

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BEST-SELLER

MEG CABOT

ALL-

American

GIRL

Six

Fortunately it was raining on Thursday when Theresa drove me to Susan Boone's studio. That meant that the chances of her finding a parking space, scrounging around the backseat for an umbrella, getting out of the car, and walking me all the way to the studio door were exactly nil.

Instead, she drove up to the side of the building and went, "If you are not out here at exactly five thirty, I will hunt you down. Do you hear me? Like an animal."

"Fine," I said, undoing my seatbelt.

"I mean it, Miss Samantha," Theresa said. "Five thirty on the dot. Or I will double park and you will have to pay the impound fees if the station wagon gets towed."

"Whatever," I said, and stepped out into the pouring rain. "See you."

Then I ran for the side door to the studio.

Only I didn't, of course, go up that narrow stairway. Well, really, how could I? I mean, I had completely

humiliated myself in there the day before yesterday. Was I really just going to go waltzing back in like nothing had happened? Like I hadn't drawn what I knew, and not what I'd seen? Whatever that meant, which I still wasn't even sure.

The answer, of course, was no. No, I was not.

What I did instead was, I waited about a minute inside the little foyer, with rainwater dripping off the hood of my Gore-Tex parka. While I was in there, I tried not to feel too guilty. I mean, my parents were paying a lot of money for these art lessons. I had heard my father grouching that they cost almost as much per month as the animal behaviorist. Susan Boone, it turned out, was kind of famous. Just what she was famous for, I didn't know, but apparently, she charged a bundle for her one-on-one art tutelage.

So I didn't feel too good, knowing I was wasting my parents' hard-earned money.

But if you think about it, I am actually the cheapest kid Mom and Dad have. I mean, they spend a small

fortune on Lucy every month. She is always needing new clothes, new pom-poms, new orthodontia, new dermatological aids, whatever, in order to maintain her image as one of Benjamin Franklin High School's beautiful people.

And Rebecca, my God, the lab fees alone at Horizon pretty much equal the gross national product of a small underdeveloped nation.

And me? How much do Mom and Dad spend on me every month? Well, up until I got busted for the horse drawing thing, nothing, besides tuition. I mean, I'm supposed to wear my sister's hand-me-down bras, right? And I didn't even need new clothes this year: I just applied black Rit to last semester's clothes, and voila! A whole new wardrobe. My mom wasn't too happy about it, of course. She doesn't understand that my black clothes represent my deep internal contempt for the establishment.

Really, as children go, I am a major bargain. I don't even eat that much, either, seeing as how I hate almost all food except hamburgers, the Bread

Lady's baguettes, and dessert.

So I shouldn't have even felt guilty about ditching art class. Not really.

But as I stood there, the familiar scent of turpentine washed over me, and I could hear, way up at the top of the stairs, the faint sound of classical music, and the occasional squawk from Joe the Crow. I was suddenly filled with a strange longing to climb those stairs, go to my bench, sit down, and draw. I mean, what was David, my possible future husband, going to think? He was probably going to be devastated by my absence.

Okay, probably not. But it was fun to think he might be. He was pretty cute, after all. And since I was pretty sure he didn't go to Benjamin Franklin at least, I hadn't spotted him there, and I'd looked he didn't know that at my own school, I am a social pariah, except amongst the non-English speaking girls and Special Ed kids, over whom I reign as horse-drawing queen.

But what was the use? I knew I was never going to

see Cute David again. I mean, I am not a masochist. No way was I putting myself through another humiliation like the one I'd suffered on Tuesday. Instead, I waited in the vestibule, praying nobody would come in while I was huddled there, and say, "Oh, hi, Sam. Aren't you coming upstairs?"

As if anybody there would even remember my name. Except possibly Susan Boone.

But nobody came in. When two minutes were up, I cautiously opened the door and looked out at the rain-soaked street.

Theresa and the station wagon were gone. It was safe. I could come out.

The first place I went was Auntie Ruthie's Cookies. Well, how could I not? It looked so warm and inviting, what with the rain and all, and I happened to have a dollar sixty-eight in my pocket, exactly as much as an Auntie Ruthie Chocolate Chunk. The cookie they handed me was still warm from the oven, too. I slipped it into the pocket of my black Gore-tex raincoat. They don't allow food in Static, where I was going next.

They weren't playing Garbage there that afternoon. They were playing The Donnas. Not ska, but perfectly acceptable. I went over to where they had some headphones plugged into the wall, so people could sample the CDs they were thinking about buying. I spent a nice half hour or so listening to the Less Than Jake CD I'd wanted but couldn't afford now that my mom had seen to it that my funding was shut off.

