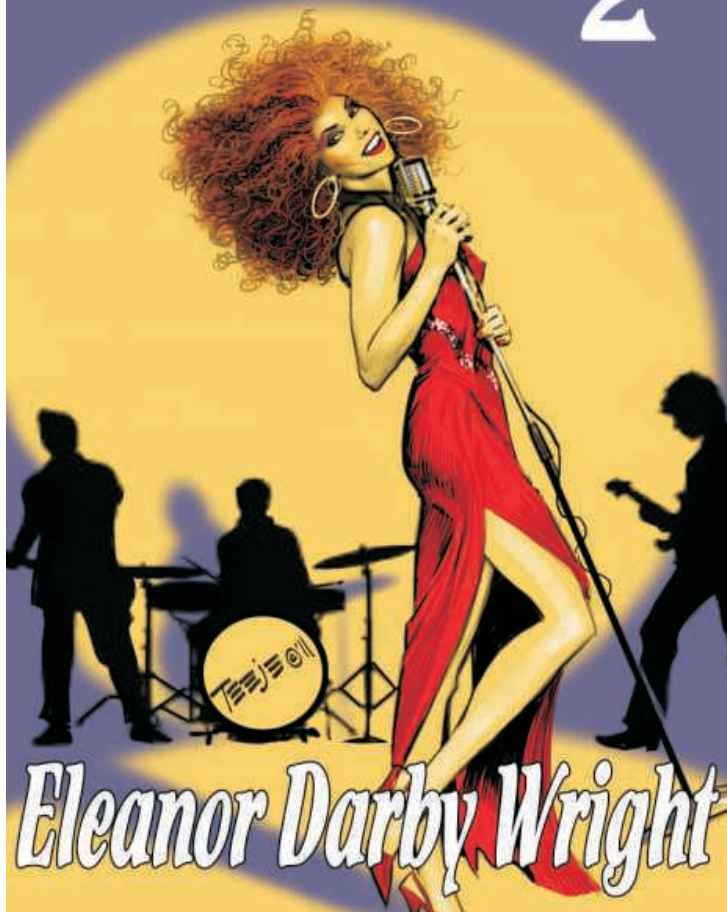


# *You Sing Like A Girl* 2



*Eleanor Darby Wright*

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# YOU SING LIKE A GIRL 2

## *Sing Like A Woman*

**by Eleanor Darby Wright**

The bus stopped for the last time in Philadelphia before the last leg into New York. I know that I didn't look my best at all and so I was wondering why this guy was looking at me so intently when he sat down in the seat across from me. The woman with the baby had finally left and so the bus was at peace at last.

"Excuse me," the dark-haired guy said, his voice betraying his New England origins. "Were you just at the same audition as me?"

I frowned at him. "Audition?" I asked him stupidly. If it was a pickup line, it was definitely an original one.

"She's been on this bus since Chicago," said the guy sitting on the other side of the idiot who looked like he wasn't long out of university. The older guy had got on

there and didn't seem to realize that I'd been on much longer than that.

"Oh, sorry," said the dark-haired guy. "It's that jacket and the emblem."

"I picked it up from a thrift store in St Paul," I told him. "It's warm."

"Oh," said the dark-haired guy. "My name's Andy," he added. "Two of the other guys trying out for a part in *The Phantom* were wearing Royston jackets like that. They didn't get into the final rounds, either."

I didn't have a clue what Andy was talking about. I didn't tell him my name. How could I? I didn't know yet who I was going to be for a while. I definitely wasn't going to tell him my real name, John Samuel Barrington. And I wasn't going to tell him that I was also Samantha Carter, the missing singer from the reality show, *Voice of the Americas*, and he could earn \$100 000, the latest reward offering, by turning me in to officials of the show who were making quite a fortune off me. I think that they would have hated him showing up with me anyway and having to pay out on the reward they were offering to anyone who could tell them where I was. I was sure that they hoped, by now, that I was dead in a ditch somewhere.

That had nearly happened, of course. I'd been heading in to a fleapit of a motel in Los Angeles, my mind in turmoil after being released from the cruise ship that had been employing me, when a car had hurtled into me, striking me, throwing me to the ground, breaking my leg and putting me in hospital.

Me in hospital! That was the only place that I didn't ever, ever want to be. I couldn't go to hospital! I couldn't go there where they would inevitably discover that

I wasn't a girl, even though everyone who looked at me immediately thought that I was a girl and not a boy.

But a boy was who I really was. It's a long story.

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I looked up at the underside of the car that had hit me and panicked. There was an awful pain in my leg which really hurt as I tried to crawl out to the side past the front wheel that was spinning beside me.

"There's a girl under there!" I heard someone screaming. Past the wheel, someone had run up and was bending down to look at me.

"You all right, miss," a young, anxious, boyish voice asked me. "Can I pull you out of there?"

An older man was swearing at the young kid, calling him all kinds of names and telling him to get me out of there before the whole car went up in flames or exploded. Just what the two of us wanted to hear, I'm sure.

"I don't think I'm trapped," I managed to gasp to the kid. "But my leg ..." He looked at it and the horror on his face told me that I had done something very bad to it. "Ignore it," I said with a shudder, "and pull me away or let me try to crawl out of here."

The kid took my hands and rescued me. Just in time, as the car crashed from the fence that surrounded the motel down on the space where I had been lying. I would definitely have been hurt very badly. What would have been worse, of course, was that I would have been hauled in, unconscious, to the Emergency Room of some hospital and they would have un-

dressed me and found out that the girl who carried a driving license, identifying her as 'Samantha Carter', was indeed a man, just like the teenaged boy who saved my life.

So, I told myself that it was as much to save his reputation as it was to save mine that I made sure that I wasn't undressed by the nurses who wanted to and told me I was a baby. I told them that my church did not even permit them to work on me but I would let them fix my leg and the other cuts and scrapes I had if they ensured that I had complete privacy for all my personal needs and, no, I wouldn't take anaesthetics for whatever they had to do to my leg to save it.

There was a lot of humming and whispering at the hospital as I lay on a gurney and let a young intern straighten out my leg. The nurses all smiled as I really did shriek just like a girl. I always have and I couldn't help it as the fixing of my leg hurt me worse than anything ever had in my short life. But, at least, they still thought that I was a girl when the doctor had finished.

"All right, Miss Smith," the doctor, in charge of me, had said when I came out of radiology. "This will hurt you a great deal as you have multiple fractures that we have to work on. But we shall accede to your wishes."

At first, they had thought I was a charity case. But I had showed them my cheque from the cruise ship I had worked on and their attitude towards me, Joanne Smith, as I was calling myself, had changed radically. One of the admitting nurses had also suggested that the shipping line that had employed me must have coverage on me as well and she would contact their insurance company.

On a technicality, my being laid off didn't come into effect until midnight, I was covered for most of the

work and painkillers that I finally succumbed to. But the major part of the money I had been trying to save by working on the ship was gone by the time I was discharged from the Mercy Hospital after two months. That's how bad the breaks had been.

I got to lie back in a ward with three women, all older than me, however, and pretend that I was a lady of leisure. I always made sure that I was locked in securely when I went to the bathroom. It was funny but my eyebrows still didn't grow back in to the way that they had been when I was a teenaged boy. I don't know what Julie, my 'Sister' in the 'Carter Sisters' act, had done to me but they were as thin and curved as they had been the first time I had screamed at her about what she had done to me.

I used the hair-removing products that the nurses gave to me and let them use Nice 'N Easy hair dye on my hair. No, I couldn't have it cut. I did, however, have it styled but the only time I had to wear makeup and perfume was when Willis, the kid who had rescued me, came to visit me. Yes, I let him hug me even though I was wearing a frilly nightdress that I had 'liberated' from the girl who had sung aboard ship before me. Willis actually kissed my cheek, sending all kinds of shivers through me, as he made me think of Teddy, the kind, old piano player who had been on terms of affection with me at the very end of my stint on the cruise ship. Yes, that means that I was on kissing terms with a man. But he didn't know that I was another man. He thought that I was Samantha Carter.

I was on the news regularly. There were a couple of reporters who were persistent in their stories about me.

"After all this time," asked one news anchor after his reporter had stated that it was now pretty conclu-

sive that I had crossed the border into Canada, “how likely is it that Samantha Carter, with all the publicity and appeals that have been made, is going to be found alive?”

Not as likely as her being found right here in Los Angeles, I said smugly to myself, as I watched video of the ‘Goth Girl’ singing *All I Ask of You*, the first thing I had done on *Voice of the Americas*. The reality show judges’ faces had all been a picture as I had sung, reminding me, and everybody else, it appeared, how the judges had reacted when Susan Boyle had been discovered on a British talent show.

“All we ask of you, Samantha,” said the unctuous host who had asked about the probability of me being alive, “is that you come back safe and sound soon from wherever you are hiding.”

“They’re still going on about her, are they?” asked Mrs Fowler, coming back from her physiotherapy.

“They think she’s dead,” I said to her, making both the helping nurse and her look at me in surprise, “or she’s in Canada.”

“Which would be worse?” asked the nurse brightly, making the other women on the four-person ward, hoot with laughter.

I was discharged after two months, with recommendations that I do six weeks more of physio, at least. I was discharged basically because my insurance ran out and so had the money I had saved.

I wasn’t from California. I had no papers, save for the driving license I’d hidden in my pack along with my last pay slip from the cruise ship line. I said that I was Joanne Smith but only the pay stub offered any proof that I was. And that was kind of misleading as

well, as I had been billed as 'Miranda Ewing' when I was the replacement for a girl singer on the cruise ship.

Well, I could barely walk and so I used the some of the money I still had, thanking Teddy for all the tips he had saved for me, and bought a bus ticket home. I was still in a dress and women's shoes and stockings. I had a half-crutch to help me get up and down stairs. I had no idea what my mother and father would say when they saw me. Or Julie, when I met her again. She would probably think that I was an idiot for not exploiting my appearance on the *Voice* show.

Julie Stoneman, my 'Sister' in the Carter Sisters act, would probably want me to stay and primp myself even more as a girl. No, I was going to hide out with my parents even if they did joke about me being gay as they had from time to time before I had gone off with Julie. I would shave off my eyebrows if they wouldn't grow in right. I would cut my hair back to a crewcut. Better to be frowned at for being a skinhead than to be condescended to any more as a girl.

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I was jolted awake when the bus pulled into New York. I had missed all the sights and sounds that people have of the New York skyline and crossing the Hudson.

"Come on," said the woman beside me and so I moved to let her past me and into the line funnelling off the bus. I was the last one off, having to dig into the overhead to find my crutch and the purse that I normally carried.

“Know where you’re going, Miss?” the driver asked me as I hauled my pack up onto my shoulder and limped towards the exit.

“Oh, yes,” I said, though I hadn’t a clue what I was going to do in New York. The impulse to get away from my home town had been intense and where else could I lose myself best but in the country’s largest city? It had been an impulse that had taken me into Canada and onto a cruise ship as a chambermaid. Now, I was doing it again.

“Hey, you’re limping!” said a voice in my ear and I turned to find Andy, the guy on the bus, sipping from a coffee that he must have bought from a concession somewhere.

“Nothing wrong with your eyesight,” I said to him, leaning on my half-crutch to drag my bad leg up the steps to what appeared to be street level.

“See those guys,” said Andy, slipping his hand under my arm. I saw several well-dressed young men waiting around the entrances, one of them looking at me and then at Andy, before looking away.

“On the lookout for runaways to the big city,” said Andy. “I can never tell whether they’re really pimps out to recruit girls or undercover cops gathering up pre-teens and putting them back on buses home. You gotta place to stay in town?”

“I need a motel, a cheap motel,” I said to him. “I’ve got some names to look up in the phone book.”

“Probably find they’re all ripped out here,” said Andy, steering me towards an entrance that said something about Transportation. “Look. You don’t know me but if you need to save money in New York, the only

way to do it is to crash with friends. You can crash with me if you like.”

“Well, Andy,” I began, looking back pointedly at the guys we had passed, one of whom had homed in on a lost-looking, young girl in black lipstick and leather jacket. Gosh, she could have been the girl I had tried to be on the *Voice* show at the beginning, I thought. The guy was flashing a badge of some sort and a woman had come to join him. The girl looked terrified of the pair.

“No, I’m not one of them,” said Andy. “My name in full is Kenneth Anderson Wright, Andy to all my friends. Never, ever, call me Kenneth or you’ll get bopped on your pretty nose. I’m supposed to be a singer and I’m coming back from what I thought would be a promising audition for a part in a travelling company but it turns out that four hundred of us tenors or light baritones had the same idea. So now I’m coming back, tail between my legs, to the apartment I share. And for a Royston Music graduate, as your jacket proclaims you, Jake and I always have room on one of our couches.”

I stood at the top of the stairs as people hurried past us to the subway while Andy stood in front of me expectantly, putting out a hand and pointing to my backpack. “E-Eva Rodriguez,” I said to him, trying out a name that a girl in front of me in the ticket line had used. She’d got off in Chicago.

I had to have a name, didn’t I? And Joanne Smith was what I had used on the cruise ship. If those searching for me were any good, and I didn’t doubt that they were, they were probably already looking for Joanne Smith.

“Artist, dancer, well not right away,” said Andy with a smile, taking my pack from me. “Singer, author ...”

“Waitress, dishwasher, chambermaid,” I said, again feeling the tingles of embarrassment shoot through me as I used feminine terms to describe myself. I was doing it all the time now.

“That’s what we all are now,” said Andy with a nice smile again, “since we’re all between the jobs that we really want and the training that we’ve just completed.”

“I have to earn money to get back to university,” I said to Andy as he waited and let me hobble as best I could down the stepped passage to the subway. He had tokens and wouldn’t let me pay from my diminishing stack of bills.

Andy guided me protectively to a seat for my first ride into New York City. His apartment had to be on the third floor, of course, up really steep stone steps to the front door.

“Oh no,” said Andy, as, with his help, we finally made it up to a dark brown door with ‘3C’ below a spyhole. There was a sock on the handle of the door which made me want to laugh immediately. So Jake was in there with a girl, was he? It seemed so juvenile.

We stood there and Andy laughingly explained that Jake was still a junior in university. “I should go in and talk to him,” he said, taking out his key.

The door behind us opened then and a dark-haired, nice-looking, older girl stood there, smiling at Andy. “Hey, Andy, just to tell you,” the girl with blonde streaks in her black hair said, looking us over with interest. “Jake’s home with Jessica. They’ve made up

again! And her friend's in there with some other guy as well. You're not supposed to be back till tomorrow at the least, Jake told me! Didn't make it in Philly?"

"Along with three hundred and ninety-nine others!" said Andy cheerily. "Oh, Mel, this is Eva, who's new in town. I had offered her a couch!"

Melissa, Mel, laughed and opened her door wider. "You're an idiot, Andy!" she said, looking at me. "You could at least have picked up a girl who's not on crutches."

"Can't catch 'em," said Andy, taking my arm and guiding me into the other apartment. "They run too fast!"

It wasn't a fancy apartment. A television was on in one corner and guess what the topic of conversation was? Melissa Martin zapped the program off and indicated the sofa. "That's for you, lover boy," she said to Andy. "You," she said to me. "You can share the bed with me."

"Ah," whined Andy, like a spoiled, little boy who wasn't getting his own way.

"I, I can have the couch," I said, speaking to the other girl for the first time. Well, that was the problem. She wasn't really the other girl. There was only one girl in the apartment and it wasn't me, even though they were both treating me as if I was.

"Bring her backpack in here, lover boy," said Melissa Martin, Mel for short, refusing to listen to any protests that I made, brushing off as well the babbling I made about paying her.

"It's what friends are for," Mel said cheerily.

But you don't know me from a hole in the ground, I wanted to tell her. But I was tired. All the walking up the stairs had made my leg start to ache as well and I still had to do the physio exercises that the therapist had made me promise to do every day.

So, I changed into the only nightie I possessed, panties, of course, and changed the tape about my private parts after using the bathroom. Gloomily, I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. I wasn't wearing any makeup but still I had clear, girlish skin, shaped girly eyebrows and flowery studs in my ears that leant such a feminine cast to my face.

My hair didn't help at all, either, since the nurses had insisted on perming it hospital. I had a natural, female bounce, even short as it was, about my neck and chin. I secured it back with a barette. There was always a glint there as well, highlights, a nurse had called them, that made me look as if I had just come out of a beauty parlor.

It was amazing to me how long the effects were lasting as it had been over two weeks since I had left the hospital. Ah, there was a darker color at the parting I made of my hair. I should be thinking of a touch-up at the least if I really was a girl. When it got a little longer, and the dark roots showed more, I must go for the skinhead look that I had promised myself I would once I reached New York and re-started my life as a man.

Melissa had said to borrow a robe of hers from the back of the bathroom door but I couldn't really. I just limped over as quickly as I could to the bedroom as the other two were talking about Andy's audition in Philadelphia.

I closed the bedroom door and got down on the floor to do the stretching exercises that I had to. I was

grimacing a lot when Melissa came in, shut the door as well, and sat on the end of the bed, watching me.

"That looks like it really hurts," she said to me as I stopped for a moment to get my breath back.

"I have to do it so that I can walk properly again," I said, gasping as I did the isometric part of the exercises that I had to do. I was going to have to go back to the bathroom and clean the sweat off me before I got into bed with Mel and pretend that I was as female as she was.

"Andy said that you needed a job," said Mel as I went on. "I think I can get you on with *Precious Moments* if you don't care about mindless, boring tasks."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Minimum wage, coffee shop really, though Paolo wants us to call it a restaurant and bar," said Mel, wrinkling her nose prettily as if the restaurant was anything but. "No-one ever stays long in the back, loading dishwashers, prepping the fries' baskets, cleaning up spills when you have to, taking out garbage. I'll help you with that while your leg is healing."

"It's really nice of you," I said hesitantly. I was going to turn her down, thinking of the scrap that there might be over papers but, looking at me, who, after all, would think that I was an illegal immigrant? And I had to start somewhere, bring some cash in, instead of having it all outflowing. The only thing wrong was that I would be stuck again for a little while as a girl. "I, I should take you up on such an offer."

"You can bunk here with me as well," said Melissa with a smile. "Andy will be just across the hallway. I can chaperone the pair of you."

I had to flush at that one. "It's not like that!" I said nervously, tingles breaking out all over my skin as I thought about what Andy and she must have been talking about. "He, he just was the only one to help me at all at the bus station."

"Yeah, he was being Mr Nice Guy," said Mel sarcastically, a big smile on her full, pink lips. She stood up and began to undress, tossing her top onto the bed, her beautiful breasts on display. "By the way," she said as I got up, picked up the towel I had exercised on and started to head back to the bathroom, "you should borrow a robe from me if you're going to wear that nightie around here, Eva. With the light of the bathroom behind you, Andy and I could see everything about you. He really thought the pink roses on your panties were cute and your flat chest didn't bother him at all, which I think you ought to know."

Andy was either asleep or feigning that he was as I went back, shivering in shame at the way Mel had been talking to me. Oh, this wasn't going to work out at all, was it? I had a strip wash and hesitated about putting on some cologne. Well, I was sleeping with a girl, after all, wasn't I, as Mel wouldn't hear of me sleeping on the floor, even if it was better for my leg, as I tried to convince her that it was. Her bed was big enough and she wouldn't bother my leg, she promised, as she didn't move around in bed.

