

How To 'Trap' A Mimic

2

Nick Lorance



A "Her TV" Novel



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How To Trap a Mimic 2

By Nick Lorance

We were in the news the next day. The same tabloid that had made the offer had this huge blow-up of a photo with what looked like Hannah using a urinal.

FIRST TRAP CAUGHT IN THE ACT!!

It wasn't until later that we heard the whole story, long after the contest was over. What we got from the tabloid was that someone had photographed her using a urinal in one of the men's rooms here. From the local and national news, we knew that she had slammed them with an eight-figure lawsuit for slander.

Tammy was facing off against Joyce O'Hara; as the rest of us kept practicing our own moves, we watched them and the guys, Patrick Bellisle and Peter Parker. Two of Dana's costumes would be seen. She'd made a suit like Paula Abdul wore in the video, and Tammy was going to perform Opposites Attract. Joyce was going to do Heartbreaker, which, oddly enough, came from one of the Anime soundtracks I had used, because it was a song on the AD Police Files, just like What a Fool I Am which I would perform if I reached the second stage. She asked Dana to turn out a costume, but Dana just altered one she had made already, and after telling Joyce, gave it to her as a gift.

Finally came the performance day. Tammy talked about how the song had been the first one she ever learned, and she had busted her hump learning the tap routine, because she had never tap danced before this competition. Joyce asked me to sit in, and we explained the provenance of the show; a post apocalyptic world where robots were designed not only for labor or combat, but to also replace human prostitutes and waitresses. Unlike my song, Heartbreaker had been a fill-in, whereas mine was linked to the first episode, the Phantom Lady.

Again the competition was fierce. When Patrick won he threw his arms around Peter. Like Toby, Peter would stay almost to the last; he played keyboard and could do great back-up.

Tammy went first. Like Tina, she had used the original video to build on. An animator superimposed the cat from the original video on Toby, who had learned the song to do the duet vocals. They didn't have the entire set, so no couch or rooftop, but on the screen behind them the scenes where the set changed did show it with her instead of Paula Abdul. When they reached the tap dance sequence, they threw themselves into it with Tammy and

Toby in front, Tammy and the cartoon cat behind them. Then it ended. As the audience applauded, Tammy hugged Toby, then Toby took a bow and faded back.

Joyce had asked my band to stand in for the back-up band from the video with Patrick, who played a mean guitar as the second. She gave a great performance, and the vote was close; only two votes separated winner from loser. Joyce hugged Tammy and left. She broke down backstage and we all did what we could to cheer her up. Unlike those who went before her, she hadn't been asked to do back-up. But we all promised that if we needed keyboard or a singer, we'd ask her to come back.

We were all dog tired. Try doing anything for 20 days straight. As comedienne Rita Rudner said commenting about a friend going through thirty odd hours of labor, "I don't even want to something that feel good for that long."

Ryan, Morgan, and Tina had become our extended family, and we decided to hit the bar for a nightcap before hitting the sack. We were talking about the next week. Both Morgan and I were a bit worried because it was our turn in the barrel next. Tina excused herself to go to the bathroom. We were still talking when we heard her scream. I was on my feet running even before the Barricade pair.

Tina was crumpled in a corner with a large man standing over her. Her dress had been ripped down one side, exposing a small breast. The guy heard me slam the door open, and turned. He smirked and came at me. I had an instant of the sight before I saw red. Tina was like a crystal vase, beautiful and delicate. As Mom would have said, she wouldn't say shit if she had a mouthful.

And this *bastard* had done this?

He got close, taking a swipe at my breast. Of course, if he pinched it or ripped my clothes, I'd be outed big time. But that didn't matter. Three years of Aikido came to the rescue. As his hand came close enough, I grabbed it and pulled with my left, spinning on my left heel. My right arm cocked back as I let him go, and I smashed my elbow into his back, slamming him into the door as someone outside trying to enter slammed it into him.

He turned, snarling, and came at me again. I did a variation of the first move; this time I caught it with my right, pivoting with my left hand behind his elbow. In Aikido, the 'gentle' martial art, it isn't brute strength that wins, because your opponent will use your energy against you. Master Kuze, our instructor, had been, as they said in an episode of M*A*S*H, "Sixty years older than God" yet he routinely threw everyone else in the dojo around when they forgot that simple thing.

I admit I did put some of my own into it. As the door slammed open and Connie charged in, she saw him slam into the wall headfirst, then slide down it, unconscious. She looked at the scene as I ran to Tina, and she simply shook her head. "And we're protecting you?"

There were bright lights, and Connie turned. "Turn that fucking camera off unless you want it as a suppository!"

An ambulance showed up to take him away. I'd dislocated both his shoulder and elbow and he was severely concussed. I got Tina out after she refused a ride to the hospital and put a large brandy in front of her. Ryan took off his suit jacket and put it around her. "That was amazing," she whispered, looking at me.

"Well, to tell you the truth, it wasn't that good. When our school had a competition in our senior year, I came in fourth. Dana—" I jerked a thumb at her, "-took first." She

just looked at me, crying, and we all took her up to her room.

The attack was too much for her fragile spirit. She withdrew from the contest the next day.

Well something good came of it...

We were depressed that Tina had been brutalized. I was furious that she wouldn't even get a chance to strut her stuff with the next round. Especially after we had worked with her on the song she had chosen; Shiawase no Iro, 'Color of Happiness' by Yoko Ishida from Ah My Goddess, Season Two. Tammy felt even worse. With Tina gone, she had been catapulted to the third round without even trying.

The film crew that had been intending to ask me about the next week had been so polite that I agreed to a talk after breakfast the next morning. It was preempted when Connie asked exactly what I had done and they filmed that instead. Since I didn't want anyone wondering why I was throwing our security guards around, we adjourned to one of the closed-off rooms. Todd and the camera crew followed.

I explained the move, a simple bypass maneuver where you use their energy to open the distance. She asked why I hadn't checked Tina then; more for the audience, she knew better, as I did. "My Master told me only fools or idiots in movies who really don't get hurt forget they have an opponent. He was on my dance card until he left, or was down and out.

"Then when he came back I used an elbow throw. Here, let me," she stood as if moving forward, arms out. "Grab the wrist, second hand on the elbow, and a little push. I pushed a little harder than I had intended. He

pissed me off hurting her like that. Master Kuze says if you get angry, your enemy has won half of the bout.”

“Kuze?” Todd asked. “What’s his first name?”

“Takeo, I think.”

He was excited. He put his hand about where his stomach was. “About so tall? Sixty years older than God?”

“That describes him.”

Todd laughed. “Son of a bitch! I studied under him in Junior High School. Back when I was small.”

The camera man had never had a better straight line. He moved around us, and I looked like a junior high school student confronting her father as I blurted, “When you were *small*?”

Todd blushed. “In junior high I was only this big.” He put his hand down to show about five feet tall; still larger than I was in junior high.

He asked me for the master’s number. I gave it before realizing that Master Kuze would remember a *boy* in his class.

Half an hour later, Master Kuze arrived. He accepted Todd’s bow regally, then looked at me as Todd told him I was his old student ‘Taylor.’ He looked at me as I bowed, and expected to be outed in the next second.

“Yes.” He breathed. “One of my better students in these last years.”

Todd had me demonstrate, using Connie’s eager assistance, what I had done. I know it looked surprising for a 5’8” tall woman to be throwing one who was 6’7” but without her interference, I did.

The master looked at the camera man. “Size is not important.” I giggled because he sounded like Yoda. “Know-

ing when to apply force is." He turned. You three," his hand swept over the hulking guards and myself. "Attack me."

We came at him all together. With just me, you'd expect him to be road pizza. But on the tapes later it looked as if each of us had agreed to let him throw us. I came down on my back, dazed, and he knelt over me. "You favor your right side too much, young man," he whispered before standing away.

That night I came back to the room, ready for bed. As I entered the small sitting room, I heard male moaning, with an occasional "Oh yes!" The lights were down, and unthinking, I flicked them up. Mike was on the couch, head lolled back toward the door with the furniture hiding his partner. His eyes snapped open in shock, then I was stunned when *Connie's* head came into view. What was happening was obvious, but sometimes when I get embarrassed, I get defensive.

"Christ, Mike, didn't you ever listen to my Mom? None of that here, do it in the bedroom!"

I flung open the door even as Mike shouted, "No!" to find Chris curled up... with *Todd*.

I looked around. I was so embarrassed I couldn't speak. I made a motion like locking my lips, turned, and left the apartment. I went down to the bar and had a stiff drink. A short while later, I felt someone sitting beside me. "Bourbon, double. Christ, I need it."

I looked at Dana, who looked shaken. "God, Dana, what happened to you?"

She looked at me defensively. "I was just going to go to bed! Then there was Mike. With *Connie*."

She nodded, looking as stunned as I must have felt. "And I did what your mom would have done by telling them to take it to the bedroom but it was occupied."

"By Chris and Todd," I completed her sentence.

She nodded. "The fact you burst in on them makes the last thing Todd said make sense." I arched an eyebrow. "He asked if we'd been twins separated at birth or something." We sat there in silence. "How long do you think we should give them?"

I finished my drink, and put out my arm. "They have those couches in the contest break room. I'd suggest we use them and leave them alone for the night."

The next morning, I saw four looks of utter innocence when I came into the buffet. I got my usual, walked over, and poured a coffee. Mike and Chris had a deer-in-the-headlights look as I sat down primly. I sipped, then said, "Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play?"

"I can explain," Mike began.

"Don't." I waved at the tables around us, some filled with guests, others with those of us contestants that remained. "Let's leave it one of life's little mysteries."

Dana entered, looking bedraggled. I felt sorry for her, I know how much she likes her sleep, and that couch had been uncomfortable. She got her coffee, no breakfast, then came over to sit down. Suddenly she blurted, "Nothing happened! Not a fucking. Thing. Happened. Right?"

Todd looked at Connie who was standing across the table from us. She had her back to me, and I could see her shoulders jerking. "Separated at birth. Just like I told you." Connie just nodded.

Last of the first round eliminations

Performance day. I won't bother to go through every time a guy got defeated from here on because while they were there and they were friendly, they weren't 'friends' like Ryan was. When it came time for Morgan, she had chosen I'm Gonna Get you Good by Shania Twain. We did back-up, or rather the band did because I was doing back-up vocal. She blew her competitor, Melissa Kale, away, outpointing her by almost two-to-one. None of them were staying, so they left, and we got down to my competition.

I was facing off against Jesse O'Neal, and whoever won, we were both being asked to do back-up vocals. She did Lover Girl by Tina Marie. Frankly, I felt I was seriously fucked. Let's face it, she was awesome. She had brought her own band rather than borrowing us. Her being able to do her own guitar riffs made me feel inadequate. Her band and her had been asked to do back-ups later.

I was in the dressing room, half-dressed as we had planned for what came next. Then as I took some deep breaths, I heard my own voice.

