

Song from a Broken Instrument

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This year they were calling it *Grammy 2000*. The spangled and sequined thousands gathered for the awards ceremony rose to their feet as Topaz Baldwin made her way up onto the stage. The applause was thunder-ous, almost deafening, mixed with cheers and whistles.

A petite woman with skin the color of burnished bronze, she walked to-ward the glass podium at front center stage with her back straight and her head high. On a night when most had obeyed the dictum of Dress to Ex-cess, she wore a simple open-necked white silk shirt and loose-fitting black silk pants. On her feet were a pair of battered red Keds. Clipped to the red beaded belt at her waist was a black leather covered object about the size and shape of a Walkman.

She reached the podium, and look-ing a little overwhelmed by the con-tinuing ovation, gazed out over the crowd with dark eyes that sparkled with emotion. A nervous smile edg-ing onto her face, she pushed back an errant wing of the curly, glossy black hair that cascaded onto her shoulders and down her back. Her smile was beautiful. The combination of a black father and Vietnamese mother had lent her wide face an exotic cast; she looked more like the product of Poly-nesian sands than the Minneapolis suburbs she had grown up in.

The audience finally returned to their seats as she reached up to adjust the microphone.

But she did not bend it toward her mouth.

Instead she pointed it at the silver filigreed, square-cut black pendant hanging at the base of her throat. She patted the device at her hip like an old friend, then began to speak...

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Gray-lit eyelids too heavy to open. A great muddy river of pain inside her. Hollow, distant voices. Lurching motion—

Although Topaz Baldwin did not become fully conscious as she was being wheeled from the operating room, she regained a brief, groggy state of interior awareness. It lasted only a few seconds, scarcely longer than the time it took the gurney to pass through a set of swinging doors, but that was long enough.

She *knew*.

Usually such fleeting moments of awareness or comprehension would be described as the flare of a candle in the darkness.

This was just the opposite. In an instant a small sweet source of light and heat was ruthlessly pinched out, leaving behind only a charred and smoldering wick.

Her throat constricted to let out a wail of horror, anguish, and denial. A cry that would have shattered glass and driven a spike of ice into the heart of anyone who heard it.

Dull pain bloomed inside her, a damp skyrocket in a heavy fog.

Not even a whimper escaped her.

She collapsed back into an inner abyss, her silent scream fading away to nothingness, the blazing trail of a falling star as it cuts a final dying line in the endless night sky.

The moment the nurse entered the small second-floor nurses' lounge she was using, the big spike-haired woman hunched in a chair with a pocketphone at her ear and an unlit cigarette in her mouth looked up hopefully. The nurse nodded.

"I'll call you back," Cass Morgenstern said, snapping the phone shut, unplugging her cigarette, and stand-ing. Even without the scuffed cowboy boots on her feet, her big-boned frame would have easily topped the six and a half foot mark. She squared her broad shoulders, staring down at the nurse.

"Well?" she asked gruffly.

The nurse smiled. "She came through just fine. No complications, and her vital signs are strong and stable. Dr. Braddock would have come in to tell you himself, but he was called in on another emergency."

In the space of a single moment several expressions crossed the blunt landscape of Cass' face. It was a square, rough-hewn face, strong jawed and heavy browed. Not exactly masculine, but not soft enough to ever be called pretty. She grimaced, banishing all but a frown. "Can I see her?"

"Well, she's in her room now, but—"

"But what?" Cass demanded harshly, stepping closer and drawing herself up as if to grab the smaller woman and take her apart one piece at a time to get the answer.

The nurse paled but held her ground. "But it's going to be several hours before Ms. Baldwin regains consciousness," she said gently, reaching out to lay a hand on Cass' arm. "You've had a rough night, Ms. Morgenstern. You should get some rest."

Cass shook her head, her shoulders sagging. "Honey," she said wearily, "The rough part hasn't even begun."

Topaz slowly awoke to the smell of rubbing alcohol and flowers. Barely able to move her head. One arm numb and immovable. Strange un-pleasant pressure in one nostril.

The first coherent thought to pass through her head made her wish she had never awakened. She remembered. She *knew*. A crushing self-knowledge that could only be measured in tons descended.

When she opened her eyes the first thing she saw was Cass. Her manager.

Ex-manager, whispered a bitter voice in her head.

Cass looked like hell, her face pale and drained, deep bags under her eyes, the moussed spikes of her brown hair drooping into question marks. She leaned closer, trying for a smile and only partially succeeding.

"Hey there Taz," she said softly, her low, throaty voice even raspier than normal. "Welcome back."

Topaz had no way of knowing how long she'd been out of it. Judging by the way Cass sounded, it had been quite a while. No doubt she'd passed whatever time had elapsed on the phone. Cass used her phone the way a juggler used her hands: keeping all those spinning plates in the air.

Well, the crash had come, and she really didn't give a damn if Cass picked up the pieces. There was no way to glue them back together again, anyway.

Cass gave that smile another shot, her big square chin firming up and her wide mouth nearly managing an upward curve. "You're going to be all right, darlin'. You gave us one hell of a scare..." She shook her head. "But you're going to be all right now."

Topaz stared back up at her expressionlessly. Somewhere inside her the Taz who loved Cass like a sister yearned to comfort her friend. Elsewhere another Taz wanted to shriek at her *Stop lying!* She was *not* going to be all right, it would have been better if she'd died. Both remained silent, smothered in numb misery.

The memory of the attack was etched into her brain cells as pre-cisely and indelibly as the pits cut

into the surface of a laser disc. The sight, the sound, the smell, the taste, the feel; all recorded with unforgiv-ing digital clarity.

You never answered my love letters!

—Leaving the radio station after taping an interview promoting the new album. Late afternoon drive-time jocks Sam Stun and Delilah James, Ed-die Rickert the program director, and Sherri Esposito the promotions man-ager going down the elevator and out onto the street with her and Cass. Sherri carrying a minicam to shoot a ten second video spot (*Hi there New York! Topaz here! Don't forget, I'm always in town on WAPL FM!*) out on the street, taking advantage of as kind an early February day as the Big Bad City gets. Warm sun on her face. Her-self out in front. Feeling good. Cass hanging back for some last minute schmoozing with Eddie and the jocks about rotation. Play those songs—but not too often. Don't oversaturate. Have the listeners *hoping* to hear them again, not dreading it.

The tall man in the army surplus trench coat appearing before her out of nowhere. Stubbled face. Crazy eyes. Sour sweat. Another street crazy, right?

Wrong. *Dead wrong.*

He screams as he comes at you, spittle flying. *You never answered my love letters!* Reaches into his coat—

Cass had let out a yell and rushed to protect her, but too late. Too late.

—Or too early. His second blow had been aimed at the side of her head and would probably have home-runned it right off her shoulders. *Lou-isville Slugger*. She could remember recognizing the logo in a kind of de-tached amazement as the ash bat came whistling toward her the first time.

Horrible crushing impact, nearly knocking her back onto her butt. Staggering, dropping to her knees. Fingers clawing uselessly at the fire in her throat. A fire spreading to her lungs. *Can't breathe!*

Her throat felt raw and swollen, throbbing with sullen pain. It was still hard to breathe, but nowhere near as hard as knowing there was no point to it.

She stared up at Cass, her gaze flat and dead. Inside she felt empty, a pi-ano gutted of its hammers and strings.

Cass' almost-smile fragmented. "Oh Jesus, Taz, I'm sorry," she whispered in a low, desperate voice. "I tried to stop—I couldn't—" She shook her head from side to side, baffled. Her big square hands opened and closed, helplessly seeking some place to grab hold and turn things around. To turn back time and try to move a little faster.

Topaz found that she could still feel dismay when she realized Cass was blaming herself for what had hap-pened. That made its way through the numbing caul of apathy into which she had been reborn.

She opened her mouth to tell Cass it wasn't her fault.

A small, ugly sound came out. The sort of sound someone choking on a chicken bone might make. It was barely audible, but it froze them both like a bloodcurdling scream.

The physical pain it set off was dulled by drugs, still it felt like a chunk of red-hot asphalt had been dragged up her windpipe. But that pain was noth-ing compared to finally hearing what was left of what she'd once had. The first subsided, but the other echoed on and on and on.

"God, Taz, don't try to talk!" Cass begged, snatching up her free hand. "Please."

"She's right. Please don't try to, um, speak," said somebody off on her other side.

This new voice was thin and reedy. Topaz rolled her head away from Cass and toward its source. A short, chubby, stoop-shouldered man in baggy green scrubs and an oversized white coat stood in the hospital room's doorway. Thick-lensed granny glasses perched on his snub nose, magnifying watery blue eyes. A shaggy head of ginger hair stuck up in every direction.

"That's Dr. Braddock," Cass ex-plained. "Best throat surgery special-ist in the city. He operated on

you. Saved your life."

Braddock looked down. "Actually your, um, manager saved your life," he mumbled. "I just did some, ah, re-pair." He came into the room and ap-proached her bedside diffidently, looking unsure he really belonged there. "Sorry it took so long to get here."

After first giving Topaz a tentative smile, he probed the thick bandages swaddling her neck with long deli-cate fingers. "Are you OK with how much this, well, hurts?"

Topaz replied with the ghost of a shrug.

"It's going to. You took one hell of a, ah, whack."

The sense-memory of it whispered through her, making her shiver. Brad-dock opened his mouth, probably to tell her what he had done to her and how. Topaz pulled her hand free of Cass' grasp and held it up. *Wait.*

"Yes?"

Although certain she already knew the answer to the only question that mattered, she went through the mo-tions and asked it the only way she could. She put her hand to her chest, then swept it outward, opening her mouth wide at the same time.

Braddock looked pained. "The blow crushed your larynx. Three years ago that would have meant it had to be, um, completely removed. I was able to, well, sort of *uncrush* it instead. But to do so I had to remove your vocal cords."

Topaz stared at him, wordlessly de-manding that he finish pronouncing her death sentence.

He shook his head sadly. "No," he said, his thin voice gentle but firm. "You won't be able to sing again."

Knowing it had made her feel like her life had ended, but hearing it said out loud had the chilling finality of a coffin lid slamming shut over her. She turned her head to stare up at the ceiling. His words rang in her ears as she closed her eyes, willing Cass and everything else to go away. She gath-ered up a bight of blanket in her free hand, trying to hold on.

After a minute she heard Braddock's soft, apologetic voice. "I think maybe we should, um, give her some time alone. Let her sleep."

She heard Cass sigh, then felt her hand close around her fist. "**T**ll be back later, Taz. You hang in there, kid. Try to rest. We'll beat this somehow, I know we will."

Her hand was released. She heard them leave the room.

She bit her lip, eyes squeezed shut so hard they hurt.

You won't be able to sing again.

There was no keeping back the scalding tear that broke free from one eye and burned its way down her cheek. More followed it.

Topaz cried herself to sleep, weep-ing with the arid silence of a dry riv-erbed mourning the chuckling, tum-bling waters which had once filled banks now doomed to dust and memory.

A Voice is Silenced

Sylvester Byrne, special to USA Today

If you are going to write about popu-lar music here are two things you must be able to do:

Find gold among the dross.

Write eulogies.

When it comes to gold among the dross, the disproportionately high per-centage of the best music

of the last half of this century has come from women. They have given us works of honesty and originality, works that touched the heart and tested the limits and tickled the brain. Works which have, and will, continue to stand the test of time.

Some of these women have become famous. Others are appreciated only by a discerning few. The best art is not always the most popular.

When we lose one of these artists, these voices, the world becomes a poorer place, no matter if it is thousands or millions who mourn.

The singer, songwriter, and musician Topaz Baldwin had earned her place as one of the brightest lights in this constellation. Critically acclaimed from the very first, she has over the course of seven albums come up from a life of club-dates and crumbs to gain a comfortable level of fortune and fame. A wider audience and bigger money can be the artistic kiss of death in the music business, but Topaz avoided that pitfall by never letting her music—or her-self—become product.

Just thirty and at the top of her form, her career promised to be long and brilliant. All that ended when yesterday, one of the darker trappings of fame got her.

I was eighteen and working for a college newspaper when Janis Joplin died. It was then that I wrote my first eulogy. In the many years since I've had to practice that sad craft far too often.

But how do I write a eulogy for an artist who still lives?

I am certain you have heard by now that Topaz was attacked yesterday afternoon by a demented fan, a man named Charles S. Norlitz. He screamed at her that she had not answered his love letters, pulled a baseball bat out of his coat, and struck her in the neck with it. Cassandra Morgenstern, Topaz's manager, tackled the man and prevented him from delivering a second, perhaps killing blow. I am certain you know about this tragic event because Topaz's modest fame, and the fact that the station's promotions manager caught the whole ugly event on tape, have guaranteed a fire-storm of publicity.

Ms. Morgenstern saved her client's life a second time. Partially trained but never qualified as an EMT, she pinned the singer to the sidewalk, cut a hole in the base of her throat with a pocketknife and inserted a soda straw. That straw allowed Topaz to start breathing again, and kept her breathing until an ambulance arrived some ten minutes later.

Thanks to those heroic acts Topaz is still alive. In a short statement delivered by her manager and a hospital spokesman early this morning, we learned that she is in stable condition. But a description of her injury and the surgery she underwent made it painfully obvious that she would never sing again.

Topaz was much more than just another female vocalist. Her fluid, distinctive piano and synthesizer playing is unmistakable. Because of it she has been voted *Keyboard Magazine's* Player of the Year four out of the last seven years.

Every song she has ever written and recorded has been crafted with intelligence and passion and precision: *Storm; You, My Love; Moonbather's Rhapsody; Cold Hard Hand of Rape; My Robot Self; All Fall Down*. A dozen or more other songs spring to mind. Yet as good as her songs are, they are rarely covered by other recording artists.

That is because no one could sing them better. Topaz had the sort of voice that comes along only once in a generation, a voice of uncanny range and flexibility. While in it one can hear echoes of such disparate artists as Barbara Striesand, Kate Bush, Joni Mitchell, Patsy Cline, Enya, and Aretha Franklin; her voice was hers and hers alone.

Now that voice has been cruelly silenced.