The last part wasn't true. When I woke up in the morning, trying to think where I was and what the lump against me was, I thought I was back in bed with Julie for a moment. Mel's arm was across me and her head was against my hair. I had to slide from her face lying on my hair, waking her.

“What ...?” Mel began, her long bare legs sliding over mine as she moved. “Oh heck, did I move in on you. Oops, did I hurt you? Sorry, Eva, I really am. It must be that lovely cologne that you’re wearing. It’s really nice. I should get some of that for myself. I might do a lot better with guys like Andy then!”

We ‘girls’ had the bathroom first. I dressed in jeans and a shirt over my female underwear, putting on my bra and falsies which made Mel smile when she saw me doing that as she stood in the bedroom doorway and told Andy to use the bathroom and to clean it up after himself as I had done.

“I should check on Jake,” said Andy of his roommate.

“Not for a while yet,” laughed Mel. “When do you have to go to work today?”

Andy, I had gathered, was a waiter in ‘the Village’, wherever that was.

“I’m not on till noon,” yawned Andy, getting up from the bed in just his underpants and heading to the bathroom, flexing his lean, sinewy body as he went.

“What you see is what you get,” murmured Mel to me, making me blush like a girl again which seemed to amuse her.

“Aren’t you going to put on any makeup or lipstick at least?” Mel wanted to know as I put on my pink, femmy sneakers and short ankle socks to go with her to *Precious Moments*, wherever it was.

“Do I need to?” I asked her, feeling so silly inside. My hair was still bouncy and feminine even after I had slept the night before with the girl who linked her arm through mine to help me down the steps of the apartment building.



“No,” laughed Melissa. “You are pretty enough as it is, Eva Rodriguez. Which you know because you saw the way that Andy was looking at you this morning. He was hungry, wasn’t he, but not for my cooking.”

"H-He was looking at you as well," I stammered, a knot again in my stomach as I traded comments with a girl about another boy as if I was interested in him as a boy.

"Hey, Eva," said Mel, still highly amused. "You don't have to think that you're treading on my turf with Andy." She laughed then. "That's a boy's expression, I know, but it fits the way that you're acting. My little fling with Andy was finished two years' ago when he found me in bed with his elder brother, Marty, who was passing through and stayed over. If you think Andy's a hunk, wait till you meet his brother. Anyway, Andy didn't take it to heart. We're friends and he introduces me to other cute guys from time to time. That's why I was coming out to see who he brought home. I'm actually a little disappointed with him because he brought a girl home with him this time."

But he didn't, I wanted to tell the brunette who held my arm and treated me like an invalid all the way down to street level. The coffee shop, sorry Paolo, the restaurant and bar, was just three blocks away. I saw Paolo shaking his head as he saw my walking crutch. But Melissa began talking very fast, in Italian, I think, and so the swarthy, muscular guy came over to where I was sitting.

"So, you gotta bum leg, and you need a job," the black-haired guy said, frowning at me.

"That sums up my predicament pretty well," I murmured to him and he actually grinned.

"Mel recommends you," Paolo said. "Think you can stay for over a month before I gotta find someone again?"

"I don't think I'll be moving anywhere else in that time," I said to him. Paolo was quite solicitous as he helped me to my feet then and we went into the back of the 'restaurant and bar' where a man and a woman, yelling at one another in Spanish, I think, were the staff, putting together sandwich and soup orders which seemed to be the feature of the day.

"Melissa!" yelled Paolo, and my future roommate came out of the Ladies' at the back in a white-collared, pink dress that fitted her feminine form really well. "You ain't on for another hour, so you show Evita," that's what Paolo called me all the time I worked for him, "what to do and when she's to do it. Luis, Suela, this is Evita. She's doing Milio's job."

Whoever Milio was, I never did find out. Consuela was really a nice woman, at least she was nice to me, even though she was always screaming at Luis, whom I only found out after two weeks of being there, was her husband.

The work wasn't hard. Taking out the garbage was the worst, a constant, half-hour job as the coffee was replenished twenty times and more an hour. Consuela didn't want that aroma in 'her' kitchen as she was making the occasional omelette, fajita, or cannelloni that someone had ordered from the menu.

The dishwasher was temperamental which was why I was the dishwasher's helper. I had to catch all the mistakes it made and wash pots and pans, coffee dispensers and the like and keep them fresh and ready for use. It wasn't brain surgery by any means and wiping the floors was actually something that I could do despite the hopping that I sometimes had to do when I felt a twinge coming on in my bad leg.

“You come back tomorrow an hour later,” said Paolo, after I had put in eight, nine hours after the break I had taken with Melissa in the middle of the afternoon. “You work an hour later as well, just like today.”

Well, it’s a living, I thought, as Mel brought her uniform back to the apartment, rinsed it out and hung it up in the apartment to dry. “Paolo likes you,” Mel told me with a grin. “He didn’t yell at you once, did he? That’s what drives everyone away. The kitchen is crazy at times what with Consuela and him going at poor Luis.”

We didn’t need to eat in the apartment as we had eaten ‘leftovers’ at the restaurant. Not left on people’s plates. Just food that Paolo had anticipated he was going to sell, had the cooks prepare and it wasn’t sold.

Melissa turned on the television to some entertainment program again. The lead story was about me, Samantha Carter, again. “Let’s switch it,” I said to Mel, trying to make light of it, as there I was, belting out the operatic aria which I had had to sing on the *Voice* reality show.

“Oh, let’s hear this!” said Mel, stepping back to get a better look at the ‘Goth Girl’ with her thick, darkly painted eyes, black lipstick and eyebrows sporting golden circles like her ears. “I loved her singing this one, didn’t you?”

I had to squirm a little at that in my bra and panties, thinking how I had felt at the time in the glittery dress, singing it the way that I had, the liberties I had taken with the words very clear to me.

“I wonder what the news about her is,” said Melissa then as, thankfully, my voice died away before the

last triumphant ending that I had milked for all it was worth, using breath control, as I hadn't ever before, to hold the last note for what had seemed like forever at the time.

"Police officials in Minneapolis tonight are reporting that a female body, found on a riverbank is tentatively identified as Samantha Carter," said a blonde, beautiful woman breathlessly, as if the news was shocking and awesome.

"Oh, my god, no!" gasped Mel, sitting down to stare at the screen all through a news story that I knew had not a word of truth in it.

I was trembling just as much as Melissa as I heard a police spokeswoman who had my drivers' licence, showing me as Samantha Carter, saying that I was dead.

"I can confirm that the young woman whose body was found in a secluded area behind a warehouse by a night watchman's dog," she said, "has been dead for several days. This driving licence was the only form of identification in a wallet found on the young woman. Hair and general height appears to match that of Samantha Carter but we won't be able to state that positively until we've checked with persons who knew her and confirmed her identity."

Julie? I thought with a shiver. They'd be contacting Julie. That was a certainty. Oh please, please, Julie, don't go off half-cocked now and tell them that Samantha is really Samuel, my middle name, please. At least, go and look at the body and you'll see that this girl isn't me. How can she be? She'll have breasts and a vagina and once you check those out, Julie, you'll know that she, the poor girl who's been murdered, could never have been me.

There were all kinds of questions to the police-woman, who confirmed that the young woman, who might be Samantha Carter, had been assaulted before she had been killed. Yes, it would probably take identification through dental records to positively confirm that the girl was me, Samantha, but the identification in the girl's wallet seemed to be pretty clear.

Mel was actually crying as she flipped over to another station. They were already convinced that I was dead and were doing an obituary for me. Basically, they were playing song after song that I had sung, ending with *Somewhere*, from *West Side Story*, with the rest of the cast staring at me as I did the sexy dance Julie had taught me to do, flouncing the skirt and petticoat about my slim, nyloned legs before I had drifted forward and finished off the production number with the song being my solo for that program.

"Such a shame," said the news announcer while the woman beside him was wiping her eyes. He was looking at her as if he couldn't understand her emotions. Neither could I. But Mel, the girl I was to share an apartment with, was crying as well and flipping around the channels that all seemed to have something about me, tributes featuring me singing seeming to be everywhere.

Only one station bothered to say the 'unconfirmed reports suggested' that the missing Samantha Carter might have been killed in Minnesota. Oh, Julie, I thought, if you would only identify that girl as me, as Samantha, wouldn't that be great. It would be all over then. No-one would be looking for me any more. I could definitely get back to being a boy, maybe facing up to my parents this time and not running from them as I had when they hadn't even recognized their own

son in the one pretty dress that he had and that he was wearing when they saw him.

Melissa wanted to go out to some bar to meet with other girl friends to talk about what she had just seen. She must have phoned four girls and asked them if they had seen what was on television. None of them were watching, wherever they were, but some were at a bar just a few blocks away.

I used the excuse of my leg, the exercises I had to do, and the stairs, the down and the up, that I would have to do again that night.

"You can't stay in at night," Mel scolded me, taking her purse and beginning to furiously alter her face with more makeup than I had seen her wear even as a waitress through the afternoon and early evening. "It's unhealthy for girls like me and you!"

"There'll be other nights," I said, promising her that I would go clubbing with her on the weekend.

"Paolo will pay you Saturday night," said Mel. "But you gotta have a dress, Evita!" I shivered as she used the feminine name Paolo used for me. "I know! I'll loan you the money. We can go shopping and then you can pay me when Paolo pays you!"

A feeble protest about me saving money for university was dismissed as of no weight by Mel, who rushed off then to meet her friends. "We have to work evenings on Saturday but we close at midnight and then we'll go clubbing!" Mel yelled from the doorway and was gone.

I was looking for any program that didn't have me on it when there was a rapid knocking on the door. I was sure it was Melissa who had probably left something behind when she had scurried out.

“What did you forget?” I was calling as I opened the door and there was Andy Wright leaning on the doorpost, grinning at me.

“I forgot how pretty you were, not having seen you all day,” said the guy who had brought me into this little corner of the world.

“Andy!” I gasped like any young maiden would upon seeing a handsome guy like Andy on her doorstep.

“That’s my name,” said Andy, smiling at me, his teeth all white and level shining at me. “Aren’t you going to invite me in, Eva? Where’s Melissa? Did she leave you all alone on your second night in the big city?”

I had to explain that it wasn’t Melissa’s fault. I did have to do my physio and get to bed as I was so tired after being on my feet all day. Yes, I was babbling because Andy just moved in, took a beer from Mel’s well-stocked fridge and then led me back to the sofa to sit beside him, turning the television to a basketball game.

Just a couple of guys together, I thought, as I crossed my legs automatically like a girl even though I was wearing jeans. Oh, I did have a lot of bad habits that I was going to have to break to be Johnny Barrington again.

Andy shifted and put his arm around me as he sat beside me.

“Don’t!” I squeaked at him. Andy smiled as he ran his hand over the edge of my shirt and down my arm to take my hand in his, lifting it to look at the fingernails I hadn’t cut or cleared of the nail polish I had put on them days before.

“Yeah, that’s a little pushy of me, isn’t it?” asked Andy, squeezing my hand. “But, hey, I haven’t seen you all day. Did Melissa get you a scuzzy job where she works today?”

I shivered and nodded that she had.

“I was thinking to try to get you on over in the Village where I work,” said Andy seriously. “But with your leg, it’s tough to travel, isn’t it, and there’s a bit of a walk and a lot of standing at the other end. Still, we have to show you the sights on Saturday night for sure. If Mel wants you to go out, you tell her that you’ve got a date with me. I’m going to leave you cab fare to come over and meet me in the Village.”

“Maybe Mel would come over with me as well,” I said shakily to Andy and he grinned at me.

“Great idea,” he said enthusiastically. “Just what I need on a Saturday night after working hard, two pretty girls lusting after me!”

“Part of that’s wrong,” I told him, trying to be light and flippant. “I doubt you’ll be working that hard and we’ll certainly not be lusting after you, Andy Wright, or should I call you by that other name you say you hate so much.”

“You don’t deny that you’re a pretty girl, I notice,” laughed Andy.

I felt a shudder go through me as I realized what I was doing. Because he thought that I was a girl, Andy must be thinking that I was flirting with him. He was squeezing my hand again as I babbled in fright that I had to do my stretching exercises. Then I would have to take a bath and wash my hair.

“Such pretty hair,” murmured Andy, leaning over as if he was going to sniff it. I sat stiffly about to let him

but that wasn't what he was leaning over me for. No, he leaned over me and his lips moved directly onto mine. I couldn't even gasp as the boy beside me on the sofa was kissing me.

I froze and my first reaction was to pull away, but Andy's arm was around me again. He held my hands against me as I tried to push him off as he kissed me most thoroughly as if I was a girl and really wanted him to do that to me.

"Hmm," Andy smiled at me again. "You do smell really nice, really girlie, if you don't mind me saying so. You hardly need to wash your hair and take a bath, Eva. You don't. Stay here and entertain me. Gosh, you really are so pretty!"

"I have to ..." I began but Andy pushed me back on the sofa and my leg gave way on me. I was half lying down and Andy Wright was pressing his face again down on mine. He kissed my cheek and my nose as I tried to twist away from me and held my head so that he could kiss me again.

Oh, I tried to resist him, but resistance to his kisses was what Andy wanted. The more I tried to be firm with him, the more he kissed me, getting really worked up and really passionate as I wriggled a little in his arms. I tried to prevent him from bumping my bad leg too badly.

"That wasn't too awful, was it?" Andy asked me huskily as he kissed my face and neck, sending the weirdest of sensations through me. Oh no, I was feeling the way I had sometimes when Teddy, on the boat, had kissed me. I tried to get up but that only made it so much easier for Andy to take possession of my lips again. It seemed as if I had answered what he had said by moving up to him, and so, for a minute and more, I

was locked in a long, romantic kiss with another man, he trying to press my padded chest against him.

"I'm not ready for this!" I protested, quaking all over, but Andy didn't want to stop. He partly undid my shirt and kissed at my neck. I felt him gently tugging on my bra straps. To stop him going further, it was easier to move against him and let him kiss me, his arms stroking my back, than to let him undo my shirt further.

I might not have been ready but Andy sure was. I could feel the passion in every kiss. His tongue ran over my lips and he tried to force my lips and mouth open. I pressed back and his mouth opened around mine and so I was kissing a man intently. I felt it all through my body, the feminine sensations running through me. I tried to lean back and he was on me again, our lips really locked together and his hand on the hip of my jeans, stroking me.

Melissa came hurtling in then through the door which I hadn't locked. "It's only me!" she was yelling and stopped as she saw me, apparently making out with Andy on her sofa.

"Oh!" Melissa said, smirking and making other faces at me. "This is what you meant by doing your exercises, is it, Eva? You should lock the door, girl, or better still, take him over to his place and get his sheets all hot and sweaty."

"Good idea," said Andy, getting to his feet and trying to pull me up with him.

"No!" I said shakily, coming to the realization that I had been kissing Andy there at the end with as much enthusiasm as he had been kissing me. That hand stroking my panties on my hip had seemed to make all

sense vanish from me. I hadn't been John Samuel Barrington then. I had been Eva and I had been reacting as an Eva would to someone caressing and complimenting her on being such a pretty girl. Yes, I had reacted like a girl should have and would have.

You are not Eva, I told myself, standing nervously as well with Andy to hold on to, wobbling on my bad leg. "I, I really do have to do my physio, An-Andy!" I told him, pushing him towards the door while Melissa zipped into the bedroom for something that she had forgotten. There had been condoms beside her bed I had noticed when I first went in there. Now, as I retreated from a protesting Andy, I noticed that they were gone.

"You, you need the bed?" I asked Mel who grinned at me and shook her head.

"If I have to come back here, we'll use the sofa," she said. "Unless you want to go over to Andy's ...?"

"Oh, god, no!" I almost roared at her. "I, I thought it was you, coming back, and he, he doesn't take 'No' for an answer!"

"Never has," said a grinning Melissa. She charged off again. "Now, Andy," I heard her saying as she pushed Andy away from her door. I hopped over as quickly as I could and turned the lock on the door.

I was shuddering as I retreated to the bedroom and set up to do my exercises as I had the night before. But all the time that I was doing them, all I could feel was the pressure of Andy's lips on mine and the touch of his hand on my bra straps and then on my hip and my panties beneath my jeans. And, of course, how I felt so much like a girl as I was kissed by my 'boy friend'.

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It was so different to be home, to walk down a street that I had strolled down as John in jeans and a tee-shirt and now I was strolling down in girlie shoes, low heels because of my bad leg. But I was in stockings and my hair was curled. My chest jutted out in my pink blouse and looked a little real, I thought. My skirt flowed around me as I minced down the street as best as I could with the help of my half-crutch.

There was the apartment that I had lived in last with my parents before I had left for a summer as a Carter Sister with Julie Stoneman. It was over a store, the entrance from the front recessed a little from the frontage of two different stores. My key did not work in the lock. I looked at it closely. I held a Weiser key in my hand but the lock was marked Schlage.

They changed the lock, I thought angrily, as I turned to Mr Chan's convenience store along the block. Could I go in there and talk to Mr or Mrs Chan about my parents and whether they were home? They would know right away that it was me in a dress, no matter how much makeup I wore on my face and no matter how much I tried to speak in a lilting, girlish voice.

I limped along to the passage that led behind the stores and into the courtyard. There was a set of stairs that went up to the balcony at the back of the apartment I had shared with my parents. It was very steep and seemed to take me forever to climb up. As I rose past the outer edge of the balcony, I realized that there were people sitting on chairs watching my feminized hair and face rising up in front of them.

The only problem for me was that I didn't recognize any of the people sitting there. I began to shiver and shudder as I stood there, having steeled myself all the way from the bus station about what I was going to say to my parents about the female way that I was dressed.

"Hello, Miss," said a portly man getting up from his patio chair. "How can we help you?"

Four people were looking at me, coffee cups in hand, as I stood there and wondered again as I had all the way from the bus station why I had been so silly, wearing a dress that day when I must have known that I would be meeting my parents. No, I didn't have the nerve to go into the Ladies', which had a lineup outside anyway, and change into my male clothing, not and have to walk out again from whatever the lineup had become by then.

"The Barringtons," I puffed at them, holding out my key. "They changed the locks!"

"No, we changed the locks," said the older man with a smile, half turning to a woman who was studying me. "Barrington? Was that the name of the folks who lived here before us, Marie?"

"I think so, Stan," said the man's wife.

"You, you wouldn't happen to know where they've moved to?" I asked them all and there were shakes of the heads all around.

"Check with the Chans," suggested the first man. "They seem to know everything about what goes on around here."

"I didn't know the Barringtons had a daughter," I heard the other woman there say as I retreated slowly, gripping the rail tightly as I had to lower my leg one

step at a time to get down what we had called the fire escape.

“No, they had a son,” said the second man. “Don’t know who she is. Pretty, little thing, though, isn’t she?”

I almost fell when I heard that. Not that it wasn’t the first time I’d heard it. I think it must be because I’d lost so much weight. I could tighten my corset and make myself have a maidenly waist. A little padding, very little, and I had female contours. Yes, my face was thinner as well. But pretty? I shuddered. No, that wasn’t me. No, I wasn’t pretty. Handsome, maybe, I pleaded silently, but please don’t call me pretty.

The Chans didn’t know me. They shouldn’t have after the way I plastered my eyes with thick makeup and my lips with plummy lipstick, fluffing all the reddish-brown curls I had around my face.

“Barringtons go long, long way away,” said Mr Chan. “Not come back here again!”

He shooed me out of the store while Mrs Chan was shaking her head at me as well. I knew that my parents hadn’t got along well with them but they had never been hostile to me. Then, I thought about the way that I was dressed. I wasn’t exactly Johnny Barrington any more.