As I listened, I snuck bits of cookie from my pocket into my mouth, and told myself that what I was doing wasn't all that wrong. I mean, look at Charlotte: For years her parents have been forcing her to go to Sunday school while they attend mass. Since there is like a two year age difference between Charlotte and each of her brothers, all three of them were in different religion classes, so she never knew until this year that Antoine and Pierre, after their mom dropped them all off, were waving good bye and then ducking around the corner to the Rac n' Cue. She only found out when her class let out early one day, and she went to look around for her

brothers, and they were nowhere to be seen. So basically for years Charlotte's been sitting there, listening to her religion teachers tell her to resist temptation, etc., while it turns out the whole time her brothers--and pretty much all the rest of the cool kids who go to her church--have been next door, getting high scores on Super Mario. So what does Charlotte do now? She waves goodbye to her mom just like Antoine and Pierre, and then she, too, goes to the Rac n'Cue, and works on her Geometry homework in the glow of PodRacer.

And does she feel bad about it? No. Why not? Because she says if the Lord really is all-forgiving, like they taught her in Sunday school, He will understand that she really does need the extra study time, or she will flunk Geometry. So why should I feel bad about skipping my drawing lesson? I mean, it is only a drawing lesson. Charlotte, on the other hand, is skipping out on God. Surely my parents, in the unlikely event they are to

find out what I've done, will understand. Probably. Maybe. On a good day, anyway, when there haven't been too many plunges in the Asian tech market. If anybody at Static thought it was strange that this fifteen-year-old redheaded girl, dressed in black from head to toe, was hanging around for two hours, sampling CDs but not buying any, they didn't say anything about it to me. The chick behind the counter, who had the kind of spiky black hair I've always wanted but have never had the guts to get, was too busy flirting with one of the other workers, a guy in plaid pants and a Le Tigre T-shirt, to pay any attention to me.

The other customers were ignoring me, too. Most of them looked like college students, wasting time between classes. Some of them might have been in high school. One of them was a kind of old guy, like in his thirties, wearing Army clothes and carrying a duffel bag. For a while he was hanging out by the headphones near me, listening to Billy Joel. I was surprised that a place like Static even had any Billy Joel, but they did. This guy kept listening

to “Uptown Girl” over and over. My dad is actually a Billy Joel fan he plays it all the time in the car, which makes driving with him mad fun, let me tell you--but even he is way over “Uptown Girl.”

My cookie was gone about midway through the Spitvalves second album. I reached into my pocket and found nothing but crumbs. I thought about going over to Auntie Ruthie’s to get another, but then I remembered I was broke. Besides, by that time it was almost five thirty. I had to go outside and wait for Theresa to pick me up.

I put my hood up and walked out into the rain. It wasn’t the steady downpour it had been when I’d arrived, but I figured the hood would keep anybody coming out of the Susan Boone Art Studio from recognizing me and being all, Hey, where were you, anyway?

As if any of them would have missed me.

It was darker outside than it had been when I’d gone into the record store. All the cars going by had their headlights on. And there were a lot more

of them than before, because it was rush hour, and everyone was trying to get home to be with their loved ones. Or maybe just to watch Friends. Whatever.

I stood on the curb, squinting into the light drizzle and headlights in the direction Theresa was supposed to come. As I stood there, I couldn't help feeling kind of sorry for myself. I mean, there I was, a fifteen-year-old redheaded, boyfriendless, misunderstood middle child reject, broke, standing in the rain after skipping her drawing class because she couldn't take criticism. What was going to happen if I grew up and started my own comic book? It would probably get rejected. I heard the guy who invented the X-men, he got rejected a bunch of times before someone was finally like, "Oh, Wolverine? Okay, cool."

So suppose if I ever did do a comic book, or something, and it got rejected? Was I just going to quit? Was I going to go hide in Static? Maybe I could just get a job there, to make things easier. It

didn't seem like a very bad place to work, actually. I bet employees get a discount on CDs.

While I was standing there being ashamed of myself for being such a quitter, the old guy who was such a big Billy Joel fan came out of Static and stood next to me, even though the crosswalk sign was green. I looked at him from the corner of my eye. He was messing around with something under his rain poncho, which was in a camouflage pattern. I wondered if he was a shoplifter. At Static I'd noticed they had a Wall of Shame, where they stuck up Polaroids of people who'd tried to swipe something. This dude looked as prime a candidate for the Wall of Shame as I'd ever seen.

And when, right after this, I saw all these flashing red lights coming out of the rain and darkness, I was like, Oh, yes, here come the cops. Mr. Uptown Girl is so busted.