I hope she continues to write songs. If she keeps on showing us life and love through her eyes we will all be a little less blind. If she continues making the music she alone can make the world will be a little less discordant.

The voice of Topaz Baldwin has been stilled, and yet I hope it is too early to write her eulogy. I have

this feeling that only she can help us endure the silence.

Cass dropped the paper across her knees, let her head slump back and closed her eyes. She made a mental note to give Sly Byrne a call. He'd managed to put into words some of what she'd been feeling and unable to express.

—*Help us endure the silence.*

Seeing Taz attacked had scared the hell out of her. Seeing her flopping helplessly on the grimy sidewalk like a fish out of water, strangling to death before her eyes had scared her worse than that. Putting a knife to her throat and willing her hand to bear down had been scarier yet.

But seeing the hopeless emptiness behind Taz's eyes had made all that seem like mild anxiety. It had taken every ounce of strength and courage left in her to face it without flinching.

Cass knew Taz better than anyone else in the whole world. She'd seen her come unstrung before, like when both her parents had died in that plane crash some four years back. That had been bad, but nothing like this.

She had gone past despair and into a far odd place Cass had seen once before. That same look had been in Nat Brolin's eyes shortly after the bassist's HIV had turned into full-blown AIDS, and just days before he'd killed himself with a massive over-dose of heroin. Nat, a Mr. Clean who wouldn't even take aspirin.

Was Taz capable of doing some-thing like that?

Just a day ago she would have laughed and said *No. Never.*

But that was then and this was now. That schmuck with the bat had started a whole new ball game.

Cass sighed, rolling her aching shoulders. She still hadn't slept, and couldn't remember ever feeling this tired. Her brain felt bruised and stu-pid, her emotions ground down to gravel.

A glance at her watch told her it was late enough in the day to call Nevada. It was time to ante up or fold.

She heaved herself out of the chair with a groan and helped herself to yet another cup of the bad coffee from the pot set up in the nurses' lounge they were letting her use as an office. Making a face at the first bitter sip, she carried it over to the window and parked a meaty hip on the wide sill. After opening the window and light-ing a forbidden cigarette she pulled her phone out of her pocket and placed the call.

It was a long shot, but if she was going to be forced to endure the si-lence it would only be after she had done everything in her power to break it. Starting *now*.

Topaz leaned back against the pil-lows, staring dully at the device propped against her thighs. She had to peer down over her nose because the thick padded collar around her neck prevented her from tipping her head forward.

Called a talkboard, it was a putty-colored steel-cased keyboard about the size of one used with a desktop computer. The letter and number keys were of the standard size and layout. Above them was a long strip of red LED readout. On the right, in place of a numeric keypad, was a tog-gle marked WORD/SENTENCE, a sliding volume control and a black-grilled speaker. On the left, instead of function keys were twenty square touchpads, each labeled with a single word.

It had taken the aide who had brought it to her less than five min-utes to show her how it operated. He'd left only after she'd promised to practice with it.

She tapped one of the touchpads on the left.

"Help," it said in a soft robotic voice.

Both her arms were free now, and she'd spent half of her life working with a MIDI setup.

Touchtyping was a breeze. She hammered four keys in quick succession, then hit SPEAK

"Shit," the talkboard said tonelessly, carrying none of the emphasis she wanted to put behind the word.

A nurse came out of the room across the hall, leaving the door open behind her. Topaz's skin prickled as that released the sound of her own voice, coming from a radio in the room.

"When the storm finally passes—" her voice sang in a rich deep con-tralto above the dying rumble of drums as her piano, acoustic and electric guitars, and a violin emerged from the thunder like clear blue sky from behind dark clouds.

Topaz squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head from side to side. The mocking sound of her voice beat at her ears like a bat into flesh and bone. It hurt. *Hurt.*

"—And the sky begins to clear—"

She tried to cry out but only a thin, nasal keening sound escaped her. Hardly a sound at all.

"—We gaze into each other eyes—"

She stared at the talkboard on her lap, searching for the pad she wanted, punching it. "Stop," on the board re-sponded tonelessly.

"—And it's then we realize—"

Her frantic hands found the volume control, jammed it all the way forward to maximum. She stabbed her finger down on the pad again, held it down.

"Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop," the board repeated in an idiot mono-tone, louder now, but nowhere near loud enough to drown out the hateful hurtful sound of her own voice.

She knew the part coming, remembered how great it had felt to nail it down on the very first take in the studio. The phrase *We're still here*, begun as a question down in the black velvet lower registers, turning to dawning amazement as it climbed though her middle range and all the instruments fell away below, soaring effortlessly up through soprano to a note so high and joyous and triumphant it shimmered like a star in the silence. A killer note—

—Forever beyond her dead voice now. A hiss of rage and pain and denial ripping from her aching throat, she flung the talkboard across the room. It crashed into the ranked pots and vases of flowers set up on the table opposite the foot of her bed, knocking them down like tenpins, the eloquent sound of shattering glass blotting out the cruel reminder of what she had lost.

In the other room the mocking sound of her voice died mid-note as the radio was snapped off.

"Are you all right in there?" A woman's voice called uncertainly. *"Are you all right?"*

Topaz wrapped her arms around her head, huddling around the despair churning inside, knowing she would *never* be all right.

Cass had been delighted to learn that Dr. Braddock had a secret vice. He smoked cigars.

Upon entering his office she'd been greeted by a thin blue haze layer that hung in the air despite an opened window. Braddock had apologized and offered to put his cigar out. "Are you kidding?" she asked, breathing a weed fiend's sigh of relief as she lit a cigarette and sat down. "I finally get to burn one without feeling like a goddamn criminal."

Braddock chuckled as he returned to the chair behind his untidy desk. The smile he gave her looked as tired as she felt.

"Sorry it took so long to find time to, um, talk to you. I had another emergency surgery right after your, ah, girl, then rounds, then—well, I've been kind of busy."

Cass blew a stream of smoke into the air. "So I've heard. You look like you belong home in bed. I won't hang you up long, Doc. There's just a couple things I want to talk about."

"Take your time, Ms. Morgenstern." He gestured with his cigar. "I plan to um, finish this before I go any-where."

Still, Cass wanted to get right down to business. "Taz isn't doing too hot," she said heavily. "Losing her voice stomped her flatter'n gum on a shoe."

Braddock's stooped shoulders slumped even lower than normal. He rubbed his stubbly chin, then peered slantwise at her through his thick round lenses. "What, um, time is it?"

Cass checked her watch. "A couple minutes after five. Why?"

Instead of answering he ducked down and began rummaging through his desk drawers, at last resurfacing with a quart bottle of Wild Turkey and two paper cups. "I believe you and I have earned a snort, um, Ms. Morgenstern."

"Call me Cass, Dr. Braddock," she said, liking this disheveled little man's style more all the time. It was even her favorite tipple.

"Dr. Braddock is off duty. I'm, um, Sid." He poured a liberal portion into each cup, then pushed one across the desk toward her. She picked it up, saluted him with it, and knocked it back in a single gulp. After a mo-ment's hesitation he did the same.

"Thanks, Sid," she said when it hit bottom. "I needed that."

He grinned at her shyly, his eyes watering. "You earned it. Like I said before, you saved her life, um, Cass. Intubating her like that took one hell of a lot of, well, nerve."

"You're telling me. I just about turned my favorite Victoria's Secret ecru panties yellow doing it. I started EMT training a few years back, but had to quit when we went on tour. Kept up on my reading, though. But do you want to know what really pulled me through?"

"What?"

"That 'M*A*S*H' rerun where Fa-ther Mulcahy had to do the same thing. I saw it on the tube last week while I was waiting for Taz to finish an interview." She snorted. "I guess that makes me a TV doctor." Al-though she made light of it, remem-bering putting a knife to Taz's throat made her insides clench and her palms break into a sweat all over again.

"I believe you still have to do an aspirin commercial to, ah, qualify for your degree," Sid explained as he re-filled their cups. He slumped back in his chair. After taking a tiny sip he met Cass' gaze. "I agree with you. She has not taken this well. I've ordered passive monitoring around the clock in case she tries something, um, rash. As for that incident this afternoon, well, I suppose I should've expected a rock star to break up her room."

"She's not a rock star," Cass cor-rected automatically. She made a face. "Sorry. Pigeonholing is the kiss of death in the music business."

"None intended." He inspected the glowing tip of his cigar. "I've been trying to imagine what it must be like for her. Losing the ability to speak is a devastating blow in and of itself. She has lost not only that, but something even more precious."

He shifted uneasily, still not look-ing at her. "I'm quite familiar with her music. She sang like a bird flies. There was an ease, a *tightness* about it. When you heard her you knew it wasn't just something she did, but what she *was*."

He blinked up at her, blushing slightly. "If you, um, know what I mean..."

Cass smiled back at him. Taz's mu-sic left its mark on people; she proba-bly knew that better than anybody. She had to wonder if it was the Wild Turkey making his speech less uncer-tain, or that old Cass Magic. That was one of the curses of her life. When she wasn't into ball-busting bulldoz-ing manager mode, people—well, *men*—found her comfortable.

Like an old overstuffed sofa.

"Believe me Sid, I know. I've de-voted the last ten years of my life to making sure Taz could sing and play what she wanted, the way she wanted, when and where she wanted. I've fought record labels, A&R men, radio programmers, concert promot-ers, publicity flacks—I've gone toe to toe with anyone and anything that tried to get in her way..."

—*And so far I've won every time it counted...*

Cass felt the tears which had been building up since the moment of the attack trying to come on once more. Those were something no one was allowed to see. *No one*. She was Cass Morgenstern. Hard as nails. She knocked back the double shot left in her cup to pull herself together. Braddock waited patiently, eyes averted and puffing on his cigar.

"Let me tell you a story, Sid," she rasped, leaning forward and helping herself to a refill. "Once upon a time, in the bad old days before National Health Care, I worked the bottom line for a private hospital system. I was doing my best to help turn health care into a highly profitable luxury commodity and make the good old US of A an awful place to be sick if you were poor. They called me the Terminator. I had an MBA and a BMW and I was on my way up the corporate ladder, each rung a pile of bodies."

Her voice dropped lower. "Then I met Taz. She was playing at this dumpy little club a lawyer friend of mine owned as a tax sump and pri-vate hunting preserve for nookie. I heard her and I was, well, *moved*. No backup. No lights. With nothing more than her voice and her words and a beat-up old electric piano she reached right out and broke my smug little world into pieces.

"I asked my friend about her. He laughed and told me he'd hired her just a couple-three days before, and already she was packing the place. Best of all, he'd been able to chisel her down to thirty bucks for three one-hour sets each night. He was so *proud* of himself, like he'd found a cure for cancer or something.

"Well, when her first set was over I screwed up my courage and asked her if she maybe needed or wanted a manager."

Cass stared past Sid, through the window behind him, looking back to a night she could still remember more clearly than she could remem-ber any day of last week. "We sat at the bar and talked. When she went back on stage to do her next set I sat there and listened, getting scareder and scareder by the second. All I could think about was how I *had* to be a part of what she was doing. It wasn't like I was thinking *I can get rich off this chick*, it was like I found Jesus and had to become a disciple. When her last set was over we talked until closing. In the end she told me I could be her manager—if I could prove I understood the things we'd been talking about."

Cass lit a fresh cigarette. One part of her wondered why she was telling him all this, but another knew that it was so he would understand pre-cisely where she stood. Braddock waited for her to continue, radiating a patient interest that helped her go on. He was a good listener. She couldn't remember the last time she'd shared any of this with anyone.

"Taz has some...limitations. She's terrible with money. She's incapable of keeping to a schedule on her own. Her love life has been one disaster after another—nearly as bad as my own. One thing and one thing only is important to her, and that's *her mu-sic*. That first night she told me the music always had to come first. If she made money, fine, but she had no in-tention of cashing in on fads or gim-micks, or having her tits and ass be what people came to see. If I wanted to be her manager I had to prove I understood that. So I did."

Braddock raised his shaggy ginger eyebrows. "What did you do, Cass?"

Few men would ever call Cass Morgenstern pretty, but the radiant smile that dawned on her face made her beautiful. "I met her at the bar that next night, sat her down at a table, put my MBA in the ashtray between us and set fire to it."

Sid guffawed, slapping his hand on the table. "Beautiful. I take it that did the trick?"

Cass nodded. "That was the begin-ning of our partnership. By the end of her first set that night I'd

nailed my schmuck friend to the wall and gotten her \$200 a night starting that evening and for the rest of the week, and \$400 a night if she decided to grace his dump with her presence a second week. Within two days I'd given all my Dress for Success suits to the Sal-vation Army, traded in my Beamer on a red metalflake Caddy hearse with her name lettered on the side, and maxxed out my Visa and American Express on new clothes and equip-ment for her."

Braddock leaned forward, elbows on the desk. "That's a wonderful story, Cass. I'm really glad you shared it with me. But what is it you're trying to lead up to?"

This guy's one hell of a lot sharper than he looks or acts, Cass thought, pleased by his directness. She sat up straight and looked him in the eye.

"The night I burned my old life I made a vow to do everything I could to help Taz make her music. No con-ditions. No excuses." Her smile was gone now. "I intend to keep doing that."

"She can still compose and play," he said gently, "But there's just no way she'll ever sing again."

Cass shook her head. "That's unac-ceptable. To her, and to me."

The chubby surgeon sighed and re-filled their cups. "I think I understand how you feel, but it simply isn't possi-ble. She no longer has the necessary equipment. Her vocal cords are gone, and there's no such thing as a practi-cal artificial substitute."

"Not as such," Cass agreed. She made a face, too tired to dance around the matter any longer. "Hell. Look Sid, let me lay out what I have in mind and you tell me what you think."

He spread his hands. "Tell away."

"First, I want to get her out of here before the media and her fans trash the place."

"Security has had its hands full," he admitted. "Though those people you called in have been a lot of help."

"I want to take her out of here by helicopter tomorrow, put her on a private jet and take her to Nevada."

"Tomorrow is too soon." There wasn't a hint of uncertainty in his voice. "Far too soon."