It took me almost a week to find out from people where my parents had gone.

“As far as I remember,” Gus Barry, the real estate guy, said to me, looking at my crossed legs in the slender skirt I was wearing, “the Barringtons were going up to the Twin Cities, taking over as supers in an apartment building. The wife was going to run the books while the old man was going to be the caretaker, that sort of thing.”

I shivered inside as I'd known that my new bottle of perfume and my new stockings, money that I hadn't wanted to spend, would get me answers from Gus Barry. I had seen him on the weekend, running an open house and flirting with all the women who went through the place.

"You wouldn't happen to know where the building is, would you?" I asked, letting my red, painted mouth curve in what I intended to be a flirtatious smile. I shuddered inside as I did that.

"St Paul," said Gus, snapping his fingers, smiling at me. "Yeah, pretty girls always inspire me. Something about North Stars, yes, reminded me of the hockey team, the North Star Apartments, something like that."

"Thank you so much, Gus," I pouted breathlessly at the old lecher. Gus positively preened as I uncrossed my legs, stood up on my stiletto heels and swayed to the door, my bad leg and walking crutch exaggerating the feminine way that I moved.

"It's lunch time," Gus began as he rushed to hold the door for me, just as there was a furious honking of car horns just over to our right. It's always the same at the intersection of State and Main. This enormous, black, chauffeur-driven car had apparently just avoided a collision with an old pickup.

The uniformed driver was out to angrily confront the boy driving when the back of the car opened and a busty blonde girl got out and laughingly stopped the driver. The girl knew the boys. "You must have taken driving lessons from Cotton," Julie, the only girl I had ever slept with, was calling to the driver of the pickup as she swished her dress at the boys. I couldn't believe her figure. She'd certainly grown since the last time I'd seen her.

The driver retreated as Julie Stoneman, my partner in the 'Carter Sisters', chatted, laughed and passed the time of day with the boys who had tormented me in high school.

"That's our local celebrity," said a smiling Gus Barry to me. "Julie Carter, she calls herself, now she's in show business."

I stared down the street as the car door was pushed open further and a tall guy, Keith Sebastian, one of the judges on the *Voice of the Americas*, called to Julie to get back in the car. Julie pranced back, waving to her friends, deliberately kissing Keith fully on the lips before she ducked back into the limo.

"Made a fortune out of that reality show," said Gus. "Bought her parents an acreage out towards Lindley, beautiful place, but she lives in LA now with that guy who's always running around with her."

"I, I thought that the girl who sang had a diff, different name," I squeaked at Gus Barry.

"Samantha Carter, Julie's friend," agreed Gus. "Didn't know her at all. Couldn't have come from round here, but you know girls, always changing their hair and their looks and their clothes. Couldn't have been a Goth girl round here, though. She woulda stuck out round here, wouldn't she? Anyway, she run off after she didn't win. Boo hoo hoo!"

Gus must have seen the look on my face, though it was as much despair as anger, that I should have been showing. "She ought to have won, of course," he went on quickly, still being sweet to me, I could see. "Everyone says so. Julie says it all the time, begging for the girl to come back and forgive her. I reckon it was a fight over the guy, really, that one Julie's with now.

Planning a big wedding out in Lindley, the pair of them. Julie said so on that Entertainment World show last night. Begging Samantha to come back and be her bridesmaid. I bet she don't come, though. Too proud of herself, that one. They all say she was a real diva, knew she was good and couldn't take failing in that contest."

"Well, thank you, Gus," I said to him. It was on the tip of my tongue to say that he'd reminded me that Julie used to go out with the Barringtons' son and I should ask her if she knew where they were but Gus forestalled me.

"Hey," he said, holding on to my arm. "Julie Stoneman, that's her real name, she used to go out with the Barrington kid. She might know where he is or where the family are. You should talk to her!"

"Oh, I don't think a girl like that ..." I began and Gus was agreeing with me even before I could say anything demeaning about the old me, Johnny B.

"No, she wouldn't be involved with him now," said Gus, screwing up his face in disgust. He made a limp-wrist gesture that really maddened me. "Heard that the Barrington kid was one of those, a real loser!"

"Well, I won't talk to her then," I said, taking his fingers from my arm and stepping off, my stiletto heels really making a loud noise as I wobbled down the boardwalk, ignoring the pain in my leg and the pain in my gut to hear such an unfair description of me.

The local newspaper had the announcement of the wedding, with excited comments from girls I had only seen in the distance at school. "It's going to be the wedding of the year!" a girl named Mindy had gushed to the reporter. "And I'm going to be part of it!" Wasn't

she the one whom Julie had called a bitch for going to the Prom with Cotton Bryant?

How could I stick around for that? How could I even ask my old girl friend for money? Make a local call to her? I'd be found within the day.

No, St Paul had to be my next stop.

Nothing connected to the words, North Star, brought any confirmation that the Barringtons had actually moved to the city. I was at my wits' end when I saw a bus with an advertisement for the Polaris Day Care. Polaris, the North Star, had many places named for it, including apartments.

It wasn't really an apartment block, just a row of apartments over shops in a walk-up shopping center. That's where I was shuffling along, looking for ways in, when my mom and dad came strolling down some stairs and out of a door in front of me.

"Mom, Dad," I whispered but they were arguing over something as they walked right by me. I turned to look after them and my Dad turned.

"Who you looking at, girl?" my father said, wrinkling his face at me. "See that, Rose," he turned back to my mother who was gesturing in frustration at him. "They got whores all over the place now. Do you see the way that one's done up? Can't get away from them anywhere!"

"Oh, Sam," said my mother to my father. "It's just the way girls dress these days, like whores and prostitutes. They think it's the way to be, really sassy, and the boys like it." She still walked away from me, her son in a dress, not recognizing me at all. "You remember that girl, Julie, who used to come around ..."

They walked away from me, probably talking about the only girl friend I'd ever had. I stood there, knowing that I shouldn't have dressed the way that I was. I felt my dress blow around my legs. I had thought to get the worst over with them and explain all about Samantha Carter and ask them what I should do.

I thought that they would have taken one look at me and rushed inside with me, begging me to explain. I needed money. I knew it would embarrass them to see me as I was, much overdone from what I really was. But I wanted them to know that I wasn't making up the story about me being Samantha Carter, the girl singer on *Voice of the Americas*. If they wanted, I would have let them turn me into the program and claim the reward for finding me. But then I would have to have stayed in a dress for a while until I could disappear again and I didn't know how Julie would take such news. I had sort of envisioned her and my parents in cahoots and all of us splitting the reward money.

It had seemed like a rational argument at the time, rather than them seeing me as half-boy, half-girl in my jeans and workshirt, my hair still waved and curled. They would have thought that I was gay and I couldn't help that. I had visions of Julie and me. I had thought that she would have been able to help me out with my parents and explain that it was all her idea to exploit the strange voice that I had. I stood looking after my parents, shuddering as I pushed my short, thick hair back behind my ears. I should just have cut it and come back to them as a skinhead. But there was no way they would have believed the rest without Julie there to back me up and now it seemed impossible.

I limped slowly along the sidewalk after wherever they had disappeared. That was where the cop my par-

ents had sent after me, stopped me and snarled at me about this place being so respectable. Why didn't a girl like me get out of town before he had to arrest me?

Arrest me? I wasn't indignant. I was terrified. I limped away and that was when he saw my crutch and his demeanor changed. At least, he apologized for what the 'older folks' had said about a girl like me. He even gave me a ride in his police car to the bus station.

But where to go? Somewhere where I could get lost, I thought, tears starting to run. I limped to the Ladies' bathroom to clean my face, taking off Julie's leather jacket that I had worn for so long. The policeman had asked me for identification and I only had my wallet with both my pay stub and driver's license in it. I set the jacket down on the space beside the sink, and lowered my face into the warmish water to wash off all the makeup I had put on my face to impress my parents.

"Hey!" I heard an older woman call out and I looked up.

"She's stolen your jacket!" yelled the woman. I looked around and the jacket which had been beside me was gone. I grabbed my pack, my purse inside it, and my crutch and hobbled to the door, a crush of young women blocking me from getting out quickly. By the time I was outside, I couldn't see anyone running away with Julie's leather jacket.

"You got to tell the police!" said the older woman as I stood there not knowing what to do, shivering in distress. "Did she steal your ticket and purse as well?"

"Not my purse," I mumbled. "But my wallet was in the pocket." The older woman wouldn't just leave me. She called over security, not real policemen, and told them that I had been robbed.

I had been weepy in the bathroom but this last incident was just too much. I burst into a flood of tears and, when the policeman asked me if my ticket had been in the pocket, I lied and said that it was.

"Where were you headed?" the older man asked me. I looked up and saw that one of the few buses still with a vacancy was one headed to Chicago, connections to Detroit, New York, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.

"New York," I babbled, thinking that they would leave me alone and let me go. But the old woman and the people in the depot were too nice. From the lost and found, I had to choose the warmest jacket and gloves that there were in it as I would need them in chilly New York. That's how I got the Royston Conservatory of Music jacket. And I got a ticket through to New York.

I felt so guilty. "I have some money," I began but the old security guard's hand closed over mine.

"It's an open seat," he said gruffly and I have wondered ever since if he paid it for me out of pity for my feminine distress. I feel so guilty each time I think of it. "If you don't take the ticket, Eva Rodriguez," I'd even lied about my name, my driver's licence stolen with my jacket, but part of that answer was true, "it'll just go empty all the way, anyway. Shirley has the replacement ticket ready for you and we'll put in a report here about the incident. But a leather jacket? Won't see that again. Junkie will have pawned it."

I felt like such a fraud as I shouldered my pack. I was almost carried onto the bus by the driver and the security guard. The old man and the woman who had insisted she report the theft hugged me as if I was a girl and waved me all the way out of the bus station. I can

read lips sometimes. Musicians who lip-sync can do it better than me. But what the woman said was so easy to read.

“Such a pretty girl,” I was sure she was saying to the old man. “But so sad! I hope everything works out well for her when she gets home.”

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Melissa was as good as her word. My leg was really sore but that didn't matter. I had to get a dress and shoes to wear out on Saturday night. And while I was at it, I might as well buy new panties and two new bras and better falsies as Mel didn't think much of what I was wearing at all. I also had to buy some big, really big, earrings, metallic and bouncy, that all the girls were wearing when they went out, according to Melissa.

But the longest time of all I had to spend in Mel's hairdressing shop when Clara fitted me in and added hair extensions to my short locks so that when we bounced into *Precious Moments*, half an hour late, Paolo snarled after Melissa, asking her if her friend had quit before the week was up.

“No,” said Mel, grinning past me, spinning me around then to face Paolo. It did hurt my leg a lot but it was worth it, I think, for the look on Paolo's face. His mouth fell open as he looked at the sweep of reddish, gleaming hair, making me tingle all over as I felt so girlish with the way Paolo stared at me. My new, lovely hair swirled about my neck and chin, disguising me completely I thought, particularly with the new makeup Clara and Mel insisted that I wear for going out later on Saturday night.

“Wasn’t this worth a half hour of your precious time, Paolo?” asked Mel as I tried to apologize to our boss for being late, trying to tell him it would never happen again.

“You look like this,” Paolo said, shaking his head at me, “and you work in the back. No, you put on a dress like Melon Head,” he said to me, calling Melissa by his ‘bad’ name for her, but smiling as if he didn’t really mean it. “She complain she got too many tables to serve. You, the pretty one,” Paolo added to me, making me feel so funny inside as he complimented me when he was supposed to yell at me, “you take some of her tables, and you rest that leg when you can.”

Paolo had someone else working in the back, Jose, a teenager, who didn’t understand English well. I gathered that he was delighted to stay on and wash the dishes and do the garbage and other chores for Luis and Consuela. I envied him after a while even though Consuela ragged on Jose much more than she did on me.

Oh, it was so tiring to be a waitress, on my high heels all the time, my pink, white-collared dress brushing against everyone as I eased down the thin aisles that Paolo insisted on to pack people in. And they really were packed in on that Saturday, my first as a waitress. They were really kind to me as well, many of them asking me about my leg.

I did tell the first people who asked that I had been in a car accident and was taking a long time to heal, but Paolo was such a nice boss, letting me work, and not giving me many tables so that I wouldn’t hurt myself too much.

Melissa might have only given me a few tables to share with her but the customers at the ones assigned

to her and to Benita didn't know that. The guys who came in immediately had me pegged as 'the new girl' and they wanted to be served by me. Many of them wanted to flirt with me as well. But they were really nice about me being so slow. Mel, of course, zipped around me, serving three times as many as me, including whipping hot meals from the kitchen out to the hungry guys while I could barely get the drinks correct and out in reasonable time to the three or four tables that I served.

It wasn't a stellar performance by any means. It was also quite unnerving as the guys seemed to want to wrap their arms about me as I flushed at the remarks they were making to me and about me to my face, several wanting to know if I would go out with them when I got off.

Paolo was beaming at me, however, at the end of the shift. "Did she do it?" asked Mel and the other waitresses were all grinning at me.

"Sure she did," said Paolo. "She only had what, six tables, and she gets more in tips than any of the rest of you!"

"I saw that Owen Junior put twenty on the bill," said Mel, with a big smile at me. "He was the balding guy who talks like he's in the Mob. He isn't and he's really tight with a bill. But you had him laughing and smiling at you, Eva. What were you talking about?"

"She a-tells him she's in a-love with him," said Benita, imitating Paolo's and his cronies' accents.

Well I didn't tell anyone I was in love with them but I got a thick envelope from Paolo and most of it I had to pass on to Melissa. Not only had my dress and shoes cost more than I had paid since I had run away from

Los Angeles, but my hair styling hadn't been cheap either and I had to share the rent as well.

Melissa insisted that I wear one of her raincoats to go out. It was pretty chilly and I was glad of it. It was amazing that we were propositioned by guys on our way down to the subway, on the subway, when we changed trains, when we climbed out of the station as close to the part of the Village that we were headed for and then along the street on the way to the club Mel called 'The Basement', though it had another name, 'Puerto Mariachi', flashing over the entrance. We had to wait half an hour to get in, one of the bouncers actually picking me up in his arms and carrying me in when he saw how I was walking. I had left my crutch in the apartment.

I was blushing when I was finally put down and Melissa arrived beside me, taking my coat, and letting me fend off boys who seemed to think that I was alone and fair game, I suppose. I might have been like them myself, I thought in a shudder, if I had let myself grow up like a guy after high school. I had been in girlie clothes, I thought with a shiver, not having thought about it in quite a while, for over half a year. I was getting so used to guys coming up and trying to hit on me. I tried to be gentle in putting them off, especially the nervous ones, as I saw myself in their clumsy approaches.

Mel laughed at me and told me to be ruder and sharper, as she was. "Not tonight," she snapped at several guys who didn't even manage to get a word out as we worked our way out into the girls' line in The Basement. I guess it had been named that before and the regulars like Melissa wouldn't let it go.

“There’s Jake,” she said, pointing to a guy in a white shirt, with a gorgeous brunette hanging on to him. “And that means that Andy isn’t too far away.”

The music was so loud that it was really hard to hear her. Mel steered me to a group of girls who seemed to be her friends. There were a lot of guys hanging around them. The girls, however, seemed to be more interested in talking, shrieking more like, to one another.

Then we saw Andy, hugging a very mobile redhead who could both kiss him and contort about him in a really sensuous dance that I could never have done.

“Serena,” said Mel in a disgusted voice. “You should see her do the lambada. Oh, Jake!”

The tall, dark guy in the white shirt was going to walk by our group, headed for Andy, probably. He turned and looked blank-eyed at Melissa and me. “Jake Kennedy,” yelled Melissa at him, holding my hand and squeezing it. “This is Eva Rodriguez, who’s living across the hall from you now. What’s happened to Jessica?”

I wouldn’t have asked that question. I could see by the look in Jake’s blue eyes what must have happened between him and the lovely girl he had been holding. “We were supposed to sing at the Raven about one,” said Jake. “But Spike tweeted me and they don’t want us. Too many bands needing a chance and we’ve had enough, Garcia says. I have to tell Andy that we’re off tonight and he should just enjoy himself.”

We watched Jake talk to Andy who looked pretty angry. I was asked to dance by a Latino guy and so was Melissa. She nodded to me that it was all right and so I tried to dance with Ricardo. My leg was a real drag and

he hurt me a few times before he realized that I wasn't faking it. But he couldn't dance with me as he wanted a more active partner.

Enjoy yourself, I kept telling myself, as several guys came up to me and asked me to dance. But me dancing with men was a real cringe-inducer. A couple of guys did change their minds when I told them that I had a bad leg and couldn't move fast. Some were nice and I did share a Pepsi with Todd, who barely looked like he was old enough to be out at that time of night.

Yes, night was growing on and it all seemed pretty aimless to me. Mel was clinching with one of the Latino guys and every girl around me seemed to have a guy stalking her. My leg was really troubling me. I knew I needed to rest it or I would never be able to work the next day.

"Would you like to dance?" a voice asked me from behind me and, turning, I almost fell up against Jake, Andy's roommate.

"Actually, no," I murmured and Jake raised an eyebrow as he looked down at me. He was definitely an alpha male, I thought, with his slightly cleft chin and his aquiline nose. His dark hair and eyebrows looked black in the dim light of 'The Basement'.

"My leg is really hurting me," I yelled at his ear as he leaned over me. "Is there anywhere in this place where I could just go and sit for a while?"

"Oh, yes, you hurt your leg in a car accident, didn't you?" shouted Jake back to me. He pointed over into the darkness and guided me. We finally reached a wall lined with chairs, all of them occupied. Jake grabbed a waitress passing us by and ordered two rum and cokes, pointing over at the chairs. I don't know how he

knew it but one was vacated almost right away as we approached. But everywhere, it was girls sitting in boys' laps.

Jake moved ahead of me and sat down, holding on to my hand. He expected me to sit in his lap like the other girls had done and so, nervously, I did as he wished, my dress really rising to expose my new stockings and my legs as I had to help my bad leg to cross the other, grimacing as I did so, Jake's hand about my waist, steadying me.

"Some relief?" asked Jake, pulling me closer so that I could hear him.

"Oh, yes," I had to admit as the waitress arrived with the drinks which Jake was ready to pay for.

"You're across the hallway from Andy and me," said Jake after a quick sip of his drink. "I thought he said that he was taking you out tonight. Bringing you to the Raven to hear us play."

"Andy is in your band?" I asked him, not really surprised.

"One of our singers sometimes," Jake shouted to me. "Jessica is, was, the lead. She quit tonight so we're back to our high school lineup."

He said it so gloomily that I had to ask, "What's wrong with that?"

"Andy's too, too musical," Jake went on, perhaps not realizing how he was caressing me with his hand and that it was the top of my panties that he was touching. "He should be in musicals, of course. He's got a powerful voice when he wants to use it. Wasted, though, in a rock and roll band."

I mentioned how I had met Andy coming back from an audition.

“Yeah,” said Jake. “It’s really awful the odds against you if you’re a trained musician, not just in this town but everywhere. All these kids who study music and make themselves so proficient as Andy is with his voice and there’s nowhere for them to play or sing, or just show off. I hate seeing dreams dieing and really good musicians giving it up.”

It hadn’t been like that for me, I thought. “Maybe Andy should try the talent contests, the reality shows on television, like *America’s Got Talent*.”