"The series Bubblegum Crisis owes a lot to the movie Blade Runner; there are even references, such as Priss, the lead singer of the band that does the song I am doing being named after the Replicant in Blade Runner. It was marketed here for over ten years only in Japanese with subtitles. But it became a cult classic even with that, and they finally released it in English."

They were showing the two videos for the song, the English animated version with Lou Bonnevie as the singer, and the Japanese live version, Konya Wa Hurricane with Oomori Kinuko singing. "That live video was

actually released before the TV show aired in Japan, with a trailer attached to it as a promo.

“What I did was try to match them together. For example, in the Japanese language version, you just watch these feet go up a flight of stairs and onto stage. But in the animation, you see Priss getting dressed. So we took both costumes and joined them. Instead of a red bustier and hip-hugger skirt, Dana made a minidress with a red top and black bottom, but kept the belt from the live action version.” I laughed. “After all, Priss is better built than I am.”

I was having trouble breathing. Morgan came in, scaring the shit out of me. She asked me if I was all right. I nodded but I felt like a bobble head doll. I had left the dress unzipped with the belt off; as the music began, Morgan zipped me up, and held the belt as I buckled it on. Then I walked down that Hall to Hell.

I paused at the door. I was going to die of a heart attack, I just knew it; fall over dead right there. But I pushed the door open, walking through the band to stand in my place. We had problems with reverb from the mike if I switched it on too soon. The man in charge of audio merely told me to switch it on when I needed it, so I slid it into the stand as I stood, staring back at the flat screens. As I walked up, all I had seen was the parquet floor. I didn't even see the bottom row of seats. Facing the back, I saw the silhouettes of the performers. On the musical cue, I spun, flipping on the mike as the floods behind us died, and I was facing the audience.

[did you know] On the stormy highway
[did you dream] You were spinning in the lonely night
[did you lie] Elusive dreams, memories of yesterday.
[did you know] Visualizing illusions

[did you dream] Was my way of life

[did you lie] The howling wind strips them all away
[no, no, no, my heart]."

I couldn't see anyone! All I saw was spots glaring into my eyes as I sang. God, did the others go through this? I was sure the entire audience had stepped out for drinks, and I was singing to an empty house. Panic gripped me as I continued singing.

"Tonight a hurricane

Feel the hurricane

Spending this lonely night loving you [loving you]

Tonight a hurricane

Touch me hurricane

Show me your love with your touch.

Burning touch."

Was there anyone even listening? Later, seeing the shots of my performance, at first I looked like Hannah had. This is just a vacation, hoe hum. But in those same videos, I saw myself buckling down. I might be doing this only as yet another rehearsal, but by God I would sing the fucking song!

"Tonight a hurricane

Touch me hurricane

Show me your love with your touch.

Burning touch.

Give me touch.

Burning touch."

The song ended and I was standing there, the mike in my hand straight up over my head as the spots died. The house lights smoothly came up. Hundreds of eyes were

on me, and I wanted to run, screaming. Then the applause began, and we took our bows.

Jesse came up and I clasped her hand desperately. The announcer came up behind us. "Alright. Vote now."

I didn't look. I didn't want to know if I'd scored worse than Hannah had against Tina. Jesse just smiled but she looked to the side, and her face fell. I looked, finally.

I had scored only six points more than her. I was shocked, and the video shows me standing there, mouth open like a freshly caught fish as Jesse hugged me. Then we were hugging each other, jumping up and down.

We headed into the backstage area, and the instant we were out of sight I hugged her so tight, I thought I might break something.

The videos show us both terrified that we had lost before we even knew the scores. Both of us had friends present, but we still clung to each other in the afterglow of the moment. She told me that she had been blinded by the spots too. Like me, she had believed that she was in an empty room, performing for no one.

Demands and Christmas Carols

Our first day off in three weeks, I awoke to Ryan pounding on the door. We had intended to sleep in, but the world, it seemed, had other plans.

"Where's the Go-To girl!" he almost screamed. Without thinking, I pointed him at Dana's room, and trudged back toward my bedroom. There was screaming and some smashing as she chased him out, threatening to kill him. She really hated getting up early.

Me? I went back to bed.

As we sat down to brunch, Tammy was venting. She felt betrayed by Tina's flight, and I understood how she felt. It was one thing to face your opponent and win or lose. Quite another to just be told "You go to the semi-finals" with no effort.

Conrad heard about our bitching, and when he asked us, Tammy rounded on him. "It's not fair, dammit! I was getting all psyched up to face Tina and she runs away?"

"Well, we can't force her to perform--"

"Fuck that! This is a contest, we are supposed to face our opponents! If I were to win, how could I face myself in the next round saying 'oh she just gave it to me?' What if something happened to Morgan or Taylor? Am I supposed to go to the finals without proving my worth?"

"What would you suggest, Tammy?" he asked.

"Make our confrontation moot. We have enough videos of Tina's song. When it comes time, show one of them, then have me face what she was supposed to do. Then let the audience decide."

"So if she wins, either Taylor or Morgan faces just that?"

"No! She's out, that's a fact. What we do is set up a fund. Have the audience vote not with numbers but money. You can contact Tina so you can ask her what cause she favors. I'll support the local animal shelters. They can pledge money to support those causes. While Tina isn't here to compete, the people watching can see who would have won if we *had* competed."

But before that, we had Ryan's slow song. He intended to do I Want To Know What Love is, by Foreigner. Dana listened to his request for a choir. She had been jokingly called the 'Go To Girl' since she found a bagpiper for Tina.

Don't ask.

On the elimination day, I was spooning ambrosia into a little cup when I heard, "Why, Taylor! As I live and breathe!"

I turned. It was Mr. Enchev, the choir director at our school for over twenty years before we arrived. He was short, chubby, with an obvious hairpiece.

"Hello, sir!" I replied. Behind him, I could see Dana smirking.

"My students always need examples. Remember the hymn you once sang A capella?"

"Which one, sir?"

"Oh Holy Night?"

My mind was working frantically. By the time he had met me, I was already a baritone. Oh Holy Night was a *Soprano* solo. His smile faltered.

"Come on. Mrs. Lewis thought it was good enough for her, do I get to hear it?"

Dana mouthed "*He knows*" at me. Then it clicked. Remember, friends since grade school? Mrs. Lewis had been my junior high school choir teacher. She would have remembered me singing it!

"Yes, sir. I do. I was just surprised you asked, it has been a long time."

"Well, you know how I am. I want to hear it again so these kids know how to do it right! So blow my doors off!" He pointed at four girls and made them sit. Then he stripped off his toupee. He had been a fun teacher back then, and I saw he hadn't changed. I had heard when I first arrived that he was a humorless man before I met him, which had to have been a lie. I think he was in his sixties now, and he had been balding since he was in his

mid-thirties. He wore a toupee and years before I had met him, he had decided to have fun with the kids teasing him. If you want an example of his sense of humor, listen to Spike Jones, the band leader from the Forties, best known for directing his orchestra with a Colt Buntline special and firing off blanks as punctuation.

Whenever he took off that hairpiece, he expected you to put everything into your projection.

“Oh holy night,
the stars are brightly shining
it is the night of our dear savior’s birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining
til he appeared and the soul felt it’s worth
A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices
for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn-”

When it’s sung by a chorus, that is where the entire choir sings back up. He spun, raising his hands, then as if planned, everyone he had brought joined in. A good choir knows when to start singing, and they had probably learned this arrangement with the man now directing.

“Fall on your knees
Oh hear the angels’ voices
Oh night divine
Oh night when Christ was born
Oh night
Oh holy night
Oh night divine!”

Then he turned around, gave me a one-armed hug, and I ended up signing autographs. The camera crews not only filmed that, but the reactions on the casino floor

about 50 feet away, where people turned and paused at their gaming, or gathered around to record it with digital cameras or cell phones

That night Ryan duplicated the video of I Want to Know What Love Is. So you had the band setting up during the first part; then in the middle, the members of the choir in not only that class, but others, getting ready. Finally, as he was singing, the choir was led out, facing him, and without being directed, sang the replies. Martin Forbes who did *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald* only lost by eight points.

So it was that the first elimination for the first semifinal had Tammy walking out. She told the audience what had happened, then issued her challenge. The videos gave us Tina doing Everything. After the applause died, Tammy sang her own offering, Evergreen, also by Barbra Streisand. Before the applause died, Conrad reported that Tina wanted any money donated to go to AIDS research.

But that wasn't the end of it. Anyone who had paid attention to Tammy and which songs had been chosen would have known who had made both famous, and someone told *her*. So while Tammy was still on stage listening to Tina's rendition, someone said, "She *is* good!" I turned and there she was, Miss Funny Girl herself. She motioned for us to be quiet as we listened.

"Pretty good? But how good is this other kid?" she asked.

"They are both fine singers, Ma'am. But I wish Tina had stayed," I replied.

Tammy finished her number and Barbra took out a checkbook. "Well, come on, people. Who gets the money?"

"Split it." We looked at Mike. "Both are good causes."

She smiled, wrote, then ripped off the check to write again. Tammy came through the door to find the woman handing her a check on-camera. "For the animals." Then she handed Mike one for AIDS research.

Both were for a quarter-million dollars.

The announcer informed the audience that Tina had edged Tammy out, and at Tammy's request the funds were held open until the end of the competition. It was a good thing they had. The news of her actions was leaked by someone to the press, along with Miss Streisand handing over the checks (Though at the star's request, the amount was never mentioned), That brought a flood of letters and checks from all over the country; by the time we began the next cycle, the amounts had grown to almost a million dollars each, and were still growing.

Tragedy strikes again

As we began the next cycle, I had to face the fact that I was in love, or at least serious lust, with Morgan. I had found myself having trouble talking to her from the start, blushing like a goddamned traffic light when she leaned close enough to smell; I could have picked out the perfume she wore in a blind test of a thousand women. The worst was that after this next round, one of us would have lost, and I didn't want to beat her. I didn't want to be the one that made her cry.

She was doing Bring Me To Life by Evanescence for the next stage, and I found myself watching her rehearsing. It was sung (and co-written) by Amy Lee with Paul McCoy of 12 Stones doing the male lead. Instead of going for the video of Lee in a nightgown, she had instead gone to the Daredevil screenplay; after all, she lifted weights, she worked out. She looked *good*. If you saw her and Jennifer Garner who played Elektra in the movie

side-by-side from behind, you would have been hard-pressed to tell them apart. Morgan could have been her double on stage.

As we counted down on Thursday, I crept in to watch her final rehearsal. Patrick was there for the lead male vocal, as were my own band members doing back-up. Dana had gone all out at making a copy of the costume from the movie. Mike had offered to go out and buy her some Sai Swords, but Morgan had merely opened a case, and drawn out her own.