Cass waved his objection aside. "Then as soon as it is safely possible." She pulled out a fresh cigarette and fired it up, waiting to see if he asked the obvious question. He did.

"Why Nevada?"

She blew out a cloud of smoke. "That's where the Skyler Institute is."

Braddock grimaced at the name. Cass had been more or less expecting this reaction. "You've heard of the place, then?"

"I have," he began cautiously.

Cass held up her hand. "Look, I know Skyler's rep. He's a gelt and glory hound. He tries to bill himself as the 'Edison of Physiological Re-em-powerment'—there's a term to make you want to puke—but what he's re-ally after is big bucks and fame. The guy's a greedy asshole out to get rich off the handicapped. His ethics suck, no doubt about it. Some of the dem-onstrations of work done there have been in piss-poor taste. Any pros-thetic devices or approaches that come out of the place have his name plastered all over them and are li-censed to the highest bidder. But—" she held up a finger to forestall argu-ment, "—some of the best people in the field are working for him. He rips them off, but he also bankrolls them to try things few other places would. I know one of the people who works there, a friend of mine from college. Dr. Woodrow Entwistle."

"I've heard of him," Braddock put in. "Using computers to help people regain the power of speech. He helped develop the talkboard."

"That's him. If anybody can help Taz sing again, it's Woody."

Cass watched Sid nod and consider his words carefully before speaking. "I can understand your

determina-tion to help your friend any way you can, Cass. Although I have some, ah, reservations about implanting chips and electrodes in people, I admit that there aren't many other options avail-able. But as I understand it, getting into one of Skyler's programs is quite difficult. What makes you think you even can?"

"Sid," Cass said with a throaty chuckle, "That was the *easy* part. Taz is famous and there's no way Skyler could pass up a chance to suck up some publicity. But I wanted this to be low profile, so I had to use another lever. I called Woody. He'd already heard about what happened to Taz, I guess everyone has. When I asked him if he could help her, he explained how he could probably make it so she can talk again."

"There's a big difference between talking and singing," Braddock pointed out gently.

Cass nodded. "That's what Woody said. But while he was explaining what it is he does, I got this weird flash that there *was* a way. It's gone now, but I figure I've got the time it takes to get her talking again to figure it out. Anyway, I told Woody I wanted him to work with Taz. When he started to hem and haw I told him to go see Skyler, tell him what I want, and explain that I'd settle two million bucks on his pointy head the day Taz was admitted with no publicity, and a few other conditions I laid out in a fax."

Cass could see that Braddock was impressed. She waved a hand dismissively. "I know that sounds like a lot of money, but I'm prepared to pony up every nickel Taz and I have between us if that's what it takes." In one way they were already halfway there, but that was nobody's business but her own.

Braddock shook his head, gazing at Cass in open admiration. "You misun-derstand me. It's not the money that impresses me—though you did use a pretty big stick to get Skyler's atten-tion. It's *you*. You really do refuse to accept what's happened, and you're prepared to move Heaven and Earth if that's what it takes to change it."

"Goddamn right I am." She gave him a warning look. "And I'll ride roughshod over anyone dumb enough to get in my way."

Braddock held up his hands palms out in a placating gesture. "Don't worry, as long as you don't try to move her too soon you'll have my full cooperation." He dropped his hands. "So tell me, did your friend take your proposal to Skyler?"

"He sure did."

"What happened?"

"Skyler called me back less than an hour later. All I have to do is make one call and he'll have his private jet on its way here to get us."

"You're betting everything on this working, aren't you?"

Cass shrugged. "Hey, it's the only game in town."

"What happens if you lose?"

"I don't intend to."

"Is Ms. Baldwin aware of your plans for her?"

"Not yet."

"What if she won't go?"

Cass smiled. "Oh, she'll go. Even if I have to hog-tie her, stuff her in a canvas sack, and carry her there over my shoulder."

"Have you ever, um, dated a doctor?"

"No, I—" Cass caught herself, stared at him. "What?"

Braddock lowered his eyes, chubby cheeks coloring. "I have this, um, thing about, ah, Junoesque women who aren't afraid to, well, say and try to get what they want," he stammered.

Cass heaved her Junoesque—now wasn't that a way cool word?—body out of her chair, eyeing

Braddock with amusement. And a bit of speculation. What he lacked in size he made up for in cute. And a doctor. God knows her mother would have approved.

"Tell you what, Doc. After all of this is over we could give it a try if you're still interested." She tossed off the dregs in her cup and ground out her cigarette. "But let me warn you, I'm nearly twice your size and I've got enough of that attitude for any four normal women."

Braddock stood up and shyly offered his hand. When she took it he met her gaze, an interesting gleam in his eye.

"All the more reason," he said.

Topaz had been just lying there on her bed and staring at nothing—contemplating her future—when Cass came in. The big woman dropped into the chair beside the bed.

One look and she knew that Cass still hadn't slept yet. She looked dead on her feet, her eyes sunken and her normally ruddy complexion almost gray with fatigue.

Sighing because she hated the thing, Topaz dragged the talkboard off the bedside table and onto her lap. The device had been built to endure frustration, and had survived its crash landing intact.

She switched the board over to sentence mode. It didn't take long to type in what she wanted to say. A double click of the SPEAK button completed the sentence.

"Go to bed Cass."

Cass gave her a tired smile. "Soon, Taz. There's just one last thing I have to do first."

Topaz arched an eyebrow in question. *What?*

"Talk to you, darlin'. Talk about what we're going to do next."

She stared at Cass, caught between anger and pity. Didn't she get it? *Nothing* happened next. No more albums. No more concerts. No more videos. No more interviews where some maniac could—

"Do you trust me, Taz?"

The question caught her off guard. After a moment she nodded. Of course she did.

"You depend on me to keep the roads open for you, and so far I've done a pretty good job, haven't I?"

Another cautious nod. Not that she disagreed with anything Cass had said, it was just that she was obviously leading up to something, and from the sound it wasn't going to be good.

Cass leaned closer, her mouth twisting like she was tasting something bitter. Topaz smelled whiskey and cigarettes.

"What's happened to you is killing me, Taz," she rasped. "I can't let it end like this. I can't—" She shook her head. "I can't endure the silence. So I've gone ahead and made a deal to take you someplace where maybe they can do something about it."

Topaz scowled and hammered out a reply on the talkboard.

"Nothing can be done about it."

Cass sat back, a grim smile appearing on her face. "Listen, honey, you said nothing could be done when your old label tried to screw you out of your third album."

She thumped her chest. "I made the bastards sorry they even tried. When that slimeball photographer hired to do the photos for your fourth album tried to sell those T&A shots he'd snuck of you changing clothes, you said nothing could be done. Those pictures got buried and buried deep. You said nothing could be done when MTV said your "Cold Hard Hand of Rape" video was too controversial to run. They gave you an award for it six months later. Your job is to make your music. My job is to make sure *nothing* gets in your way."

Her heavy brows drew down. "Some asshole tried to take your music away. I don't intend to let that happen. Do you?"

Topaz stared back at her old friend. That last had been spoken like a demand, but there was no mistaking the undertone of appeal in her voice and behind her eyes.

Still, what could she say? There was no *let* to it. When someone kills you, it's not a matter of letting yourself be dead. Singing was the mainspring which drove her music. The man with the bat had destroyed that and now her time was over.

Cass took her hand. "Don't you want to be able to talk again?"

A shrug. When your life is over you don't really have much to say, do you?

Cass' grip tightened. "Don't—" She grimaced. Her voice dropped to a gruff whisper. "Don't you want to be able to sing again?"

YES! If she could have screamed it aloud she would have been heard from one end of the hospital to the other. There could be only one answer to that question. There was a raw hole torn in her soul where singing had been, and it felt like every-thing else of any value inside her was bleeding away through it.

Cass's grip was inescapable, almost painful. "Is making your music really more important than anything else," she went on harshly, "Or have you just been bullshitting me since day one?" Her gaze bored into Topaz's eyes, making her squirm. "We made a pact back then, you and me. Are you going to break it now? Or are you going to trust me and work with me and try to *beat* this?"

Topaz looked down, absolutely lost in a tangle of contradicting thoughts and emotions. Anger. Resignation. Despair. Resentment. Desperation. Spread over them all like a suffocating blanket of darkness was this ever-growing, numbing apathy. She couldn't find it in herself to believe that the silence could be broken. Hope was beyond her.

Contemplating the blank tape her life had become spooling on out ahead, she saw that it really didn't matter what she did next. The band-wagon had hit a brick wall and not even a master fixer like Cass could patch it up and put it back on the road again.

She looked up at Cass. How badly she wanted this was written in every line of her face. It took her back to when Cass had first appeared at the foot of the stage and nervously asked if she needed or wanted a manager.

For ten years now Cass had asked for little and never refused her any-thing that really mattered. Had never failed her.

She gave a resigned nod. If nothing else, she could oblige for old times' sake. Besides, Cass would just keep hassling her until she gave in, and all she really wanted was to be left alone. Give in. Go through the motions. She didn't have the energy to fight.

Cass closed her eyes, and for just a second Topaz thought the big woman was going to cry. For all the time they had been together she had never once seen Cass cry. Not over men, not over the loss of friends to AIDS and age and accident and a lifestyle that treated people like crash test dummies.

After a few seconds Cass opened her eyes again, producing something like a smile. "Thanks, Taz," she said gruffly, giving her hand one last squeeze before standing. "You get some rest now. I'll see you in the morning. If you want me, the hospital switchboard will put you through to my phone. I've reserved a room at the Ramada right across the street."

Topaz watched her leave, walking very slowly and carefully, as if there were some great weight balanced on her broad shoulders. When the door closed behind her she turned her eyes toward the ceiling, sinking back into the black muck of despair.

Cass lowered herself into the tub of scalding hot water cautiously, hoping it would leach enough tension out of her body to let her sleep. Once she was sitting down she took a less than dainty sip of the straight

bourbon in one hand, then settled back with a groan.

"Cassandra Morgenstern," she said, her voice sounding hollow and portentous in the tiled bathroom. "Big bad hard-ass Cass."

Another sip. She closed her eyes.

"What the hell have you done?"

Ah, but she knew exactly what she had done. Bulldozed Taz into going along with her hare-brained scheme by promising the impossible, even knowing what failure could cost.

She drained the glass and put it aside.

Then there in the safety of a locked bathroom in a locked hotel room, she finally gave in to doubt.

She finally gave in to tears.

The huge, rambling, red-tile roofed Spanish style structure which housed the Skyler Institute was located in north central Nevada, about twenty miles west of Winnemucca near the Little Humboldt River. It had been built in the thirties as a very private, very exclusive, very expensive sanitarium. In the late fifties it had been converted to a fat farm and spa for the same class of clientele.

In the early eighties it had been turned into a place for high rollers to get a handle on their coke habits. Unfortunately this clientele's bill-paying habits turned out to be as erratic as their commitment to a drug-free lifestyle. Henry Skyler, who had gotten his start not in science or medicine but real estate, had snapped the place up for next to nothing from its all but bankrupt former owners.

Exactly one week to the day after she had been attacked, Topaz and Cass were escorted into the sunny second-floor suite of rooms where they would be staying by one of Skyler's aides. Their suite was one of a dozen he kept for important clients and prospective investors.

Cass shooed the woman off, then wheeled Topaz into the center of the sitting room. Open and airy, it had been decorated in a southwestern motif. "Well, that was one hell of a ride," she said, beginning to prowl the room. "Sure glad it's over."

Topaz had to agree. Her face was pale and drained, her eyes smudged with exhaustion. She hadn't been particularly happy about Dr. Braddock's insistence that she use a wheelchair for the trip. But after boarding a heli-copter on the hospital's rooftop heli-pad, riding in it out to New Jersey, transferring to a waiting Lear Jet, crossing the country, then boarding another 'copter for the ride out here to the middle of nowhere, she was glad she had it.

The talkboard was clipped to one arm of the wheelchair. She tapped out a reply. "Star treatment. I'm surprised Skyler didn't meet us himself."

Cass snorted, looking up from her inspection of the videophone. "He's probably sulking. I told him one peep of publicity and I'd knock half a mil off his 'contribution,' and that if he kept out of our faces I'd sweeten the pot by the same amount. I imagine he's holed up in his office right now counting his money and chewing on his own liver."

Topaz tapped out a question which had been on her mind. "Did I really have two million dollars, Cass?" It hardly seemed possible. She knew she made money, but that much? Cass gave her financial statements quarterly, but to be honest she had never looked at them. If she wanted something expensive she asked Cass, who then bought it for her if she could afford it.

Cass didn't answer immediately. She headed over to the small wet-bar set up just beyond the heavy, dark wood, ersatz-rustic table and chair set. Ducking down, she peered into the small built-in fridge.

"All right, they got one thing right," she said, pulling out a beer and a Diet Pepsi. She searched the bar with a frown. "No straws," she muttered darkly, reaching inside the pocket of her black denim jacket and getting one. The straw went into the soda, which she brought to Topaz, who took it gratefully.

The big brace was off her neck now, but it was still stiff and sore. Straws made drinking easier. One small square bandage covered the healing hole at the base of her throat. The surgery itself had been done by going down her throat through her mouth, and using a lot of scary sound-ing instruments whose names began with *tracheo-* or *laryngeo-*.

Cass twisted the top off her beer, took a swig. "You've got quite a bit more than two mil stashed away," she said at last. "Don't go worrying about what this is costing. OK?"

"Is insurance covering it?"

"It's covered. Leave it at that."

Taz shook her head. "I want to kn-ow." Cass was hiding something, and she wanted to find out what it was.

Cass sighed. "I'm picking up the tab, OK?"

"You had that much money?"

Cass only shrugged. Topaz started to get angry. "Well?"

"I had about a million three I could lay hands on fast." Cass answered in a flat, inflectionless voice. "OK?"

Money—especially large sums of it—had never been particularly real to Topaz. Still, she could add. "Wh-ere did the rest come from?"

Cass frowned at her beer bottle. "If you must know, Gabe Wickenstahl of Plutonium Cream Pie has been after me to sell him my place ever since he came to that party I threw last year. I gave him a call."