“It’s much harder than you think,” Jake told me seriously, “to even get past the application stage for *Idol* or *Voice* or *Talent*. They get thousands of people applying who think that they have a unique voice or talent and there are a thousand who sound all the same. That’s why that Darnell hip hop won that last *Voice*. He really did have an unusual sounding voice, didn’t he, never mind his choice of songs.”

I had never thought of that and the thought jarred me. I had firmly believed that Samantha Carter had been cheated out of being *Voice of the Americas*. The tabloids and the entertainment shows on television all seemed to be in agreement about it as well.

“You think that Samantha Carter should have won?” asked Jake, turning and holding me in so that another couple could pass us. Oh, it was so wiggly to be sitting there on another man’s lap, his hand on my hip guiding my movements.

I nodded and sipped on the drink Jake had bought. It must have been a double or more by the taste of rum in it. Jake saw me make a face and took it from me, his

gone. He deliberately turned the part with the lipstick bow I had made on the glass away from him and drank it down easily.

“Ah, a slow one,” he said at the change in dance music. “I really liked Samantha Carter on folk tunes and slow ballads but teens rule the clubs and they want faster stuff. She’d probably go down well in piano bars and places like that with the old folks but I never thought she’d be a big hit. Not like this CD of her singing is doing.”

“It’s doing well?” I asked in surprise.

Jake laughed at me as he steered me onto the dance floor for a clinch to a slow waltz beat. “You must be the only person I know who doesn’t know about the release of the Samantha Carter DVD and CD for the Christmas market. They’ve advance orders in the stores, just in the US, for over twenty million, I read somewhere.

“It’s the only way to see her, after all,” Jake went on, lifting my arms about his neck so that I could dance with him like all the other girls were doing. “Since she’s disappeared, Samantha Carter is the hottest of the hot as far as singers go. And all they’ve got to go on are her appearances on *Voice*. I hear they’ve changed the arrangements to strings on everything she’s done.”

“She did that operatic thing as well,” I said with a shiver as Jake pressed me close to him, his head resting against mine as he leaned over me.

“I was stunned when she did that,” said Jake, lifting his head and smiling down at me. “I don’t know that it will be more than a novelty item, though. Hey, we should get Andy to do that for our group, shouldn’t we? It’s supposed to be sung by a man.”

It was, I wanted to tell him but I couldn't. I did several waltzes with Jake as that was easy on my leg. It seemed so easy then to go home with him as we lived opposite one another. Andy was gone and Melissa was occupied with Ricardo, still dancing very sexily with the man. She had given me the key to her place to let myself in.

Jake slipped my arm through his and was really good about waiting for me to negotiate the stairs down to the subway. I had my arm under his as I sat demurely, thinking about the girlie night I had had and now the coming home with a guy to escort me all the way.

It wasn't really like that, of course, as Jake just had to go my way. "Eva," he said as we reached the steps to the apartment block. "Do you mind if I carry you up the stairs? It's going to take you forever, otherwise, isn't it, and it's nearly four o'clock."

I knew it was late but I hadn't thought it was up to four. Gosh, I would have no time for a full night's sleep as I had to be at Paolo's 'restaurant' for Sunday morning breakfast serving, Paolo had said, telling me not to be late this time.

"Would you look at that?" asked Jake as we went down the passage to our respective apartments. There was a clear sign that Andy was home and he wasn't alone in the boys' apartment.

"I suppose you get the couch?" I asked nervously and Jake looked at me with a frown. "Andy had Mel's couch when you and Jessica ... when I first arrived in town."

“So he did,” smiled Jake at me. “Thank you, Eva. That’s really a relief at this time of the morning, not to have to go out and look for a space.”

I nervously opened the door to Mel’s apartment. Jake smiled as I pointed to the couch. He still had an arm at my waist and I felt a rising of alarm as he didn’t let go of me.

“For a very interesting evening, thank you,” said Jake, putting his other hand on my shoulder, drawing me to him to kiss me. I had been kissed by Andy many times in this room, hadn’t I? What was one more man kissing me as if I was a girl? He didn’t know about me and if he wanted a goodnight kiss, heck, what was wrong with that, the way that I looked. Not after the poor guy had been dumped by his girl friend earlier, as well.

Jake laid his lips on mine and I had to lift myself a little in my heels to meet him with what I had thought with a shiver of excitement at my daring to be a girl. It would be a quick, pleasant exchange. It was to some extent, but it was so much more than that. I liked kissing Jake, much more than I liked kissing Andy. There was no demand from Jake, only pleasure, wonderful pleasure as he moved his lips gently on mine. I submitted to him and there we were, kissing like boys and girls do as his hands began to caress me, the girl in the partnership.

Once we both realized how pleasant it was, we had to kiss so much more, neither of us wanting to stop. I didn’t, not with the way that I felt. Oh, I knew it was so girlish, the way I felt but for a moment I didn’t care at all. It was bells, fireworks and rockets going off for me. I think it was for Jake as well as he lifted me up and put me down on the sofa, his body on top of mine so

that he could kiss me more forcefully and I didn't mind at all, despite all the trembling running through me.

I didn't want ever to let him go again as we wrestled together, my mouth accepting his tongue as any girl would have. I received such intense girlish delight, letting his hands caress my legs and stockings, being as much of a girl as I could be for such delightful kisses that Jake was showering on me.

We didn't make it all the way, only because Jake had such good self control. He was the one who stopped while I clung to him. He was the one to lift me up and carry me to the bedroom which I loved him doing, quaking as I thought about what we might do there. But, after a final kiss, Jake gently withdrew, leaving me shivering with so many unsuppressed emotions, my dress up across my panties and my legs and garter belt completely exposed to him as Jake left me alone in my bedroom. Alone with my overheated skin and racing heartbeat and the weirdest of thoughts preventing me from sleeping.

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I felt like death warmed over when I staggered into *Precious Moments* to work on Sunday morning. Mel came in as I was fastening the white belt about the pink waitress's dress that Paolo had told me to put on.

"You look how I feel," I had to say to her and Melissa pouted at me as she stripped to her pretty, black underwear that she had worn the night before.

"Ricardo is really active," Mel groaned at me, "which is why this girl is only half awake. Did you get any last night? I saw you going off with Jake."

“He, he’d just had a fight with Jessica,” I began.

“About time,” said Mel as she took a brush to my hair and the hair extensions I hadn’t known how to remove. I looked a whole lot better as Mel blotted my lipstick for me as well and told me that I really must wear more eye shadow as it would suit me.

Mel sashayed out to greet the people at ‘her’ tables while I limped over. It was an older crowd than the one from the night before and they were really sympathetic to me, the new girl. One or two of the guys actually went out of their way to get coffee and not only serve themselves but other people that I should have been serving. I had to smile a lot, that was what Mel and Paolo had been telling me the night before, and that seemed to be what my ‘helpers’ wanted from me.

I wished that I had brought my crutch with me as we limped home, Mel and I, she not moving very fast and looking as if she would drop off to sleep at any moment. But she woke up when I mentioned Jake sleeping over, on the sofa.

“On the sofa!” Melissa screamed. “He didn’t! Why would he do that?”

I tried to explain about Andy.

“Oh, he didn’t take that slut, Karen, back to his apartment, did he?” Mel wanted to know.

I didn’t know and so Mel found out in her inimitable fashion. She hammered on the door to the 3C apartment and barged right in when Jake opened it. “Where’s Andy?” she screamed as Andy actually came wobbling out of his bathroom, bleary-eyed and shaking.

“I’m sick,” he muttered, flopping onto a sofa that was a twin in age to the one in Melissa’s apartment.

"I told you she'd give him something!" said Melissa triumphantly as I quivered in the doorway, trying not to look at Jake, right beside me, standing so quietly. I could sense that he was looking at me, studying me.

"No, it's something I ate," moaned Andy. "It came on after Karen left."

"She gave you a dose of the clap!" jeered Mel as if it was all a game to her. She turned to me. "Shall we just let him wallow in it, Eva? He deserves it after he makes a date with you and then goes off with a girl who leaves him like this?"

"Oh, god, I forgot," said Andy, clutching at his head. "Oh, Eva, I'm so sorry. I, I..." But, whatever his excuse was going to be was left unsaid, as he had to get up from the couch and run to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

"So you see, Eva," gloated Mel outrageously. "There really is a goddess!"

"Leave Andy alone, Melissa," said Jake, moving back into the apartment and putting an electric guitar back into its case, which he must have been playing when Mel came pounding on his door. "He's trying to make our gig tonight."

"Like that?" asked Mel with a laugh. "You better call Jessica back, Jake. You'll have one singer for sure with you. Where you playing, the Raven again?"

"No, we're sitting in on a jam at Whitey Moore's old place," said Jake. "It's still being renovated and they welcome anyone who can play."

"Jessica?" asked Mel pointedly.

"She's quit," said Jake sourly. "Joined the Ramblers as a backup singer. They got a paid gig uptown. I told

her she'd only be eye candy with them and she told me, better eye candy than nobody's candy."

"We should come and see how you do as an instrumental band," said Mel with a laugh. Jake actually smiled.

"If Whitey's there," he said, still not looking at me, but making me shiver anyway as I felt it was quite deliberate, "he doesn't mind sitting in with us kids and showing us how it's done. But if you come, you have to sing or dance on stage. You know that's Whitey's rule on Sundays, or it was. Everyone has to pay their dues. It's his mantra."

"We're really tired, both of us," I managed to squeak out. "We should have an early night."

"Heck with that," laughed Mel. "We don't work tomorrow, Evita." She pronounced that as Paolo did all the time, stretching the long middle sound out for an age. "We can sleep anyway when we're dead."

"Speaking of dead," said Jake, heading to a rack of guitars and choosing another. "Samantha Carter."

A spike of sheer terror went through me when Jake said my other name like that. He looked over and really frowned at whatever expression I was showing.

"She's really dead, then," said Mel eagerly as we all heard a dreadful heaving from the bathroom. "Was she murdered?" She stroked her face as if she was about to start crying.

"It wasn't her," said Jake, turning to look at me with a frown again. "Seems the dead girl had her driving license but they identified her as a druggie, Alice somebody-or-other. Now they're looking for her boy friend. It's on all the news stations, the ones that give news on a Sunday, that is."

"How'd they know it wasn't her?" demanded Mel as Andy came shuddering out of the bathroom, staggering into the half-open bedroom, groaning as we heard the bed creak as he threw himself upon it.

Jake crossed to the door and looked at Andy, shaking his head. "Well, I guess you're not in the band tonight," he said while Andy was mumbling something in the background.

"How'd they know?" persisted Mel as I tried to get her to leave the boys' apartment with me.

"Turn on your television," said Jake with a sigh. "That sister of hers. Getting married, I think it said. Had to identify the body and told them it wasn't Samantha. The dead girl, she turned up in some police file. They were showing her in a police photo, anyway. Look, Mel, I wasn't listening. Okay? I wouldn't even have heard anything but for your roomie talking about her last night, and looking so much like her, Samantha Carter, that is."

Mel looked at me and scowled. "She doesn't look anything at all like Samantha Carter," she said as I was stunned and shaking in fright as Jake said that, out of the blue. "If she did, I'd turn Eva in right away and claim the reward for finding her."

"There's a reward?" asked Jake with a frown.

"Over a hundred thousand," said Mel exultantly. "Come on, Eva. Let's go back to our place and find a station with news about Samantha Carter. See you, Andy!" The last was screamed at the top of her voice.

I was shaking as she took my hand and I wobbled over to the 3D apartment. The way that Jake had looked at me really bothered me. He knows who I am, I thought, a chill running all over me. Mel hadn't

seemed to have noticed that I looked like Samantha Carter, for obvious reasons. But Jake had, I thought in fright, wondering what I would do if he did call Paragon Records and turn me in for the reward.

Mel hit the couch and grabbed the remote to search for the story on television. It was Sunday, however, and that meant politics everywhere where there weren't repeats. I was beginning to think that Jake had made it up when suddenly there was an interruption on an all-news station for 'breaking news'. There was the same woman cop as before being interviewed and saying basically what Jake had just said to us.

"I told you she wasn't dead, didn't I?" said Mel, lying back on a pillow, resting. She took up so much of the sofa that I couldn't find a place to sit. Well, I still had a bad leg and I had exercises to do. I retreated into the bedroom and changed into my only pair of sweat pants, keeping on the frilly top that disguised a little that I was wearing falsies in my bra. It was really hard to do exercises after all the walking I had done, my thigh swelling just a little.

I was more than half way through when the bedroom door opened slowly and Jake tiptoed in. He put a finger on his lips then and pointed back at where Mel had been. I could hear light snoring from there.

"Andy's doing the same back in our place," Jake whispered, towering over me as I scrambled up, my leg quivering and almost buckling under me. "Look, I'm sorry for being so weird but I have to ask you."

I could feel the fear rising inside me. Here it comes, I thought. Oh, what could I do? Could I lie to him and tell him that I wasn't Samantha Carter and never had been. Would he believe me?

"I do have to know," Jake said. "Are you Andy's new girl friend? I saw him with that Karen and I didn't think. And I didn't explain about Jessica, either, did I? So, are you and Andy an item?"

I shook my head, feeling the sway of the hair extensions around my neck. The little earrings I had worn for work tinkled a little, making me wonder what I looked like to Jake. I certainly felt, hot, sweaty, dusty after being on the floor for so long and ready for a shower.

"Good," Jake said and I felt nervous palpitations fill me.

I swayed a little on my leg and Jake reached out a hand to steady me. "You're all right, Eva?" he whispered anxiously. "That looks pretty hard, the stretches you were doing." He didn't let go of me. Instead he loomed over me, so much taller than me because I wasn't in my high heels.

"Jake," I said from a dry throat, hardly able to speak in my apprehension at the way that he was looking down at me.

"Jessica hasn't been my girl friend for an age," Jake went on. "She came back into our lives when she heard that we were playing at the Raven. She told me how much she missed me and wanted to get back with me. I shouldn't have let her stay over but she wanted to and, well, when she heard that we got bumped, you heard the rest. I'm relieved actually. So ..."

"I, I have to shower," I began, relief flooding through me as he didn't call me Samantha and tell me that he knew who I was.

"So," Jake went on. "Are you in a relationship with anyone, Eva?"

I should have lied to him. I should have, I should have, I should have. But I behaved like a cutesy, little girl that he made me feel that I was. I shook my curled, wavy hair and couldn't look him in the eyes, blushing at what I knew was happening, why he was asking me that question.

Jake drew me against him and so I had to look up into his dark blue eyes and his lips reaching for mine. Oh, it was just the same as it had been last night. Jake seemed to be trembling just as much as me as well as he hugged me to him, in my sweats, and I felt so wonderfully weird and girlish with the pressure of his full, firm lips on mine.

"You don't have to come to Whitey's," Jake whispered to me. "Rest your leg and get well, Eva. But I will see you later. If you want me to, that is."

I should have said, 'No'. I should have said that I would need to sleep. I should have told him that he was kissing a boy and nothing good could come out of our kissing. I didn't. I just nodded and let him kiss me again, loving the way he hugged me to him and made me feel all wanted and that I really was a pretty girl.

Jake had to go, tiptoeing over to the door, holding my hand and drawing me to him again in the doorway so that he could kiss me again, out lips locked and his hands caressing my back and my waist.

"I don't believe that I saw what I just saw," said Melissa as she rose up as I closed the door so quietly. "You and Jake? I thought you said that he slept on the couch last night?"

I turned to Mel in excruciating embarrassment. I was only thankful that I tucked as I did, all the time and as tightly as I could. Otherwise, she would have

seen that Jake was arousing something in me that I really didn't want to understand at all. "He, he did sleep on the couch," I said, knowing that my face must be totally red with the blushing that I was doing.



“So what does he want you to do?” asked Mel, sitting up and seemingly totally refreshed by her short nap. “Go over to Whitey’s and cheer him on. You haven’t heard Jake’s band play, have you? Andy sometimes sings with them.”

“J-Jake said that we shouldn’t go,” I had to say in a quivering whisper. “It, it’s too far and I need to rest up my leg and ...”

“There’s lots of places to sit at Whitey’s,” said Mel with a shake of her head. “So we’ll splurge and take a cab if your leg’s really hurting you. The only thing is, as Jake was saying, everyone has to sing and everybody will want me to because they know I can’t sing a lick. That’s what Jake was really trying to save you from, finding out that your roommate is tone-deaf!”

I was given the bathroom all to myself and a bath drawn, liberally perfumed with fragrant bath salts. After making me do my eyes really well, and arch my eyebrows more than I did normally, thinning what I had been trying to grow, Melissa put the extensions back in my hair and more. It was as if I really did have a thick mane of hair about my neck. It swished as I moved sending all kinds of chills and thrills through me and I didn’t know which was worse, the chill or the thrill.

Mel even made me wear one of her dresses for our night out, but I kept my own perfume and my own lipstick as they suited me. The dress was blue and had a plunging neckline that I knew I couldn’t wear but Mel grabbed me, taped my non-existent breasts while I flushed so much at her. She showed me how to disguise myself with firm taping and a little makeup. Oh gods, did I ever look like a girl with real breasts in the

mirrors in our apartment. And that swishing dress, it felt so wonderfully girlish against me!

I borrowed Mel's coat and shivered as we went up the street to the cab rank where an older man held the back door open for us. It was getting colder and Mel told me I must get myself a warm jacket and warm tights as winter was upon us and the unexpected warm spell was going to end soon. And boots. Yes, I needed boots, like those, she pointed out in a department store window we passed. The mannequin wore high-heeled boots and was posed like a model.

"I'll show you where you can get a knock-off of those," said Melissa, shivering herself as we arrived at the Seventies Lounge. I wasn't sure if it referred to the avenue, the street or the music. "I should get another pair as well. And you need a new coat. That jacket you have, Eva, just isn't good enough for a New York winter."

It was funny, I later thought, that I didn't think that anything was wrong with what Melissa was talking about. Yes, I found myself agreeing. I needed a new coat. I needed to look like her, a girl who was walking past the Seventies in her high-heeled boots, like a model, laughing into the face of her boy friend. Yes, I needed boots to be warm in the winter. And, ooh, how cold it was around my legs in the stockings that I was wearing. I must get some thick jeans or tights for my legs over the winter as well. Soon, I would be just like Melissa who seemed to like me as a girl friend. And I wanted to be hers as well and not let her down in front of her friends.

Mel again seemed to know just about everyone in the Seventies Lounge. A folk group was up on stage, featuring a couple of girls. I didn't know the music at

all. It wasn't catchy to me. I gathered as they went off to loud applause that they had written all their songs themselves.

We listened, Melissa and I, through several bands before the old guy with a white beard and full head of snowy hair said gruffly into the mike, "Well, now it's my turn to sing. C'mon, Jake, get your band up here and we'll entertain the ladies."

Jake and three other guys got up and did a knock-out version of the Allman Brothers Band *Statesboro Blues*. Jake's solos were fantastic. I had the shivers just listening to him play and swap licks with the drummer, who was unbelievable. Why the heck would Jessica, whoever she was, want to leave a group as good as this, I wondered.

"Oh, that hurts," said Whitey as the crowd's applause died. "I need another singer up here, Jake, to help me out with *Separate Lives*. Any volunteers? Not you, Magee." That was to a very hirsute guy who had jumped up, drumsticks in his hands, to volunteer. "This is a duet with a girl, not a fairy!"

"I can be a girl," piped up Magee in a lilting falsetto that got everyone laughing.

"I get to pick," said Whitey, looking around the club. "And you all know the rules. You can't say, No, or out you go!"

