you work hard and demonstrate your potential, you will be returned to the living world in a new body to try again."

"Why not my old body?"

The Manager's forehead twitched in irritation. "Because it is quite dead, Ms Jones. It was smashed beneath a concrete mixer truck."

"Oh. Was that what happened?"

The Manager nodded and Sam looked down at the spotless desktop for a moment, processing what she had just been told. "So you are telling me," she said carefully, "that Happy Happeez Playland is owned by Satan?"

"Happy Happeez is one small part of a large and complex global corporation," said The Manager smoothly. "It is not owned by any one entity." He pushed the other folder toward her. "These are the terms of your employment here at Happy Happeez Playland." The Manager noted Sam's trembling hand. "Don't worry," he said, opening the folder. "There is nothing here but ordinary paper. I do encourage you to read it carefully as you will be held to every point of the contract."

Sam looked up at the Manager. "Are you some kind of lavender hell spawn or something?"

The Manager smiled that smile of his and Sam felt an urgent need to hide under her chair. The Manager pulled out a large magnifying glass from his coat pocket and handed it to her. "You'll need this to read the last few pages."

Then he sat back and started messing around with his computer.

Sam had always loved books and read thousands of them in her relatively brief, largely wasted life. She knew all about contracts with the Devil and was determined to read every word of this one before she signed anything. The contract started out with 6 words printed large enough to take up the entire page.

Judgement:
YOU ARE A
BAD PERSON.

Samantha gulped. *Chill out girl*, she said to herself. *They are just messing with your head. Now focus.*

She read for hours.

She read until the words blurred over; until her eyeballs hurt and her back was cramped. The language was impossible -- dense legalese with cross references to clauses all over the document and referring to laws from all over the world. Sam was pretty sure that at least one page she read through was written completely in Latin.

She shoved the papers across the desk. "I give up."

The Manager turned from his computer. "Everyone does."

"So if I don't sign this, I go straight to h-e- double toothpick, right?"

The Manager nodded.

"If I sign it and do what you tell me, I might get out of here. Right?"

The Manager nodded again. He picked up the beautiful fountain pen that Sam had considered stealing when she walked in and handed it to her.

Sam sighed and took the pen. "Fine. Where do I sign?"

The Manager unclipped the papers and pulled the last page off the bottom.

"Do I sign in blood or something?"

"Ink will be fine."

Sam looked up into the predatory eyes of the giant violet hippo in front of her and considered her options. There were none. The only option she saw was to find a way out those doors on her own. She sighed heavily and signed the document.

"So Mr. Shift Supervisor," Sam asked the harried man in front of her, "where do I start? Scrubbing the toilets?"

The man's head was down, scribbling on a piece of paper. More paper towered over him on either side and binders were piled up behind him. "My name is Todd," he said, not looking up. "And no. You don't get janitor duties until you've got some seniority. You'll start on the floor."

"Since when is waitressing worse than scrubbing toilets?"

Todd smiled a little but still didn't look up.

Sam slouched down in her chair and checked her fingernails. She'd need a new manicure soon. Ewww... was that blood under her nails? She picked up a pen from Todd's desk and started picking under them. "Listen, Todd," she said, admiring her fingernails again. "I can see that you are busy here. How about I pop outside for a smoke break and we'll do this in a few minutes."

"There's no smoking at Happy Happeez," mumbled Todd.

"I'd just kill for a cigarette right now," said Sam, trying to sound charming.

Todd finished scribbling and put the paper in an already overburdened "out" basket. "Go ahead," he said. "Molly will just send you back to The Manager. If you get more than three trips to The Manager, you get kicked downstairs."

Sam stopped admiring her nails. "Downstairs? As in...."

"H-e-double toothpicks. Yes."

Sam grinned. "I just love hearing people say that."

"Pluck a duck, Jones."

Sam giggled. Todd ignored her.

"You are going to assist Jeremy with parties until you learn the ropes," he said, taking another piece of paper from a tottering pile and looking over it. He pressed a button on his waist and held a finger to his ear. "Jeremy? Yeah. I need you to train

the new girl. Come and get her, will you?" There was a hesitation, then a vein in Todd's temple started to bulge. "Because I said so," he said slowly. "Thank you."

"Why don't they give you a computer?" asked Sam. "The Manager had one. All of this paper is very 1985."