Topaz stared at her. She started to speak, caught herself, typed it out in-stead. "You sold your house? Why?"

"Hey, it's an investment, OK?" Cass answered gruffly. "What the hell good are you to me like this?"

Topaz knew she was joking. Any other time she might have laughed, but at that moment it hit hard enough to bruise bone. It had a cruel ring of truth to it. It gave a shape to the dif-fused resentment she'd been feeling about being made to come here when all she really wanted to do was crawl into a hole and die.

An uneasy silence reigned until she broke it by saying, "I'm tired," through the talkboard.

"Jesus, you must be," Cass said, looking relieved. She put her beer aside and pushed her into one of the suite's two bedrooms. Topaz let her-self be helped out of the chair and into the bed, biting her lip and re-senting being treated like a child or a cripple.

Cass closed the drapes to shut out the late afternoon sun. "You rest here a while, love. If you want anything, I'll just be in the next room." She reached into the side-pocket of her jacket and pulled out a chrome-plated whistle. "Just give this a toot and I'll come running."

Topaz nodded. Cass put the whistle on the bedside table, then went back into the other room, leaving the door open a crack behind her.

Topaz stared at the door, her lips pressed together in dull-edged anger.

What the hell good are you to me like this?

That's how it felt. Since the attack walls had come up between them. There was still a door, but it was clos-ing more every day. Well, a lot of doors had closed since then...

Her eyes dropped shut. So tired. Her thoughts slumping into a muddy jumble. She tried to pry them open again, not wanting to let herself fall asleep.

That was where the man with the bat waited for her.

Cass hooked another beer, then parked herself at the videophone. She found the inhouse number she

wanted in her notebook and punched it in. **ONE MOMENT PLEASE** appeared on the paperback-sized screen. Bad tinkly Muzak cut in.

She tipped her head back and took a long swallow of beer. The Muzak stopped. When she lowered the bottle and looked at the screen again Woody Entwhistle was grinning up at her on it.

"Cassster! You made it!"

She smiled back at him. "The big-assed bird has landed." Although they had kept in touch by the odd mid-night phone call, it had to be at least six years since she had last seen him. He appeared to have changed little from when she had met him at USC. A little less hair, but not much. "You look good, Woods."

He leered at her, "So do you, babe."

She snorted. "Yeah, right. I've dropped ten pounds in the last week, and it all seems to have come from the only place I can't afford to lose it—namely my tits." She shrugged. "Look, we can get together and compare middle age later. Are you ready to start working with Taz?"

Woody's smile softened. "Same old Cass. All business." He shook his head. "I remember the first time you saw a surfboard. You asked me which made the most money, renting or selling them."

"That's me," Cass agreed glumly. "The soul of a cash register."

"Cass," Woody said gently, "I'm not kicking sand. I know this is really mega-important to you. You've put yourself out on a limb with this."

"I hope you're not afraid of heights, Woody, because I've brought you out here with me. I told Taz we'll be able to help her sing again."

He winced. "Yow."

She nodded. "You're telling me."

He raked his fingers through his hair, looking decidedly unhappy. "I thought you understood that I can't do that. Talk, yes. Sing? No can do. We're just not there yet. We're not even close."

"I know. Believe me, I know. But it was the only way I could get her to come. And the thing is, that first time I called something you said rang a bell. It was just a flash, and it's gone now. Hell, it was in and out of my head so fast I sometimes wonder if it was even there." She took a deep breath. "But I'm willing to bet there is a way, and we can find it."

"So you shelled out two million bucks to bring her here and promised she could sing again all on a hunch?"

She met his gaze squarely. "Yes."

He chuckled, shaking his head in amazement. "You got balls you could like bowl with, lady. That's one hell of a gamble."

"More than you know." Never once in the time she'd known Taz had she ever promised something she couldn't deliver. This would be the worst possible time to let her down. Failure would equal a betrayal of trust. It would be devastating, plating her despair in iron.

"Your idea's still hiding?" Woody asked.

Cass rubbed her tired eyes. She had a splitting headache, jet lag, and she felt old. Forty going on four hundred. "You could park cars in my brain."

"Bummer. So the plan is to start with what we can do and hope you catch a wave for the rest, right?"

"That's it."

"Does she know what it is we'll be doing?"

"She hasn't asked. I don't think she cares."

"Do you think she'll be cooper-ative?"

Cass glanced towards Topaz's bed-room. "I doubt it. She's down. Real down. Figures she's already beaten."

"Do you know what you're doing, Cass?"

Cass drained her beer before an-swering. "I'm beginning to wonder."

The next morning Topaz found breakfast waiting for her, and Cass gone. A note propped against the cof-fee butler only said that she would catch up with her later on.

A chesty redhead in a pink blouse and slacks turned up a few minutes later, saying she was supposed to take her to the Speech Lab. Her name tag read *Candy*. The name fit.

Obviously awed by meeting the actual Topaz Baldwin, she more begged than insisted that Topaz ride in the wheelchair. Once they were out the door and in the red-tiled hallways she launched into a disjointed, gum-cracking explanation of what went on in the various parts of the Institute and which of the male staff and pa-tients were like total steaks and which were like weenies.

Topaz let herself be pushed along, Candy's babble going in one ear and out the other. The talkboard was clipped to the arm of her chair, but it was too much trouble to tell her to shut up. Her journey ended at the north wing of the first floor, in front of a set of wide double doors. A plate by the doorframe read:

SPEECH LAB

Dr. Woodrow Entwistle/Dr. Sarah Bright.

"Woody's like a total berg," Candy confided conspiratorially before opening one of the doors and wheel-ing her inside. "Ms. Baldwin is here," she called cheerily as they entered. "Are you here, Dr. E?"

The speech lab turned out to be a large, high-ceilinged room illumi-nated by the morning sun pouring in tinted floor to ceiling windows. Spread through the left side of the room were randomly placed and sized low-walled work areas filled with computers and other electronic equipment. Perhaps a dozen casually dressed people were at work in them.

On the right was a larger work-space with as many plants as ma-chines. The woman working inside looked up and smiled. Nearby was what looked like some sort of sound-proof booth, and a long low workbench covered with tools and com-plicated looking test equipment.

"Yo!" There was a long low worktable straight ahead. A man's head ap-peared to one side of an oversized computer monitor. "Over here!" He disappeared as Candy wheeled her closer. A half-dozen computers and other pieces of unidentifiable equip-ment covered the table, a thicket of cables hanging to the floor. There were wooden tubs at either end of the table, each one home to a potted palm whose green umbrella top was a good eight feet above the floor. Standing guard by the base of each palm was a pink plastic flamingo.

The man appeared again, "Thanks, Candee. I'll take it from here."

Topaz heard the aide giggle and walk away. She sat there staring at the man behind the table, wondering if he could possible be Dr. Entwistle. The title *Doctor* and the fact that he ran one part of a research facility had given her certain expectations of what he would look like. They were not being met.

"Give me one more sec here," he said, flashing her a toothy, hundred-kilowatt grin before looking down and tapping something into an un-seen keyboard. "There. The Mario Brothers are on their own for a while."

She was momentarily confused when he started coming around the table without standing up first, but when he rounded the corner she saw that he too was in a wheelchair.

From the waist up he was an al-bum-cover perfect California surf-bum; tanned, muscular arms and chest, faded Vuarnet tank-top, square-jawed face with blue eyes and perfect white teeth framed by a shoulder-length mane of slightly receding, sun-bleached blond hair. It seemed im-possible that anyone named Dr. Ent-whistle would wear a gold earring. He had four in his left ear.

A wide waist-strap held him in his chair. His ragged cut-offs suited him, but the body below the strap seemed to belong to a whole other person. His legs were tanned, but both were badly twisted and scarred. One was at least six inches shorter than the other.

He rolled to a stop and held out his hand. "Hi! I'm Woody Entwhistle. And you are the one and only Topaz Baldwin." He chuckled. "You proba-bly already knew that."

Topaz nodded uncertainly, keeping her hands on her lap.

He turned the attempted hand-shake into a broad inclusive wave of his hand. "We're all pretty pumped about having you here." He laughed and shook his head. "Let me tell you, the Cass-Lass really turned this place on its ear. When I hit the Hankster with her deal he nearly flipped out. Two million bucks and a chance to get his hooks on the one and only Topaz Baldwin? Man, he thought he'd died and gone to Fort Knox. Then he found out he couldn't suck any pub-licity out of it..." An amused shake of the head. "Dude turned three shades of purple and just about swal-lowed his tongue."

Not knowing what else to do, she shrugged.

"Right, right. You don't know the Hankmeister well enough to know why that's funny. But trust me, it is."

Topaz looked around the room again, then bent over her talkboard and typed out a question. "What are you going to do to me?"

He crossed his muscular arms, beaming at her. "Try to fix it so you can talk without your fingers having to walk."

She picked out another question, not hitting the SPEAK button until she was looking him in the eye. "Will I ever sing again?"

His smile faltered. "I can't promise that."

"Cass says I'm going to."

"Cass is one determined lady," he said carefully. "What do you think?"

Topaz sighed. She hammered out her answer, striking the keys vengefully. "No. Never." The robotic voice gave her words an air of cold finality.

"I see." He cocked his head. "What about talking? Wouldn't you like to be able to do that again?"

"It doesn't matter."

Woody appeared to ponder her an-swer for several seconds. At last he asked, "Then why did you come here?"

"Cass."

"You two are pretty tight, huh?"

"We were."

"Were as in not any more?"

She shrugged. It wasn't anything she wanted to talk about. Besides, wasn't it obvious?

"Why not?"

Her face tight with anger she pounded out an answer. He wanted to know? Then she'd tell him. "I was a singer. She was my manager. I'm no fucking good to her like this." She stared at him defiantly, daring him to argue.

"Man," he said softly, "That really sucks." He shook his head. "Well, long as you're here let's see

what we can do. The ticket's bought, might as well take the ride." He rolled his chair back and away, then bellowed, "*Sarah!*"

The woman who answered his call came out of the large workspace on her right. Tall, maybe in her late thirties, she had a model's cheekbones and straight salt and pepper hair that hung almost to the waist of her faded jeans. She sauntered over to his side. He slipped a tanned arm around her. "This is my main squeeze, Dr. Sarah Bright. Sarah, this is Topaz Baldwin."

The woman had a warm, kind smile. "Pleased to meet you, Topaz," she said. "I'm also the surf-bozo's chief collaborator and second in command."

Woody rolled his eyes. "This soon to be demoted person will explain the program to you and help you get started. OK?"

Topaz shrugged. She was beginning to realize that as long as she could do that, she was able to say what she wanted to say most of the time anyway.

Sarah detached herself from Woody, came around behind Topaz and began pushing her toward the large workspace on the right.

His smile fading, Woody propelled his wheelchair around behind the isolation booth, past the workbench and toward a door marked PRIVATE.

Cass tried to have a smile ready when Woody joined her in the observation room. None came. She turned back toward the video monitor which showed Sarah ushering Taz into her plant-filled workspace. The high camera angle and black and white picture made it look like a scene from an old *film noir*. Not a happy ending sort of flick.

"You OK, babe?" Woody asked as he maneuvered his wheelchair around behind the console beside her.

"Just ducky." That was one of the advantages of having a froggy voice like hers. It always sounded hoarse.

Woody parked his chair beside her and covered one of her hands with his own. "I don't think she really meant what she said."

"I know."

"Still it had to hurt like a bastard."

"She's really hurting. I'm her man-ager. I've got to get my percentage." She took a deep breath, shaking off his hand and swiveling her chair to face him. "OK, enough soap opera. Let's get down to business."

He shook his head. "You're really something, Cass."

"Yeah, but what?"

"Something exceptional. You really love her, don't you?"

Cass gazed at the small, unhappy woman in the wheelchair listening as Sarah began explaining what they would be doing. A big shimmering bubble of emotion swelled up inside her, making her feel helpless and lost. "Until I met her I didn't even know how to love myself," she murmured. "That's getting a lot harder to do lately."

The list just kept getting longer and longer. Promises she shouldn't have made. Bad jokes that came back sounding cruel and insensitive. Being here, hidden away, ready to lend her expertise in manipulating Taz if it was needed.

Woody patted her arm. "I think it's worth the effort."

"It's a dirty job, but I suppose somebody's gotta do it," she said, summoning up that glum wisecrack to help shake off the mood that had fallen over her. She slapped her pockets in search of her cigarettes.

Light-ing one, she drew the smoke into her lungs like it was a source of strength. Woody looked disapproving but held his tongue.

"OK, whiz-kid," she rasped through a wreath of smoke, "Walk me through the whole program. Maybe it'll shake something loose."

"One shaking coming up," he said as he turned his chair to pour two cups of coffee from the pot set up within easy reach of the line of moni-tors. He handed hers over, along with a saucer to use as an ashtray. "Which version do you want? Pure jargon, or the chopped and channeled gonzo version?"

"Better make it gonzo, but don't skimp on details. I didn't quite get all of it on the phone."

"An excellent choice, madam." He took a sip of his coffee. "Here we go. Speech is a mucho complicated pro-cess. Sarah and my work is with *artic-ulation*, the physiological end of speech. Putting aside the way hard question of how words and phrases are mentally processed—and we might as well 'cause we really don't know do-wah diddley about it—we're still left with a whole lot of dif-ferent processes working together all at once. Pick a word, any word."

Cass swallowed a mouthful of cof-fee. "Uh, word."

"Smartass. OK class, let's produce the word *word*. Act one: a column of air is pushed up through the wind-pipe and into the voicebox. There it's forced through the vocal cords to make a sound. Now these guys are very thin and elastic, and when air is forced through them they vibrate—"

"Like making a Junior Mints box hum."

Woody laughed. "Right. Only they can be controlled to raise or lower the frequency by changing the size of the opening and the amount of ten-sion on them."

Cass nodded. "That's where Taz's problem is. Her voicebox was crushed. Sid Braddock was able to, um, uncrush it, but to do so he had to remove her vocal cords and take away the strain they put on it."