Only it turned out the sirens didn't belong to the cops at all. Instead, they were part of the President's motorcade. First came the lead car, a black SUV with a rack of flashing red lights on its roof. Then

came another black SUV, and behind it, a long black limo. Behind that were some more SUVs with flashing lights.

Instead of being excited that I was going to get to see the President go by--even though you can't really see him when he's in his limo because the windows are those weird ones the people inside the car can see out of, but the people outside the car can't see into I was like, Aw, crud. Because Theresa was probably somewhere behind the motorcade, which was crawling along at a snail's pace. Not only was she going to be in a really bad mood by the time she finally picked me up, but no way was I going to make it home in time for TRL. Again.

Also, when you live in DC, seeing the President go by is really no big deal, since he goes by all the time. Then the strangest thing happened. The first SUV in the motorcade pulled up right in front of me and stopped. Just stopped.

And the traffic light wasn't even red.

Behind the first SUV, the second one stopped, and

then the limo, and so on. And then these guys with these ear pieces climbed out of the cars and all went towards the limo.

And then, to my utter astonishment, the President of the United States got out of his limo, and walked, with a bunch of Secret Service guys clustered around him, holding up umbrellas and looking around and speaking into their walkie-talkies, into Auntie Ruthie's Cookies!

That's right, just walked into Auntie Ruthie's Cookies like he did it every day.

I didn't know that the President liked Auntie Ruthie's Cookies. Auntie Ruthie's Cookies are good, and all, but they're not the most famous cookies around, or anything.

And wouldn't you think that if you were the President, you could get Auntie Ruthie to send you a personal supply of her cookies, so you wouldn't have to go ducking out of your limo, in the rain, just to get your hands on some? I mean, if I were Auntie Ruthie and I found out that the President of the United States liked my cookies, I would fully

make sure he got a steady supply of them.

On the other hand, Auntie Ruthie would probably prefer to have the President be seen ducking into one of her stores. That is way better publicity than you could ever get by privately shipping him his own supply.

And then, as I stood there in the dark and the rain, with the red lights from the top of the SUV in front of me flashing in my face, I saw Mr. Uptown Girl throw back his rain poncho.

And it turned out what he'd been doing under there had nothing to do with him being a shoplifter. Not at all. It turned out what he'd been doing under there had to do with a great big gun, which he brought out and pointed in the direction of the door to Auntie Ruthie's Cookies the door through which the President, his cookies secure, was just exiting.

I am not what most people would call a particularly brave person. I stick up for the kids at school who get picked on only because I remember what it was

like to get picked on back when I lived in Morocco, and during the whole Speech and Hearing thing. But that does not mean that I am the sort of girl to throw herself into the path of danger without the slightest concern for her own personal safety. I mean, the closest thing I have been in lately that could qualify as a physical altercation would be the last time Lucy and I wrestled over possession of the remote control.

But whatever. What I ended up doing is so atypical of my normal behavior that it was like someone else took over my body for a minute, or something. All I know is, one second I was standing there, watching Mr. Uptown Girl raise his gun to fire at the President as he exited Auntie Ruthie's Cookies and the next, I had jumped him.

Seven

It turns out if you jump onto the back of a would-be assassin, and he isn't expecting you to or anything, you can really throw off his aim. So the bullet Mr. Uptown Girl had meant to send speeding

into the President's head went speeding harmlessly off into the stratosphere instead.

Something else happens when you jump onto the back of a guy with a gun, though. He tends to be very surprised, and loses his balance, and falls over backwards on top of you, so that you get all the wind knocked out of you and your Gore-Tex parka rides up and rainwater soaks through the seat of your pants and you get all wet.

Plus the guy lands on one of your arms, and you hear a crunching sound, and it kind of hurts, and you can't help wondering, Was that what I think it was?

But you don't really get a chance to mull it over for very long because you are too busy trying to keep the guy from getting off another shot, which you do by yelling, "Gun! Gun! He's got a gun!"

And even though everyone already knows this that the guy has a gun, since they heard the stupid thing go off the first time this seems to do the trick, since all of a sudden, about twenty Secret Service agents

crowd around you, with their guns pulled out, and pointed right into your face, all of them yelling, “Freeze!”

Believe me, I froze.

And then the next thing I knew, Mr. Uptown Girl was lifted off me much to my relief: that dude was heavy and then people started pulling on me, too. Somebody pulled on the arm that the guy with the gun had landed on, and I yelled, “Ow!” really loud, but nobody seemed to hear me. They were all busy speaking into their walkie-talkies, saying things like, “Eagle is secure, repeat, Eagle is secure.”