Todd sighed heavily.

The door opened and the man who had found Sam sitting on the floor of the store room stared at her.

"Oh no," said Jeremy. "No, Todd. Not *her*!"

Todd ignored him and kept scribbling. Jeremy pushed past Sam and put his palms down on Todd's desk, shaking the piles of paper ominously. "Come on, man," Jeremy said, pleading. "What did I do to deserve this?"

Todd looked up at Jeremy calmly, then twisted around to grab a tattered blue binder. He pulled out the top page and put it between Jeremy's hands.

"That was a misunderstanding," said Jeremy.

Todd took another page out of the binder and put it on top of the first.

"No one ever proved that I did that," said Jeremy. "It could have been the kid."

Todd looked at Jeremy.

"*FINE!*" said Jeremy, throwing the papers back at Todd. "But this isn't right and you know it. I plan to take this up with The Manager."

Todd sat back and smiled. "If you feel you must," he said.

Jeremy's face turned beet red. He threw open the door of Todd's office and the crush of the floor noise rushed in. "Well?" he shouted at Sam. "Are you coming?"

Sam followed the seething Jeremy across the chaotic floor. "Are you really going to rat him out to The Manager?" she asked.

Jeremy turned and stared at her with a wild look on his face. Sam took a half step back, but Jeremy's rage had faded as quickly as it had appeared. "Right," he said. "Newbie. No. No one goes to The Manager unless they have to. He scares the holy humus out of me."

Sam arched an eyebrow. "You mean the talking purple hippo with the James Bond complex?"

Jeremy nodded. "Lesson one, new girl. Don't mess with The Manager. Don't look at The Manager, don't talk to The Manager, don't let him even remember that you exist." He leaned forward. "People disappear," he whispered.

"Balderdash," huffed Sam.

Jeremy shrugged. "Then try it. It makes no difference to me. I don't even like you. For now, though, we have to get ready for another round of birthday parties." He moved to the back of the building. "You can collect the stuff out of the storeroom while I clear the tables."

"I gotta take a chiz."

"No you don't," said Jeremy.

Sam stopped. "How do you know whether or not I gotta grizzle?"

Jeremy moved very close to Sam, so close that it was almost an embrace. "Because," he whispered in her ear, "you don't chiz anymore. None of us do. We don't chiz, we don't grizzle, we don't eat, we don't sleep, we don't frazzle anybody. We just work."

Sam was uncharacteristically speechless.

"Don't believe me?" asked Jeremy, hooking a thumb toward the storeroom door on the back wall. "While you are in the storeroom, take a peek under those fabulously un-fabulous trousers. You'll see that you are no longer..." he licked his lips, "...equipped."

Sam's eyes went wide and she raced to the storeroom, slamming the door behind her. She unzipped her pants and found herself as smooth and featureless as a Barbie doll.

"Well son of a turkey fart," she breathed. Her thoughts about seducing someone to get out of this place vaporized.

"Are you done looking at yourself yet?" Jeremy's voice buzzed in her ear.

"What the schnoodles?" said Sam, zipping up her trousers again and looking around frantically.

"And don't get ideas about trying to off yourself," said Jeremy. "You're already dead. You get all the pain, but you'll heal up in, like, an hour."

Sam rolled her eyes. She hadn't even considered offing herself. She liked herself way too much for that. "Seriously?"

"The box on your belt," said Jeremy, sounding bored. "Push the button on top to talk to me."

Sam cautiously pushed the button. "Ummm... hello?"

"Good monkey," said Jeremy. "Now, there's a computer monitor over by the door. I need product for the Smith, Diaz, and Kemper parties out here."

Sam squinted at the monitor. There was a list of things for each group -- goody bags, crowns, tablecloths, napkins, everything -- complete with the number of goody bags, contact names, and customer preferences. Sam found herself wishing that half of the places she had worked while she was alive had been this organized. She thought about causing more problems for Jeremy but decided it would be best to do what she was told until she figured out how this place worked. She pulled the plastic doodads for the three parties and took them out into the bright, blinking, bing-bonging, child screaming din. She looked longingly back at the quiet storeroom.

"Jones!" yelled Jeremy over the noise. "Jones! Over here!"