I trembled a little as I took another sip of the Mountain Dew that I was drinking. I turned as Mel said something and everyone around me was suddenly applauding. I half-turned and there was Whitey standing right in front of me and he was pointing at me.

"You," he said with a big smile. "Your first time here?" Behind him, I could see Jake and his band look-

ing out from the stage at me and I realized that it was a set-up. Oh gods, Jake must have recognized me after all. He was going to expose me to this crowd as Samantha Carter! I shook my hair and my long earrings, as people all around me were trying to help me to my feet and push me forward. There was such a roar in the crowd as if it was all a great joke. Oh gods, they're all in on it, I thought.

"Not me!" I gasped, trying to pull back and indicating Melissa. "She's the one you want!"

"Hey, I've heard Mel sing," said the white-haired old man. "And, darling, you really cannot be worse than she is!"

Whitey Moore took hold of my hand then and pulled me to my feet. I saw Jake jump forward as I grimaced in pain and staggered forward. The whole crowd around us was yelling and applauding as if to encourage me. That's when I realized that they probably didn't know me. They wanted me to sing, to sing badly. Then they would all get a laugh. They were all trying to push me to the stage.

"Oh, the lady has a gimpy leg tonight," said Whitey with a smile. "Just the way I like 'em," he went on lasciviously. "S-l-o-w!" He drew the word out for twenty seconds or more so that I ended up on the slightly raised stage. Jake was shaking his head and handing me a mike.

"It was supposed to be Melissa," Jake whispered to me as Whitey showed me the very modern teleprompter he had that the words would scroll across.

"A hand for our new girl singer, Eva Rodriguez," announced Jake, turning on the mike for me as Whitey

went on about the teleprompter of which he seemed very proud. I hadn't seen one like it in any of the clubs the Carter Sisters had performed in. But then, this was New York, wasn't it?

"Just like karaoke," I said as Whitey asked me if I could read all the big words. That got a laugh but Whitey didn't seem that pleased.

"*You call me from the room in your hotel,*" Whitey began to sing and I wondered if I dared to mess it up, sing off-key, even as I was shaking, wishing I had never worn this dress of Mel's that Whitey seemed to be looking down the front of, rather than at me. He was pointing at a line on the prompter then but I didn't need it. I knew the song well and had done it as a solo with Teddy Ross on the cruise ship in our late night standards.

Whitey's eyes widened in surprise as I got a tingle of delight inside me as I did the girl's part of *Separate Lives*. Oh, it felt so good to stretch my throat, so to speak, and to amaze the audience that had been so sure that I was going to fail and give them a good laugh. Well, the laugh was on them.

"You conned me!" Whitey was yelling while the audience applauded our effort. I thought he was shouting at me but he was turned to face Jake who was shrugging his shoulders and displaying his empty hands as if he had been as astonished as the blues singer.

I limped back to where I had been sitting, right there in the audience, musicians mostly, I gathered, just like Jake, which made me wonder where Melissa fitted in. Everyone around us was very complimentary but Jake and his band were blasting away at *Walk on Hot Coals* which Whitey fronted for them with practised ease.

"I didn't know you could sing like that!" said Jake when he came out into the crowd, looking for me. Melissa got up then and did a Cyndi Lauper impersonation on *Girls Just Want to Have Fun*. She was off-key at times but no one cared as it was a lot of fun and the band that played for her was urging her on.

"I'm surprised you came," said Jake, putting his arm about me, his chair closer to mine than when Melissa had sat there. "But I'm glad that you did. I should have known that you were a singer or musician. You must have been at the same audition as Andy was last week."

"No, we just met on the bus," I gasped. "And since I didn't know where I was going to stay ..."

"Andy brought you home," laughed Jake, making me tingle all over as he caressed me and drew me closer as his bandmates arrived and exchanged insults and smiles with the crowd around us.

Just as Whitey had said, everyone had to sing or play, it seemed, even an older couple who were parents of some kids in another group. They said they knew nothing but Whitey got them to do *Pop Goes the Weasel* and everyone helped out. The old folks looked like they were having fun as well.

"Is she going to take Jessica's place?" one of Jake's band wanted to know.

"We'll see," Jake said as I was shaking my head, a nervous reaction setting in as I thought how I was jumping back into the fire. I really didn't need this again.

Melissa hooked up with someone from the band she had sung with and came by, seeing me with Jake. "Oh good," she said with a big smile. "Jake will see

you home, Eva. So, be good, kiddies! I'll see you tomorrow afternoon most likely, Eva. Don't do anything I wouldn't do!"

I think that Jake must have seen the look of fright on my face. "It will be all right," he said to me. "Really, I won't take advantage of the fact that Mel isn't with you. I'll see you home all right."

The drummer in Jake's band, Spike, had a van into which his drum set, the keyboard and amplifiers went. "You sounded good with Whitey," Spike said to me. "You sing with Andy Wright?"

"No," I whispered to him.

"You should," he said. "But Andy ain't what we really need in this band. We need someone more rock and punk than Andy."

Miles, the keyboard player, scowled at the drummer. "We need someone who can write a decent song, an original," he said. "I don't care if we're the tightest punk band in the world. I don't just want to sound good and have nothing to say."

"Andy should be in musicals," Spike sneered. "So should you be, babe." That was directed at me and a shiver ran up my spine as he said that to me. "You sing with us and you're gonna have to change your look as well as your sound."

"Oh?" I said, trying to be non-committal as I felt his eyes studying the blue dress I was in and how it emphasized what I really didn't have at my chest. Jake came from the Seventies Lounge then with the coat I had borrowed from Mel.

"Yeah," said Spike. "You got to look like her!"

I had to turn to see the billboard on the other side of the club. I think all the blood must have drained from my face then and I wanted to run away as fast as I could. What Spike was pointing to was a poster of me as 'Goth Girl' on the *Voice of the Americas* show. There I was, posing with what, a dozen earrings or more, pins and circles in my eyebrow and nose. It was an advertisement for Samantha Carter's new CD, *All I Ask of You*, out for Christmas on Paragon Records. Now available at the shop below the sign.

"Yeah," Miles agreed, smiling up at the billboard. "How many copies of that do you think they're going to sell?"

"Millions," laughed Spike. "She looks like that and she sings like Mariah Carey. I ask you if that's fair. Jenny's bought a copy and she said there was a lineup at *Ringtones* to buy them. Some people were buying more than one copy since it was out there first."

"Is Jenny listening to that stuff?" Miles wanted to know.

"Says she is," Spike went on. "Says Samantha Carter's the best singer in the world."

They both laughed at that as I squirmed in disgust at myself for what I was doing, and for what I had done. I didn't want boys talking about me in the way that Miles, Spike and the bass player, Rick, were.

"Hey," said Jake, putting Mel's coat about my shoulders and taking my hands in his as if I really was a girl. "You must be cold, Eva. You're shivering like a leaf on a tree. Hey, you guys. Couldn't one of you have lent my girl a coat or something?"

Oh, that was so much worse. I had gone from being a babe to being a girl friend. I would have to set Jake

straight on that and very soon. But I sat, my dress and my stockinged legs pressed right up against Jake, all the way back to our apartments. As I hobbled out of the van, Jake kept his arm about me and took only one of his guitars with him. There was a practice on Wednesday at Miles' hangout, wherever that was.

"Bring her along, Jake," Miles told Jake with a grin. "She can sing duets with Andy and make us sound like we're in the pit for a musical."

"Would you like to sing with us?" Jake asked me, still holding me closely to him as we went up the stairs. I had to put my arm about him as well, as I still found it so awkward with the steep steps.

"I, I've never sung with a band before," I temporized, disguising the tension I felt at being asked about that by saying that the stairs were a real strain.

"You've got a good voice," said Jake generously as he assisted me and carried his guitar up the three long flights of stairs, six really as they went up a half floor at a time before curving back on themselves. "Where did you learn to sing like that?"

"School, some, and church choir mainly," I said, thinking how what I had said hadn't fooled Teddy Ross at all. But then he'd had years of experience as a professional musician. I shivered a little as I thought of Whitey Moore. But he had only heard me on one song and he'd been singing as well. But all in all, it would be so much better if I just didn't sing at all.

Oh, Melissa. I hadn't thought of her as a singer. But it made sense if she knew Andy that it must be through music. So she wasn't that good but she seemed to have been really enjoying getting up and imitating Cindy Lauper in her most stylized performances. No, Melissa

wasn't going to allow me to just fade away. I would have to leave the welcome security of her apartment and the friendly guys across the hall if I decided that I couldn't sing again.

No, I must change what I was doing. I didn't want anyone to hear me and recognize me as Samantha Carter. No, that part of my life was definitely over. I wasn't going to be a woman, full-time, any more, as Julie had told me that I should be.

The irony of what I was doing and how long I had been nothing else but a girl hit me. I shivered again and Jake was instantly solicitous, stopping and holding me until I stopped shaking. He wanted to carry me to the apartment but I couldn't let him do that.

"You should come with Andy to our next rehearsal," said Jake. "I suppose the others were pretty scathing about Andy as our lead singer."

"Sort of," I said as I used Mel's key again to let us into the girls' apartment, counting me as a girl, of course.

"Andy's really good," said Jake with a sort of grimace as he told me about his band. "We've sort of been together since high school as a band, though we all went to different ones. We used to have three guitar players and the other two could sing. But they've drifted off and Jessica came in first of all to sing with Andy, thinking we were going to be a pop music band. That's why all the fights. I want to play in a rocking band as well as the others do which is why I doubt Andy will be with us long. He's going to catch on in an audition, anyway, sometime, and get a part in a musical. Then, he'll be off touring. Spike's good enough to play in a better band as well."

“So are you, Jake,” I said without thinking. “The breaks and solos on *Statesboro Blues* were really great!”

Jake gave me a crooked grin, helping me off with my coat, and laughing as I shook out my longer hair as if it was really mine. He knew that I had phoney hair and he probably knew my ‘breasts’ were fake as well. “You’re only saying that because you’re my girl friend,” Jake said huskily, putting his arms about my waist and drawing me to him.

I resisted for once, trembling as I did so. “You said ...” I whispered.

“I know what I said,” Jake murmured back, hugging me more tightly as I tried to keep him from me with my hands on his chest. “I said I’d see you home and I have.”

“You, you said that you wouldn’t take advantage of me,” I said, avoiding his attempt to kiss me though he did brush my forehead with his mouth and I felt an electric charge pass through me.

“Well, I won’t do that,” Jack said with a low chuckle, kissing my forehead as I really began to shake with the feelings his holding me, swishing my dress about me, were arousing in me. He took hold of my arms and put them about his neck, drawing me so much closer to his smiling face. “Not unless you want me to, that is.”

Oh, his kisses were so wonderful. I couldn’t resist Jake’s tender kisses. I really couldn’t. I tried to stop his petting and caressing, though, as it raised really girlish feelings in me. Oh, I really did want him to touch me as he was and stroke my stockings but my leg did hurt when he lay on me and he drew off to the side when he realized that I was hurting.

Jake asked me all about my leg and the accident then. I whispered to him more than I really wanted to say as he stroked me and sympathized with me. "You must use your crutch when you go out," he told me. "And do your physio exercises. I really want to dance properly with you, Eva, so you get well. Oh, I should say the opposite, shouldn't I? After all, I really love clinching with you in a waltz. You're so girlie and fragrant, and your lips are so soft."

Oh, I had to kiss him again and we really did get into it on the sofa. Mel's dress wasn't any protection at all from his wandering hands but I didn't really mind them touching me at all so long as my thin dress was at least between us. But when he undid my zipper, I really had to come to my senses and try to cool him off.

"You, you know that this isn't me at all," I had to say to him as he pressed my falsies back against my chest.

"Oh, yes," grinned Jake, hugging me and swishing me from side to side on him. "I've had enough girls in my career to know the real from the unreal. You can do something about that these days, you know."

"I, I just didn't want you to, to be disappointed," I whispered.

"Eva, Eva, Eva," said my boy friend. "I could never, ever be disappointed in you, no matter if you turned out to have a wooden leg."

"Oh, I do," I whispered back at him. Jake stopped kissing me and caressing my stockings and my tightly pressed legs under my dress for a moment to look at me in suspicion. "It's over there by the door." I indicated the crutch that I had left behind since Mel and I had taken a cab to the Seventies Lounge.

I shouldn't have made a joke of such as Jake really had to explore my legs, my stockings, my garter belt, even my panties. What was I doing? Pressing myself tightly to him, I felt his manhood really rising against me as well. He really wanted me but I felt safe because he had promised and Jake was a nice guy, a good guy, I knew that. And I wanted him to know that I appreciated all the compliments and nice things he had done for me, like bringing me home and protecting me on the streets of New York for the last two nights.

So, I maybe went a little far. No, I went far too far. I was practically inviting him to have sex with me and indicating with my responses to his kisses and caresses that I was enjoying him as a girl would have enjoyed him.

"No, Jake," I finally whispered to him as he slipped the shoulders of my dress over my arms and I was sort of trapped. "No, it's far enough, I think."

"Oh, babe," said Jake, his voice kind of strangled as he rose over me. "You can't leave me like this, Eva. You can't. You can't be that cruel to me."

"I, I have to be," I whispered. "I have, I have to tell you ..." My throat was dry and my temperature was zooming upwards frantically as I tried to push Jake's hands down but that only allowed him to caress my tush and my thighs even more intensely than he had before.

"You're on your period or something," whispered Jake, kissing me wholeheartedly, pushing his tongue between my lips as he rolled on top of me as well.

"I, I have to tell you ..." I began with another quiver, knowing that I had to come clean with him before we went on any further.

"I know," Jake murmured, kissing my ear and sending all kinds of weird, delicious feelings through me. "And, I won't try to be right into you, Eva darling. But I need to come and you will help me, won't you, like girls do?"

I had no idea what girls do to help a guy get off without taking him into herself. I felt the terror rise inside me as Jake took off my dress. I could feel his caresses directly on my skin and that was ten times' as provocative as caressing me through my dress. He pushed his naked manhood between my thighs, against my panties, with the tape holding back my burgeoning little man who wanted to show how aroused he was as well with Jake's caresses. I wriggled and writhed in my black, silky panties beneath my would-be lover and, most surprisingly to me, Jake reached a climax against me and I was covered by a flood of male essence.

"Thanks, baby," said Jake, kissing and kissing me as I held onto him with my thighs as he rubbed against me, caressing as if I was a girl and only separated from him by the thinness of my panties.

I was still shivering in excited arousal after Jake had come. He was still aroused as well and so he had to have me in his pretend fashion again, only this time, he let me use my long fingers on him. That excited him no end as he came again as a man against his woman, me, my mind in such a turmoil as I enjoyed the fact that I was making love with Jake, he was pleased by me, and he still thought that I was a girl. It was a most wonderful experience.

"I think that I had better go and check on Andy," whispered Jake, disentangling himself from me. He pulled me off the sofa and so I went with him in my

wet underwear over to the doorway and we kissed some more there, Jake putting his pants back on, just in time, as Mel arrived, looking a little the worse for wear.

“Why don’t you take the bed, you two?” she asked in a tipsy sort of fashion. “Go on. I can take the couch in your place, Jake, and check on Andy.”

But Jake agreed with me that he should go and he did.

“Girl, do you know how wet you are?” laughed Mel at me. “So, don’t tell me that you haven’t reached the stage of going to bed with Jake yet. Don’t expect me to tell you what a naughty girl you are. You’re too old for that, Eva. And it’s quite all right with me if you want to take your boy friend to bed with you and leave me the couch. I really don’t mind. I expect you to do that tomorrow night when Jake comes back and takes you out for coffee and more heavy petting.”

Which Jake did. And I went along with it after dreaming about it all day and how it would feel to be kissing Jake again. I made myself pretty like a girl and even flirted with Paolo when he asked me if I was in love and told him that I was, with him.

In the coffee bar we went into, Mel introduced me as Jake’s new girl friend and no-one thought anything of it. How could they, when Jake had his hands all over me all the time, and demanded kisses from me all the time, making me feel so absolutely girly and warm. I had to admit to myself that I loved that feeling. I was trying to be as girly as I could be myself around him, even initiating his kissing me when I came back after refreshing my makeup with Mel in the Ladies’ Room where I felt so at home with the ‘other’ girls.

Mel conveniently 'vanished' into our room as Jake and I lingered in the hallway. "Your couch or mine?" asked Jake, squeezing me against him as I let him kiss me passionately in the hallway. His hands were again on my tush, easing me against him so that I could feel how aroused he was and how much he wanted to make love to me, me as a woman.

Poor Jake, I thought miserably. I couldn't do what he wanted but then he whispered in my ear, "Just as much as we did last night and no more."

Oh, the thrill of being a girl that went through me. Oh, but kissing Jake and letting him rouse me, oh, it was going to be so wonderful for a girl in the future whom I made love to. I would know how she felt all the time and I would try so hard to make her feel just the way that I did now, my lips pressed to Jake's, my earrings and hair floating so enticingly about my neck and my face.

"All right," I murmured to Jake and went with him into his apartment. Andy wasn't there and the uncomfortable couch was all ours. It didn't take Jake very long to open my blouse and kiss my upper chest and bra straps. It was so wonderful to feel his face and mouth on the drawn together mounds on the upper part of my chest. Jake loved the perfume I wore and wanted to take off my bra but I stopped him.

"We didn't go that far last night," I whispered to him.

"No," he breathed in my ear, making me shiver all over in delight. "We didn't, did we? What was it that we did do?"

I thought Jake was standing to change positions but suddenly he picked me up and, in a little panic, I

started to wiggle and squiggle as I realized that he was headed with me into the bedroom he shared with Andy.

“Jake, I can’t ...” I began, as I was dropped on one of the two beds that almost completely filled the little room.

“It’s as comfy as Mel’s couch,” murmured Jake, grinning as he pressed me down on his bed. “There, now it feels like last night, doesn’t it, and what was it that you were doing with your legs last night? Oh, that skirt’s much too tight and it has to come off.”

“No!” I screamed but that was cut off as Jake’s mouth descended on mine and it was so heavenly as he taught me how soft and gentle a man should be when he makes love to a woman. I don’t know how he got my skirt open, but he did and when he moved to sit up and caress my bra and corset again, he edged to one side and suddenly my skirt was sliding right off.

“Oh, I can’t!” I began again but then his hands were all over my stockings, caressing my thighs and, oh no, he was slipping out of his pants and his manhood was pressing against me, between my legs that I tried to close so quickly. Jake laughed and grasped my garter belt on either side of my hips. I was squealing as he spread my legs wide and pulled me closer to him and my legs were about his waist.

I was kissed so thoroughly, his tongue inside my mouth. His manhood was wriggling and making me feel every sensation so hard against my panties. I tried to wiggle free but Jake encouraged me to wiggle even more. I couldn’t believe it! He was making love to me though I was still in my panties as if I was a girl! I was being kissed and kissed and hugged and caressed and it was absolutely, unbelievably wonderful. I really was

Jake's girl, I exulted. I was his girl and he was my man. I slowed down my wiggling and kissed him back with the same passion that he was kissing me.

We went on and on until, with a little caressing from me and my smooth skinned legs, Jake came all over me again, cursing as he held me and rocked on me as he did what any guy would do with a girl. I didn't mind and tried to tell him so but he only wanted kisses and caresses from me.

"I know it's not the full thing," whispered Jake, lying on me, keeping my legs about him, his hand on the sides of my panties, stroking my hips as I gave him little kisses from my flushed, overheated face. "It's not fair that you aren't as fulfilled, darling Eva, as much as I am."