"You got it. She's like a wind instru-ment that's lost its reed. Now there's more to this part, like the larynx mov-ing up and down to change the size of the resonating chamber of the pharynx and further altering the tone, but we'll move on now to the really tricky part. That happens in the mouth.

"For speech to be more than hums and grunts it has to be shaped. To do that we use the mouth—lips, teeth, palate, even our old friend the glottis. But this part of the speaking process is a lot like French-kissing. The tongue's what makes it happen. Now what was our word, class?"

"Word."

"Say it verrrrry slowly, and pay close attention to what goes on as you do."

Cass did as he said. The *w* sound had her pursing and then opening her lips, the sound buzzing over top of her tongue. The *or* sound hauled her tongue back and down, only to have it head for the roof of her mouth and hit the part of her palate just over her front teeth as it started the *d*, flipping back and her mouth opening as she finished it.

"Neat, huh?" Woody asked with a grin. "Every time you say a word there's a three ring circus in your mouth. Topaz is an ideal candidate for our approach because all her upper equipment is intact. For us the deal-breaker is the tongue. In some ways that's the master organ of speech."

"Taz just can't make any sound to shape."

"Right. Now there has been some work done on artificial vocal cords, but so far they only make people sound like they've swallowed kazoos. Our approach is to use a computer to produce the sound. Here's how we do it."

Cass butted out her cigarette and lit a fresh one, listening intently to every word he said. It was some-where in here that the idea had flitted through her mind.

"Speech can be broken down into separate sounds called *phonemes*. Each phoneme is created by a certain discrete set of physiological actions. What we do is monitor these actions and identify them."

"Yeah," she put in. "This is one of the parts I didn't get straight. You said something about wiring her teeth?" She'd imagined Taz having to wear something like braces.

"We sure do, but we don't use wires. Tiny—and I mean *tiny* trans-mitting transducers will be bonded either to or between her teeth. All but two go inside, and they're all coated with white enamel so they hardly show. These will tell the com-puter what she's doing with her mouth by giving it a relational geom-etry. It will know if her mouth is open or closed, and the relative position of her teeth, lips, and tongue.

He lifted his chin and ran a thumb and finger down the front of his neck. "Electrodes along here will read the messages going to her voicebox and its relative position. We start out with big ugly surface 'trodes, but later on ones just a little bigger than BB's can be implanted beneath the skin. One other pickup that works more like a microphone tells the computer how much air is being pushed up the windpipe. That provides a volume reading. With me so far?"

Cass put down her empty coffee cup. "I think so. The computer uses all this information to decide exactly what kind of sound the person is try-ing to make."

"You got it. Each particular con-figuration triggers the computer to make a certain sound."

"Kind of like a MIDI and a se-quencer setup in music?"

"A lot like. You could even think of each particular configuration as a chord to be played."

"So she'll be able to talk as soon as you wire her up?"

"Yes and no. Sarah has developed rough paradigms for the pho-nemes—that's her specialty—but the results are pretty crude. For one thing, they have too much chop and mush."

Cass chuckled. "Sounds like a Brit-ish breakfast."

"Right, just add tea and boil. The thing is, sounds flow into each other, they're not just a hopscotch from one to the next—except when they are. Chop is what you get when the vari-ous phonemes are too discrete and badly matched, the computer voice effect. Mush is just the opposite, the stringing together of that which should hang loose."

Cass asked the obvious question. "So how do you get around it?"

Woody spread his hands. "By one hell of a lot of very boring work tai-loring the paradigms. You see, what we're trying to provide is natural sounding speech. The voice is syn-thesized, but anything we can do to humanize and personalize it is worth the effort. So we'll sit her down and find out *exactly* how she used to speak. First we run through the single phonemes, altering the sound pro-duced until we're all satisfied with it, and having her repeat it a pain in the assedly monotonous number of times. That gives the computer a broad sample of how she makes that sound. Once we've covered the sin-gle phonemes we move on to pairs, then triplets, at last concentrating on about a thousand words that have been carefully chosen to cover a broad spectrum of convoluted but typical phoneme combinations."

Cass crushed out her smoke. "It learns the difference between *word* and *want* and *wash* and *well*."

"Very good, class. One bonus to this approach is that it allows the computer to learn the stresses and slurs that make up a person's individ-ual speech patterns and accent."

"So Taz will have to lug a computer around with her for the rest of her life?"

Woody grinned at her. "There are computers, and then there are com-puters, my sweet. The initial articula-tion recognition paradigms are worked up on a monster desktop. The software alone runs to a hair over thirteen megabytes. But the trigger values themselves are quite compact. The phoneme paradigms are encoded on a chip about the size of a postage stamp. That chip controls a voice syn-thesizing sound chip about the same size."

He reached into a leather bag hang-ing off one arm of his wheelchair, held out his closed fist. "Here, check it out."

Cass held out her hand.

He dropped a necklace onto her palm. Hung from a gold chain with a clasp on the back was what looked like a two inch square of polished onyx surrounded by woven silver fil-igree. The pendant was slightly thicker than her little finger. She turned it over. Its back was stainless steel, like a watch. She glanced at Woody, puzzled. "What's this?"

"Topaz's voice."

She frowned. "You're shitting me."

"Nope." He pointed. "That black surface in front is a laminar surface transducer—essentially a speaker. The fancywork around the case is the antenna which picks up the signals from the bugs in her mouth and neck. The back pops off like a watchcase. Inside it are a receiver chip, the voice paradigm chip, the sound chip, and a rechargeable battery."

Cass let the device dangle from one finger, glittering in the bluish light from the monitors. "This is amazing, Woody!"

He polished his knuckles on his chest. "We kind of think so. That's the state of the art you're holding there. In another couple months the Hankster is going to put this puppy up for grabs, along with the software to train it." His grin widened. "You picked a good time to call 'cause he's pretty high on me and my posse right now."

"I imagine he would be." She handed the device back over. "It's perfect."

He shook his shaggy head. "Nah, not even close. It costs a bundle to hand make each one. Mass production will cut the cost, but it's still going to take a highly trained operator and some fairly heavy-duty computer equipment at least two weeks to impress each one. The battery has to be recharged after about sixteen hours of use, but it just sits on a little charger stand and comes back up in about three hours. The voice is sex specific and pretty good, but it's still obviously synthetic. The size of the output device limits sound quality as well. The generation before this had slightly better reproduction, but the speaker was twice as big and looked just like one."

He slipped it back into his side bag. "We're working on the next generation, but it's far from ready. You could think of this as one of those little cheapo electronic keyboards. It's small and self-contained and makes pretty good sound for its size, but it ain't no grand piano."

"And for Taz to be able to sing you'd need a grand piano."

"At least." He toyed with one ear-ring. "So, any brain action?"

"Not really." She glanced at her watch, grimaced. "Hell. I have to go make some calls. You guys can handle Taz for a while?"

"We'll yell for help if she starts wrecking the place."

Cass stood up, taking one last look at the monitor. Taz sat there listening to Sarah, her arms crossed before her chest and an unhappy frown on her face. "Be patient with her," she said softly.

"We will." He squeezed her hand as she edged around his wheelchair. "Hang in there."

"If my fingernails give out there's always my neck." She slipped out the observation room's side door and into the sunlit, empty corridor. She hesitated, brow furrowing in thought. Something Woody said...

"Lost?"

Cass blinked in surprise. The question had come from a short Hispanic man with a truly splendid bandito mustache. *Dr. Ricardo Perez*, read his nametag. The amused look on his face hinted that he'd been standing there watching her spacewalk for more than just a couple seconds.

She shook her head. "No more than normal."

"Man, I know how that feels," he said with a laugh, and went on his way.

Cass watched him walk away, rubbing her mouth thoughtfully.

"Grand piano..." she said in a soft, bemused voice.

Topaz let the aide wheel her back into the living room of their suite, then dismissed him with a curt wave of her hand. As the door closed she got out of the chair and headed for her room. Her legs felt stiff, but that was mostly due from sitting all day.

Cass was on the couch, hunched over her laptop. It was set up on the coffee table and surrounded by papers, empty beer bottles, and an over-flowing ashtray. She looked up and smiled. "How'd it go, Taz?"

Topaz opened her mouth to say something, then closed it and shook her head. She turned her back on Cass and walked stiffly to her room. Just so Cass would have no doubt about how it went she slammed the door behind her.

"That good, huh?" Cass said with weary irony, lighting a fresh cigarette and going back to work.

Topaz sat on the side of her bed, back stiff and tightly strung as a guitar neck, her hands clenched into fists. It was all she could do to keep them from starting to beat on something. On the walls, on herself.

So this was Cass' big plan. Letting them glue crap inside her mouth and stick stuff to her neck so she could end up sounding like some movie android.

Her gaze swung toward the bed-room door. There she sits, shuffling papers like nothing had happened or changed. Expecting me to be grateful for *this*?

Ever since the attack her feelings toward Cass had changed faster than the picture on a video surfer's TV screen. Love/hate /gratitude /resentment/concern/contempt/suspicion ...

She owed Cass her life—for what-ever that was worth. She'd tackled the crazoid who attacked her and kept him from finishing what he had begun, then pinned her to the sidewalk, whispered *this is gonna hurt, honey*, and cut the hole in her throat, which had let breath back into her spasming lungs. Saving her life twice in two minutes. Condemning her to live like this.

Cass spending her own money—even selling her own house—to get her here. Generosity...or protecting her investment?

Cass promising she would sing again.

There was the barbed wire binding the snarl of confusion. The poison in the well. The tangled root of her growing distrust.

She didn't believe it could happen. But god help her, she had *wanted* to believe it could. Cass had set one sharp hook of hope into her heart, only to have it be ripped out by inches.

Topaz slumped back on the bed, her head pounding. She just couldn't resolve the equation. *Cass had to be lying to her; Cass never lied to her.* Around and around it went, spinning like a lathe, cutting away certainty and trust.

She found herself remembering sitting on a hard pew, the air in the church cruelly sweet with flowers, mournful, syrupy hymns like some awful Muzak in her ears. There in front of her the two closed wooden caskets holding what was left of her mother and father. Literally ashes to ashes because the plane crash and fire had not left enough of them for her to be able to take a final look at their faces. Sitting there, a black dress filled with emptiness. Unable to think of them without the memory peeling another layer off her heart with the blunt razor of grief.

Cass beside her, holding her hand. Cass, who had handled all the arrangements and kept the micro-phones and cameras out of her face. Cass, who had been there when the terrible phone call had come, held her when she cried, and scarcely left her side all through it. Cass, the rock.

Cass, who had leaned over and whispered, *It'll get better, Taz. You'll be able to remember them and smile.*

Anger had sparked and died in her like a wet match. Cass had done so much that she had to be

forgiven the glib platitude. It was just one more of the many she'd been forced to endure.

Yet within a few days Cass had been proved right. Oh, it still hurt, it hurt to remember even now, but their memory became something to cherish, not something to shut out because it made her wish she was dead herself.

She didn't know what was happen-ing to her. Since the attack it seemed like her emotional range had been re-duced to three grim notes; anger, apa-thy, and despair, and they played over and over like she was stuck in a single groove of an old LP. Everything else seemed beyond her. And as for Cass...

Topaz closed her eyes and curled into a fetal ball on her bed. Her head hurt. Her throat hurt. She was so tired she couldn't think straight. If she let herself sleep then all the pressures inside her would let up for a while.

But it would be nothing like restful, for in her dreams a tall man in a long coat would scream at her and swing his bat, and with one stroke the night-mare would begin again.

Then she would awaken in a cold sweat, a silent scream trapped in her useless throat. If she was lucky.

Cass was slouched on the couch with her feet up on the table and a beer in her hand when Topaz came in at the end of the next day. She knew it had been a rough day for her. She'd watched part of it from the ob-servation room.

In the morning various measure-ments had been made in Taz's mouth and a cast had been made of her teeth. Woody had used a computer to plot out the optimal placement for the transducers. In the afternoon she had submitted to having them bonded in place with the indifference of a car with its hood open. Cass had been forced—though actually it was a re-lief—to leave partway through the procedure to accept and oversee a delivery. After that he and Sarah had worked out the placement for the electrode array which would be gummed to her slim neck, marking each place with an X of seven-day ink.

Although still escorted by an aide, she had been allowed to walk to and from the speech lab. Cass had hoped that this small reclaimed freedom would help her be in a better mood.

So much for plan A, Cass thought glumly when she came in the door. *Let's hope plan B works better*. Topaz looked in a sour mood, her mouth a tight line and a warning crease be-tween her brows. Underlying that was a pale, hollow-eyed exhaustion. She hadn't been eating. Cass was pretty sure she wasn't sleeping well either. But every time she brought the subject up all she got in return was a blank stare.

Cass waited for her to notice the new addition to the room, hoping it would break through the icy walls she'd thrown up around her. Some-thing had to.

Topaz glanced incuriously in her direction, about to give her the gri-mace that passed for a greeting of late. Then suddenly she saw it. Her dark eyes went wide with surprise.

Cass watched Taz slowly approach the piano, doing her best to keep her face expressionless.

Getting it had been no easy feat. It had taken Cass half a dozen calls to track down a vacationing Ariana Christensen, the West Coast rep for Steinway. It had taken Ariana about that same amount of time to track down what Cass wanted. Then the two of them had embarked on a rov-ing conference call, nailing down the logistics of getting the full concert grand piano delivered, set up and tuned to perfection in the middle of the Nevada desert within twenty-four hours.

It had cost a bundle, but if it brought Taz out of herself then the cost and effort meant nothing.

Taz ran her fingers along the instru-ment's glossy flank, her reflection chasing her along the grain. The look on her face said she was having a hard time believing it was real.

Cass knew that Taz thought white pianos belonged in cocktail bars, and had decided that a black

piano might be too depressing. This beauty glowed with the rich dark red of lac-quered rosewood. She'd had it set up near the sliding glass doors leading out onto the balcony so that Taz could sit at it and gaze out onto the austere beauty of the desert.

Topaz's trailing fingers led her around to the gleaming keyboard. Cass held her breath as Taz reached out hesitantly, one slim finger poised uncertainly over an ivory key.