I had watched her in practice, and if she could have recorded the song and just done the kata in silence, she could have matched the movie performance. After some discussion, that was what she did on screen. The hotel had rigged all of the sandbags used in the video in a slightly darkened room, and she flowed through them like a beautiful homicidal Valkyrie. Since the scene in the movie only used about half of the song, she had extended her kata. The full video with her voice in the background became a favorite on YouTube before the year was out.

She began onstage as the scene did, kneeling with arms outstretched. Since the first part of the song was hers, she stayed in it effortlessly as she sang, uncurling to stand defiant. When the male portions were being sung, she gave an acrobatic performance combined with fight scene that flowed before the band smoothly. As the song ended, she was back into the same position she had started in.

“That was wonderful,” I shouted.

She looked up, waving. “Really?”

“I wish I was as flexible as you are. That standing aerial somersault was just, just... amazing.”

She shrugged, smiling slightly. Then she did a reverse walkover, rolling backward until her hands were on the floor, then flipping her legs up to land lightly on her feet.

“If you need to do it again before I practice-”

“No.” She motioned at my costume. I was in a copy of the costume Dana had made for Joyce. “Nice look.”

“Thank-” There was a popping sound, and suddenly I was back outside the restaurant, Mom falling against me. I spun. What happened next was so fast that I didn’t even know what happened until I saw the video later. Something large was hurtling toward where I stood frozen. Someone screamed my name and I was slammed down on my face as whatever it was passed right through where my head would have been. I heard a scream that cut off abruptly, then the sound of a body hitting the floor.

I rolled on my hands and knees and ducked as what looked like one of the large spotlights swung back over me. I spun around on my knees, and stared in horror at Morgan. She was crumpled in a fetal ball, mewling in pain. I scuttled without getting any higher as the lamp kept swinging, so Mike reached her first.

On rehearsal days, everything in the room was recorded with live camera crews up in the seating area. I had barely reached her when the doors slammed open, and the paramedic team that worked for the hotel was there.

Her costume was covered in blood from just above her stomach to her chin, and she was gasping in pain. Her terror-filled eyes turned to me, and she whispered, “Oh God, it hurts.” Then I was filled with terror as she coughed up blood.

The paramedic shoved me aside, but he was doing his job, so I didn’t complain. Her left hand was flailing and I

caught it. She almost crushed my hand as they rolled her on her back. They had brought a Stokes litter, and gently transferred her to it. "Ambulance is in route. Let go of her hand, Taylor."

Morgan and I said no together. The paramedic just grumbled as Connie and Todd came running in. He shook his head, then went to the head of the litter with his partner. "We'll carry her out to meet the ambulance. You two, take the foot."

I moved so Connie could take one side, Todd took the other. As they lifted, I stood with Morgan's hand still in mine. We hurried through the rear area, and as we reached the rear-loading doors, the ambulance arrived. They tried to make me stay, but I refused to let go. Morgan's grip tightened every time someone suggested I leave her.

The ambulance ride was sheer terror. The paramedic in the back was talking gently to her as he worked, letting her know what was happening even as we swayed with the movement of the van. She was intubated, and put on pure oxygen. We arrived and they finally broke me free of her as they rushed her into the emergency room, then up for surgery.

I sat, my costume blood-spattered, just staring into space. Mike, Chris, and Dana, followed by Connie and Todd, arrived in time to stop me from ripping some guy's head off. He'd recognized me from one of the news stories, and was trying to get me to pose with him so his wife could take a picture. Todd gently told him my friend had been injured, and I wasn't in the mood. They sat with me, or at least my friends sat; Todd and Connie were in full bodyguard mode. I giggled, realizing that both Connie and Todd had taken 'body' guarding a bit too far, but I didn't explain why I had.

Later, watching the show, I realized that while I had felt completely alone before they arrived, a camera crew and four of the Barricade guards had arrived at the hospital seconds after the ambulance. So far they had deflected two news crews, and a born again asshole who had intended to walk up to me and preach about the evils of accepting gays. He was lucky that he just left in disgust; the guards, I found out later, were not in mood to be overly polite. Neither was I.

We waited for hours, then finally the attending physician arrived. The camera crew had convinced Dana to carry a mike so while there was almost thirty feet between where they were and us, they recorded it all.

I couldn't find the strength to stand when he came toward us. Todd just put out his arm, and when I took it, lifted me to my feet. The doctor looked at us for a long moment. "She's stabilized, but she's still in critical condition."

"How bad is it?" I asked.

"From what I have been told, when she pushed you out of the way, she leaped up and tried to ride the impact. It's a good thing she did, but she also leaped to the side and the spotlight hit her here." He motioned, covering his chest from the sternum out on the right side. "All of the supported ribs on her right side were shattered, along with her collarbone and right arm. The arm is broken in nine places, her shoulder was dislocated, and the joint was smashed. Some of the rib fragments were also jammed into her right lung." He saw our horror-filled faces. "But if she hadn't made that leap, or tried to follow you to the floor, it would have snapped her neck like a twig.

"We've plugged the entrance to her right lung, and have her on a full oxygen regimen, so she's breathing all

right. We aren't done draining her lung yet; only opened her up and tied off any bleeders. We have to do that before we can begin sewing it up unless we remove the lung. We've set and immobilized the arm and collarbone." He sighed. "She may never regain full use of it again."

"Can I see her?"

"All you're going to see is her laying there with tubes stuck in everywhere, young lady. She's still under sedation, and we're not bringing her out until after we've repaired her lung."

"Doctor, if she hadn't shoved me first, it would be me up there, or in the morgue. Please."

"All right. But just you."

"She doesn't go anywhere without me, Doc," Todd rumbled. "But I will stay out of the room," he agreed.

I have never done a braver thing in my life than walking into that room. She looked like she had been attacked by one of those tentacled monsters you see in Anime, with tubes going every which way. Her right arm was in a traction cast pulled straight down her side and strapped down. I walked over and looked at her face. She looked almost peaceful, but so sallow in complexion that I thought she had really died and this was all some kind of insane medical experiment.

I sat, holding her slack hand in both of my own and held it as my tears ran down both of our hands. I was alive because she had shoved me; even with the doctor telling us she was stable, I knew that 'critical' meant her life was still in danger.

"Oh Morgan," I sobbed. "I haven't gotten a chance to tell you how I feel. I'm living a lie and you've been sucked

into it. I want to see you open your eyes so I can tell you the truth. Don't leave me alone, please."



I heard the door open and a blond man between Mike and Connie in height came in. He was in a uniform, one of those 'Smokey the Bear' hats in hand. He paused when he saw me, then came forward.

"You're Taylor, right?"

"Yes sir." I scrubbed my eyes.

"Morgan's told me a lot about you. Wish we had met under better circumstances."

"I as well, sir." I stood and he nodded to me, taking the seat. His hands were large enough to cup my entire face, but you would have thought her hand was a baby bird he was afraid he might crush.

For a long time he just sat there, crying silently. A nurse came in, and told us we had to leave. He wiped his eyes, then ushered me out of the room.

"She saved my life, sir."

"She's always been the brave one. She would climb trees like a little monkey. 'Can't see the world right from down there, daddy,' she'd say." He looked up, eyes glistening. "She would do the same for anyone."

"I realize that. It's just me that was saved this time."

"Oh God, my little girl." He fell to his knees, and when I hugged him he returned it so strong I was unable to breath. But I didn't utter a protest. I know, from being told, that the scene was filmed.

It was never used.

Dedication to the fallen

I got to sleep only because the hotel doctor made me take a sleeping pill. When I awoke and went to breakfast, Ryan told me the hospital had called; Morgan's condition

had been upgraded to guarded. When I started crying, he held me, turning me so that the cameras didn't get my wounded face. I choked down some toast and coffee, then found myself facing my greatest challenge.

Conrad had been on the phone with the studio and corporation. They had decided that since Morgan was out due to her injury, they would merely do a retrospective of her participation; next week Tammy and I would skip the slow song portion and go directly to the foreign language one.

"No."

"Taylor--"

"Damn it, Mr. Conrad. If she hadn't pushed me aside, I'd be dead now! She may still die! And they just want to do... that?" I was standing and screaming at him. "She is not dead, and I am not going to let them treat her like she is!"

He sat there looking at me. "And what would you suggest? After sitting down and *calming* down, that is."

I sat. "Sorry."

"No offense taken. Talk to me."

"You let Tammy compete with Tina, even though Tina wasn't here. Let me do the same thing. I'll ask that anything paid toward me goes to Juvenile Leukemia. You can ask her father where she might want it donated."

"And if they refuse?"

"Then I'll pull the plug and Tammy wins by default. Because I am not going to let Morgan go."

He watched me for a long time. "I'll see what I can do. But no guarantees."

"I'll pack, just in case."

When the show aired, the entire scene was shown. thanks to the cameras mounted over his door and behind his desk. He waited until I had left, then placed the call. He told whoever he was speaking to (that part did not make the show) what I had said, then added. "She feels it so strongly that she'll withdraw if you say no. And if she does, you can have my resignation as well."

I was watching when it aired, and I was on the phone immediately. He answered the phone. "Taylor, I presume." I must have sounded maudlin, crying as I thanked him for his support. He just let me maunder on. Then he replied softly, "I lost my eight-year-old son to Juvenile Leukemia."

But I only heard that I was allowed my plea. When it came time for our performances, no one had told the audience what had happened yet. I told them, and I heard gasps from some of them.

"But like Tina, I'm not letting Morgan go unheard. We do have the dress rehearsal recording, shot from where you are sitting now, which is not up to a proper performance, but I am going to make the same challenge Tammy did just a few days ago. Vote with your wallet. The bets placed on Morgan will go to Breast Cancer research." I paused."Until her father told me, I didn't know that Morgan lost her mother at an early age to that disease.

"I had a friend who died of Juvenile Leukemia, and I'm asking that every vote for me be money put into that fund. And I'm going to go you one better. I am donating every cent I have made up to this point, and until I lose or win...to Breast Cancer in thanks for her saving my life.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Morgan Daley performing Bring Me Back to Life." I stepped aside and watched that final performance. Morgan was in intensive care, still se-

dated, though they reported that they had finished repairing her lung. I was horrified to discover that along with her arm, she had lost about a third of the air space in her lung. This recording might be the last thing anyone would see of her as a performer.

The recording ended as I was coming down the steps to join her on the floor. The applause started, then built as the audience members gave her a standing ovation, the first of the series. I was clapping just as hard.

As the band set up, they got to watch me giving the provenance of the song. "Like Bubblegum Crisis, the original AD Police files were set in a post-apocalyptic world as a prequel to the better-known series. In the first episode, you meet Leon McNichols from BGC. He had started with what they call the 'regular' police, and he is almost killed by a malfunctioning robot designed for sex. He later joins the AD police, who specialize in destroying these malfunctioning units.

"Through dialogue, you discover that these sex robots are literally the perfect prostitute; they will do anything, endure anything their partner wants. But think about how many *human* prostitute are brutalized, and how many more would be if there were not safeguards such as they have in the 'houses' here in Nevada.

