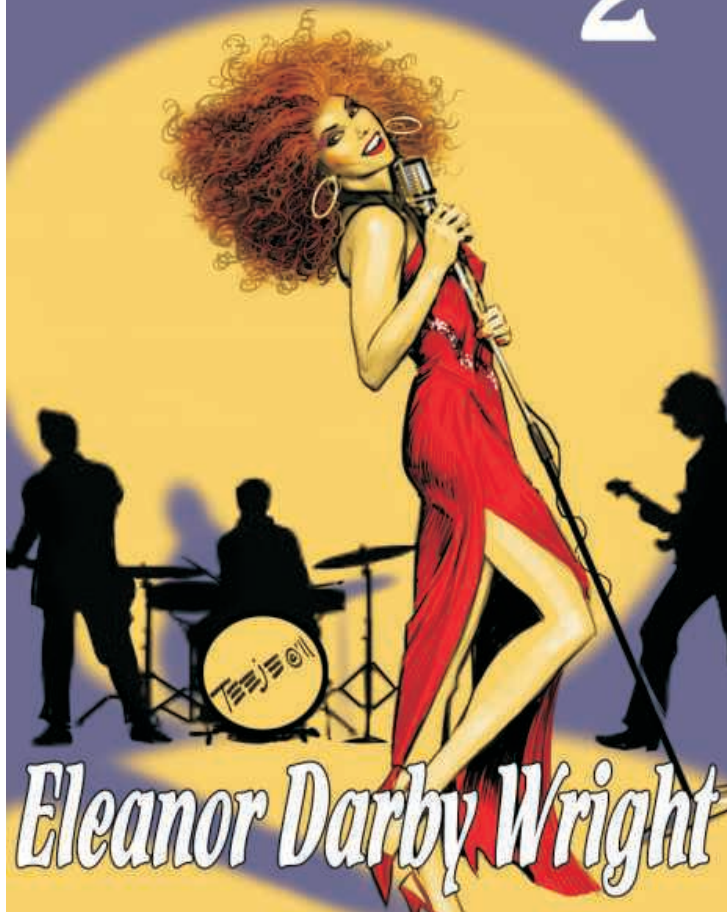


You Sing Like A Girl 2



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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.

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.

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.