When it fell a single note welled up, pure and sweet as water springing up in the middle of an arid wasteland. Something inside Cass dissolved and went *aaahhhh*.

A second later Taz's face contorted in sudden rage. She slammed the cover down over the keys hard enough to make the strings inside ring in discordant sympathy. Pausing only long enough to fire a look of blackest hatred at Cass, she stormed off to her room.

Cass let her breath out slowly.

"Any more bright ideas, girl ge-nius?" she asked her beer bottle. Get-ting no answer, she drained it, then just sat there in the silence fighting the urge to hurl the empty bottle at the closed bedroom door.

See the pretty piano, Taz? Topaz mimicked Cass' raspy voice in her head. Make some pretty music, girl. After all—

She flung herself on the bed.

—you're no good to me like this. No good to anybody at all.

The pant and huff of her breath and the muffled thump of her hands pounding the pillows in frustration was the loudest sound she made.

Cass was not the sole focus of her rage. At least half of it was hatred for what she had become.

Cass hustled into the speech lab's observation room a bit before eleven that next morning, answering Woody's call.

"What's up?" she panted as she closed the door behind her. Running was not one of her A skills, and dan-gerous in the bargain. You could die from it.

"Nothin'," he drawled, eyes on one of the monitors.

"What the hell do you mean *nothin*?" she snapped, advancing on him and balling her fists like she planned to beat the answer out of him. "What's the fucking problem?"

Woody blinked up at her in sur-prise. "Hey! Chill out."

"Shit," she muttered, dropping heavily into the chair next to him. "Sorry." Threatening to hit someone in a wheelchair was a new low. What was next? Deciding to lose weight on the Fabulous Dr. Mengele Puppy & Kitten Diet?

"Things a little rocky?" he asked gently.

She scrubbed her face with her hands. "My life's a gravel pit. Taz is acting mad at me and she's shut me out. Everything I do to help just seems to make things worse. I'm be-ginning to wonder if that flash I had was just a brain bubble. There's all sorts of rumors festering up faster than I can squash them. She's dead. She's horribly disfigured. She's at-tempted suicide. One of the tabloids claims they have proof she's here and being turned into some sort of sing-ing Robocop." A mordant chuckle es-caped her. "They even have actual unretouched photographs."

Woody gave her a one-armed hug. "I know you're having a rough time, Cassie-o." His smile turned rueful. "You know that thing they say about problems being opportunities in dis-guise?"

"Yeah," she answered unhappily.

"Well, I guess we got us a big op-portunity here." He used his free hand to point at one of the monitors. "She's refusing to begin work on the phonemes."

"She said she wouldn't do it?"

"She hasn't said jack. She just sits there. She's all wired up and ready to go, but Sarah can't get her to open her mouth."

Cass rubbed at one aching temple. "Great. Haven't you ever had this problem before?"

He shook his head. "Nope. The thing is, not being able to talk—to *communicate*—is frustrating as hell. It's easy to forget just how much a part of our lives it is. It's how we connect with each other and how we define ourselves. People who've lost the power of speech usually jump at the chance to get it back. They've got things to say, and they can't wait to get them out. The drive to communicate is at least as powerful as the urge for sex. Probably stronger. Celibacy is a walk on the beach compared to enforced silence. Communication can even be considered the primal intimacy; we need it to grow and stay sane."

Cass bit back on the impulse to tell him what was needed was a plan of action, not a philosophy. "What do you think Taz's problem is?" she asked tightly.

"I don't know her well enough to say for sure. Fatalism isn't all that unusual in people who've been attacked and suffered a trauma like hers. Maybe she's surrendered to defeat. She knows she'll never fly again so she refuses to even try to crawl. Maybe she's so messed up inside she can't try. Maybe she's punishing her-self. Maybe all of the above and who knows what else."

Cass stared at Taz's image on the screen, her head pounding dully. She had her arms crossed and her lower lip stuck out like a pouting child. A seething acid wave of anger and re-resentment rose up inside her.

You spoiled, self-centered little brat! I've busted my hump trying to help you and this is the thanks I get? Her jaw clamped tight and her eyes narrowed. I'm beginning to think what you need is a good slap in the face. That'd make you open your god-damn mouth, wouldn't it? Or maybe I should—

The anger fragmented into dismay with a suddenness that left her feeling sick to her stomach. She swallowed back the bitter knot in her throat, ap-palled at herself.

But in that one unguarded moment she had seen what had to be done. It was an extreme, and it was going to hurt, and just like when she had put a knife to Taz's throat it had to be done *now*, before second thoughts could keep her from carrying it through.

"The computer will respond if she tries to make a sound?" she asked as she lurched out of her chair.

"Yeah, but—"

"Can you pipe sound in there from here?"

"Sure, but—"

She headed for the door. "Wait right here. I'll be back in a couple minutes."

More running. This job was going to kill her yet.

Topaz sat there in Sarah's cheerful, plant-filled work space, a microphone aimed at her face like a gun.

It seemed like each and every night brought less sleep and more bad dreams. Last night had been the worst one yet, the man with the bat lurking there behind her lids every time exhaustion dragged her eyes shut. In one he'd been waiting there on stage while Cass pushed her from behind toward the spotlight, refusing to acknowledge that her lips had been sewn shut, grinning—

The morning had begun with Cass mooching around the breakfast table like some big stupid dog that'd been kicked. The damn piano had flowers on it, just like an arrangement on a casket. The aide who walked her here had treated her like some sort of spun-glass cripple. Sarah was so bright and cheerful about what they were going to do it made her want to puke. She'd been forced to endure having

stuff stuck to her throat and then be wired up like a frigging Christmas tree.

Then Sarah had plunked that mi-crophone down in front of her. It wasn't even *hooked* to anything. That was the last straw.

Once she'd been able to step up to a mike, plant her feet, and pour her heart and soul—her *self*—into it in an act that was as natural as breathing, and so fulfilling and uplifting that it made her feel like a wind-filled kite lifting toward the Sun.

Now she was supposed to sit here before a dead mike and make *muh muh muh* sounds like some baby struggling for its very first word. She wouldn't. She *couldn't*.

Sarah sat at her desk, pretending to do some paperwork while she waited for a certain ungrateful, uncoopera-tive bitch to quit throwing tantrums and play her little game. Topaz watched her out of the corner of her eye. Just like it seemed to have done every third heartbeat since the attack, her mood swung crazily between rage, apathy, and despair.

A muted click came from some-where overhead. She looked up, for the first time noticing speaker grilles in the ceiling above her. Seconds later music began pouring down from them.

The bottom dropped out of her stomach as she recognized the shim-mering piano and cello intro to "Moonbather's Rhapsody."

She looked around in wild-eyed desperation, vainly seeking the mu-sic's source. Her whole body tensed as if to take a blow, anticipating the hated sound of her own voice. The bars counted on down, five, four, three—

There was no place to hide. She shook her head from side to side in denial as her voice washed over her in a low, sultry tide, the words a puls-ing sensual incantation.

"Night into the night into the light into the silver light bright delight streaming silver from the moon the waiting moon the laughing moon—"

She clapped her hands over her ears to shut the sound out but the speakers above her blared louder, her voice leaking through her fingers in insinuating mockery—

"—the dreaming moon silver light streaming onto the skin like wine—"

The small whimper that was wrung out between her clenched teeth came out of another speaker some-where, a tin dart fired into the beating heart of the music, marring the smooth perfection that was now for-ever beyond her.

She sucked in a lungful of air hungrily, not knowing, not caring what the stuff wired to her would make of a scream.

The anguished hiss she let out was translated into a shrill, inarticulate yowl that chopped into the music like an axe, ripping a swath through it. But the music closed in after, louder yet.

Her hands clenching into fists; she lurched to her feet as another cry was torn from her useless throat. Once again it was brought to tinny life by machinery.

"Stop!"

The sound—the *word*—shocked her. Inside something shivered and began to crumble. As if that one word had made the fatal crack in a dam, more words came boiling out after.

"Stop, dammit stop! It hurts and I can't—it's too—please, oh God I—please please STOP!"

That last appeal was delivered to a ringing silence. The music had stopped.

Topaz stood there, swaying drunkenly as she realized what she had done, then buried her face in her hands. Sarah was in front of her by then, taking her by the shoulders. "Are you all right?" she asked.

She hid her face against the woman's breast, let herself be held. "I'm sorry," the computer voice said, its flat tone unable to convey how much she meant it. "I'm so sorry, I—"

The words continued to bubble out of her in a halting flow, finally easing the terrible pressure which had built so high that she had been inside it rather than it inside her.

Woody settled back in his wheel-chair, eyes on the monitor and a be-mused expression on his face. "Well, look who's talking," he said quietly.

Cass lunged to her feet and fled the observation room, stiff-arming the door out of her way.

One time when she was thirteen Topaz's father had slapped her face. The only time he had ever laid any-thing other than a gentle hand on her. She had never forgotten it, and now she was thinking about it once more.

The only child of parents devoted to her and each other, Topaz had enjoyed a pretty happy childhood. But it wasn't always easy having parents of mixed race. Parents who were different.

Still, it hadn't really been any big deal until tall, red-haired and handsome Billy O'Rourke had transferred to her seventh grade class. It had begun as love at first sight.

Topaz had been lucky. She'd somehow avoided that gawky, ugly duckling stage some girls suffer while trying to navigate that stormy, rocky gulf between being a girl and a young woman. She hadn't been the cutest girl in class, but she was in the top ten. Before long Billy had started checking her out. Doing goofy stuff when he had her attention. Bumping into her in the halls. The usual awkward adolescent courtship rites.

Being thirteen and in love can be a terrible and wonderful thing. She'd been sure she'd found her Prince Charming.

That was until Billy found out that her coppery skin color didn't come from the sun or a tanning booth. It came from having a black father and a Vietnamese mother. She'd met an entirely different Billy then, an unsuspected Billy, one who sneered at her and used words like *nigger* and *gook* as he said things that cut to the bone.

When you are thirteen you want to be liked and loved and accepted more than anything else in the whole world. When you're thirteen and in love the sudden vicious cruelty of the one whose name covers your notebooks and is written on your heart in glowing neon letters a mile high is the end of the world.

When you're thirteen and in love and have had your heart broken because of who and what your parents are, you go a little crazy and strike out, using words you've seen and heard but *never* before thought to apply to them. Ugly words. Hateful words. Hurtful words.

And when your father looks at you with tears of hurt surprise in his eyes, and slaps you, it brings you up short. It makes you think.

Maybe you learn yet another lesson about love.

Not long after Topaz had pulled herself back together she'd realized that only one person could have been behind the music. The only person who knew about the fit she'd pitched back at the hospital.

Cass.

The corrosive bitterness which had poisoned her blood since the attack wanted her to believe that Cass had done it to be cruel. For revenge.

But in the end she could no more believe that than she could believe Cass had pinned her to the sidewalk and cut a hole in her throat just to see her bleed. That her father had slapped her because he hated her.

Sometimes you have to slap the one you love to wake them up. Sometimes it takes a slap in the face to make you stop and look at what you're doing.

When she let herself back into their suite late that afternoon, a thin, brittle glaze of resentment still

remained, but she knew that came more from shame than anything else.

There was no sign of Cass in the living room. She crossed to her bed-room door and tried the knob. It was locked. She rattled the knob harder and tried to call her name. Only a faint sighing came out; a breath empty of meaning, a lip-synch with a sound heard only in her head.

"Go 'way!" Cass called from inside, her voice muffled by the door between them. "I'll be out inna while! You c'n fire me then!" She sounded drunk.

Topaz stood there, hand splayed on the door, biting her lip. At that moment being able to talk seemed even more important than being able to sing. There was so much she had to say to Cass, the things left unsaid had piled up like stones in a wall. No wonder their relationship had broken down, they hadn't been communicating. Cass had kept trying, reaching out time and time again. It was she who had withdrawn, pulling into her shell like a wounded turtle and snapping at anyone who came near.

Topaz took her hand off the door. How could she say what needed to be said? How could she break the silence?

Looking around the room she saw one way it could be done.

Cass sat on the floor, her back against the side of the bed. She took another swig from the scotch bottle that had been keeping her company since the middle of the afternoon.

Who but Johnny Walker would want to hang out with Cass Morgenstern? Personal manager of the famed Marquis de Sade School. Johnny didn't mind.

Manipulating Taz was part of her job. Getting her to meet schedules and deadlines. Chilling her out or pumping her up when touring or publicity stops got to her. Finessing her into paying at least minimal attention to the Right People and steering her away from the Wrong People.

She knew Taz couldn't live out the rest of her life keeping some sort of fucked up vow of silence. Communicating was her life, and she had to start putting that life back together. Which meant breaking the silence. Since she wouldn't or couldn't do it on her own, that meant she needed a push.

That was Cass' job. To push.

But you went too far this time, old girl. Way too far.

Taz wasn't stupid. She'd know who had tormented her with her own voice.

Cass peered at her watch. Any time now she'll come back from her session and fire my fat useless ass. Another slug of scotch as she peered around the room, thinking about how she could probably still be packed and gone first.

"No," she muttered with a shake of her head. Taz had earned the right to fire her, and she would be enough of a mensch to take it. She owed her that.

The doorknob rattled. Her heart sank. She wasn't ready yet. The knob rattled again, more insistently. *Let me in!*

"Go 'way!" she bawled. She hugged herself as if keeping herself together so she could get the next words out. "I'll be out inna while! You c'n fire me then!"

No response.

She took another swig, then lit a fresh cigarette from the butt of her last. Once she finished it she'd go face the firing squad. Don't want to keep the poor kid waiting...

Her mouth twisted into a bitter smile as she exhaled. It was funny. She'd spent most of the afternoon trying to think about what she was going to do next—after all, she was broke and out of a job—but her mind kept returning to Taz's situation.

If her recording career was truly over then her money would have to be managed very carefully. Her label was already talking about releasing a couple of farewell compilations, and it would take close

watching to make sure she got her fair share, and that they met the standards of her earlier releases. Her old label would proba-bly try the same thing and need even closer watching. The media was still hovering around out there like a pack of vultures. Maybe she would stay here long enough to regain the ability to speak, but no one was going to be trying to find a way to make it so she could sing again.