"During an investigation, his partner Jeena discovers that instead of being totally dismantled and destroyed, some of the parts of damaged robots, or 'boomers', are being illegally recycled. She also discovers that the brain of the robot that had tried to kill Leon was one of those parts. The fools that sold it hadn't even considered the one memory they could not erase; Leon with his weapon extended with blood on his face.

"The episode reaches its climax as Leon is again attacked. In the internal monologue, the robot has equated

violence to love and fixated on Leon as literally the only man that had ever 'loved' her because he had been the officer that shot her until she 'died'. She's begging in her mind for him to prove his love, to shoot her again and again to show that love; kill her with his love or she will kill him. It ends with her killed by Jeena, laying there with a tear running from her eye.

"What a Fool I Am was the ending theme, and it fits; someone desperate for a love she can never have."

It was almost twenty minutes before the announcer introduced me and What a Fool I am By Lou Bonnevie.

I stood there silently as the intro played.

"I, I've never realized

What I've given up for you

You, you never gave me the chance

To be what I wanted

To love you as I am

Life o' love you never gave me

Doesn't stop me from wantin' you

And all the crazy lies you told me

Doesn't stop me from lovin' you

What a fool I am

What a fool I've been

('Cause I'm) falling in love with you helplessly

What a fool I am

What a fool I've been

Begging my love for you endlessly

Now, now that I've come to know

You never really cared

Still, still in my heart I hold
This everlastin' love
If only you could look into my heart
If only you could feel the love I have
Then maybe you'll come to realize
There's one in a million me!"

At my request, the background was not the video itself like we had originally planned; instead it was that retrospective montage of Morgan through the contest. There were scenes of me doing back-up, of her singing with Mike correcting her with the video of the song she had chosen for the foreign language segment in the background. Others showed us having dinner or all cuddled up, watching one of the shows we had brought from home. I was crying through it. When she recovered, she'd no doubt leave without saying goodbye.

I'd never get the chance to tell her I loved her.

"What a fool I am

What a fool I've been

('Cause I'm) falling in love with you helplessly

What a fool I am

What a fool I've been

Begging my love for you endlessly."

I fell silent. The silence continued for several moments. Then suddenly the applause began, and the audience gave me a standing ovation too.

In the following weeks, those thermometer graphs used by charities were put up in the lobby of the casino with the four funds marked, with the number of dollars donated. Each was marked with the ribbons they give out for them. Pink for Breast Cancer, Amber for Juvenile Dia-

betes, Red for AIDS research, and Blue for the animals. If asked, hotel employees would tell the patrons what it was for, and there were screenings of Tammy and I making our pleas for those causes, along with sneak previews of all four songs. If you donated at the casino or at their on-line site, you received a ribbon wrapped around a picture of the sponsoring singer attached to a plaque.

While I was originally ahead of her, Morgan's cause drew a massive leap when someone leaked a copy of the actual injury, and video of her saving my life. Barricade sent a full squad, eight men, to the hospital immediately because the press has started another feeding frenzy. Nothing was getting done without having them there to shove the press out again.

Lies and Redemption

We entered our last week with the glad news that Morgan was awake, coherent, and on the road to recovery. However, I brought us all back down when I told everyone about the doctor's prognosis.

I had only two songs to rehearse. One I couldn't do yet because Chris had locked himself in his room, still writing it. I picked up my mike to start rehearsing Princess of December, and it felt wrong. It rattled when I moved it. I thought originally that holding it in my hand as I clapped for Morgan might have damaged it. We had been issued them at the start of the contest, so no one would have been handling it beyond the guys who maintained them, so I carried it down to the shop.

Michael Reeves was the electronics specialist, and he took it from me. He shook it, and shrugged. "Sometimes that happens, maybe it will still work." He turned on a small radio and flicked the switch. The mikes were wire-

less; radios picked up the music and carried it to the speakers.

He brought it to his mouth, but before he could speak, something came out of the radio speakers. It was my voice, singing Princess of December, A capella.

He shut it off, and turned it back on. We heard me still singing. Then he turned it off again, picking up a screwdriver. "Punch 1414 on my phone. That's security. When they answer, tell them I asked for a couple of guards. Do you have Mr. Conrad's number?"

"Yes, he called me when that media shit-storm began." I had put him on speed dial.

"After security, call him. Tell him that you, me, and a couple of guards have to see him as soon as possible." Confused, I did as instructed. When the guards arrived, Reeves put the innards of the mike in a ziplock bag, and we headed upstairs. He laid it on Conrad's desk.

"It's one of those Spy Pens they make. Click one button, you write. Click another, and it records. It was wired into one of our on-stage wireless mikes."

Conrad picked up the bag, then looked at him. "Who else knows about this?"

"Just Taylor who brought the mike to me when she thought she had damaged it, these guards, me, and you."

"Thank you. You three-" he motioned to the guards and Reeves, "-go down to casino security and make statements about this. But tell no one else." They left.

"What's happening, sir?"

"Someone is trying to make you look like Milli Vanilli."

That band was still one of the largest music industry scandals of the last three decades. A German promoter

had found three people with excellent voice talents, but whom he did not consider marketable. Instead, he coerced two not-too-bright male models into fronting for them by lip-synching the lyrics. They were caught, and it ended six careers. The last that had been seen of the fake singers was when they did a commercial for Carefree gum where the opera record they are lip-synching skips.

I was horrified. "Sir, you don't think--"

"Taylor," he smiled gently. "we have enough footage of you singing without accompaniment to stop that dead. No, this is part of a bigger problem." He nudged the bag. "The night Morgan was injured, someone called her phone using a voice synthesizer." He poked the bag again. "Probably bought at the same store he or she bought this. Her father answered it.

"He was told that you were a trap and that you couldn't sing because of an injury almost four years ago." He looked up into my eyes. "The caller also claimed that Morgan had found out, was ready to spill the story, and that you rigged the light to try to kill her."

"I did what?" I almost screamed. He held up his hand.

"When you came to me about creating the funds for yourself and Morgan, I had already been informed that traces of a small charge of what they think was plastic explosive; just enough to break the shackle, had been detected. The Best Boy had seen scorch marks, and we called in the police that night."

"Someone tried to murder her?"

"Someone tried to murder *you*, Taylor. That person is asking Daniel to meet secretly tonight. Whoever it is wants him to agree to break the story and if they can convince the tabloid that issued the bounty to pay it, let him have that money in return for the 'evidence'."

"I don't know what to say." I shook my head in shock. Someone was willing to kill me, and had almost killed Morgan trying?

"Take some time off. We have two days before the next elimination. Get your head straight, because I want your best." He stood, patting me on my shoulder. "The next elimination for you girls will be Tina and Morgan doing their songs, so you guys can be ready for the final elimination."

The day of the performance, he brought a picture. It was of a man in front of the markers they use in police photographs. "Do you know him?"

I stared at it then handed it back. "I should, it's my father."

Skean Dubh

Even though my father had been captured and arrested, he got one last shot in. He was screaming that I was a boy and that I had been lip-synching all this time when they arrived at Metro. Conrad called a press conference to address the claim that I was lip-synching. He and I were on stage, and he pointed out that there were hours of footage of me doing back-up vocals and singing back-stage. The press wasn't convinced.

Then the door opened. Ryan, followed by Chris with his guitar burst in, and Chris began setting up.

"They say the proof of the pudding is in the eating. I know she knows the lyrics to Somewhere Out There from An American Tale. We will sing it together without accompaniment or mikes."

"Then what's he doing?" a reporter pointed at Chris.

“There’s a bridge; a period with music and no vocals in the song. He will play it.”

He came up on stage, motioned me to stand far stage left, then took his place stage left. Both of us faced about a quarter-turn from back-to-back. “Whenever you’re ready, Taylor.

I took a deep breath.

“Somewhere out there beneath the pale moonlight
Someone’s thinking of me and loving me tonight”

Then he picked it up.

“Somewhere out there someone’s saying a prayer

That we’ll find one another in that big somewhere out there

“And even though I know how very far apart we are

It helps to think we might be wishing on the same bright star.”

Chris pointed up and toward me, aimed about half-way across the stage.

“And when the night wind starts to sing a lonesome lullaby

It helps to think we’re sleeping underneath the same big sky.” I swept my arm, with my hand pointed at just about the same point. Then we turned, walking toward each other as we both sang.

“Somewhere out there if love can see us through

Then we’ll be together somewhere out there

Out where dreams come true.”

As the bridge began, he took my hand. Right before it ended, he twirled me, and we traded places. He turned part-way away again as he sang.

“And even though I know how very far apart we are
It helps to think we might be wishing on the same
bright star.”

His gesture again aimed toward me.

“And when the night wind starts to sing a lonesome
lullaby

It helps to think we’re sleeping underneath the same
big sky.”

My gesture came up, and our hands were touching.
He took mine, and he turned me so we faced each other,
singing.

“Somewhere out there if love can see us through (love
can see us through)

Then we’ll be together somewhere out there

Out where dreams come true.”

“That looked choreographed to me.” One reporter
snorted.

Ryan gave him a scathing look. “We’ve been working
on nothing *but* performing for the last seven weeks, you
toad. Every one of us has had to learn new things. Stage
direction, lighting, choreography, makeup, costuming,
and the list goes on.

“We may have been amateurs when we started, but by
God we’re professionals now! If it was Streisand and Neil
Diamond up here, you wouldn’t be criticizing them like
this!”

“But she still hasn’t addressed whether she’s a trap or
not-”

“If you think for a minute that the subject matters, you
haven’t been paying attention these past weeks.” Ryan
snarled. “If she is, we’ll know eventually. By God! All of

this, this *crap* because some lunatic that tried to kill her screamed it? Give me a fucking break!"

Except for the word that was bleeped from nationwide television (It was kept in when the show aired), that tirade pretty much settled the question.

The Last Song

"I did it!" Chris came out of his room, snatched me up to spin me, dropped me, did the same to Dana, and only stopped when Mike warned him that he'd *really* hurt him if he tried.

"Did what? If you're talking about Todd-" I started.

"No, the song."

"What song."

"Not what song, THE song. The one I've been writing for you."

He went to his keyboard, set the sheets of paper down, and started playing. He sang about what I was going through, something I had not paid much attention to.

For the last seven weeks, we had been stuck pretty much in the hotel, going only to the three bars they had; the rooftop dance club (though that was placed off-limits when some guy tried to use the 'Crocodile Dundee' test on Dane. In reply, she flipped him into and partway over the bar where Security collected him); the buffet; and the occasional big dinner at the classy restaurant. The first night we were all in the Irish pub, some guy sent me a drink. As a guy, I knew this was usually a pick-up attempt, and I didn't know how to handle it.