Sam walked the armload of stuff over to the long table that Jeremy was standing at. He grabbed a plastic tablecloth. "Get the tablecloths on these two tables," he said, pointing. "Get them straight. If you don't, some parent will sit his or her fat urgalurga on it and pull everything down on the floor. If that happens, you have to reset everything while the kids are sitting there. It makes the parents complain to The Manager."

Sam shrugged. She got complaints all the time. The managers she worked for usually just ignored them.

"Jones," Jeremy was suddenly in her ear again. "Remember what I said about The Manager. Every complement and complaint goes on your record. Until the complaint column is empty, you are stuck here."

"Oh. So what do people say when they see that The Manager is a giant purple hippo?"

Jeremy sighed and pointed at his belt. Whoops, thought Sam. She pushed the button and repeated her question.

"He only looks like that to staff," said Jeremy. "Now finish setting up."

"Whatever," muttered Sam, dropping the party stuff on chair. She got the tables set up quickly and sat down, stretching her legs across the chairs that ran along the table. "I wish I had a book," she muttered. "This is going to get really boring."

Her earpiece buzzed. "Jones. How are you doing over there?"

"Done," she said.

"Good," said Jeremy. "Because your party is here."

"What just happened?" asked Sam. Her left side was covered in grape soda and confetti. She had icing smashed against one hip and there was something heavy in her hair. She was also pretty sure her leg was bleeding.

"That," said Jeremy, looking clean and dapper, "was your first Happy Happeez birthday party."

Sam pulled a half-eaten piece of pepperoni pizza out of her hair. "That. Was. Horrible."

Jeremy tried not to smile but didn't succeed. "You get used to it."

"What happened?" ask Sam. "I've never experienced anything like that. No kid has *ever* gotten the best of me but they came out of nowhere...." Sam shook her head. "It's like they were...."

"Organized?" finished Jeremy, wrapping up the remains of the plastic cups and plates in a giant ball using the tablecloth.

Sam's eyes went wide. "Yes! Yes! That's it! They were *organized*. One would distract me while the other one hit me with some kind of food," said Sam. "It was never the same kid twice." She looked down at the blood congealing on her pant leg. "I think that last kid got me with a pocket knife or something."

"No metal knives allowed in Happy Happeez," said Jeremy. "The Doorman makes sure of that. He probably just bit you."

"YUCK!"

"Relax. You'll heal."

"It bit me! That little creature *bit* me! Can't I to sue or at least bite him back?"

Jeremy was enjoying Sam's revulsion. "Nope," he said cheerfully. "Here at Happy Happeez, the customer is always right -- especially if the customer is a kid. You have to take it or you get a first-class ticket to downstairs."

"Snot buckets," said Sam, pulling tomato-colored gunk out of her hair. "Where do I go to clean up?"

"You don't," said Jeremy laying down a fresh tablecloth. "You've got five minutes before your next party. Just tie up your hair in a ponytail. You can clean up during your break."

"When's that?" asked Sam, sullenly setting out plates.

"Twelve hours or so," said Jeremy. "Now get the confetti off your face. We are professionals here."

"Mothersmucker," muttered Sam, wiping her face with the heel of her hand.

Jeremy just smiled. "We'll need helium balloons for this one," he said.

"I hate helium balloons," said Sam, balancing on a chair to pull down a half dozen balloons off the ceiling. "What am I supposed to do with them once I get them?"

"You have to pop them or the keep floating back up to the ceiling."

"Pop them with what?"

Jeremy shrugged. "Figure something out," he said. "The next party is in 10 minutes. They signed up for the Hippo Deluxe package. That means you get to wear the costume."

"Costume?"

Jeremy smiled an awful smile and hooked his thumb at a beat-up hippo animatronic in the corner of the room.

"You mean I have to dress up like a hippo?" Sam asked.

Jeremy nodded.

"Have you *seen* what those kids do to that thing?" asked Sam pointing at the animatronic in the corner.

Jeremy nodded again.

Sam grabbed a balloon and bit the neck with her teeth, putting a hole in it. Then she let go of the balloon, It floated away from her, squealing and shrinking and slowly falling like some kind of bulbous floating animal dying horribly.

The sound made her feel better somehow.

She bit another one and sent it after the first.

"Wait," she said, grabbing a third balloon. "Aren't you supposed to be helping me?"