"I don't care," I murmured. "It's all right. I love what you are doing to me." And I really did, I realized. I loved being a girl for Jake and so I thought nothing of it as he lowered himself onto me again and we began again to kiss one another so passionately, my own erection straining against me, inside the tightest bindings I had ever tucked myself into.

"It isn't fair to you," murmured Jake, and I felt his fingers inside my panties, sliding them over my tush. If it had been a little panic before, now it was a great one.

"Don't!" I must have screamed half a dozen times as Jake took down my panties and was confronted by the taping that concealed what I really was.

Jake was caressing my thighs as he ripped the tape from me and, of course, I convulsed with the agony that engulfed me.

"What the fucking ...?" began Jake as he pressed my legs beneath him on the bed with his knees.

“You’re a fucking queen! I’ve been fucking a fucking queen!”

“No! No!” I gasped, trying to wriggle free, trying to get my tape back and my panties about me. “No, I’m not gay! I’m not!”

“You’re a guy and you let me make love to you as if you were a woman!” Jake spat at me. “And you’re not gay?” That was the best of what he said to me at that moment as his language and accusations got worse and worse.

Everything that I had been so glorying in turned to dust as I realized how right he was. I had deceived him. I should have told him. I shouldn’t have made love with him, not last night and not tonight. I shouldn’t have kissed him. I had no right to kiss another man and, yes, there must be something wrong with me.

The only thing that I was fortunate in was that Jake was a really nice guy, really nice, because, although he got up and threw my clothing at me, including my saturated panties, he didn’t hit me or kick me.

I scrambled into my panties and skirt, doing up my blouse that had been so open and ready to accept his kisses.

“Does Melissa know that she’s sharing her bed with another guy?” asked Jake suddenly, a horrified expression on his face.

I shook my head, the hair extensions swinging. Oh, I had lost an earring, but that was the least of my worries, I thought, as I scrambled off the bed and tried to find out what had happened to my high heels and my purse. I think that was when I began to cry.

“You going to tell her or do you want me to?” Jake snarled at me, strolling after me as I gathered Mel’s coat and my purse, and staggered to the door.

“I will,” I whispered, opening the door, and rushing, as best I could, down the hallway to the top of the stairs. I heard the door slam behind me and then I really began to cry. Oh, what an idiot I was. What a super-colossal idiot! This dressing up as a girl had got to stop! I had promised myself that it would all be gone and be behind me as soon as I reached New York.

And I hadn’t done that. I had done something far worse. I had entered into femininity whole-heartedly, particularly after meeting Jake. Even the touch of his hand had made me tingle when we had first met that evening. Why oh why couldn’t I just have left it at that? Why oh why did he make me feel so girlish? Why oh why did I want to be his girl? I was everything he had called me and worse.

I must have cried like a girl in the hallway for over an hour. Jake did not come out. I wiped my face with tissues and hobbled back as quietly as I could and went into the 3D apartment as silently as I could. Mel was fast asleep in our bed. It looked sort of obscene that she had placed my nightie and clean panties on the end of the bed for me, a man. It made me shudder just to look at them.

I wondered if I should wake her up, nervous twitches running through me. It took me the longest time to decide to change into my nightie and to slip into the other side of the bed from Melissa.

She grunted and stopped the little snoring, ‘heavy breathing’ as she called it. “Have a good time?” she asked me, turning away, sighing, and almost instantly going back to sleep.

Mel must have because when I whispered to her that I had something I had to tell her, she didn't respond at all. I didn't have the heart to wake her and tell her what I had to tell her before she heard it from Jake.

The following morning was a panic as we both overslept and it had finally snowed. The cold wind was blowing fiercely and we didn't have time even for breakfast, never mind the short talk that I had to have with her. Mel was going to scream at me worse than Jake had the night before. And I was going to be thrown out into the snow, wasn't I, and it served me right.

I had visions of someone tracking me as Samantha Carter and finding out that I had lived here with Mel before I headed out into the snow. Yes, I could lie down somewhere, couldn't I? When you got cold enough and exposure or hypothermia got you, it was supposed to be like drowning. You could just slip away and not even know that you were dieing until you were gone. I wondered what my obituary would be as myself. Would anyone now ever be able to link me to Samantha Carter?

My imaginary tracker could. Could I get out on a boat again? In New York City without any papers at all? And little to no money at all as I had spent it all on women's clothing and cosmetics to make myself attractive to Jake. I really was such an idiot.

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"You want to pop over and ask Jake to come with us?" Melissa asked as she decided we must go and see the new movie of the *Sex and the City* girls. "I know he'll likely be the only guy in there to watch the movie.

But you can take him for a drink and let him smooch you for the night. Nothing like a winter storm for getting a guy all affectionate with a girl, not that Jake needs any encouragement with you, Eva."

"Why don't just we girls go?" I said hurriedly, a shiver running through me again as I described myself like that. "Jake wouldn't enjoy it. I know he wouldn't. No real man would."

Melissa laughed at that. We had a girls' night out and my words were most prophetic. I didn't like the movie at all but I had to pretend that I did as Mel and all the friends that she met at the showing loved it. There must have been two hundred women there, cheering, and me, dieing. And all the talk about the clothes with Mel's friends. I must have given myself away but for Mel covering for me all the time, telling the others that I was pining for my boy friend who wouldn't come to the movie with us.

That got me a lot of sympathy. "My Ken wouldn't come with me, either," said Eileen. "Did you see the three guys that were there?"

"They were all gay, anyway," said Paulette, a striking blonde. "They were!" she insisted when all the other girls twitted her. "I wish I had invited Roderick, he's my gay friend, to come with me. He would have loved it just like those guys did who were leaving with Susan and Carol. I know David and he's gay. I bet the other was his boy friend!"

"So who's your boy friend?" Eileen asked me, as I sipped on the latté, trying to be as feminine as I could with women who were so glamorous that it was like observing a whole new species of humanity.

Melissa answered for me, of course. "Jake Kennedy," she said and the other girls turned to me, with eyebrows raised. It was as if my status with them had been raised instantly.

"Is he still trying to put that frightful band together, what did they call it, something about the Dead, or something?" Paulette asked.

"Of course he is," laughed Melissa. "They've got some wedding gig on Saturday. Ashley Ramallen had a thing for Jake ..."

"We all do, darling," said Paulette breathily making the six women at our table all laugh and nod affirmatively to that.

"We should go," said Melissa. "Crash the party after we go to the church. We can't let Ashley Ramallen get away with marrying a stockbroker, and not introduce us to all of Bruce's friends, can we?"

"But I hardly knew her," said one of the women, sitting so primly, legs crossed, in a suit with stockings, despite the weather, looking the way that I had thought that I would have looked before Mel had told me to dress more warmly.

"Eva wouldn't know her at all," said Eileen.

"But she'll be there with Jake," insisted Mel. "She doesn't need all those wealthy stock traders panting after her as well!"

"About Jake," I began, as we headed back to the apartment, stopping at all the boutiques to look at clothes that Mel was sure that I would look so great in if I would buy them.

"He won't be mad at you for cutting out on him!" laughed Melissa. "Didn't you see the note I left for

Andy and him? I told them to come and join us if they dared and they didn't dare."

"I know," I said.

I had to stop as the long, black dress was so absolutely perfect for me. And when was I going to get new boots, boots fit for New York, and was it Mel's imagination, or wasn't I walking better? Then she had to spoil it by saying slyly that it was all the extra exercises and workouts I was getting from Jake Kennedy.

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We were both in our undies, Mel and I, flying about, trying to put on makeup and dress warmly for the hazardous walk to *Precious Moments* when there was a ring on the doorbell. Melissa had invited Jake in before I could tell her not to. I still hadn't told her about myself. She also thought that it was all still on with Jake and me.

"I need to talk to Eva," said Jake, wooden-faced, as I stood there in my slip, shivering a little as I began to put on a sweater, an old one of Mel's, and a pair of slacks. "Come over and talk to Andy and me, will you?" Jake said to me, turning on his heel and heading back quickly.

"Well, that's abrupt," said Mel, taking over the mirror from me and beginning to do her eyes. That could mean up to thirty minutes if something went wrong once or twice and she started over each time from the beginning.

I felt quite numb as I stepped out into the hallway and Jake stopped me from going right into his and Andy's place.

"You haven't told her, have you?" Jake snapped at me.

"The, the time just hasn't been right," I said shakily, prepared to beg Jake to let me do it later.

"Well, don't tell her," said Jake, shocking me. "I can use you, your voice actually, at this wedding gig we've got on Saturday. It's Andy's idea. The people we're playing for really like musicals." He pulled a face. "You should see the list of tunes they've requested. Lots of duets and you sing like a girl, don't you? Andy wants to hear you."

"I can't do that!" I protested as Jake marched me in. Andy got up from his couch and looked from one of us to the other.

"Just like you did with Whitey Moore," insisted Jake. "Heck, he called you a professional singer, Eva, and told me to watch out as you had more talent in your little finger than any of the rest of us. Now, you and Andy sing while I try to put something together for the band to play while you're singing these hokey duets."

"I can't sing with your band!" I protested. "Jake, you know why!" Andy was staring at me and looking at Jake with a weird smile on his face.

"If the girl doesn't want to sing, Jake," Andy cut in.

"The girl is going to sing," muttered Jake furiously, stepping in front of me as I tried to turn and leave. "Or she knows what I will do."

I shivered at the look on his face. "You, you're a worse bastard than me!" I said nervously.

"What you did that would be hard to beat," snapped Jake back at me.

We both stared at one another, not wanting to say what we thought. "Kiddies, kiddies," laughed Andy,

stepping between us. "Lovers' spats are so ridiculous, you know."

Jake's lower jaw dropped. He hadn't told Andy about me. "You know nothing about her," he said furiously, indicating me with a jerk of his head. "She's a lousy singer anyway."

Andy held me as I tried once more to leave. Jake picked up his acoustic guitar and started to tune it, though it sounded good to me. "We have to pay him back for that," said Andy. "What did you sing with Whitey Moore?"

"*Separate Lives*," I told him nervously. "The perfect song for a wedding, isn't it?"

Andy laughed a little and burst out in song, his voice rich and polished. It made me shiver in surprise to hear him. Wow, no wonder Jake had called him a singer for musicals. He definitely had the voice. I didn't join him at what should have been my entrance, trying again to step away from him, but Andy just held on to me.

"You're right," Andy said, smiling as he broke off where I should have sung by myself. "It isn't a wedding song, is it? Gosh, what song is there that isn't about a breakup or a fight between lovers?"

"Try *Number One Crush*," said Jake acidly, chording into the rhythm of the song that Shirley Manson sings for the group, Garbage. It was pitched a little too low for Andy and he wandered all over the place with it. I laughed, a stupid, cruel thing to do, as Andy was doing his best and was trying at least. Suddenly, he dropped his hands from me as Jake was sneering as he played on.

"I guess you can get lost then," said Andy as I stood there, so glad I didn't have a skirt on to make me feel much worse than I was. He turned his back on me and went into their kitchen area to get a pop. Jake kept on playing. I should have left right then. I guess I was stung by what Jake had said to me.

When Jake chorded to the right place, I stood there in front of the pair of them and sang, "*I would die for you/ I would die for you/ I've been dying just to feel you by my side/ to know that you're mine.*"

Andy stopped at the fridge door and didn't open it, staring at me, as I finished the song, even doing some of the eerie sound effects that Shirley Manson must have double-tracked to that tune. It was so unlike anything that I had sung as Samantha Carter.

Andy changed the subject completely when Jake stopped, which meant me as well, and asked, "How do we do 'Anything from *My Fair Lady*'?" Andy asked with a frown.

"That's what we need to work out," snapped Jake, watching me as I shivered as I always did when I finished a song that was really a girl's song. I preferred not to sing things that were so intensely personal. That was made me so noticed on *Voice of the Americas*. Now, it looked like I was in Jake's band and that was what they wanted me, Eva, to sing.

Jake played the melody for *Wouldn't it be Lovely* and stopped, "Going to stay?" he asked. "Your share is four hundred dollars. You'll need a new dress to wear at the reception. How much will that cost?"

Andy smiled at me from across the room. "Count yourself lucky, Eva," he said as Jake looked at him sharply. "We guys have to wear suits, at least for the

first half, until the dancing begins in earnest. Just don't buy anything that makes you outshine the bride."

I should have told them that I wasn't going to stay, that I wasn't going to sing with them, but Jake was giving me such a mulish look. I guessed that if I walked out of their apartment, he would tell Andy all about me. That would mean the end of me as well with Melissa and working at *Precious Moments*.

"Oh," I said, a feeling of relief coming over me. "I have to work. I have to work on the weekend. Paolo expects me ..."

"I already checked with him," snapped Jake, his smile more of a grimace. "He's used to having artists working for him. He says you can work Monday instead. It's Mel who's going to have a problem, getting off."

So, my life was in the hands of others again. Not even my stupidity with Jake was going to save me. I was going to be blackmailed into doing girlish things that I knew I shouldn't. His smile at me was distinctly superior and challenging as he told me how we could make *I Have Often Walked On This Street Before* into a duet with Andy.

Mel came rushing in with my coat and purse and so I had to leave before we rehearsed that or any other duet that I would sing with Andy.

"You're singing that at Ashley Ramallen's wedding?" asked Mel who had just heard me trilling a little of a descant that Jake had suggested.

"She's sent Jake a list of what she wants his band to play," I told her. "That's why they want me to sing. It's a lot of musicals and stuff, for the older folks, I would

guess. Then, Jake and the others can do what they normally do at the end of the night.”

That was only a guess on my part, wrong as it turned out. But the wedding was huge and the hall was enormous. The couple of days that we had to rehearse, over in Spike’s basement, not much warmer than the unheated garage where he kept his van, were just frenetic as Jake and Andy improvised everything. All the instruments were cold. Only the arguments about the music were hot. The other guys hated what they were playing but, when Jake reminded them about the money they were making, they grumbled but nobody quit.

It was kind of exciting as well to sing with talented musicians. It was an eye opener to me how much the others anticipated one another. The solos that Jake and Miles, on piano or organ, improvised were thrilling for me to listen to. Then, there was Andy. I could see what Spike had meant when Andy filled the room with his voice on several show tunes. That was where Spike and the others looked murderously at him.

But when we got into *The Phantom of the Opera*, Ashley’s favorite, the notes said, Jake really got Spike to emphasize the drums in the title song. Then, he changed *Music of the Night* into a duet for Andy and me, though it was usually a song just for a guy, not a girl like me. With *All I Ask of You*, and Andy backing off a little ‘so as not to overpower Eva’s girlie voice’ as Jake said, we had quite a little set that seemed to please the other guys in the band.

Spike had winked at me when Jake was talking to Andy about toning it down and not shutting out my voice. I think he realized that I was bristling at that. I knew I could hold my own against Andy at any time

and I was about to show him. But Spike's wink made me shudder a little to see how Jake was manipulating his roomie for the good of the band and the music.

It was thrilling as we left Spike's and there were several people standing around on the stoop, stamping their feet and smiling at us. "You guys sound really great," one of the people, puffing on a cigarette said. "Where are you playing next?"

"We've a wedding," Andy told them all. "But we might be at Raven's after that, on Sunday."

It was the first I'd heard that.

"You've got to get a dress for the wedding," Jake told me when I asked him about it. "Sunday always depends on the list at Raven's. We might make it again. Miles is trying to get us on there or we could go back to the Seventies. You know we don't get paid at either of those places, don't you?"

"I can't afford a new dress," I began and that was when Jake gave me five hundred dollars out of his pocket as we headed to the subway. A junior at university?

"Don't use it to run out on us, Eva," Jake said softly then as Andy was chatting up another girl on the station platform. "We do really need you on Saturday."

I shivered as I looked at him. He put his arm under mine to guide me onto the train that was arriving. It was the first time Jake had touched me since I had been basically flung out of his bed and his apartment.

"It had crossed my mind," I admitted to him as I put his money into my purse and he pulled a face as he saw all the female junk I had in it. "I do have to move on soon, don't I?"

“Not on my account,” said Jake as Andy was sitting down with a smiling blonde and her friend, amusing the two of them as Jake and I stayed standing by ourselves.

“You, you’re blackmailing me into singing with your band,” I said to Jake, who looked at me in surprise.

“You mean you don’t want to?” he asked. “I thought that you were enjoying yourself. The other guys really like you singing with us. They’re not griping at all about Andy and the music we’re playing, are they?”

“Griping?” I asked him and Jake smiled. He reached out a hand and steadied me as the train came to a halt.

“Grousing, grumbling, being grumpy,” said Jake, his arm about me as the train lurched away from the station. “And the swearing is gone. That’s what it’s like having a girl in the band. I don’t suppose you’ve noticed.”

“But,” I began, staring up at him. I didn’t have to finish that and tell him that he didn’t have a girl in the band anyway. He kind of winced as I said it and I felt a squeeze around me.

“Let’s not talk about that, shall we?” Jake muttered. “Let’s just get through this gig and the weekend.”

We went on a little in silence. Andy joined us as we got out at the right station. “You two made it up, have you?” he asked us, looking at Jake’s arm around me, directing me to the stairwell. “Aw, gee, I was hoping to make time with the girl I saw first, Jakey boy. If she plays her cards right, the girl can upgrade in room-mates, you know.”

I could see that it was all talk with Andy. He'd had a night of singing, his preferred occupation to waiting tables. He was awakened and alert as singing and performing well can do to a person and so he was on the prowl. I shook a little as I remembered how I had been with Julie, how I had needed her after the performances I had made as a girl, and how awful I had felt when I couldn't say anything to her.

Melissa was in the apartment after I got home, with Jake there all the way to help me navigate the stairs and the icy streets. He didn't do more than that, just being pleasant and releasing me at the top of the last flight of stairs and letting me go on my own to the 3D apartment, turning into his own as I looked back. I don't think that he did.

I was shivering as I went in quietly. The program on television that Mel was watching avidly was all about Samantha Carter and the search for her. "And while executives of Paragon and Graham Notting's entertainment company," this excited announcer-reporter was going on, "were dining out on caviar and champagne, charging all their expenses to her account, Samantha Carter was fighting for her life in a Los Angeles charity hospital, not able to even afford anaesthetics to have her mangled body put back together again."

I watched in horror as the reporter she was talking to, confirmed that that was the case, making the hospital sound like the workhouse in *Oliver Twist* and my injured leg as if I was at death's door. I shuddered as I realized that someone was on my trail. Someone had found out that I had been on a cruise ship and that I had been set off in Los Angeles.

"But why was she in St Paul?" asked the announcer.

“Well, if we look at St Paul and Los Angeles,” said the bespectacled reporter, pointing to a map of the United States behind him, “it’s almost a straight line through Whitefalls, which is the home of Julie Stoneman, Samantha’s partner in an act known as the Carter Sisters. She must have been there, after being tossed out of the hospital.” I wasn’t tossed out, I thought with more shakes.

Oh goodness, how this reporter, Van Bryant, was slanting the story, making my escape from Los Angeles into an epic! “She must have been there,” he was going on dramatically, “on the very day that Julie Stoneman was married to Keith Sebastian, a judge on *Voice of the Americas*. Samantha hasn’t contacted her sister at all, since she left after the final show.”

“And it was Julie,” the female announcer went on, “who was able to tell police in St Paul that the woman murdered there, whom Gary Richard Niles has been charged with killing, was not the missing Samantha Carter.”