It was so hilarious that it made her want to let out a technicolor chuckle. Even now she believed it was possi-ble. Even now.

Cass sighed, her head lolling back against the mattress. *Maybe the prob-lem was mine all along. I just couldn't face reality, and now that weakness has cost everything.*

She rolled her head back up and lifted the bottle. About two more slugs and she'd be ready go out there and face the music. *Ha ha.*

She froze with the bottle halfway to her lips, a chill skittering up her spine. Listening.

To a familiar tune being played on the piano in the other room.

Topaz perched nervously on the wide padded bench and just stared at the gleaming white and black keys before her. She knew simply touching them would be like letting a genie out of a bottle. An impotent genie ca-pable of granting only certain wishes.

She licked her lips and flexed her fingers. They itched to do the work they knew so well, and the keys pulled at them, exerting a magnetism that reached deep inside her to that buried and barricaded place where music sprang from. The restless ghosts of melodies stirred, aching to come out, to form themselves around the pain and confusion of the last few days like pearls around sharp-edged grains of sand.

But she couldn't play her own mu-sic, not yet. Just as it had been with the death of her parents, the wound was too fresh and raw. It was going to take time before that brought any-thing but a sense of wrenching loss.

Another's music then. She closed her eyes, snatches of favorite songs flitting through her mind like butter-flies. So many choices, and which one would say what she needed to say?

She couldn't decide so she let her hands fall and do what they would.

Had it been possible she would have laughed aloud when the first notes sounded. In delight, for the Steinway had the pure, resonant voice of a god trapped in wood and steel as it spoke the intro, and in amusement she recognized the tune her subconscious had chosen. The notes rang out dark and sweet as red wine, then in her head she heard the magical, inimitable voices of Maggie Terre and Suzzy Roche as they hit their mark in the melody: *The time/has come/for me/to speak—*

Her hands hesitated as the phrase faded, then swept toward opposite ends of the keyboard and began play-ing something different.

Something *new*.

No, a small voice inside her head wailed in dismay, but she could no more stop what had been begun than she could have stilled the beating of her heart. For the second time that day an inner dam had been breached, and there was no stopping what poured out.

Her left hand had begun pounding out a low, arrythmic, angry sound, all harsh words and slamming doors. Her right hand began picking high, uncer-tain notes out of the air, all crippled flats and sharps in search of a friendly chord. Slowly, painfully they modu-lated into naturals and began finding some tentative structure, but by then the furious bass line had changed to dissonant flattened minors that tried to shout them down.

Little by little the single notes worked their way down the scale in a melodic line of slowly unfolding complexity.

She heard Cass' door open behind her, sensed her approach. But her eyes remained tightly closed

and her soul fused with her hands. The central melody grew more complex; it still had a wistful edge, but at its core there was a growing certainty.

Then words to fit the music un-earthed themselves inside her like dusty diamonds.

The sun and sky had fallen/I hid my eyes in fear/sure the dark would never never never end—

The bench creaked as Cass sat down beside her. She felt her old friend's familiar warmth, smelled whiskey and cigarettes.

Little by little her rampaging left hand was tamed by her right. Harmony crept in. Dissonance dried like tears.

—Maybe the sun and sky have fallen/maybe all I knew is gone/still a new dawn breaks over the ruins/the midnight of my soul tolls no longer/because I feel your hand in mine, my friend.

There was more of it, and it was rough as hell, crying out to be rewritten and polished until every note and word was perfect, but now she could let it go. She could put it aside.

Topaz brought her hands down in a final unresolved chord.

Beside her Cass sniffled.

A half-smile quirking her lips, she pecked out a snatch of an old song from her first album with her right hand as she turned her head to look at Cass.

—So is it you and me, sport, or should I get me a dog?—

Cass' eyes were red and brimming with tears. She nodded solemnly. "If you'll still have me."

The wall Topaz had put up to hide behind came all the way down then. She stepped over the rubble by putting her arms around the bigger woman and holding her tight. Cass bear-hugged her back.

The two old friends held each other and cried. For several minutes no word was spoken. Not because they had fallen back on wordlessness, but because they had gone beyond it.

If a picture can be worth a thousand words, then one loving, forgiving embrace can be worth a thousand pictures.

That night Topaz still had night-mares, but some sort of threshold seemed to have been passed. They were fewer and briefer, and for the first night since she was attacked her sleep was more restful than harrowing.

Over the next few days she applied herself to her part of helping create her speech paradigms with an almost monomaniacal intensity. She worked tirelessly at drilling the phonemes, pushing Sarah so hard that she came down with a slight case of laryngitis.

As for Cass' promise that this would somehow lead to her being able to sing again, well, she let that slide.

The promise had been made with the best intentions, and she figured Cass needed to cling to that illusion for a little while longer. Cass was a realist. She'd come around sooner or later.

Cass got in the habit of visiting the Speech Lab at least twice each day. She no longer had to hide in the observation room. Topaz was glad to have her see how well she was doing.

On an afternoon five days into the process, Cass took a break from the endless phone calls and e-mailing and faxes that kept as many plates as possible still spinning, and dropped by. Woody joined her, gazing fondly at their star pupil.

"She's really amazing," he said quietly. "At the rate she's going we'll have everything we need to program her voice chip in another couple of days or so. Most subjects can drill for only about two hours before they lose their concentration and begin making mistakes. We always figured if we got three or four

usable hours out of a day we were doing real good. Not her. At the end of eight she might be tired, but her ear and enunciation are sharp as ever. Not only has she got stamina, she's got control."

Cass smiled. "You have to remember that her voice has been trained, and she's worked it hard all her life. I've seen her spend ten hours in the studio laying down forty separate vocal tracks, never once using one already recorded as a guide, or even anything to give her a beat to follow. When they were played back all at once they fit together just like a jigsaw puzzle..." Her voice trailed away uncertainly.

Woody peered up at her, a question—the question—in his eyes. "Got something, babe?"

She shook her head slowly. *Jigsaw puzzle?*

"It's gone again." She thumped her forehead with the heel of her hand. "Maybe if I put a quarter in my ear something would come out."

That made him laugh. "Hey, it just might."

"But it would probably just be a gumball."

After supper that night Topaz went to the piano, just like she had been doing every night since she had first played it.

Cass sprawled on the couch, savoring one last cup of coffee as she soaked in the music and read. After a few minutes the playing stopped. She looked up from her book when she heard Taz sigh. "Problem?"

Taz turned to face her. A plastic box the size of a paperback hung around her neck, the electrodes running up her neck wired to it. "Kind of." When her mouth moved a toneless synthesized voice came from the laptop and soundbox parked atop the piano. It was a crude temporary setup, but it freed her from the talk-board.

"Can—can I ask you something Cass?"

Cass put down her book and sat up straighten "Shoot."

"Promise you won't get mad?"

"Cross my heart."

Topaz took a deep breath. "I really love this piano, Cass. It's beautiful. But I kinda wish I had my MIDI set-up from home. I'm..." She bit her lip and lowered her eyes, as if about to confess some shameful secret. "Well, I'm writing some songs."

Cass smiled and said, "That's great Taz," in a mildly pleased voice, even though what she really wanted to do was leap off the couch and run around the room yelling *Yes! Yes! YES!* at the top of her lungs.

"It'd be easier with my stuff," Taz went on hopefully. "I could print out sheet music and use the synth and sample to play different parts. I could even..." She shrugged.

"What?" Cass prompted gently.

"I could even use that digital loop program we used on 'My Robot Self' to kinda, well, fake my own voice."

The rising happiness Cass was feeling turned to something else altogether in an instant. Her heart seemed to stop mid-beat. All expression drained from her face.

"Oh shit," she said in a faint reedy voice.

Topaz stared at her uncertainly. "Are you OK?"

"Oh shit..." She rubbed her open mouth with her hand.

"Cass! What's wrong?" Topaz cried, knocking the piano bench over in her haste to get up. "Are you having a heart attack?" She sprinted to the couch and grabbed her by the shoulders. "Cass?"

The big woman stared in her direction blindly, her face surprised and strange. Her mouth worked sound-lessly a moment, then she whispered, "Oh shit," again.

Topaz's fingers dug into Cass's meaty shoulders. "Jesus, Cass, you're scaring me!" she wailed, her voice still coming back from the piano, as if she had left it behind in her haste.

Cass focused on her face at last. "Shit, oh goodness," she rasped, at least changing her tune. A grin crept out onto her face, and it just kept get-ting brighter and wider.

"What is it?" Topaz cried. "Tell me!"

"Whooo-ha!" Cass bellowed, com-ing up off the couch like a charging bear and sweeping the smaller woman off her feet. She began whirling Topaz around the room with her toes a good six inches off the floor, laughing and whooping like a maniac the whole time.

Suddenly she put Topaz down and began pacing back across the room, hands on her forehead.

"New York or LA?" she asked the ceiling. "New York is better but LA is closer. FedEx can do the rest. Right." She stopped, spun on her heel and headed back the way she came. "Who to call? Jimmy Witherspoon. Bug Slowdowsky. Maybe Hiro Kanata. Wendy Carlos said anything we needed..." Stop. Turn. Pace. "Hell. Skyler's gonna blow a fuse. No doubt about it. Another mil should keep him out of our faces." Stop. Turn. Pace. "Better handle him in person. Woody I can call on my way to the plane. Or should I drive?" Stop. Turn—

"What the hell are you *talking* about?" Topaz demanded, planting her-self in Cass' path. "Tell me!"

Cass stared at her, her face soften-ing. "I finally got it. I think—I think I see how you can sing again."

All expression fled from Topaz's face. "How?" she whispered, the computer voice a harsh rattle.

"You said it yourself. 'My Robot Self.'" .

Taz shook her head. "I still don't—"

"We didn't record what you sang. Remember? Jimmy and Bug helped set it up so that you used your voice like a keyboard, to trigger synthed samples of your singing from com-pletely different songs."

It was Topaz's turn to go wide-eyed as she realized what Cass was sug-gesting. She touched the electrodes on her neck, questioningly.

Cass nodded. "I want you to keep working with Sarah and Woody, get speech nailed down. I hope you'll let them put in those subcutaneous throat implants—they're higher defi-nition than those stick-on thingies. I'll be back in—" She shrugged help-lessly. "I don't know. Two or three days. I've got to find Bug and Jimmy, get them to drop whatever they're doing, get a truckload of equipment together, and all your—"

"I get the picture." Topaz looked Cass straight in the eye, a hopeful, fearful expression on her face. "Do you—do you really think it will work?"

Cass closed her eyes, her certainty sagging. For just a moment she looked very old and very unsure of herself. Then the old Cass reasserted herself. Her face firmed up and she met Topaz's gaze squarely.

"I don't know. I shouldn't have promised it before, and I can't prom-ise it now. But I think it will. I think it's worth trying."

Topaz nodded solemnly, thinking of all the unsung words bubbling up with the music inside her. Even if it didn't work very well, it would still give her some small measure of what she'd once had. Anything had to be better than nothing.

Just like with reconstructing her ability to speak, there would be limi-tations. The thing was to keep trying to overcome those limitations, not let them overcome her.

"So do I," she said. "So?"

Cass frowned. "So what?"

Topaz laughed, the rattling wound the computer made striking sympathetic notes from the piano. "So what the hell are you doing still hanging around here?"

The Cass Morgenstern Express was packed and in motion less than five minutes later. She tracked Henry Skyler to the small but well-equipped studio where his production crew turned out videos promoting the work—and the profitable potential thereof—of the Skyler Institute in general, and Skyler himself in particular. She bulldozed her way past two secretaries, an executive assistant and a security guard to get in.

Skyler had been in a director's chair with his name on the back in gold, and a bib around his neck as a makeup woman fussed over him. Cass had sent her twittering for cover, planted herself in front of him, and laid out what she wanted. Every time he tried to interrupt she pushed her face closer to his, and in the end he had to shut up and listen or lose his nose.

"You want to *what*?" he demanded when she stepped back to let a bit of slack in his chain.

She shook her head. "Don't play that Edison riff too hard. You aren't deaf. You heard every word I said." To help cultivate a public image as the "Edison of Physiological Re-empowerment" he'd had his pate shaved back and his hair bleached white. There were even rumors of plastic surgery to heighten the resemblance.

"Now you listen to me, young lady," he warned, wattles quivering and his hands gripping the arms of his chair. "I don't have to—"

Cass got right down into his face again. "I don't have time to fuck with you, Hank," she said heavily. "So here's the deal. I'm going to be back in about three days with a truckload of equipment and a couple people to help run it. The whole Speech Lab is ours for as long as we need it. That includes Woody, Sarah, and anybody else we want. No publicity, no jogging our elbows. We think we're onto something, and the last thing we need is a clown like you pissing into what we're trying to cook up."

She straightened up and reached into her pocket. "Here's a check for five hundred thousand dollars." She held the check toward him, reading the greed in his eyes. "Think of it as an advance. If what we're going to try works this dump is going to have money and publicity coming out the wazoo."

He frowned up at her, not letting his gaze stray too far from the money. "This is a research facility, young lady," he said in what was supposed to pass for an indignant tone. "Surely you don't think you can just hand me that check and expect me to let you turn one of my labs into some sort of rock and roll circus."

"Of course not. I know you better than that, Hank," Cass said sweetly. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and offered it with her other hand. "I've already set up an EFT in your name to the tune of another five hundred grand. All you have to do is punch in the destination code of your numbered account."

Skyler stared at her hands, licking his thin lips. Before a count of five could pass he emptied them both. The check went into his pocket. He turned his back on Cass as he punched the numbers into the phone's keypad. When it beeped to signal that the transfer had been made he returned it to her.

Cass slipped it back into her pocket. "Cayman Islands?"

Skyler chuckled. "Switzerland." He waved the makeup woman back over. "Now if you will excuse me? I have a video to make."

Cass grinned at him. "Break a leg." She turned on her heel and strode away. "Break both while you're at it, schmuck," she added under her breath.

The Cass Morgenstern Express was back on the road and running in high gear by the time she hit the door.

"Nervous?"