"I am helping," said Jeremy. "I'm telling you what to do."

"Then *you* wear the costume."

Jeremy smiled and stretched out across a booth bench. "The Happy Happeez Procedure Book says that a new employee gets two 'training' parties where he or she must assist the trainer," he said, putting his hands behind his head. "That's me."

Sam rolled her eyes and bit another balloon neck.

"The third party must be run by the trainee with minimal assistance from the trainer," Jeremy continued. "The trainer should only be there to ensure that each customer has a good experience at Happy Happeez Playland."

"Balderdash!" said Sam.

"Seven minutes," said Jeremy looking at his watch.

Sam bit the last balloon neck and stepped off the ladder. She had taken quite enough crap for one day without having to put on some giant hippo costume. "I won't do it," she said. "Guess you'll have to send me to the Manager."

Jeremy smiled again and Sam was suddenly very, very nervous. "No need for that," he said. "I'll just tell the supervisor." He hit the button at his waist. "Hi Todd. Jones said she won't wear the costume..... Yeah...." He checked his watch. "In about five minutes -- a Hippo Deluxe package."

Sam felt a tickle crawl across her scalp. She scratched her head only to get a handful of pizza cheese. The tickle became a buzz that jostled her eyeballs and rattled her teeth. Then the buzz spread down her chest and hands and Sam started to feel hot -- like she was getting a sunburn.

"Yeah," said Jeremy, watching Sam. "She's feeling it now."

Sam hands were turning red and blotchy before her eyes. "Are you doing this?" she demanded.

Jeremy shook his head and pointed at the box on his waist. "Todd wants to know if you are willing to follow Happy Happeez procedures now."

"Todd is doing this to me?"

Jeremy rolled his eyes. "Well, duh."

Sam put her hands to her face. It was burning hot and starting to blister. She reached up to her hair and a large clump of it fell away into her hand.

"OK! OK!" screamed Sam, holding the clump of hair in front of her like a dead mouse. "I'll wear the fiddlesniddle costume!"

"That should about do it," said Jeremy holding the button down and looking at the carpet. "Yeah.... I know...." He glanced at his watch. "I will."

The heat suddenly left Sam's body, but the blisters on her arms and face remained. They stung as Sam touched them.

"It's almost time so I'll help you get set up," said Jeremy. "But this is the last time. Go back in the storeroom and get into the costume."

Sam's bottom lip quivered and she walked slowly toward the storeroom. The corpses of the balloons she had popped stuck to the bottoms of her icing-and-cheese-sticky shoes. They made little farting noises as her steps emptied the last of the helium out of their rubber skins. When she got to the storeroom, Sam Jones did something she hadn't done since she was 13.

She cried.

Sam had herself a deep think while she pulled the purple costume gingerly over her burned skin. She wouldn't do it. She refused to live this life under these rules. Sam had gotten herself out of all kinds of dangerous situations before. She would get herself out of this one.

"Samantha Jones doesn't live by *other* people's rules," she told herself, rubbing away the last tears she would ever shed. "There has to be an angle. I just have to be smart about this."

She took a deep breath, put on the gigantic plastic hippo head, and walked out the door to the screeching delight of 10 overstimulated six-year-olds.

"They kicked me in the cockadoodle-do," said Sam to the woman brushing out her hair in the mirror next to her. "Over and over again."

The woman laughed. "You've never *had* a cockadoodle-do."

"It still hurts," said Sam trying to find a style that covered her missing clump of hair. "I'm not allowed to smack them so what should I do?"

The woman shrugged. "I do a little dance. It lets me protect my tender parts and it just looks like part of the show. If you don't stop moving, they can't connect with much more than your shins."

Sam nodded. That was a good tip. "I'm Sam," she said. "What are you in for?"

"Arleen," said the woman, "and none of your flipping flippidity flip business."

"Whatever," said Sam. "So has anyone ever escaped from here?"

Arleen smiled tightly. "Not that I know of."

"There's got to be a way," said Sam. "I'm getting out." She gave Arleen a quick once-over. "You seem reasonably cool. You want to help me? We can both get out of here."

"No thanks," said Arleen. "And you really shouldn't be talking about that sort of thing."

"Why? Are you going to tell on me?"