Meanwhile, sirens started to wail, and suddenly, all these cop cars and ambulances showed up from out of nowhere, practically, brakes squealing and rainwater getting sprayed all over the place.

It was just like something out of a Bruce Willis movie, only without the soundtrack.

And then one of the Secret Service agents started going through my backpack, while another stooped to pat down my ankles--like I might have a bowie

knife or something strapped down there--while a third was digging around the pockets of my Gore-Tex parka without even asking my permission (and ended up getting a handful of Auntie Ruthie's Cookie crumbs for his efforts).

He also jostled my sore arm some more. I yelled, "OW," again, only even louder than before.

Then the agent who was going through my pockets went, "This one seems to be unarmed."

"Of course I'm unarmed," I yelled. "I'm only in the tenth grade!"

Which is a totally lame thing to have said, because of course there are tenth graders who have guns. They just don't happen to go to Benjamin Franklin High School. Only I wasn't really thinking straight. In fact, I was almost crying. Well, you would have almost been crying, too, if

a) you were wet all over.

b) your arm was most likely broken which actually wasn't so bad, really, because it wasn't my drawing arm or anything, and now I had a built-in excuse not to take part in volleyball, which Coach Donnelly

is making everyone do in PE next week--but it still really, really hurt.

c) people were yelling but you couldn't hear so well on account of Mr. Uptown Girl's gun having gone off very close to your ear, probably causing hearing damage that for all you know might be permanent.

d) you had found yourself looking down the mouths of 20 or so guns. Or even one gun, for that matter. And

e) it was starting to seem pretty likely that your parents were totally going to find out about your skipping your drawing lesson.

I mean, any one of those things would have been upsetting. But I had all five.

Then this older agent came up to me. He looked a little less scary than the other agents, maybe because he stooped down until his face was level with mine, which was thoughtful of him.

He went, very seriously, "You're going to have to come with us, miss. We need to ask you some questions about your friend over there."

That was when it really hit me:

They thought Mr. Uptown Girl and I were buddies!
They thought we'd been trying to kill the President together!

“He’s not my friend!” I wailed. I wasn’t almost crying anymore. I was bawling my head off, and I didn’t even care. It was raining, I was wet all over, my arm was throbbing, my ears were ringing, and the United States Secret Service thought I was some international terrorist assassin, or something.

Heck, yeah, I was crying.

“I’ve never even seen him before today!” I hiccupped. “He pulled out that gun, and he was going to shoot the President, and so I jumped on him, and he fell on my arm and now it really hurts, and I just want to go ho-o-ome!”

It was really embarrassing. I was crying like a baby. Worse than a baby. I was crying the way Lucy cried the day her orthodontist told her she was going to have to keep her braces on for another six months. Then a very surprising thing happened. The older

Secret Service agent put his arm around me. He said something to the other Secret Service agents, then walked me away from them, towards one of the ambulances. Some paramedic types were standing there, waiting. They opened the doors to the back of the ambulance, and the Secret Service agent and I climbed in.

It was nice inside the ambulance. I got to sit on a little gurney, out of the rain and cold. You could barely hear the sirens and stuff inside there. The paramedics were very nice, too. They gave me a dry blanket to wrap around me in place of my Gore-Tex parka. They were so jokey and nice, I stopped crying.

Really, I told myself. This wasn't so bad. Everything was going to be okay.

Well, except when my parents found out about how I'd skipped drawing class. That part was not going to be okay.

But maybe they wouldn't have to find out. Maybe the Secret Service agents would check me out and

realize that I am not a member of any paramilitary group out to draw attention to their cause, and let me go. Theresa was probably still stuck in all that traffic. By the time she pulled up, the whole thing might be over, and I could just get into the car, and when she asked, “What did you do today in class?” I could be like, “Oh, nothing.”

Hey. It could happen.

The paramedics asked me where I was injured. And even though I felt dumb being such a baby about my arm, considering how serious everything was with, you know, an attempt on the life of the President, and all, I showed them my wrist. I was somewhat gratified to see that it had already swelled to about twice its usual size. I was glad I hadn't been crying over nothing.

While the paramedics were examining my arm, I looked over at the Secret Service agent, who was busy filling out a report of some kind that included my name, which he had got off my school ID, which had been inside my wallet in my backpack. I didn't want to disturb him or anything, but I really

needed to know how long this was all going to take.

So I went, “Um, excuse me, sir?”

The Secret Service guy looked up. “Yes, sweetheart?” he asked. He obviously didn’t know that no one calls me sweetheart, not even my mother. Not since Morocco, when she caught me trying to flush my dad’s credit cards down the toilet (in revenge for him making us move to a foreign country where I didn’t speak the language).