It had been all my friends and new friends at the table, with the bounty still on our minds. We discussed it, and we asked the camera man not to film it. Finally we

agreed, and when it was suggested, all of the other female performers agreed with it too. From that point on, we would walk up to the person, and say, "Thank you, however if this is a pick-up, I am not interested at the moment. If you wish to talk, however, I would be happy to oblige."

A lot of the guys got huffy, but since we always had this conversation with one of the guards standing there, they always gave it up. The guard remained in case the person got grabby later. I was amazed by how many men sent me drinks, and almost as many women did too. For the men it was sometimes the idea of maybe seeing, say, Milla Jovovich and hoping she accepted a drink and talk, or a man who wonders about a sexual partner who has a better grasp of what a man likes than any woman who is not a professional would. Or women who were lesbians, or maybe were attracted to the idea of a partner who would know what a woman likes, yet be able to satisfy other urges without mechanical assistance.

We had all played the game, but always at a remove. They got the talk, an autograph, and maybe a picture of kiss on the cheek, but nothing else.

But Chris had been paying attention to something I had not; the longing or speculating glances. While I had flowers delivered to me almost everyday, I tossed the cards away unread, but he had collected them. After he finished the song, I got to see them. They ran the gamut from asking me to dinner or dancing down to blatant offers of sex with a few just admiring from a distance. And they were from both men and women. One man had even offered marriage. Another (from a woman) had promised to keep me in 'Sissy Heaven' if I agreed.

I listened to the song as the last notes died. "Perfect."

"You know," he said, idly playing with the keys, "When this one is sung, you'll be out."

"I realize that. But it was going to come out anyway."

"True. But with it, you have a chance to make someone else's dream come true." He looked up at me. "One of the cameramen has a dream of doing music videos. He and I have really gotten close..."

"What about Todd?"

"He's fun, but frankly, he's so big down there that he scares the crap out of me."

I clawed my face. "My god! I did not need that visual!"

"But Ray is just right."

"I *so* did not want to hear about your love life, Fag Boy." He just grinned.

"I know that, you dork. Just wanted to see your reaction. But he did ask me to ask you..."

"I'll think about it. Now let me try this." I picked up the sheets

Instead of it being me and Tammy facing off, the studio did the two women that had been unable to compete with us with Ryan's last challenge.

Again, I did the intro to the song with him. "The series is about an almost mythical man who founded what could be called the first nation of Korea in the 1st Century BCE," I told the interviewer. "The song is linked to four characters; Jumong, his father Hae Mosu, his mother Luhua, and the love of his life, Soseono.

"There are two tragic loves through most of it. Hae Mosu is a rebel against the occupying Chinese Han Dynasty government. He was captured, blinded, and believed dead for most of his son's life. He finds he has a son, and a woman who has mourned him all of those lost years. Luhua goes through decades as a concubine to the

King of Puyu, the man who raised her son, then discovers her love is still alive, only to lose him tragically after they reunite. The song is a cry for all the things they never got to do.

“The second love is equally tragic. When they meet, she thinks he’s a clownish common laborer, not fit to marry the daughter of a prosperous merchant house. Then she finds he didn’t lie about being a prince, but his older adoptive brother is in pursuit. They end up in marriages to other people, his arranged, hers because she knows of the arrangement. His attempt to tell her how he feels ends in silence when he sees the newly-married couple riding away.

“When he later becomes a rebel founding his own nation, they are uneasy allies, unable to show their love for political reason. But they finally do marry in the end.”

Ryan, singing the love theme from Jumong, blew away Michael Ryan’s La Bamba, out-scoring him almost three-to-one; almost as bad as the defeat suffered by Hannah.

Both of the female performances that night were taped, because the actual performers had either left or were in the hospital. In fact, I got more air time than either of them, as I had to explain the provenance of the songs, which I had done with them there. Tina’s had gone first, so we were sitting in front of a blue screen. With the start of the show, it came from behind us.

“Shiawase no Iro is translated, ‘Color of Happiness’; and was sung by Yoko Ishida. It’s the theme of the second season of the Anime Ah My Goddess. The show is a comedy about all the problems caused by three, at one point four, goddesses living in the same house with one human man. While set in Japan, the Goddesses are actually Norse.

“The main ones are actually the Norns; the goddesses who determine your fate in life. They are Uror; called Urd, who determines where your life begins. Verithandi, called Belldandy in the Anime whose Norse name literally means ‘present’ or today; and Skuld, whose name means debt or future.

“You see this in part of the first season; There has been a disruption in Yggdrasil, which in Norse mythology is the World Tree, but in the series, it’s Heaven’s main computer. When the computer crashes, Urd suddenly shrinks until she looks like she’s ten or eleven years old. Belldandy is pretty much unaffected except for having trouble staying awake, and Skuld, who is a girl just past puberty, is briefly catapulted into a mature, college-age body.

“The song itself is a paean of joy about life, from the Goddess to her human love, saying, ‘I’m here to be with you, so let’s enjoy life.’”

The scene opened with the band set up, Morgan and I ready to do back-up, and Tina in the center, dressed as Belldandy. The bagpiper played the intro, and she leaped into the song, as joyous as Belldandy would have been singing it to her love. Since we were doing the full-length rather than the television show intro, we needed the back-up singers. Then it ended with Dana drumming a martial beat accompanying the bagpiper.

Then we went to Hajimari No Kaze by Ayaka Hirahara. “The title literally means the first wind, as in the first breath of spring. The show is named the Story of Saiunkoku. It centers around the life of one woman, Shurei Hong. She is a member of a noble family, but yearns to be not wife and mother, but to be a court official, a bureaucrat. A dream she knows she cannot have, for women are barred from competing.

“Most of the story concentrates on the backstage play inside the government when she first becomes the consort of the king. It is done intentionally on the part of a senior adviser to force the king to buckle down and do his job; up to now he had been ignoring the government. Instead of trying to sire an heir, he seems to like men more. Shurei is not told this, merely paid to be the consort and she accepts not only for the money but because it will give her a chance to learn more about government. As someone who understands the value of money, she is constantly incensed with the waste, such as a silver tea service she is given to use the value of which would feed a family for a year or more.

“Her actions from the start show a firm grasp of what needs to be done. When one court official refuses to countenance women in government, it is arranged for Shurei; posing as a boy, to be assigned to his department as an intern of sorts. When the King, who really wishes to give her the chance, suggests it the next time, the man who had refused to even listen agrees, and she gets that chance.

“The song is a personal promise not to a being, but to an ideal. “She’s saying ‘the wind is delivering this message, I believe in you’.”

Then Morgan’s performance began. She was dressed in Dana’s rendition of Surei’s Consort garb. In the backstage area there was reverent silence. Ryan merely sat there looking sad through Tina’s song. I was crying through Morgan’s.

The funds took another leap that week.

Final cut

Suddenly everyone was back. Conrad had announced that after the contest was over, we were going to have the

Cast Party From Hell. I saw everyone except for Hannah



and Tina. Jay Leno, upon hearing about the party, joked that Leonard Nimoy was still 'In Search Of' her.

Tammy and I now faced our second-to-last hurdle, The foreign language songs. When we were done with those would come the final round, our own original songs. We didn't eat much, and spent a lot of time giving each other sickly brave smiles.

The band, Ryan and I, had closed off several rooms, and all camera crews were banned. Conrad knew why, and asked that some crews be allowed, only that any filming they do was subject to my refusal about being aired.

We got done right before the show. I was wearing my Valkyrie Ghost costume, with a mockup of the actual Valkyrie tacked over it. I had to lose the cape and wrist bands, but we would have what they call 'Chinese Stagehands,' people in solid black coveralls that covered every square inch of skin so they would not be seen by the audience.

The first part of the song is Valkyrie singing, so when it went to the bridge and we doused the house lights, they would step in, strip off my outer garb, slap on the bands and cloak, replace the hat, and vanish so that when the lights came back up, I would be ready for the second part as Valkyrie Ghost.

We had brought Sally again because in the video, Valkyrie becomes Val Q, her child self when, briefly, the ghost steals her lover's heart. She would be standing in front of the drums, covered with a black cloth until the end of the song. At that point, the stagehands would step in as the house lights dropped again for a few seconds, take that cloth off Sally as she stood and throw it over me so that when the lights came up again, she would be standing there, lost and forlorn.

I had finished my make up, and was almost ready when Dana and the backstage director came running in. "Tammy's having a panic attack! She's in the bathroom hyperventilating and screaming!"

"Get Conrad and call the hotel doctor!" I ordered. Then I was flying, with a camera crew hot on my heels. I motioned for them to stop. "I'm doing this alone. Let Conrad and the doc in, but if I see that camera inside, there will be trouble."

Unbeknownst to me, every bathroom we used during filming since Hannah's supposed urinal episode had been wired for sight and sound. So what happened next was recorded and used on the show.

She was in the corner, and I was reminded of Tina after the attack. She had her knees pulled up, and tears rolled down her face. "Hey Tammy, we've got five to air." She nodded her head jerkily, but did nothing else. I came over like someone approaching a feral kitten; afraid that she would start screaming if I touched her. "Come on, honey, talk to me."

She buried her head against her knees. "It's just, all the pressure. It's been building since the contest started. I...I can't do it anymore."

I touched her then, stroking her hair. She had gotten dressed; a long black overcoat with the costume of the 'Major' from Ghost In The Shell under it before she panicked, though her makeup needed to be redone. "We've all been under pressure, honey. But it's the last of it tonight."

"I can't. Please, don't make me do this again." She looked up pleading.

I sighed and sat down beside her, taking her in my arms. "Remember when you refused to let Tina just be forgotten? When I did the same for Morgan?" Again the

jerky nod. "Are you going to make me go through that again? Neither of us liked winning by default, and I don't want that to happen again."

"Oh God, I forgot about that." She wiped her face against her leggings as Conrad and the doc showed up. "I'm sorry, Taylor, I put it all on you."

The doc knelt. "Do you think something to calm you will help get you up on your feet, Tammy?"

"Maybe... Maybe something a bit stronger?" she whispered.

"You're not the first star I've done this for." He took a bottle and syringe, and half-filled it. "This will take about two minutes to take effect. But you'll be ready to go in less than ten."

More than that; the makeup would take a few more minutes, maybe five. I looked at Conrad. Tammy was scheduled first. "They just started your taped intro," he answered my unasked question. "The control room has just you on screen, not you and Mike. They're editing out his comments, so it looks like he's too far away to be in the scene. Any suggestions?"

"Run a live segment with only Mike following. Have the interviewer ask him about his grandmother. We may run late, but it will give us plenty of time."

"Get out there."

I got. I ran to the makeup room and checked my face, then out into the common room where everyone but Mike was gathered. I was on-screen.

"The most interesting characters in the two series were not the humans or cyborgs, they was small mobile combat machines called Tachikoma. They show emotions but it isn't until Episode Fourteen, 'Little Tachikoma Lost' that the characters realize that they are developing not only

emotions, but individual personalities. In the first series, they are sent back to the lab after being disarmed. They leave singing a song that to American or European ears is just about a girl being sent from home with a foreign man. It has a darker side to the Oriental ear; it's about a daughter sold into prostitution.