Arleen shook her head then nodded toward a black circle right above the mirrors. It was about the size of a half-dollar and buzzed quietly as a mechanical iris focused itself. "I don't have to," Arleen said.

Sam felt a hot buzz on her scalp and another clump of her beautiful blonde hair fell into the sink in front of her.

Sam sat in the chair opposite the Manager's desk. It looked exactly the same as it did the last time she was there... which was exactly the same as it was when she first got to this crazy place.

The Manager was looking through a file on his desk. Sam was nervous. This was her second time in the Manager's office and everyone said that people disappeared after

two trips. She tapped her toe against the air in front of her, making her bob slightly in the chair.

"Don't do that," said the Manager.

"Don't do what?"

"Don't. Do. Anything," said the Manager, not looking up.

Sam sighed.

The Manager slowly finished reading the file and then turned the computer. A few clicks later, Sam heard the tinny noise of screaming children and bing-bonging machines of Happy Happeez Playland as recorded by a cheap surveillance camera.

The video. Of course he would be reviewing the video. Sam's heart beat a little faster and she started chewing on her lower lip. She smiled a little when she heard the chants of "Go! Go! Go!" It *had* been nice to have a room full of kids cheering for her.

The Manager clicked the video silent and turned to Sam. "I had to watch the video before I believed it," he said.

Sam shrugged.

The Manager picked up a piece of paper from the file in front of him. "On the afternoon of the 11th, Employee Samantha Jones attempted escape from her place of employment by putting on a head from a Happy Happeez Hippo costume and running head-first into the front doors...."

The corners of Sam's mouth quirked up. That was probably not the brightest thing she could have done. The hippo costume didn't have as much padding as she thought so her head had hurt like a son of a monkey. Still, it *was* a memorable way to go.

"...This was done as part of the party so that the children were recruited as de facto witnesses to the event, limiting the actions that could be taken by the Doorman...."

"You should have seen her face," muttered Sam.

"...Employee Jones managed to shatter one of the doors, essentially shutting down the front entrance for approximately 15 minutes while staff cleaned up the broken glass and the remains of the hippo head. This delayed the exit of a rather large party of customers, several of whom complained to Happy Happeez management."

The Manager put the paper down and addressed Sam from behind purple steepled fingers. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?" he asked.

"You're looking very lavender today?" she asked hopefully. "It's very dashing in a... ummm.... purple sort of way."

The Manager just stared at her.

"No," said Sam. "I don't have anything to say."

"Additional escape attempts will not be tolerated," said the Manager. "Now get back to your duties."

Sam's mouth dropped open and hung there.

The Manager glanced toward the door. "Out."

Sam stood up, then stopped and sat back down.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why aren't you sending me down the hole? They all said I'd be sent down the hole this time."

The Manager sighed and sat back in his chair, making it creak ominously. "Because, Samantha Jones, four minutes and 38 seconds after your ill-considered escape attempt, the driver of a large delivery truck had a massive stroke. He lost control of his truck, which raced past the entrance of Happy Happeez Playland at precisely the moment that two families would have been leaving the premises."

Sam arched an eyebrow. "So they didn't die because I broke the door?"

The Manager nodded. "Your actions accidentally saved the lives of five adults and eight children ranging in age from six months to nine years of age."

"And that gives me a pass?"

The Manager closed his eyes as if in pain. "Yes. Please don't share this with your co-workers."

Sam snorted. She stood up, grinning and opened the door. She turned. "For real?" she asked.

"Out," said the Manager.

"You are snicklefritzing me," said Arleen. "For real? You got a pass from a trip downstairs because some truck *might* have killed some people?"

"Yep," said Sam.

"That ain't right," said Arleen. "I've seen better people than you sent down for less than the schinkies you pulled."

"Go figure," said Sam, taking another gulp out of the red plastic cup. "What is this anyway?"

"It's like hard cider," said Arleen, shifting to try to get more comfortable in the tiny supply closet. She had been drinking for some time now and was starting to get a little sloppy. "You know those juice boxes that little kids always have? A pizza cook figured out how to cook it into booze. He got sent down ages ago, but the recipe always gets passed on to someone else. The rest of us grab them whenever we see them and get them to the kitchen."

"No schnoodles," exclaimed Sam. "There's a still in the Happy Happeez kitchen and the giant purple hippo doesn't know about it?"