“Yes,” agreed the reporter, looking a little annoyed that the woman was horning in on his story. “Julie made that tearful appeal for Samantha to call her which, as far as we know, Samantha hasn’t responded to at all. It took a lot of digging to get this next link of the story but Alicia Fuentes,” that must have been the girl who robbed me, “was a druggie who used the bus station as a place to rob passengers.

“And we found out that there was a girl robbed of her ticket and wallet around that time. Here’s security guard, Allen Howard, talking to us.”

There was the guard who had got me a free ticket on the bus. Then, there was even an interview with an older woman in her home, a Mrs Anna Strassmann, re-

lating the distress that I was in, and how she'd persuaded the company to replace my ticket to New York.

"New York?" asked the female announcer as I watched in horror over Melissa's head, clutching the doorpost to the bedroom. "Samantha Carter is somewhere in New York?"

"We think so," said Van Bryant. "She could have transferred or stopped off anywhere else on the long ride to New York. But she didn't! She definitely made it all the way to New York."

"How can you be so sure?" asked the announcer, serving up the perfect question.

"Because she was crippled after the accident she was in," said Van Bryant importantly, grinning as if he was pleased to tell the world that I was a cripple, which I wasn't, I thought indignantly. "That's what made the Minnesotans so sorry for her, because she could only walk with her crutch and someone had robbed her. It's taken me the last week, talking to every driver I could but, yes, I found the driver on her bus and he remembered a girl, getting off last and struggling with her pack. So, we do know that Samantha Carter is in New York."

Melissa bolted up from the couch and turned to stare at me, her mouth wide open. "It's you, isn't it!" she screamed. "It's you! You're Samantha Carter!"

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"You're going to be found," Melissa told me as we lay in our nighties together in her bed. "You might as well give up and call that Van Bryant or someone else

if you don't like the smarmy way he was talking about you."

"You could call in," I said with a shudder, knowing that I didn't want her to at all. "You could claim the reward for finding me. It's still being posted, isn't it? A hundred thousand dollars?"

"Turn in a friend to the cops?" asked Melissa, turning and snuggling up to me, her arm snaking across my thin waist. "You don't want me to, do you?"

"No," I had to whisper as I felt her smooth legs against mine, the aroma of Chanel that both of us were using, enveloping me in a delicious, female fragrance.

"So what are you going to do?" asked Melissa. "Go off on another cruise as a chambermaid?"

"I don't have the papers," I told her bitterly.

"That's no problem here," snorted Melissa. "Look, when you've got a few bucks together, we can visit a friend of a friend of mine, if you know what I mean. He can make papers for you that will make you into anyone you want to be. You could be Bin Laden if you wanted to be a man."

If I wanted to be a man. I shook at that as Mel released me and turned back to her side of the bed. "But what are you going to do tomorrow?" she asked me. "If Jake or Andy sees this program, they'll guess as well as I did who you really are."

"There's the wedding," I said, thinking that I had to buy a new dress for it. I still had Jake's money that I didn't dare to return to him. He'd know that I wasn't going to the wedding and all the intense rehearsing we had made to prepare for the reception, all the work on Ashley's favorite songs, had been wasted.

“You’re still going to sing at the wedding?” asked Mel in surprise from her side of the bed. “Why?”

“I, I can’t let the band down,” I whispered into my pillow, an ache starting in my groin as I thought of Jake and how disappointed he would be. I owed him for not telling on me, yet. Oh no, I would owe Mel as well. I shuddered as I thought of what Jake would do when he put the two stories of me together.

“Gosh, Eva ... geez, Samantha,” laughed Mel into the darkness. “You really got it bad for a certain guy, haven’t you? You want my advice? Don’t buy the dress! Take off. Don’t even tell me where you’re going. Go over to Brooklyn and get lost again. Or get out of town. Go south, somewhere warm. You should be able to get a cleaning job, easy, even without papers.”

Perhaps I should have taken her advice, but, instead, I went with Melissa to her favorite ‘knock-off’ boutique. I bought a ‘designer’ cocktail dress of shimmering red ‘silk’ for three hundred dollars, new red slingback high heels and then a whole new set, of soft, feminine underwear which Melissa told me I had to as it would make the dress feel so much better.

If she meant that it would make me feel really, really femmy, she was entirely right. My entire skin tingled as I stood in front of the hall mirror, swishing from side to side, my legs feeling so bare and the rest of me so feminine and girlish as Mel gave me her small, evening purse. She went off then to do a shift for Paolo, who had complained at how short he was on Saturday of all days. I had to wait, stalking about the apartment, trying not to limp at all, for Jake to come for me.

The knock on the door startled me even though I was expecting it. I checked my madeup face in the mirror and the long, dark-red hair at my shoulders. My

eyes were vividly outlined as Mel had showed me how to do. They were much like hers. My mouth was a softened, plummy color, my face pale and unblemished, a young girl's face, curls and silver earrings deceiving anyone looking at me to think that I was really a girl.

I lifted my hair as I put on Mel's dark raincoat and swished to the door, thinking how wonderful it was for girls to be able to wear dresses as I was and feel as I did, the dabs of perfume on my neck making me feel a little queasy at being so fragrant.

"You're ready?" asked Jake quickly and then he stepped back a little. "Whoa," he gasped. "Wow, Eva, you look like ... Well, you look good."

I minced forward on my high heels and smiled. It must have been a very nervous smile the way that I felt. I don't know why but I twirled around in the hallway, so that he could get a good look at me and know that I wouldn't disgrace him. I would be a woman for him, the girl singer for his band. Then, as Mel had suggested, I must be on my way as she was right. I really did have it bad for Jake. I really wanted him to take me in his arms and kiss me as if I was a girl. But that wasn't going to happen.

Jake seemed stunned by me. I hadn't worn so much makeup for a long time, maybe since I was Samantha Carter.

"Wh-Where's Andy?" I asked as I slammed our apartment door shut.

"Downstairs, with Spike and the van," said Jake, looking really good, so manly in his dark suit and soft, blue tie. We went down the three flights of stairs very slowly. Several times Jake took my hand so that I

wouldn't fall, particularly over the tall, stone steps down onto the street.

"Wow, Eva," said Spike with a huge smile. "You look beautiful!"

"And cold," said Andy, turning, his breath visible in the air, like Spike's. "Come and sit beside me and warm me up!"

"It's Jake who has dibs on that," said Spike slyly, grinning at Jake who was trying to assist me across the sidewalk to the van.

"Girls are allowed to change their minds," said Andy, laughing at Jake, I thought, more than at me.

It was a quiet ride to the hotel and hall where the reception was to be held. Miles and the bass player, Rick, were waiting for us and ready to unload the van. I wasn't allowed to carry anything as busboys appeared to help with music stands and amplifiers. All I had to do was sashay into the hotel and find a place to store my coat and purse on the stage at the back of the hall. The banquet was going on there and Miles was needed for some soft, piano music. Jake was supposed to attend as a guest. He went off right away, leaving me with Andy and the others as we heard rounds of applause and toasts being proclaimed.

I was taken a little by surprise at how quickly the banquet hall was changed over to become a ballroom but I guess the staff running the place were experienced. Spike and Rick joined Miles, playing very lightly, while the changes were going on, nodding finally to Andy who started off with *Isn't She Lovely* and other wedding classics like *Daddy's Little Girl*. I only had to do a little backup and smile at the blushing bride, her father and mother. Andy whispered to me,

“Doesn’t Ashley look just like you? You can see why Jake made the band take this gig!”

I could see Jake smiling, the expression painted on his face as he looked at me. I could almost see what was running through his mind as he stared at my red, rustly dress and swaying earrings and then back at a real girl, the blushing bride. I was trembling as we guys played through pop wedding music that Spike had called ‘sugary crap’ and said he wouldn’t play. But he did though he was the only one of us not smiling.

For the bridegroom, I did *Nothing Compares To You*, trying to sound like Sinéad O’Connor and not Prince. I did a duet with Andy on *Falling in Love with You* and then it was time for ‘Ashley’s favorite music’, as Jake announced it.

I don’t think the older crowd were quite ready for Spike’s drum break beginning or for Andy in his mask and cloak as the Phantom, but Ashley and her new husband really were. She applauded wildly as we finished the title song, did the *All I Ask of You* duet, and then *Music of the Night*, also as a duet as Jake had proposed.

We worked our way through what was really pop music which we all knew so well. We did any number of Mamas and Papas tunes, *California Dreaming* and *Dedicated to the One I Love* being the most appreciated with Ashley screaming her approval from the floor. We did Bangles’ tunes, Jake getting all the little kids up to do *Walk Like an Egyptian*, which we then had to do again, later, as a request, before the little kids went home.

Andy abandoned to me for the pretty bridesmaids even though we were supposed to share the lead singing on Phil Collins, Linda Ronstadt and Carol King

standards. Ashley cried mock tears as she had to go and change. She wanted to stay and listen to Jake's band, she shrieked.

Jake was incredible on lead guitar. He called out from the list that Ashley had given him and the others cut in with arrangements so like the original records that I fitted in the vocals easily. I got goose bumps a few times just listening to Jake as he improvised his solos. No wonder Ashley had wanted him to play at her wedding.

Finally, the bride and groom were leaving which was our first break of the night. Jake and Rick's fingers were actually creased from their guitar playing. As they blew on their hands, Spike leaned over to me and told me to go over to Jake and 'kiss it better'. I could see them all admiring me and my lovely dress, feminine shudders getting to me again as I realized that none of them really knew me at all, not as Jake did. He hadn't told on me, which pleased me no end. I could also do all the stuff that he wanted sung, with Andy or not, though it wasn't rock music by any means.

Andy joined me for *One More Night*, to start off the second part of the 'show' which is what it now became. There were only a few couples dancing but no-one seemed in any hurry to leave as they sat there and listened to us work through James Taylor, Carly Simon, Carol King, Linda Ronstadt, and other Seventies and Eighties music.

"How long do we have to play?" I croaked to Jake as Mel and her friends wanted livelier music, which we tried to supply.

"As long as they want us to," said Jake as I did Destiny's Child and the Supremes as just one person, Andy enjoying himself with Mel on the dance floor.

Andy said to me that Mel had a message for me, that she wasn't going to tell anyone. "What isn't she going to tell anyone?" Andy had to ask me as Jake moved back to us as Miles cut in with a solo of his own.



“She isn’t going to tell you,” snapped Jake, turning away from the audience and giving me a fierce look. It made me feel so funny that he thought that I would ever tell Andy what it was that Jake knew about me.

I actually had a private fit of the giggles and almost blew my re-entry into the James Taylor medley that I was easing through with Andy. Jake glared at me, not knowing that my amusement was triggered by him trying to protect me from being exposed for one secret, while Mel was trying to protect me from being exposed for another. I didn’t know which one I wanted discovered first about me. Either one was going to put me in deep, deep distress, I knew.

Eventually, the management told us that we were nearly an hour past the permit time and would we please play a last waltz, *Time after Time*, being a request from Melissa, I noted, the Cindy Lauper fan.

For the first time in my life, I felt hoarse when I finished. I didn’t quite understand it when the people who were left, so many of them, got up and began to applaud us and applaud us. I looked over in astonishment at a grinning Spike as Andy came up and joined us for the ovation and the bowing that Jake had us do. I was used to a little, polite applause to acknowledge Julie’s and my efforts but this was as if we were at a concert or something.

“Well, that was interesting,” said Spike with a smile at me as the busboys helped him stow the amps in the van. I was told to just stand there and look pretty and not get in the way. “God, Eva, you had that crowd in the palm of your hand. I didn’t know anyone could sing that good and for that long. Is there anything you can’t sing?”

"It, it was you guys in the band," I rasped, my throat tightening up on me despite the water I was pouring into me. I could only sip during a performance when I needed moisture but now I felt I needed gallons. "You were all so great!"

"No, it was definitely you," said Miles sincerely as we stood by the van and packed in the keyboards. "I mean, Jake's pretty good, and Spike was on tonight, but you were awe-inspiring, Eva. Did you see all those people in the front of the stage wanting to know where we're playing next? Jake's talking to some guys about another gig or two, I think. That's you, Eva. It really is!"

I shuddered and got into the cold van and waited for Jake. He came running over and got in. "Okay," he said to Spike as a cold breeze swept around my stockings, and the edge of my dress, reminding me so clearly what I was supposed to be. "Andy's off with one of the bridesmaids and Mel and her friends are going on to the Raven. You want to drop us first, Spike, and we'll come over tomorrow and sort everything out?"

Spike laughed as he drove us away. "I drop off you with the girl and go home alone. Is that it?" he asked, looking back at us, sitting a fair distance apart. "Same as always, Jake?"

Jake looked a little startled. He glanced at me and moved over to me as I shivered, with the cold, of course, and crossed my legs. "Sure," Jake said, reaching over and putting his arm about my shoulders, pressing against me. I shivered but didn't stop him, knowing that he had a reputation to keep up, with the rest of the band.

“Were you talking to those guys about gigs?” Spike wanted to know.

“Yeah,” said Jake but he didn’t sound too excited. “How’d you like to play a wedding gig every weekend for the next year for half the pay that we got tonight?”

“You can always get another drummer,” Spike said with a laugh.

“That’s what I thought,” said Jake. “I told the guy we’d let him know. The other one was interested more in Eva than he was in us.”

“That’s what we were telling her,” said Spike, grinning at us, at me, leaning back with Jake’s arm about me. “She doesn’t know how great she was. Did you ever hear anyone as good, Jake?”

“Well, the originals,” said Jake honestly, and I felt the pressure of his hand around my waist.

“Here we are,” said Spike, double-parking in front of our building. “Sure you guys don’t want to head on over to the Raven or Whitey’s?”

‘You guys’ sent a nervous spasm through me which Jake felt. He was looking at me, his face a little angry, I think. Trust Spike to remind him of the ‘girl’ he was really escorting back to her apartment.

“Maybe later for me,” Jake said to Spike as I slid out of the warmed van into the cold, night air.

“Want me to wait?” asked Spike but Jake scowled and shut the door quickly, holding my arm as I teetered on my new red high heels.

“You, you should go with him, Jake,” I said as he lifted me over the slippery sidewalk and onto the steep steps.

"I'll see you get home safely in those female excuses for shoes," Jake almost snarled at me. "I don't know why girls like you wear them like that," he went on, not noticing I think what he was saying about me. "They might make your legs look prettier but they're downright unsafe at this time of the year."

Of course, I stumbled and slid a little all the way up and into the building. The steps were icy as well where the building heat hadn't melted the ice off people's shoes, people going up and down.

"I didn't mention to Spike," said Jake as he waited while I stepped up one step at a time. All the standing to perform had left my legs on the verge of collapse. High heels often did that to me but I couldn't not wear them, could I? Not and maintain my reputation as a girl.

"I didn't tell Spike," Jake went on, "that we might be invited to perform on New Years' Eve over in Brooklyn. Only the offer was that we drop the musicals stuff and Andy and do just retro girl singer stuff."

"Oh, you can't do that to Andy," I said, slipping against him.

"That's what I said," said Jake gloomily. "But the musicals stuff was for Ashley, wasn't it, and think how much Andy did. You carried the bulk of the singing and how many times did he actually get up in the second half. I know he was supposed to but you did a complete show all by yourself, didn't you, and the audience loved it!"

"The originals were better," I had to say, repeating what Jake had said to Spike.

Jake laughed. "I know I said that," he whispered, looking around as I went through Mel's purse, looking

for her key, Jake dropping his hand from around my waist. "But I didn't mean it. I thought that you were terrific, Eva, really terrific."

I was shuddering and didn't dare to look back at him as I put the key in the lock and turned it. "Well, good night," I said, sort of over my shoulder, my earrings swinging wildly again as I headed in to the safety of Mel's apartment.

Jake came in, right after me, and took hold of my hand and spun me around.

"J-Jake," I said, shaking as I knew what he was going to do to me, both his hands about me, my hand behind me as I was being tugged against him. Jake lowered his head and kissed me.

Jake knew that I wasn't a girl at all and yet he kissed me. And it wasn't just a peck, an acknowledgment that I had performed well as a girl and that I looked like a girl. No, Jake kissed me and hugged me to him. He pressed me against him as if I was a girl. Our lips joined and moved and it was every bit as wonderful as it had been before. I twisted and got my free arm up on his chest to push him away but Jake wouldn't let me.

Jake kissed me feverishly and I answered his kiss with my own agonized, excited, co-operative response. Oh, I wanted Jake to kiss me as he was. I swayed in his arms and let my free hand, and then the other, when he released it, go around his neck so that my mouth was stuck to his. I took every bit of feminine pleasure that I could from him and his thrilling embrace.

Jake kicked the door shut behind him and slid his coat from his shoulders. He held onto my lips with his

as he maneuvered Mel's coat from me. I didn't know where my purse went. I think he took it and it landed on the sofa somewhere.

"Eva, Eva, Eva," murmured Jake as he undid his tie and unbuttoned his shirt.

"You, you don't have to do this," I murmured, shivering with excitement as Jake held me and kissed my neck, taking off his shirt, a blue vest below. Oh, he just didn't want to get lipstick on his shirt, I thought, as I raised my head and he obliged my trembling with yet another, wonderful, wonderful kiss.

Jake kicked his shoes off. He broke off his kiss then and grinned at me. "Can you take off your earrings, please, darling Eva?" Jake said. "I think I just got nicked by your left one."

"Oh," I gasped and there was a little scratch on his cheek. I hastily undid my earrings but still Jake didn't let me go. He took my earrings and I think he put them in his pocket but I didn't care as he resumed kissing me, his hands over my back, caressing me, holding me, my padded falsies sort of bouncing on him, so disconcerting to both of us, I was certain.

I don't know how Jake undid my dress without me feeling it but suddenly, I felt it all loose and falling down the front of me. "What ...?" I began and he held me a little apart for a moment, guiding my high-necked dress over my chest and arms which he lowered one by one, kissing my bare neck and upper chest, especially my bra straps.

"No, Jake," I said, trembling with desire. I tried to hold onto my dress but Jake's hands eased it down over my hips. It fell so gently and femininely about my stockings and slip like a caress. Jake's hands were slid-

ing over my hips as well, onto my tush and pulling me close to him.

I could feel his alert maleness against my slip and my panties as his pants were heading to the floor much faster than my dress had. Jake's tongue entered my mouth as he pressed against me. Jake couldn't have forgotten what I was, could he, I thought desperately? No, he was just going to arouse me unmercifully and leave me before going off to find Spike. Hadn't he said so to the band's drummer? Oh, the pleasure and the arousal that I was feeling was soon going to end when he finally realized what he was pressing against and that I couldn't really be his girl.

Jake picked me up, sweeping one arm under me as I clung to him. He carried me into my bedroom. "J-Jake!" I think I gasped again but I didn't tell him to stop kissing me, or to stop fondling my legs as he was doing, easing off my high heels. I lay out on the bed and snuggled in tight under him and he loved that. We kissed and he fondled me through my lingerie, taking my slip up from me as he caressed my thighs.

I think I jumped in startled pleasure at his touching. I pushed my face into his and he kissed me with as much force as I kissed him, his tongue again driving mine aside and possessing my mouth. I felt his gentle hands removing my panties.

I knew what Jake must want. I lowered my trembling arms, stroking his manhood as I kissed him and he struggled with my tucking. I fondled his so alert member but Jake stunned me as he took my arms and put them back about his neck. I felt his erection between my smooth thighs and recalled how we had sort of made love to one another before.