"The Tachikoma show self sacrifice in both series; In the first, three of them that had been assigned other duties band together to rescue the people they worked for. They are armed with a single 40mm grenade shell.

"One is destroyed almost instantly; another is heavily damaged as the one with the shell charges in, only to find that the powder charge is a dud. As it lays there badly damaged, it prays, 'we are so weak'. Yet what appears to be a phantom voice tells them they could be more. Working together, the two partially operational units ram the armored suit of their enemy. The grenade kills him, and destroys them.

"At the end of the second series, they show it again. They have their memory externally stored, oddly enough, on an American, what they call the American Empire's, satellite. They know a nuclear weapon will be launched by an American submarine at a refugee area and have a good idea of when. The only way to stop it is to intercept the missile, which must be done before launch. But the only weapon they have is the satellite that holds their memories.

"As they de-orbit the satellite to destroy the missile, they sing a song entitled *The Sun Through My Palms* in English, a joyful song about how everything is alive, and so are they. It is cut short as the satellite rams the missile, detonating it outside the atmosphere."

The camera cut to Mike as Clarissa asked, "Isn't Russian a bit odd to learn for an Oriental Linguist?"

"I learned that before. My maternal Grandmother taught it to me literally on her knee."

"Tell me about her. She sounds like an interesting woman."

"She was born mere months before the October Revolution in 1917. Her father was in England on business for some of the Boyars, the nobles. He didn't return after the revolution because the Bolsheviks were running their own reign of terror, and would have wanted to raid the Swiss accounts he routinely accessed. My great grandmother, with the help of a doctor, destroyed the birth certificate of my grandmother, and had another issued, marked Father Unknown. That is as much a stigma there as it is here.

"While outwardly a good loyal daughter of the revolution, Grandmother Ludmilla had been taught to loathe everything they represented, and to look for a way to escape. In 1941, she joined the Red Army as a clerk typist. She was an attractive woman and caught the eye of a Brigade Zampolit; a political officer. What that meant was she worked as his clerk by day, and his whore by night. Her mother died when Moscow was besieged, and she was alone.

"She survived the war, actually earning medals for bravery. She was still with the same man, now a political officer for a Front, their term for an Army Group when the war ended with her less than ten kilometers from the outskirts of Berlin. She bided her time, and in 1947 when her commanding officer went to the Western Zone of Berlin, she parked the car, took off her uniform jacket, and ran.

"She was chased, and just as she would have been caught, the pursuers were confronted by an armed American soldier. He held them off, killed one to drive them

away, then hid her in his rooms. For six months, she lived in terror that the American authorities would find her and turn her to the Russians.

“In a little-remembered act of stupidity, the Western Allies gave in to Russian demands to return all Russian POW’s and displaced persons of Russian descent. Some of them, the Cossacks that fought for the Nazis against the Communists, had intentionally retreated until they met British forces, when they promptly surrendered. Over two thousand of them were handed over to the Russians and were butchered at Lienz, Austria. There are reports that some of them begged to stay and were clubbed down and thrown into trucks.

“The US was no better; several hundred thousand of the ‘Russians’ in the DP, the displaced persons camps, were Russians who had fled the Communists. They had stateless person passports, called Nansen Passports, yet were handed over anyway. Her father was among them, and he was shot as an enemy of state after a show trial.

“Her rescuer, my maternal grandfather, bought a forged Polish passport, and was able to get her sent to England during the Berlin Airlift. During the months when she hid, he never touched her sexually. After she was in England, he told her she could stay there, or marry him.”

As Mike was venting, I saw Tammy walk by. She gave me a small wave. Then she was announced. The music started. For a moment, I thought she would freeze. Then her hand rose.

““I’m a soldier, znachit ya
I otvyetchik i sud’ya
Ya stoyu na dvukh kotsakh ognya
Ogibaya virazhi, obgonyaya smyert’ i zhizn’

Ya byegu srazit'sya s tyen'yu lzhi."

Just before she got to that line, I remembered that I was supposed to be singing back-up for her! But before I could move, Dana came in on cue;

"skol'ko b nityey nye plyol obman
pokazhyet lik svyeta istina."

She never hesitated, never faltered.

Then she was done to rousing applause. I straightened and marched to the stage door. Even close by, I only caught a few glimpses of the dark-clad stage hands. On-screen, I was going over the song.

"The Series is UFO Ultramaiden Valkyrie, the Song is 'Princess of December which is a perfect example of the problems of translation. The first verse is translated literally.

"Princess of the imperial ancestors gods sings at a black moon

Oh, illusive lover, go together to the night

"The two become wind and traveled around the stars

Watching the scenery until they awake from their dreams

"The two people are the eyes of the heart

The maiden thinks, where is the key?"

"Yet if you sang it that way, an American audience would be confused, even though every part of it is there. So you have someone who know Japanese rewrite the lyrics to something a westerner would understand. In the English language release of the same scene, the lyrics are;

"The Imperial Princess sings to the black moon

Phantom Lovers spend the night together

“The two become the wind, and course through the stars

Enjoy the view until the dream comes to an end

“The ethereal string is the sound of the heart

The Maiden thinks

“Where is the key?

where is the key to stop time for eternity?”

I paused. “The newer lyrics are something we can more easily understand.

“Where is the key to hold this moment for eternity? It is linked to an ancient legend of her world that few except some of the royal families know is a fact. That millennia before their world was threatened by a spatial phenomenon called the Blizzard of Time. In an act of self-sacrifice, four of the twelve princes sealed it away, at the cost of their own lives. But the legend said they awaited the Illustrious Prince, or in the English versions, the Phantom Lover.

“Jump to the present day. Valkyrie, heir to a weapon called the Key Of Time, has found that she loves the human Kozuto Tokino. They met when she crashed her ship into the family-run bathhouse, and he is mortally wounded. She gives him half her soul to keep him alive. Because of this, she spends a lot of time as Val Q, herself as a girl of perhaps six. Whenever they kiss, and their hearts are aligned, she transforms into her adult form briefly.

“The main antagonist during the second season is Valkyrie Ghost, who is a twin of Valkyrie as an adult. In contrast to the rest of the cast in the series, she’s a dark and serious character. She doesn’t even really have a

name; she just tells Kozuto that since this woman she looks like has a chance with him, she would be her ghost hoping for the same chance

“She is not a single individual person, but rather the combined energies and emotions of the four missing Princesses of Valhalla from ancient times. Valkyrie finding love has reached across time, space and death to them, and they yearn for the Phantom Lover to free them.

“The song is in two parts. The first, a girl in love asking her lover to give her the key to time itself so she can stop at this one perfect moment. The second, sung by Valkyrie Ghost is the dark side of the thought. That we all die, and instead of stopping time, throw away the ability to save yourself from death.”

I was standing in front of the band as I was announced, and the spotlight brightened on me.

“sumeruki no himemiko wa kuroki tsuki ni utau
maboroshi no koibito yo tomoni yoru wo yukamu
futari kaze to nari hoshi wo meguri
yume sameru made miharukasu
tainaru ito wa kokoro no me
otome wa omou kagi wa izuko
kono toki wo towa ni todomuru
kagi wa izuko to.”

The spot vanished. I felt hands ripping, the bright blue and white cloth being stuffed under their clothes, the new hat jammed on my head. Then the lights came back up.

“utakata no himemiko wa kuroki tsuki ni nemuru
maboroshi no koibito wa onaji kage ni sumitsu
utsutsu awa to nari yami ni tenji

yume hatsuru asa no kanashiki
chirieta hito wa kokoro no shi
otome wa meizu kagi wo sute yo
hakanaku mo kiyuru kage nara kagi wo suteyo to.”

The lights cut and a stage hand pushed me down, throwing the cloth over me, Then I could see the floor as the light came back, and the song ended.

The lights came up and I threw the cloth off as the audience began to applaud. Tammy came over, grabbing my hand, and we waited as the voting was done. She hugged me crying when we saw I had edged her out by only two points.

I'm Not What You Think I Am

I went backstage to change into a pants suit as Ryan sang his own song, 'Could I please have another chance'; a song of a man abandoned by the woman he loves, begging her to give him one more chance to fix it. Then it was my turn.

I walked out, looking up into the lights at my invisible audience. "Ladies and gentlemen, win or lose, I want to say I have been thrilled by all of your attention. It is a memory I will cherish as long as I live. But I have something to say.

"Almost four years ago, I was injured at the same time my mother was killed in a drive by shooting. My voice was destroyed, and while I can sing now, this is not the voice I was born with." I stood aside. Win or lose, the truth would have its day.

Behind me the song 'Love'll Get You If You Don't Watch Out' played, with us in our Ranma garb. I had joked with Chris about that; technically he had to get per-

mission from the songwriter (himself) to perform it. He cracked up everyone including the cameraman when he wailed, "But what if I say no?"

The song ended and the audience applauded. "Ladies and gentlemen, that was then. This is now." The music video we'd sweated over began. It became a favorite within weeks of being added to YouTube by me, and still is.

The scene at the end of my performing Tonight a Hurricane was shown. As the new music begins, I am walking away from the band and Ryan, in a suit with a bouquet of flowers, is standing near the stage door. He hands them to me, and I smile as I walk by. In the hall beyond, I walk to a door with a star on it, and go in.

It cuts to me looking at the flowers, then setting them down as the vocals begin.

"You see me standing on the stage
And in your eyes, I'm all the rage
But it's not the right book, not to mention the page,
Cause I'm not what you think I am"

I stare in the mirror, then strip off the blonde wig, revealing my own hair pinned down.

"I see your eyes, upon my hair,
As they sweep it's length from here to there
But you don't realize, it's something I wear
Cause I'm not what you think I am"

I start scrubbing off my makeup as the refrain begins. Every third verse was with backup by Dana, each sounding more frustrated;

"Why, oh why, won't you listen to me?
Just heed my word, and leave me be

Cause what you are seeing, that ain't really me
Cause I'm not what you think I am"

Dana arrived, passing Ryan, and began to help me. I reach up under my skirt with the camera behind me, then pull down my hose.

"You're always looking for a long time at my legs,
When I walk, it might look like I'm walking carefully
on eggs

No matter how much time I spend trying to beg
Cause I'm not what you think I am"

My hands run down my body, over the waist to the
thighs.

"My body draws your look burning with desire
I can see it, in your eyes like a forest fire
If I stripped down, would that look then expire?
Cause I'm not what you think I am"

Then with the dress unzipped, and nothing truly revealed yet, I walk to a side door. Dana strips the dress away, I step in, then a moment later the bra is held out, and a moment after that, the breast prosthesis, though it is concealed.

"Please, oh please, why won't you understand
I've even had to talk to my back-up band
But they tell me you always answer, 'Ain't love
grand?'