"No schnoodles," said Arleen. She pointed a finger in Sam's face. "Don't tell."

Sam crossed her heart and drank a bit more of nasty sweet stuff. Her head was getting delightfully cloudy. "So how come there's not more staff stumbling around drunk on this stuff?"

Arleen shrugged. "It doesn't last long -- ten or fifteen minutes maybe. Then the happy drunk just sort of fades away."

"Fiddlesticks," said Sam.

They sat in silence for a minute, staring at the purple carpet.

"So what are you going to do now?" asked Arleen. "You got lucky once. You going to be a good girl now?"

"Great god in the foothills, no!" said Sam. "I'm getting out of this nut hole."

Arleen smiled and patted Sam's back. "That's my girl."

"Jones!" buzzed Todd's voice in her ear. "The Manager wants to see you. Again."

Sam sighed and hit the button at her waist. "I'm busy here. That son of a Cheeto you partnered me up with is having me set up on some monster birthday party with piñatas -- three separate piñatas -- and we're short-handed since the Manager dropped those two newbies down the hole last week."

Sam released the button and grinned, imagining the vein on Todd's temple pulse with stress. Apparently, this was Todd's punishment for whatever he did in life -- he wasn't not allowed to lose his temper. She found out from another staffer who had hacked into the Manager's computer. That staffer had, of course, disappeared, but pushing Todd to the edge had been Sam's little hobby ever since.

The trick, she thought to herself while she waited for Todd to regain control, was to find the balance between irritating him into a pulsating silence and pushing him into psychotic rage. The vein at his temple was the "tell". When that bad boy started throbbing, she knew she had hit her mark.

"I'll find someone else," said Todd, carefully enunciating every word. "Go see the Manager."

Sam dropped the pile of plastic on the nearest table and took the long way to the Manager's office. Some guy was yelling at his kids for spilling a drink on the carpet. Something about the guy just irked Sam. "Sir," she said politely, "I'd be happy to get someone to clean that up for you."

"Yeah. Good," he grumbled.

Sam smiled her most charming smile and grabbed the wallet that the man had left carelessly on the table as she bent to pick up the cup. The man's eyes were following her open neckline -- just as Sam expected him to.

"We're here to help," said Sam, slipping the wallet into the empty cup. "In the meantime, I'll take your kids over to get another soda -- on the house!"

"Fine," he said, sitting back in the booth and pulling out his cell phone. "Whatever."

"Let's get you a new cup," she said to the kids as they walked to the front counter. She pulled out the wallet and started counting the cash.

"Is that my dad's...." the girl asked.

Sam put her finger to her lips. "Janet," she said to the girl behind the counter, "these children dropped their sodas. Can you get them new cups?"

Janet nodded and pulled out two cups.

"One other thing, my good lady," said Sam winking at the kids. "Their father asked me to get them more tokens -- say..." she glanced at the children. "... about \$20 worth? Isn't that what he asked for?"

"But we'll get in trouble," whispered the girl.

"No you won't," said Sam. "I will and I don't care. Do you want the tokens or not?"

The kids nodded, their eyes watering with joy.

Sam handed over a \$20 bill to Janet and dropped the wallet in a box behind the counter. "That's a lost and found box," Sam said to the kids. "Your dad's wallet will be safe here." Then she handed over plastic cups overflowing with little coin-shaped tokens. They ran off, screaming happily.

"I did not just see that," said Janet.

"See what?" asked Sam. "I was just spreading a little Happy Happeez mother-loving kiddie joy. You might also want to run this guy's driver's license through the Doorman's database. The dude was skeeving me out."

"The Manager wants to see you," said Janet, pulling out the wallet and finding the driver's license.

"Yeah. I heard," said Sam.

"Do you think you're going down this time?" asked Janet.

Sam shrugged. "Whatever. I'm starting to think that anything is better than one more Happy Hippo party."

"We're rooting for you to come back," said Janet, popping her gum.

"You got a bet on me?"

Janet grinned. "Forty tokens."

"I'll do my best," said Sam.

The door of the Manager's office was cracked open and Sam could hear voices. She stopped and listened.

"Is this girl for real?" asked a man inside the office.