The sweetheart thing threw me. I didn’t want to come out and just ask him how long this was all going to take, since it might seem ungracious. He was only doing his job, after all. So instead, after a few seconds during which I desperately tried to think up something else to ask, I went, “Um. Is the President okay?”

The Secret Service agent smiled at me some more.

“The President is just fine, honey,” he said. “Thanks to you.”

“Oh,” I said. “Great. So, um, do you think it would be okay for me to go soon?”

The paramedics exchanged glances. They looked

amused.

“Not with that arm,” one of them said. “Your wrist is broken, kiddo. We’ll need an X-ray to see how badly, but ten to one, you’re going to have a nice big cast for all your new fans to sign.”

Fans? What was he talking about?

And I couldn’t get a cast! If I got a cast, my parents would want to know how I’d broken my arm, and then I’d have to admit that I’d skipped class.

Unless unless I lied and told them I tripped. Yeah, I tripped and fell down the stairs to Susan Boone’s studio. Except what if they asked her? Oh, God. I was such dead meat.

“Couldn’t I--” I was really grasping at straws, but I was desperate. “Couldn’t I just go to my own doctor tomorrow, or something? I mean, my arm really feels much better.”

Both the paramedics and the Secret Service agent looked at me like I was insane. Okay, yeah, my arm had swollen up to the size of my thigh, and was throbbing the way hearts do during open-heart surgeries on the Discovery Channel. But it actually

didn't hurt that much. Except when I moved. "It's just that our housekeeper is coming to pick me up," I explained, lamely. "And if you guys take me to the hospital, and I'm not where I said I'd be, she'll freak out."

The Secret Service guy said, "Why don't you give me a phone number where I can reach your parents? I'll call them and explain the situation. I'm sure they'll want to come down to see you themselves."

Oh, God! Then they'll know for sure I skipped class! But, really. What choice did I have? That'd be none. "Listen," I said, low and fast. "You don't have to tell my parents about this. I mean, of course you have to tell them about this, but not about how I skipped my drawing class and was hanging out in Static. I mean, you don't have to tell them that part, do you? Because I don't want to get in any more trouble than I'm already in."

The Secret Service dude blinked at me like he didn't really know what I was talking about. But he

apparently thought he'd just better just go along with me as if I were some kind of a nutcase, like Mr. Uptown Girl--since he went, "Why don't we wait and see."

Well, it was better than nothing, I guess. I gave him my mom's and dad's work numbers, then closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the side of the ambulance.

Oh, well, I thought. Things could have been worse. For instance, I could have a chicken bone where my nose should be.

Eight

Top ten pieces of incontrovertible proof that stopping a bullet from entering the skull of the President of the United States of American changes your life:

10. The ambulance you are riding in gets a police escort all the way to the hospital.

9. Instead of having to visit the triage nurse upon arrival at the emergency room, like everyone else, you are wheeled in right away, ahead of all the

gang-bangers bleeding from knife wounds, women in labor, people with pencils wedged into their eye sockets, etc.

8. Everywhere you are sent inside the hospital, men in black suits with ear thingies follow you.

7. When they give you a hospital gown to wear because your clothes are all wet, and you refuse to put it on because the back is all cut out, they give you another one, so you can wear one that opens in the front and one that opens in the back, thus covering all of you. No one else in the entire hospital gets two gowns but you.

6. You get your own private room with an armed guard at the door, even though all that is wrong with you is your wrist.

5. When the doctor comes in to examine you, he goes, "So you're the girl who saved the President!"

4. When you say in abject mortification, "Well, not really," the doctor goes, "That's not what I hear. You're a national hero!"

3. When he tells you that your wrist is broken in two places and that you will have to wear a cast

from the elbow down for six to eight weeks, instead of giving you a lollipop or whatever, he asks for your autograph.

2. While you are waiting for the cast guys to come and fix your arm, you switch on your private room's TV and see that on every channel, there is a Breaking News bulletin. Then Tom Brokaw comes on and says that an attempt has been made on the life of the President. Then he says that the attempt was thwarted by the heroic act of a single individual. Then they show the picture of you from your school ID.

The one where you were blinking just as the photographer took the picture. The one where your hair was looking particularly bushy and out of control. The one you have never showed to anyone for fear of being publicly mocked and ridiculed.

And the number one way you can tell your life is over:
1. You scream so loudly when you see your hideous school photo on national television that about thirty Secret Service agents burst into your room, pistols drawn, demanding to know if you're all right.