Topaz gave Cass an uncertain smile. "A little."

The two women were facing a semicircle of so much equipment that it looked like they had wandered into some sort of Mission Control by accident. Taped-down cables vined the floor. A combination of a 100° day outside and the heat generated by all the equipment had the air conditioning running at full blast just to keep the speech lab in the high seventies. Most other lab projects had been moved to another room to clear space for what they were doing.

Topaz was perched on a padded stool, a cold soda in her hand. Before her was a microphone on a stand. It wasn't hooked to anything, but it would give her a point of focus. She wore only sandals, shorts, and a sleeveless red blouse knotted at the midriff. Sweat beaded her skin, not all of it due to the heat.

Now when she spoke, it was through the gleaming black pendant. While her voice was smoothly femi-nine, it was still unmistakably syn-thetic. Although the device allowed her to speak without anything else hooked to it, only its receiving cir-cuits would be used when she tried to sing. A ribbon cable sprouted from its back, running to the cigarette-pack sized plastic box taped to it. More wires led from that to the thumb but-ton control in her hand and another paperback-sized module clipped to her belt. The sweat made the tiny in-cisions where her throat implants were itch under their Band-Aids.

"Almost ready, Taz," Woody called encouragingly. He looked tired, but excited. The deep bags under his eyes had been put there by working with two of the Institute's programmers nearly around the clock to modify the speech software to this new use.

Bug Slowdowsky's heavily made up green eyes appeared over the top of one of her computer monitors. Stand-ing just a hair over four feet tall, her bright orange dreadlocks framed the face of a demented cherub. She had a reputation for being somewhat abra-sive, but what she didn't know about the interfacing of music and comput-ers to shape sound wasn't worth knowing.

"I'm ready to give this junk pile a try," she drawled. She waved a chubby, ring-covered hand toward the blade-thin, shirtless black man at the equipment-laden table next to her. "We's just waitin' for Jimmy to get his shit together."

"Eat my shorts, Bug." Witherspoon peered at Topaz through bottle-bot-tom tinted glasses. Sweat gleamed on his shaved head. "I'm ready." He waved at the stacks of ROM archive boxes, floptical drives, and Magna-cards patched to an over-sized desk-top computer built into an Anvil case.

"The thing is, we've got almost too much stuff on hand. I've tried to orga-nize it like Woody and Sarah sug-gested, but even so the first searches and matches will be slow." He grinned, revealing diamond-studded incisors. "Once we get rolling I can tweak my search-progs and it'll speed up." Jimmy's specialty was sampling; the locating and extracting of the one particular sound needed. His ear was perfect and his memory extraordinary. He already knew every note in two-thirds of the material on hand.

Woody spun his chair toward Sarah, who had been working just as hard as everybody else, roughing out base paradigms for singing. She would be monitoring and adjusting the devices reading what Topaz's voice was trying to do. "You ready to boogie, love?" he asked.

Of all of them, she seemed the least touched by the heat and tension. "Of course." She gave Topaz a serene smile. "OK, Taz, just like before. Take your time. This isn't going to happen overnight."

Topaz nodded back, feeling that flutter she always got just before going out on stage. This time the audi-ence was smaller, but it was the most momentous performance of her life.

Cass' idea had been simple enough, even though it had taken them all sev-eral days to prepare to implement it.

The device which now allowed her to speak worked by recognizing the sound she was trying to make and triggering a corresponding phoneme stored in a sound chip.

If that was possible, then why couldn't the act of vocalizing trigger a corresponding digitalized

sample of her own singing voice?

At Cass' behest Jimmy had gathered well over a hundred hours of digitalized recordings of Topaz singing. That included the masters from all her studio and concert recordings, outtakes and discards. Recordings from her own home studio. Even warm ups.

Topaz's newly regained confidence had begun to erode as the pile of equipment it was taking to give this a try grew in size and complexity day by day. It was beginning to look like singing *Happy Birthday to You* was going to be about as simple and spontaneous as sending a manned space-craft to Mars.

She had finally confessed her fears to Woody and Cass. Woody had explained that like what they had done with speech, once they had her voice plotted out the paradigms and the equipment needed to reproduce them would be much smaller and simpler.

How much smaller? There was no way to tell yet. Singing was considerably more complex than speaking, and the more that they tried to recapture of the extraordinary range she'd once had, the more memory they were going to need. Singing was going to take one—more likely two—very fast computers, a bank of signal processors, one hell of a lot of very fast memory, and at least one person to keep the system tweaked to optimum.

"So much for singing on street corners," she'd joked weakly, still dismayed by the prospect.

Then Cass, her Cass who had started all this and kept it moving by force of will, had put her arm around her.

"Woody said that for you to sing we had to build a grand piano." She said, gesturing dismissively at all the red ready lights and glowing computer screens. "That's what we're building you now. A serious musical instrument. It'll be smaller once we get it figured out and stuffed into a box, but even if it isn't exactly portable, who the hell cares? Neither's that Steinway. Why'd you think God made trucks and roadies?"

Topaz gazed at those gathered to help her. They were waiting for her to begin.

Well, here goes nothing.

She took a deep breath and put down her soda. "OK, kiddies. Plain vanilla middle C coming up."

Cass crossed her fingers and waited. Beside her Taz took another deep breath. She stared at Taz's favorite old Klipsch speakers, shipped from her basement studio back in New York, trying to will the sound she wanted to hear from them.

The sound they spat out a second later made her wince. It was beyond awful; it sounded like Taz had tried to sing while gargling gravel jello. She peeked fearfully at the singer, trying to find words to ease her disappointment.

To her surprise Taz threw back her head and laughed.

"Sorry, folks," she gasped at last. "My fault." she held up the pushbutton control in her hand. "I forgot to switch over from the speech circuits."

Cass let out a sigh of relief. She wasn't the only one.

"Let's give it another shot." Topaz held the control out and made a big show out of putting her thumb on the button. Then she took a breath, opened her mouth and let it back out in a voiceless hiss.

A fraction of a second later the pure perfect voice of Topaz Baldwin blared from the speakers like a triumphant trumpet. Cass shivered as the brassy note hung there in the air several seconds, then died.

Topaz stepped back from the mike, her dark eyes closed and her face expressionless.

Cass waited, almost afraid to breathe. Bug's dreadlocked head popped into view. Jimmy stood there with his arms crossed before his bare chest, patiently waiting for the verdict. Sarah pushed her salt and pepper hair back, a hopeful smile on her face.

"Well?" Woody asked. "Did we wipe out?"

"It needs to be fuller and softer," Topaz said at last. She opened her eyes. "Sarah, I think you're reading me as pushing a lot harder than I re-ally am, and it's a softer, more open sound. Bug, it's got too much brass, it's more pipe. The note was right on, Jimmy, but I was using more the voice I used on *Cassandra*."

That set off a flurry of activity. Cass waited it out, wishing she could light a cigarette. Topaz watched them work, her face placid.

"Ready to try again," Woody re-ported at last.

Topaz nodded, took a breath, and tried again.

This time her voice rolled out of the speakers like a velvet wave. Topaz made a lowering gesture toward Sarah. The volume dropped and it be-came softer. She made a flattening gesture toward Bug, and a second later some of the overtone faded, leaving a note as clear as glass. Still she held the note, her head rolling back and her eyes closing, at last let-ting it trail away to silence.

Cass wiped her sweaty hands on her jeans, her heart in her mouth.

Topaz stepped back from the mike. She took her thumb off the button. She opened her eyes and smiled.

"That's a take," she said.

Topaz's nightmares had leveled off at about one each night when she started up the road to recovering her speech.

That night she slept deeply and peacefully, the man with the bat ban-ished from her dreams at last.

It was well past three in the morn-ing when Cass slipped quietly into their suite several nights later. She was wiped out from the long drive to Reno and back, but it had been worth the trip. It was a good tired. There was a pleased smile on her face, put there by the day's end.

The late morning, afternoon, and early evening had been spent in meetings. She had gotten Taz's label to hold off starting on a farewell com-pilation for another month, and made sure the lawyers keeping her old label from releasing one were on their toes. She had met with money people, a couple of sympathetic journalists, and put the kibosh on yet another attempt at an unauthorized "Topaz Baldwin Story" movie of the week.

Then, just when she had thought the meetings were over a shy, uncer-tain voice coming from behind her had asked if she, um, had any plans for, well, dinner?

Dr. Sid Braddock had been calling her every so often, ostensibly to check on his former patient's prog-ress. She didn't remember men-tioning the trip to Reno, but she must have because the sly little devil had taken the day off and flown out. He'd hung around all afternoon and early evening hoping for a chance to spend some time with her.

Dinner had been late and lovely, candle-lit and *very* romantic. Cass would have been sorely tempted to share a horizontal aperitif with him afterward, but he had to catch the midnight flight back East. She could still feel his goodbye kiss on her lips.

She closed the door quietly behind her, turned around.

"The prodigal manager returns."

It was Topaz's electronic voice. She was sitting at the piano, the moon-light streaming in the sliding glass doors painting her hair silver.

"What're you still doing up?" she asked, hoping it wasn't a recurrence of the nightmares that had plagued her earlier.

"Waiting for you," Taz patted the bench beside her. "Come here a minute."

Cass crossed the room and dropped onto the bench with a sigh. "Something wrong, hon?"

"The gang thinks I'll have maybe 90 percent of my voice nailed down in another couple of weeks. The rest will be spots we won't know about 'til we hit them."

"I knew that," Cass said, wondering what she was getting at. Her face gave no clues.

"Today I asked Jimmy and Bug if they'd work with me for at least the next six months. They both said yes."

Cass frowned. "You think it'll take that long to get all the kinks out of your voice?"

Topaz shook her head. "No, but it may take that long to record my next album."

Cass stared at her, her mouth hang-ing open. "Really?" she managed at last.

A coy smile. "Well, it might take longer..."

"No, I mean you *really* want to re-cord again?"

"Now Cass," she said in a tone of fond exasperation as she patted the big red Steinway. "What the hell's the sense of having two grand pianos and not making music with them?"

The applause died down as Topaz adjusted the microphone so it was pointed at her throat. She patted the small black box at her hip, laid her small hands atop the glass podium and began to speak.

"First I want to thank all of you for picking 'Songs from a Broken Instru-ment' as Album of the Year."

The people in the audience and watching the show at home heard a very good simulacrum of her natural voice. Other than a slight tinny edge, her speaking voice was much the same one she'd had before the attack.

Woody, Sarah, and their people, had carried the idea that let Topaz sing to its logical conclusion, coming up with a way to use a sampled hu-man voice for speaking instead of an artificial one. In Topaz's case they had been able to reconstruct her voice from dozens of hours of recordings of studio chatter and interviews. For others with no sample to work from there was already a growing library of voices to choose from and modify. The amount of memory this process took still wouldn't fit into the pendant at her throat, but did fit quite neatly into the small device at her hip.

"Everyone who comes up here al-ways says that they want to share the credit for this honor." She grinned impishly. "It's a good thing there's no lie detector built into this podium."

When the laughter and applause died down her expression turned se-rious. "In my case it's true. I wouldn't be up here if it were not for the help of several people. Now Henry Skyler couldn't be here tonight—"

—Because Cass had arranged for Raul Faoud, manager of the Hebrab band Camel Lip Kiss to be in Skyler's office at this very moment, passing himself off as a Kuwaiti sheik with barrels of oil money and interest in investing in the very lucrative cyber-netic prosthetics market.

"—but Dr. Woody Entwhistle and Dr. Sarah Bright of the Skyler Institute are here, and it was their pioneering work which made me possible." Sarah half stood and Woody waved a peace-sign in the air to a round of applause.

"Hiding in the back of the curtain behind me are Jimmy Witherspoon and Bug Slowdowsky, two very tal-ented people who helped get this cy-borg songbird built and keep her war-bling. They're back there getting ready to do that voodoo they do so well." More applause.

Her gaze returned to where Woody and Sarah were seated. "Also here tonight is Dr. Sid Braddock, whose surgical skills and advanced techniques kept me from having to breathe through a hole in my throat the rest of my life. Stand up Sid, show the folks your too cool tux!"

Blushing and looking quite dashing in the pink and black satin tuxedo his fiancée had picked out for him, Braddock stood, ducked his head, and dropped back out of sight.

Topaz gripped the podium tightly, gazing out into the audience. "But if anyone—"

Her voice broke. She shook her head, took a deep breath and tried again. "If anyone deserves most of the credit for my being up here tonight, it's my manager, Cass Morgenstern. Who, by the way, is now engaged to become Mrs. Sid Braddock," She smiled fondly at Cass, her eyes glittering. "Or, if I know my Cass, Sid is going to become Mr. Cass Morgenstern. Would you please stand up, Cass? I'd like these folks to see my best friend ever."

Cass slowly rose to her feet, blushing furiously, the big goofy-looking corsage Sid had brought her proudly pinned to her jacket. The applause became a thundering ovation as one by one the people rose to their feet. She stood there, looking stricken, then sat back down and tried to become invisible.

Sid took her hand and kissed it, beaming with pride.

"So," Topaz said when everyone had returned to their seats. "As you know I haven't performed live since my attack. I was asked if I would like to sing tonight. You can't possibly know how glad I was to be able to say yes."

The curtain behind her opened as she turned toward it. Front and center on the amber-lit stage waited the rosewood Steinway.

Cass watched Taz take her place at the big red grand piano. Jimmy, Bug, and the backup musicians were already in place. The house and stage lights dimmed, leaving Taz in a pool of warm golden light. An expectant hush fell.

She looked out into the audience. "This one's for Cass," she said softly, then turned to the keyboard and began the long, aching solo piano intro to "Song from a Broken Instrument."

"You did good, my love," Sid whispered in Cass' ear, squeezing her hand tightly. "I'm so proud I could just plotz."

She nodded, eyes on Taz, determined that she was not going to start bawling. She was Cass Morgenstern, after all. Tough as nails. Soul of a cash register.

But when the petite, dark-haired woman up on the stage opened her mouth and began to sweetly sing, she began to cry.

Once more glad, beyond all containing, that she wouldn't have to endure the silence.