Sam heard the Manager sigh. "Ask her yourself," he said wearily. "She's standing outside the door trying to listen in on our conversation. Jones! Get in here."

Sam walked in.

"You're late," he said.

Sam shrugged. "Had to help out some kids."

There was a ding on the Manager's computer. The Manager looked at the message and then shook his head, pinching the space between his hippo eyes as if he was a human with a headache. Behind him, an elegant man nodded at Sam.

"Ms Jones."

Sam flopped down in her customary chair and winked at him. The man hitched his eyebrow at her. "Sir," said the Manager, pointing at the computer screen, "this is what I've been up against."

The man leaned in and read the screen over the Manager's shoulder. "Ms Jones, did you steal a customer's wallet on your way over here?"

"I wouldn't call it 'stealing'," she said. "I just moved it someplace safe before someone else stole it. He just left it sitting there on the table. Seriously. He was asking to be robbed."

"Did you take money out of the wallet to buy tokens for his children?"

"They deserved it. He was being a real son of a nutcracker to them."

"We don't do that at Happy Happeez," said the man slowly. "Not even to sons of nutcrackers."

"Well," said Sam, nonplussed, "the missing \$20 guarantees that he'll be asking to see the Manager. Did anything come up on the database?"

The Manager sighed again. "Noncustodial parent... restraining order due to several counts of child abuse...." The Manager tapped the box on his belt. "Doorman? There will be a Manny Onsuela coming to the front counter to retrieve his wallet. Please bring him to the holding room. He's wanted by the Sheriff.... No. Keep his kids busy on the floor until the Sheriff gets here."

Sam grinned. "Nice. You know I should be getting some kind of bonus for this stuff. This is the third child abuser in, like, a month, right?"

The Manager's chest rumbled with something very like a tiger growling. Sam looked at the man. "Do real hippos in the wild make that noise or is it just the purple ones? I've been wondering."

The man just smiled.

"Just who are you?" asked Sam.

The man glanced at the Manager who then nodded and left the room. The man perched himself casually on the corner of the Manager's desk. "I'm Michael."

Sam grinned. This is what she had been waiting for. "Are you the archangel?"

Michael shook his head, still smiling. "No. I'm not an archangel."

"So? What are you?"

Michael stood up and sat down in the Manager's chair. He leaned back and steepled his fingers, watching her for a moment before answering. "I'm the Vice President for North American Operations."

Sam steepled her own fingers, mirroring the man in front of her. "Does that mean I can negotiate with you?"

Michael's smile froze. "Negotiate?"

Sam rolled her eyes. "Yes. *Ne-go-ti-ate*," she said. "Do you or do you not have the authority to get me the barnacles out of here?"

"I do," said Michael.

"I need to get out of here," said Sam.

"I can see that," said Michael. He pulled a fat file folder from a corner of the desk and started to page through it. "I see six escape attempts listed here, as well as numerous customer complaints. Your behavior as a Happy Happeez Playland employee does not warrant cancelation of your contract at this time."

"Butter biscuits," said Sam.

"I'm sorry," said Michael. "What did you say to me?"

"Butter biscuits," said Sam. "Snickerdoodle, son of a gun, scuttle butt, bull spit!"

"That kind of language is not necessary Ms Jones."

Sam leaned forward across the desk. "Then why are you here? If I had a ticket downstairs, the Manager would have done it. Instead I have you, Mr. Vice President for North American Operations. My guess is that your precious policy and procedure book won't let you toss me down the hole, but I'm causing too much trouble for you to let me keep putting in my time here. If I were a betting woman, I'd bet that you are here to get rid of me some other way."

"Perhaps," said Michael, "I'm just here to investigate what looks like a very odd situation." He turned a page. "Based on what I see here, you should have been sent down months ago, but...."

"Yeah," said Sam. "I know. I'm lucky."

"Impossibly lucky," said Michael, looking at her with honest dismay as she leaned back in to her chair. "With every major offense, you managed to save the lives of..." he glanced at the paper, "... at least two people. You uncovered a ring of people stealing wallets from customers, sent six child abusers to jail, found eight missing kids, discovered faulty concrete in the ceiling...."

Sam looked at her fingernails. " Well, I notice things."

"...And saved 13 people from being killed by a runaway truck."

"Yeah. That one *was* kind of random," said Sam.