Cause I'm not what you think I am"

Then I am shown in the shower from behind, my hair in a cap as I drop my robe, and for the first time, the audience can see I have a man's chest.

"I've noticed your attention to my breasts

and on camera, they're impressive, I will confess
but is it sexy if I just have a flat chest?

Cause I'm not what you think I am"

I'm in the shower, the sponge running across my body. I lean into the wall beneath the shower. At one point, I am standing with my head hanging, and there are those who watched the video who claimed later that I was crying.

"How much pain will you inflict on me?

Oh please, my friend, are you too blind to see?

How much must I do, how blunt must I be?

Cause I'm not what you think I am"

I get out with the towel wrapped around my waist.

"How many times must I have to ask you why?

Cause you don't listen no matter how hard I try

Must I scream, will you listen, I'm a Guy!

And I'm not what you think I am"

Then it cuts to Ryan outside, and segues into other shots, of what he might have been thinking if it were real. Both of us at a table with candlelight, with him reaching across and taking my hand; of us dancing, looking longingly into each other's eyes; of us walking the Strip arm in arm; of him kissing me; and unlocking a hotel room door as we go in, followed by shadows of two people in bed, moving.

Then it cuts back to me in the dressing room. Now I am standing, my long hair down the back under a polo shirt and tucked into pants. I toe on a pair of soft shoes, pull on a floor-length black wool coat, then put a fedora on. My face is exposed and if you look, you can tell it's me, but you wouldn't automatically say 'woman'.

Dana touches my hand, I give her a sad smile, and she leaves through the door. I pull a single red rose from the bouquet, break the stem, and put it in my buttonhole. Then I go to the mirror, open and extend my lipstick, and lean forward. We do another refrain as I go through a second door into a hallway that crosses the other.

“I really wish I could get through to you
Just convince you to think; not admire the view
What you offer me now is not what I’m due
Cause I’m not what you think I am”

Outside the room Ryan is waiting, now a bit impatiently. Around the near corner I come, hands in my pockets, just walking by. He looks up, nods, then looks down, back to waiting as I walk right by him.

I stop at the door, looking back, pluck the rosebud from the buttonhole and let it fall.

I just walked by you, and you really didn’t see
So the things you would want, well it’s just not meant to be
Because even with me there, you don’t see the real me
Cause I’m not what you think I am”

I flip up the collar to hide my face as a single tear runs down my cheek, then I push open the door and I’m gone. A moment passes, then he knocks, and opens the dressing room door.

The view cuts to what he can see, the empty room with only the bouquet to prove I had been there. Written on the mirror in lipstick is:

I'M NOT WHAT YOU THINK I AM

I turned back to the audience, lowered the mike, and bowed my head as the applause began. It swelled and swelled, and the audience was on its feet. Ryan came up beside me, draping an arm over me. "Glad it's over?" he whispered.

"Like the old joke. Why do you hit yourself with a hammer?" He shook his head. "Cause it feels so good when I stop." We chuckled together as the applause finally died down.

The announcer came forward, looking up at the audience. "And now the moment these two have built to for these long weeks. Ladies and gentlemen, cast your votes."

"Tell me how badly fucked I am," I told Ryan, squeezing my eyes closed.

"You expect me to look?" he said. I laughed, and opened my eyes. We both looked. I had won!

Reconciliation

As the audience left, the party started. We burst into the back room. The buffet was already open, and everyone came over to greet us. Someone thrust a glass of champagne into my hand, and Ryan shouted until he got silence. "Taylor, yeah, I think you really can sing. Congratulations." Everyone drank.

The party was the last episode of the show. But there were still surprises in store.

"May I say something?" a hesitant voice asked. We turned to face Hannah who had just entered.

There was a tense moment, then I walked across the room, and held out my hand. "Welcome back."

She took it, tears in her eyes. She looked down. "I don't think I deserve what I am going to ask." She looked up. "I was an arrogant bitch who came in expecting to win and all of you could just get out of my way. The morning of the first contest day I got a note I thought was from a friend to meet him in that restroom. Another note with a small vial of perfume had been left behind the pipe on the urinal, wishing me luck.

"When I lost that night, I was furious, and I blew up at all of you. When the tabloid called the next morning to ask if I had any comments on the story they were running, I exploded at my 'friend' to..." She fell silent. "Toby, I'm sorry. I was wrong and lashed out at you. I didn't believe you when you said you didn't send it."

She turned. "During the press conference when they accused you of lip-synching, Ryan said you all learned from this. I learned what I needed. Humility. Taylor, if I had your attitude, I might have succeeded. Can you forgive me?"

I turned away, then back to her. As I turned, the ever-present cameras saw her face fall, as if she expected me to pay her back for all of her arrogance. "On one condition." She looked hurt, then nodded. "Three songs."

"What?"

"I need three songs from you to fill out my first album. You get full credit for them, and a percentage of the royalties. I want to see your best. the audience never got to see it."

She nodded and we hugged as the others applauded. Toby came over, handing her a glass, and she reached past it to touch his face. Then she kissed him before accepting the glass.

A few moments later, the door opened again and Tina came in. When we saw her, there was stunned silence.

Ryan leaped to his feet, knocking down two others to run and snatch her up into a hug. I found out later that Conrad had known where our two lost sheep had been, and had made sure they could track the contest. Hannah had been busy until the tabloid agreed to settle out of court, but Tina had been in a depression until she saw the effort we had gone to to keep her alive in the contest.

It looked rehearsed, but all Conrad had done was tell them about the end-of-show party, and arranged plane tickets when they asked to attend. Tina had been the one worried about what we could draw; she had been living literally from paycheck to paycheck, and had left without what she was due. Conrad paid for her ticket out of his own pocket and refused to let her pay him back.

Neither Ryan nor I had given a provenance for the last songs we did. During the party he admitted that he and Tina had been getting close; when she left, she had not told him how to contact her. She had come back to thank Tammy and me for our efforts, but it was that song that gave her the courage to join us at the bash.

After everyone had eaten their fill, we were taken back into the arena, and guided into the front row seats. With all of us, the cameras had caught almost eight thousand hours of digital video to be cut and edited into the fourteen episodes planned. One of the people editing created blooper reels from every season, which were a lot of fun to view.

We got to watch *our* bloopers; at least up to the second week of competition. We roared as Ryan was run over by the giant cassette player, not once but twice. My showing Connie how I had dealt with the brute in the bar was done by having me throw her, a voice saying, 'I really didn't get that' followed by them reversing the video so that she flipped back until I held her again, then a repeat of me throwing her.

Dana's dealing with the guy who tried to grab her crotch was dealt with by a voice saying, 'Can you tell me where the bar is?' as he came up behind her, ending with him crumpled against it saying, 'Thanks'. There were pratfalls, the usual accidentally funny comments, even two small food fights. When the show finally aired, segments of the blooper reel were run during the closing credits.

Finally the evening ended. We knew the future was not set in stone. Most of us would still not succeed; we knew that going in. But the competition and the immediate future of at least one album with our songs gave us hope for the future.

By the end of the competition we had reached just under 7 million dollars for our assorted causes. The hotel kept the faux thermometers there, with a statement below; *We can do more.*

Even today they stand there, and every year more money is added. Last year when the second contest began, the amount we collected exceeded \$20 million.

Saying Goodbye, Saying Hello

The next morning after breakfast, we said our goodbyes. There were only three I called friend; Ryan, Tina, and Tammy. The others I knew and some I liked, but they had not shared as much. Dana, Chris, and Mike had our stuff packed already, and I said my goodbyes before I joined them. We drove across town, and when we got home, moved the stuff in.

Dana took her suitcases, and looked at me. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"You are still a dork." She sighed. "What about Morgan?"

“What about Morgan?”

Mike, who had picked up the boxes with the anime we had brought, set it down. The next instant, I was hanging in the air. “She’s not leaving until the end of the week, Taylor. Aren’t you going to tell her?”

“Tell her-” I stopped as his hand swung, stopping mere inches from my face.

“Tell her how you feel?”

“I’d thought about it.”

“I’d thought about bitch-slapping you again,” he replied. “So is it tell, or get your butt whipped?”

“You know, this is *my* life you’re interfering with.”

“Just do it before I bring on the pain.”

“All right, you troll. Put me down.” He looked at me. “Please?”

Dana opened her bag, and thrust a package into my hands. “Here, we got this for you to give to her.”

I looked at it, confused. “Sure, thanks.”

“What, you’re still here?”

“Okay, Okay. I’m going.”

“Bring back Chinese!” Chris called as he ran up the steps.

How romantic, I thought. *Go tell a girl how you feel, and while you’re at it, pick up Chinese take-out.* Only Chris...

I arrived at the Medical Center, and went in. I had been by to visit Morgan a few times in the last few weeks. A lot of time I was unnerved by her laying there in pain, trying to be strong. When I wasn’t, I was as tongue tied as I had been before. I couldn’t for the life of me remember what we had talked about, only that I left feeling frustrated and wanting to say so much more.

I walked up, and opened her door. She was laying there, watching something on her laptop. She saw me, and smiled. "Hello, Taylor."

"Hi, Morgan." And just like that, I ran out of small talk. I just stood there like an idiot, then I remembered the package. "Dana and the others got this for you." Did she look disappointed? I brought it over, and she opened it one-handed. She no longer needed IV support, but her right arm was still immobilized by the cast. I finally had to hold it down for her to rip the paper away. There was a boxed set of the new Jack Daniels 'Devil's cut' whiskey with old-fashioned glasses, and a box of Godiva chocolates. She looked at it, then at me.

"Either they want me drunk or fat. I'm not sure which."

"I'm sorry. I should have brought something I picked..."

"No matter." She nudged the package with the bottle. "I am allowed some alcohol. What say you pour for me?" I opened the package, opened the bottle, and poured about an inch into a glass. She looked at me. "For both of us, you dork." Blushing, I poured an equal amount in the other glass. I lifted mine as she did.

"So, what are we drinking to?" I asked.

"To the truth." She replied. I froze. She held her glass out, and I clinked mine against hers. Then we drank. If you have never tried it, you should; smoky, sharp, it was wonderful. She held it out for more, and I poured two more inches. "That was your cue, Taylor."

I was terrified. The truth about what? She looked at me for a long time, then took pity on me. "I know."

"Know what?"

"About the real Taylor."

Something about the situation pissed me off. "Was I that obvious? Did everyone know? Was every fucking person during the contest standing there saying, 'He thinks he can pretend, but we all know better?'"

What I got back was a gentle laugh. She looked at me, eyes alight with mirth. Have you ever seen 'Victor-Victoria'?" I shook my head. "A very funny movie in its way. The main character is a woman with an excellent singing voice, but she is a bit old. It's the Depression and the Vaudeville houses would rather hire two young nubile girls with less than stellar voices than hire an older woman with an excellent one. A friend suggests she use that age difference; that she perform, singing as a woman while pretending to be a man." She laughed gently.