Oh, how I wiggled and moaned as my taped male-ness was released. Jake stroked me and I thought that he intended to tease me first before he made me release the excited arousal that each of us was exhibiting to the other.

“Oh, Eva, darling,” whispered Jake to me, making me thrill in delight all over as he still called me by a girlish name.

Jake spread my legs apart. “Oh, oh!” I think I screamed as I held onto Jake, his mouth arousing my neck and upper chest. I felt his moistness and where it was headed.

I went rigid as Jake lifted my hips and I had my legs about him. I think I was squealing as Jake’s moistness was spread all over my tush and then he was penetrating me, penetrating me as if I was his woman, telling me that I, Eva, was his woman and that he loved me. He loved me as a woman and I was going to love being his woman, he whispered to me.

Jake begged me to relax and not to fight him.

“I can’t do this!” I squealed as I tried to relax as Jake wanted me too. Jake entered me. He kissed me and that was it. I had to please him. I had to. I relaxed more and Jake slid more into me. He began to pump himself in and out of me, his hands squeezing my tush, his mouth lowered to kiss the raised mounds on my chest that the taping had given me. Oh, gods, I was a woman! I exulted! I quaked in delight as I bounced on my lover’s manhood.

Jake stroked my thighs, my garter belt and stockings. I had to clamp his mouth to mine as the pleasure and the pain engulfed me. I felt him rocking me. To increase his pleasure, I did it as well. But it was my fe-

male pleasure that was increased. It was me being made love to and me squeaking in delight and begging the man making me a woman not to stop, never to stop.

Jake's hands seemed to be everywhere, on my legs, unsnapping my garter belt, stroking my legs, undoing my bra, squeezing my nipples. He clutched me mightily as I bucked and wriggled beneath him, impaled on his maleness. I felt him coming inside me. He came as a man comes with a woman as I rocked and squealed and kissed his so wonderful lips. I think that I climaxed as well. I know that I was all wet.

Oh, what had I done, the thought went through me, as Jake finally slowed almost to a stop and I knew what I had done. I had made love to another male. I had let him use me as if I was a woman. I shuddered and tried to lever myself away but Jake would have none of it.

No, Jake wanted to kiss me and stroke me some more as if I was a woman. What he had done inside me with his erection he apparently didn't find that unpleasant. How did I know? I could feel him inside me again. I could feel his hardness and he was rocking on me again, pressing my own erect maleness back against me, his abdomen forcing me down as Jake made love to me, slowly and wonderfully, touching me and raising girlish pleasure in every part of me, from my painted toes to my dyed hair and my lacquered fingernails.

Something strange happened as I was writhing beneath Jake and he was pumping away in me. Not only did I start to climax as he was doing but a tremendous urge grew inside me. Every nerve end seemed to be exploding all over my body. I felt a convulsion rocking through me as I clung to Jake. Oh, how I was loving

and loving him, loving what he was doing to me, as we pressed so close together, our lips locked, so that we might as well have been one person. Then, the convulsion climaxed! I was screaming and rocking beneath Jake as I twisted and spasmed with female passion that I had been denying I'd been feeling since Jake had lifted me into bed. I was a woman and women have orgasms! It was so incredibly marvellous!

"Oh, darling, darling, Eva," murmured Jake, holding me.

"Oh, Jake, I love you so," I cried to him and he held me tightly to him after I said that. I couldn't believe it when he began to do again what he had already done twice to me. I was so sticky. I thought I would hurt again but that third time went on for such a long time. Only when I finally lost my stockings to his kisses did Jake spurt into me. It was so wonderful, so pleasurable as he made me into a woman again.

"Eva, I love you," Jake told me as he kissed me and told me how beautiful I was. He told me that I was his woman.

I tried to tell him that he shouldn't do this to me, but he stopped me. "Why not?" asked Jake. "A man loves a woman and I just told you that you are my woman, Eva, so what takes place between us cannot be wrong. Not while you are a woman and I am your man. Now tell me that I am your man and you are my woman."

I didn't think that I could. But Jake kissed me and kissed me and I was able to tell him, a real thrill passing through me as I said it. "You are my man, Jake," I whispered to him. "And I am your woman."

“Darn right you are,” said Jake, starting a fourth bout of lovemaking. Well, it was delightful. Jake pleased me immensely but he couldn’t do more than get hard inside me and caress me. He couldn’t climax again. Finally, he relented and let me sleep in his arms.

“We’re going to perform at Raven’s tomorrow,” I remember Jake saying. “Would you mind doing some of the duets again with Andy, darling Eva?”

Of course, I wouldn’t. With the way that Jake had kissed me and made love to me, I would have done anything for him, anything.

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We giggled our way shyly through breakfast, picking up my girl’s clothes that were scattered all over the apartment. I had to go to work and Jake said that he would walk me there as it was getting colder as Christmas was just around the corner.

I would have put on slacks but Jake would have none of it. It had been really embarrassing to have him in my bath with me, up to a point at least. I didn’t want him to see the boyish body that I had but it didn’t seem to faze Jake.

Jake talked about me one day being a woman, presuming that that was my goal in life. I didn’t know how to tell him that it wasn’t. But he kissed and cuddled me in my bathtub and played with parts of me that I had never let a man touch before.

“All right, woman,” Jake told me. “You may get dressed. But no slacks and men’s jackets for you. My woman looks like a woman in every way, do you hear? And I like stockings and garter belts, tight panties and

bras, lots of makeup and long hair. I want my woman in dress or a skirt all the time and we'll do something about the things you don't have yet, like boobies. I have a lot of money saved and it couldn't go to a more worthy cause."

"Oh, Jake," I murmured, clutching a towel about me, wondering how, as I looked in the mirror, I could still look so feminine as the towel slitted and showed off my legs and the panties I had put on so hastily. "You're getting so far ahead of me. I, I don't think I can do that now."

Jake was still going on about it, caressing my bra and breasts, when we came down the stairs to the iced up windows in the foyer. "What else do I have to spend my money on but what will please me the most?" a randy Jake Kennedy was saying as I limped out onto the top step and suddenly there were flash-bulbs going off all around us.

"That's her," I heard a male voice saying and looking down, I had to gasp as Andy Wright was pointing at me with Van Bryant beside him, a huge mike stand overhead. There was a crowd gathered behind them.

"Samantha, Samantha Carter!" Van Bryant, the television reporter, yelled at me. "Samantha! Can we have a word?"

"An exclusive interview," called out another woman, running up with a microphone covered with letters. "We'll pay for an exclusive."

I stared in horror at the people below me and beside me on the steps, all screaming at me and naming me as 'Samantha.'

"Samantha Carter!" said Jake, his lower jaw dropping in complete surprise.

"Jake!" I gasped, turning to clutch at him while he stared at me and took my hands from his jacket.

"What a complete idiot I am!" said Jake then. That was what the whole country heard as I tried to cling to him and explain.

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I'm completely Samantha Carter now. What else could I do with the clamor outside the building? That's who they wanted me to be and I was too weak to resist. I let Melissa when she was home make the arrangements with Julie, acting for Graham and Paragon, to prove to the world that the red-haired, frightened girl in Mel's apartment was indeed me.

A private security team rescued us, Mel and me, from the riot that seemed to be starting up in front of our building.

"You'd think I had done something special like find a cure for cancer," I said shakily to Mel as we were whisked out of New York to an airfield I didn't even know existed. We were then flown off to California where Julie came to meet me.

Julie was smiling and flashing her ring at me when I limped off the plane, still in my straight skirt, tights and boots that I would have worn in chilly New York.

"What do you think?" were Julie's first words to me. "Cost Keith fifty grand and he isn't getting it back. It's why I married him. I wouldn't have if you'd contacted me when you were in Whitefalls, you silly girl."

Julie raised her eyebrows to me and glanced at Melissa. I shook my long hair extensions that Melissa had worked on. My hair looked a lot better than it had

when I had climbed out of bed with Jake's arms around me that morning.

That relaxed Julie no end. "Anyone else who knows?" she asked me while Mel looked on mystified.

"Everyone knows that Eva is Samantha Carter," Mel said sharply for me.

"You're going to stay Samantha?" Julie asked me. I hesitated and the tension rose in her, I could see.

"I think so," I said and Julie definitely relaxed, stepping up to me and hugging me as a Carter Sister should.

"You know that I've retired from the act," said Julie with a smile, her arm through mine as Mel took my other. We three girls were taken in a limo to meet with Graham, Keith and their bosses to plan out my future. "Let me tell you how they are going to try and exploit you, Sammie my girl, and your wonderful singing voice."

"I, I've got to have some time to myself," I said, a quiver in my voice. "And money, I'm going to need a lot of money. There are some changes that I just have to make before I go any further."

Julie hooted with laughter at the first thing that I told her I was going to change.

"Oh, that's a wonderful idea!" Julie said, and she had to hug me and kiss me. I think she might have felt that there was something still between us as she kissed me enthusiastically to Mel's astonishment. But I couldn't respond to her as I used to, not after being kissed so much by my darling Jake.

"I, I need money and privacy for ..." I said with a shiver and Julie withdrew, shrugging a little as she

glanced over at Melissa as if she might be a rival for my affection. She had it so wrong but I needed privacy to tell Julie what I had to tell her about how it would be between us in the future. We would really be sisters, after all.

"There's an account with millions of dollars in it," Julie said, her eyes gleaming at me, "millions, Samantha! Millions, even though they've robbed us blind! Well, robbed you really, I mean."

"No-one's going to do that to Samantha any more," said Melissa indignantly and I was so glad that she had agreed to come with me as I had to face the music and own up to what I had been doing.

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"Walter Brown," said the nationally known interviewer as I sat across from him, my hair blonde-streaked, thick and beautiful, my makeup and stylish dress just perfect, it's low v-neck showing off my just a little of my jiggly, femininely shaped breasts. But even as the interviewer went on with the introduction, all I could think of was that I was petrified and I had to smile, I had to, and pretend that I was the girl that I looked to be, "with the first, exclusive interview with Samantha Carter, the runaway singer in more ways than one."

Wally, I was supposed to call him, smiled at me and behind him I saw that the camera had expanded the shot so that both of us were in it, an old grey-haired man and a younger, shapely, attractive woman, her dark stockings showing off her shapely, crossed, feminine legs.

“Were you aware, Samantha,” asked the older host of his own television show, “that your record, CD, album, whatever it’s called these days, is one of the biggest sellers in recent music history? Forty million in sales over the Christmas period, worldwide. And there’s no end in sight for what the final total might be? Fifty plus million by the end of summer? What are the folks at Paragon saying to you about that?”



“That I owe them a lot of money,” I had to admit to Walter Brown, who had to laugh. I suppose he thought that I was joking but I wasn’t. The record company claimed that I owed them all kinds of money for performances, for breaching my contract and stuff like that. After all, I hadn’t done a single show for them as all the other contestants on the *Voice* reality show had done.

That was Graham Notting’s company that was suing me, as, I think, was Keith Sebastian, Julie’s soon-to-be-ex, according to her when she came to visit me in the house I was locked up in, thankfully, outside Los Angeles. Yes, she wanted to try me out again, particularly the new, womanly figure that I had made the first thing that I had done to me.

So, I let Julie make love to me, for old times’ sake, trembling all the time as she kissed my breasts and caressed them, sliding off my panties and taping to have me enter her, even though just as before she was the one who was on top throughout our lovemaking.

“It’s still like making love to another woman,” Julie finally said to me sorrowfully. “Sorry, Sam, but it just doesn’t arouse me as it used to. I guess I really do have to find a new man, someone to replace Keith. I should never have married him but it was your fault, you know! I thought he was such a man after you. But you’re not a man at all now, are you, even if your thing is still working, sort of. Why don’t you get rid of it?”

I said how sorry I was and cried when Julie left me. She came back and we cuddled but finally she left and I cried again, in such relief that she was gone and I was safe to go on with the rest of my life as Samantha.

The women judges who had been on the show weren’t part of the law suits piled up against me. They

were having a field day going around various talk shows and telling how awfully the 'Goth Girl' had been treated on *Voice of the Americas*.

"Tell us how a young, beautiful girl like you, Samantha," began Walter Brown, "could possibly have avoided detection for so long after you decided not to stay in the madhouse that *Voice of the Americas* became after you weren't selected as the winner."

No, I didn't get any easy 'questions'. They all came at me like that, loaded, with a tendency to tell me what the answer was that they wanted to hear.

"First," I had to say and give a rueful, femmy smile as I shifted nervously in my lovely, little, black dress, "it wasn't a madhouse that I decided to leave. It was just show business, which is frenzied sometimes. The show was an island of sanity most of the time, as it was all about music and singing. What led me to going off on my own for a short while, as I planned it, was the fact that I couldn't get off the set when the results were announced, without being mobbed, couldn't get transportation, without being mobbed, couldn't get into my hotel, couldn't even buy anything, such as a cellphone to call Julie, without being chased by a mob of reporters."

Walter put up the mob scene that had developed in New York outside the apartment building into which I had retreated with Jake, trying vainly to bar the door and telling the people pushing in that they were trespassing.

"You were only intending to avoid such mob scenes after you lost?" asked Walter and I could see and hear why he was Julie's favorite interviewer. Such an easy, puffball question to deal with.

“Yes,” I agreed. “I tried to tell everybody, and I’ll say it again now.” It was a lie really as I used the words, sort of, that Jake had said to me when we first met. On the show, I had been too beset by people mobbing me that I hadn’t really been able to say anything.

“Darnell won the competition fair and square,” I said, trying to keep my voice light, feminine and lilting, to match the image of the girl I could see coming back to me from all the television monitors. The studio seemed to be full of people as well, only a few whom I knew but all were staring at me, making my nerves react like bowstrings being tightened to snapping points.

“He had the unique voice in the group,” I went on, repeating what Jake had said to me. “I really was just an imitator of famous girl singers. As a judge on another famous talent show has said before, on reality shows like *Voice*, you don’t get much more than average voices which the judges over-praise. It’s all really presentation in the end. And Darnell was better than average at hip-hop and rap and he presented so well, didn’t he? I loved hearing his part of the shows. He deserved to win but everyone who talked to me said the opposite, no matter what I said. So, I left.”

“I think I disagree with you about the average voice, and so do critics who rated the shows,” said Walter nicely. “What did you think of the CD that was put out after the show?”

“The one with all my performances on the show, with strings and instrumentals added?” I asked, thinking for a moment that there might have been another with all of us singers together. Some years, they did that, put out a collection, I’d heard.

“Yes,” said Walter with a smile. “A studio album would have been better, don’t you think?”

“At that time, no,” I said with yet another smile.  
“Today, I think I would be better.”

I went on, describing my attempts to get away ‘for a little peace’ from the media trying to get me to say what wasn’t true while I thought about what I should do. Walter sort of backed me up, showing me clips of what others said about me, on the show and after, only Julie being really supportive. She could really get me, Samantha Carter, into real trouble, I thought with a shudder, even though she had told me that I was completely safe as Samantha into the future.

Not even my new girlish figure, my lovely, lovely breasts, and improvements to my tush and my thighs would turn around the accusations that Julie could level against me, if she wanted.

I told Julie all about coming to see her in Whitefalls. “Oh, you should have come over!” Julie had said to me. “Maybe then I would have seen through Keith a little quicker. You know that Mindy Becker, one of my bridesmaids, is telling everyone back home that Keith had her the day before our wedding when I had to be away from him. He can’t keep his hands away from anyone in a dress, you know. That’s why he was so down on you, Samantha, I think. You must be the only woman in this business who was impervious to his charms. Marrying me was to get back at you, my sister, I’m sure.”

“I need someone still to help me in the act,” I said to my ‘Sister’. “C-Couldn’t we be the Carter Sisters again?” I really didn’t want to do that as Julie might think that it was her, and her body, that I was still being tempted by, but luckily she didn’t take me up on that offer I had to make.

"I'd rather be your backup singer," Julie said to me with a smile. And I had agreed that she could be. I knew it would be tough to get my new musical director to agree but sometimes I had to put my foot down with him. At least he wasn't Keith Sebastian or Ray Fielding, but someone who really liked the way that I sang.

I finally did sing for Walter Brown after I answered all the questions about what had happened to me, the car accident and the robbery taking some time.

By then, I had my own band, sort of, which meant that I could sing anything that anyone, even me, wanted. Walter wanted me to sing *All I Ask of You* as I had done it the first time on *Voice*. I rehearsed it a couple of times to get all the words just right as I did it once more as a solo. I couldn't believe how enraptured with me Walter was or how the people in the studio were applauding. I think Walter's rapture was at the highest ratings he ever had, reported to him while the show was going on. He got his exclusive and soon excerpts of the interview I had given were all over the Internet and on other shows.

"Everyone is saying that I'm singing better than ever," I told my musical director and band leader as I changed for bed in our hotel bedroom suite after that very first show.

"That's because they haven't heard what you sound like in here," murmured my musical director as he pounced on me when I was still in my panties and stockings.

My musical director kissed me. So wonderful were his kisses that I couldn't do anything to correct him.

"You beast!" I said thickly to him, feminine emotion flooding all over me, as he ran his hands over my

rounded buttocks and then began to kiss my lovely, rounded breasts and their large, full nipples, womanly nipples. I slipped beneath him and kissed him with all the eagerness with which he kissed me. Yes, Jake and I only had to kiss each other lightly and it was a race to the bedroom to see me ravished and cherished as any other young woman like me would be.

'Jake's Band', so much better than 'Dead to the World', which is what Spike's drum set still spelled out, were the band I was part of, now. I insisted. I wanted Jake on top of me in all that we did together. All of the guys in the band, Spike, Miles, Rick and Andy (yes, I forgave him when I realized he'd never get any money soon as a reward for 'finding' me) liked being part of Jake's Band and really admired the new womanly figure and new hair, grown so long, of the band's girl singer, me.

The girls, Julie and Melissa, taking lessons to be better backup singers, loved my new female shape as well, though they had different reasons for telling me how lovely I looked. I kissed them all indiscriminately, male and female, and often as well, when we played so well, preparing for the show that we were to take on the road, the whole tour sold out before we even started.

Kissing everyone always made me feel so girlish, just as wearing so many swishy, short, femmy dresses did. I kissed Jake a lot more, of course, than everyone else. It was only with Jake that my skin became so energized that I had to head to the bedroom to have my dress removed and my girlish feelings taken care of right away. Only huge amounts of pleasuring as Jake's woman would suffice. All the time, he told me repeatedly I was his woman and I now believed him.

In just minutes of kissing Jake in our bedroom, I would be flat on my back, my legs spreadeagled and wrapped about his waist as he entered me as he always did, making me squeal and enjoy with my whole body being made into his woman as Jake called me all of the time.

I think Jake was resigned to the fact that I wasn't going to undergo any further changes than the lovely, lovely breasts that he found every bit as enchanting as I did. He loved my new tush, too, and patted me on it enough times, whenever we were out in public or in front of the others in our little band, making me strain all the time against the taping that I was still forced to endure.

But for a different kind of woman like me, with a man so devoted to her, so devoted to making me feel like a real woman, the woman of his dreams, what else could I do but submit myself to his every wish. At last, being in the public eye so much wasn't really a chore, not with Jake there to let me know that what I was doing was perfect for him, in and out of bed. He loved me and I loved him as I strove to be the woman he wanted.

I not only sing like a girl, my man tells me, but I squeal like a girl and I make love like a girl. And he loves me, my Jake. I am the luckiest new woman alive.

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