Michael closed the file. "I was sent here to find out if your Manager was being honest in his reports."

"Like he'd make that horse pucky up," Sam smirked.

"So I see."

"Can we get back to the negotiation now? I'm clearly a thorn in your corporate saddle. Just send me back to the real world and everything goes back to normal."

"First," said Michael gesturing at the file in front of him, "I have to know. How did you pull this off?"

Sam looked at him for a moment and then sighed. "Honestly," she said. "I don't know. It's been like this all my life: Nothing bad can happen to me for years and then all of a sudden, something colossal bad happens to me. My mom died of cancer when I was eight, my dad took off somewhere when I was 15, a slime sucking fart sack of a man dumped me after my miscarriage. I figure I'm some kind of karma goddess or something."

"That's not exactly what karma is...."

"Whatever. So the last really bad thing that happened was getting run over by a concrete truck and landing here. The only colossally bad thing that can happen here is getting sent down the hole so I figure I've got nothing to lose."

Michael looked uncertain.

"I also figure I've got years of this poodle doodle before my time. In the meantime, I'll be causing all kinds of trouble for you at corporate by inspiring my fellow staffers to misbehave."

"That has resulted in several people who might have gone on to something better to be sent downstairs," said Michael softly.

"That's on them, not me," said Sam. "I never forced anyone to do anything they didn't want to do."

"You are an odd bird, Ms Jones."

"Yeah," said Sam. "I know. Can we work something out here or do I go back out there and start saving lives again?"

Michael's eyes narrowed. "Very well. Let's work something out."

"Well butter my butt and call me a biscuit!" sang Sam. "*Finally* we are communicating. I want my old life back."

"I can't do that."

"Do I need to talk to someone above you?" asked Sam.

"No," said Michael carefully. "*No one* can give you your old life back. You died. Your body was crushed beyond repair. Your life, as it was, evaporated shortly after you were buried, largely for lack of interest from anyone still living."

Sam made a poofing noise and rolled her eyes.

"I can put you back in the same city, however," continued Michael.

"I suppose that's a start," said Sam, thinking. "I don't want to be a baby again. I hated childhood. Do I have to be reborn?"

"Being reborn makes things easier," said Michael, "but it's not required."

"Good. I want to be put back as an adult," said Sam.

Michael nodded.

"Are you going to remember all of this?" asked Sam.

Michael tapped the side of his head. "Steel trap, Ms Jones. Steel trap. What other requirements do you have for your new life?"

Sam wiggled her butt a bit in her chair. If she had a tail, she would have been wagging it. "I want to be hot," she said. Michael cocked an eyebrow. "You know," she said, "good looking." Sam pulled off her Happy Happeez hat and the ponytail she had sewn to it. "I want my plucking hair back."

Michael stared at her bald, blistered head.

"How many times did they buzz you?" he asked.

Sam shrugged. "I lost count," she said. "Anyway, thick flowing blonde hair. Got it?"

Michael nodded. "Anything else?"

"Yes. I don't want to work for a living anymore. I've done enough of that for one narfing lifetime. I want to be taken care of and to have nothing to do all day but sit around and sleep."

Michael nodded.

"And I need to be able to swear again," Sam said. "This son of a bleep fake profanity is making me crazy."

"Of course."

Sam looked around. "So what do you do? Do you have a magic wand or something?"

Michael pulled a folded piece of paper out of his breast pocket. "Nothing so dramatic," he said, spreading the document out before Sam. "This document will replace your contract, which is now considered null and void. By signing this, we are severing your working relationship with Happy Happeez Playland. You will return to the living world."

Sam grabbed a pen and scribbled her name. "It's about shamalama time."

Michael turned the paper around and signed his name. Sam closed her eyes and her bald head clunked on to the desk in front of him.

Sam opened her eyes to warm sunshine, traffic noises, and the smell of fresh coffee from her favorite coffee place on Newport Street. "Coffee," she thought. "I think I'll start with some real coffee."

She turned to go in the shop and hit her head on something hard and metal. It was a table and somehow she was standing under it. Then she saw legs and they were enormous.

"What the..." thought Sam. She turned quickly and looked at her reflection in the coffee shop window. A golden retriever -- with thick, blonde, flowing hair -- looked back at her.

"Well, shit," barked Sam.