"You intrigued me from the start. So efficient dealing with groups, but such a lack wit dealing with me alone. I thought you were a lesbian who was just tongue-tied. For the first time in my life, I felt attraction to someone of the same sex. Honestly, it bugged the crap out of me. I have never had even one lesbian fantasy. There I was, trapped in a hotel with someone that made me want to lay back, spread my legs, and pull you between them!" I blushed, and she laughed gently again. "You don't even realize how seductive it is to have someone who blushes when you talk to them.

"I was going mad; either I was going to have a lesbian affair, or find out the truth. So I asked Dana."

"When?"

"Near the end of the second week of our rehearsals. I told her how I felt, promised to swear by any vow she would demand, but asked if you were a man or a woman?"

I swallowed. I poured more of that addictive taste. "And what if she had said I was a woman?"

She looked at me for a long time. "By then I didn't care. I would have licked you to orgasm or sucked you to one." She picked up her glass, sipping. "But after she told me the truth, she also told me to go slow, to get you comfortable with me before I threw you down and did you like a farmer's daughter."

She grimaced. "Then this happened, so I wasn't there anymore. But I was there in spirit, thanks to you." I looked at her. "The fund. Forcing them to run my slow song, then my foreign language one."

At my blank look, she motioned toward her laptop. "Mr. Conrad made sure I could follow the contest, your 'vote with your wallet' demand, and throwing everything you made into the hat for me. I knew you loved me then. I was just waiting for you to get off your ass and admit it."

She reached out, and I held her hand. "I won't be strong enough for that for a couple more weeks."

"No matter." I laughed. "I can wait. I'll even fly up to see you."

"Why?" I gave her an unbelieving look. "I can go to college here just as easily as I can in Elko. If I had a place to stay..."

I found her in my arms. I looked down, tears in my eyes as I kissed the top of her head. "You'll always have a place at my side, Morgan, my love."

Aftermath

The reporters swarmed as the limo pulled to a stop. I sighed, shaking my head as I took Morgan's hand. "Ready?"

"For that?" She laughed. The driver opened the door, and we stepped out. I was one of Barricade Security's best

customers, because of the paparazzi. Todd and Connie were in charge of my team whenever I called because I asked for them.

“Taylor! Are you getting implants?”

“Taylor! There’s a rumor you’re going to Thailand for a sex change.”

“Morgan! how does it feel to go to bed with another woman?”

“Taylor! Dark Star announced the third season of So You Think You Can Sing is going to start filming. Is the rumor that you have been asked to host it true?” I waved for silence.

“To answer the questions you addressed to me, no implants, and someone suggesting that I’m going to go for SRS means someone is having a better time with my life than I am.” They all laughed. “As for being the host, that isn’t correct. *We* are hosting it.”

“As for me and Taylor, somebody out there is having a better fantasy than we are.”

“Now come on, I have a show to do!”

Finally I was in a long silk dress with slits up both sides, standing on the podium looking across the football field.

“If tomorrow all the things were gone I’d worked for all my life,

And I had to start again with just my children and my wife,

I’d thank my lucky stars to be living here today,

‘Cause the flag still stands for freedom

And they can’t take that away.”

Except for wearing women's clothes on stage, it was all I had ever imagined it would be. Morgan never regained the full use of her arm, but she can still sing, though she limits how many songs she does at a time. We're expecting our first this winter, and we're picturing



the faces of people when we take her (yes, we checked the ultrasound) on her first stroller ride.

Hannah's lawsuit was settled out of court for eighteen million dollars. It would have been a lot less if their lawyer had not demanded that Hannah undergo an examination by a gynecologist to prove that she was not a post-operative transsexual. That examination was simply an endoscope rather than a full physical examination in public and videotaped. Having her own specialist specify that no one doing cosmetic surgery could create artificial wombs and ovaries shot them down quite efficiently.

Hannah wanted money, but also demanded a retraction. Since the story had run on the front page, she demanded the same space for that retraction. Her lawyer merely sat silent as they offered first a half-million and a simple retraction somewhere inside the paper. As the contest reached its last two weeks, the amount had risen to thirteen million and a fourth page retraction when her lawyer merely told them that if they weren't serious, the court was standing by to really smack them down.

The retraction was the same picture from before with the headline "SO WE WERE WRONG THIS TIME", with a link to an inner page extolling when they had gotten stories ahead of the mainstream press.

The group record went to the Top Twenty, and five of the seventeen songs (Chris' first was added) went to Number One. The one that stayed longest was Tina's 'When I'm Finally The Woman I Want To Be'.

Yes, she was a Trap. But the thing that has made the show such a success was the fact (later reported) that there were *three* in that first contest. While the company knows who they were, they aren't telling, even now. Every one of us has records in the top 100 constantly, and the biggest surprise was Hannah who had two in the top

10 at the same time off my first Album, 'That Was Then, This is Now', though 'I'm Not What You Think I Am' made the Top Ten first. It's now the unofficial theme song of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transvestite Coalition.

A T-Shirt company made shirts with an arrow pointing to the side underneath 'That's my man' (Or 'woman' so all sexual minorities could use them). There was also a matching one with the arrow pointing up, saying 'Yeah, I'm a man (or whatever variation), deal with it'.

My first song spawned three parodies. The one I enjoyed most was Weird Al Yankovic's that used the same title. His parody uses some of the film from my own video along with footage I did for him. It's about a Malamute that turns into a man and paws through the closet, rolling around on my dress as a man like a dog on a dead animal. His scenes has the dog stuffing down my cleavage, poking me in the ass with his nose, peeing on the coat of some guy who's taking me out on a date, that kind of thing. It ends with me going to 'my' car where the man/dog had written ARF, ARF, ARF, ARF on the driver's side window. As I pull out, the dog looks at the camera, and winks.

As rockers, the entire group is atypical politically. We're not anti-war, anti-establishment, or pro-gun control. We've been asked either singly or collectively to back causes, and none of us accept the ones you would expect rockers to back. Tammy who was our resident Green had backed saving animals, but turned PETA down flat because of their pro-life stance. So we are roundly condemned from the pulpit at the same time sales of our records skyrocketed.

When as a group we were asked to do a 4th of July show, I refused unless it was linked not to the nation, but to those who had died in the nation's defense. The show ran three hours with songs from wars where American

men had died; not propaganda like the Battle Hymn of the Republic, but songs of the men being away, sung back home as the men fought. When we reached the Second World War, we had Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B, and even Gee, I Wish I Was Back in The Army, from White Christmas.

At the end of the show, I started a new fund. I told the audience I was taking everything the network was paying me for the show to start a college fund aimed at children of veterans who had died without insurance. I told the audience that they were more worthy than I.

That was the first time I sang *I'm Proud to Be An American* in public. When I got to the last refrain, I shouted, 'Sing with me!' and the 200-some live audience sang with me.

The Requiem Fund started that day; with only two rules. One, you had to be the child of a deceased veteran, eligible for college, and Two, you had to maintain a C-plus overall. What I put in would have taken only one student through four years at Bennington, but more money flowed in.

That was the last time we were all together. As you know if you have been following the Golden 16, as we have been called, five have since faded from public view. And one has died.

Tammy had flown in to Vegas from Reno carrying her cat Tasha, and asked if she could stay with the band. She was doing studio work to finish her first album and was really excited. When she finished, she got a call because her brother had died in Houston, and she had to fly down for his funeral. She asked us if we could watch Tasha, and we took her to McCarren.

She was pensive, worried, when we got to the airport. As she left, she handed me an envelope. "Watch this for me."

"Sure." I took it. "Hurry back."

"Right," she said.

"Tammy, is something wrong?"

She laughed. "No. It's just... I have a feeling I'll be seeing Fred soon."

I thought it an odd statement. Her brother Fred was being buried in a closed casket ceremony. "You'll say goodbye, and come right back."

"Yeah."

"See you."

"Goodbye." It wasn't until later that I thought it odd that I said I'd see her again, but she didn't expect to see me again.

Her flight was hit by a freak thunderstorm on the Texas-New Mexico border. The wind shear threw it into the ground, killing everyone aboard. When we heard, I opened the envelope. She had taken out the largest amount of flight insurance you could buy. There was a hastily written note from her. 'Taylor, I have a feeling we will never see another again. If I am wrong, you can give this back'.

She had left almost a million dollars in flight insurance to the Requiem Fund. I later discovered that her father had lost his father during WWII. He'd never bothered to sign up for the standard life insurance offered, and her father had not been able to go to college. She didn't want others to suffer as he had.

Tasha now lives with Morgan and me. Whenever one of Tammy's songs is on the radio, she'll meow at it, and pat the speaker as if trying to get back to Mama.

Then the biggest shock of all. Morgan and I had been visiting her family in Virginia when there was a call at her aunt's house, asking for me. A man identified himself as a professor at VMI, and asked if I would be willing to sing the national anthem to open the game against Navy. I replied that I preferred I'm proud to Be An America because it's usual for Military men and women to stand when it's played.

It didn't matter, he said. Just come and sing. We'll pay you...

While it wasn't recorded, it has been quoted perhaps a thousand times since I said, "Pay me for a patriotic duty? Be real!" They agreed to donate what they would have paid to the Fund.

While singing it, I shouted for them to sing along and got the shock of my life. You see; I had forgotten that VMI is a *Military* School, as of course, is the Naval Academy. They are not the kind of school you attend without a strong, sometimes passionate, streak of patriotism. So instead of the usual lackluster response you get in most places, I watched as every man and woman in uniform stood up and sang with me. The few who weren't immediately on their feet joined them as we finished the second refrain. We went into the last verse with several thousand people singing with me.

It made the local news in Lexington, Virginia, then exploded nationwide. The networks had to scramble for video from those at the game, finally using the one shot by the KayDets themselves that had hit YouTube. In that video, you have me standing in the center of the stadium. I waved my hand and everyone rose. The cameraman had

zoomed in as I looked around in surprise but kept singing. He ran onto the field, the video jiggling, then swept the crowd in a panoramic circle. David Letterman later said I had been trying to get into the Guinness Book of World Records for the largest choir directed.

My detractors claimed it had been staged, as if I could have convinced 18,000 people to sing any song. I have also been called a warmonger because of the Fund. The one time some reporter asked me about that, I replied with my own question. Regardless of the justice of the cause they fought for, why are the children of our nation's fallen unworthy? Thanks to that, I am the military's poster 'girl'. Someone estimated there are more posters of me or me and Morgan in soldier's lockers than there had been of Betty Grable during WWII. If you go in to buy one, the plastic covers all say 'All proceeds from this sale go to the Requiem Fund'.

That's how I ended up here, starting off the Superbowl.

But we are the despair of politicians, every one of us. Only two of the original 16 have ever publicly supported a politician. Causes that try to get us to do benefits have been so few that we're better remembered for the ones we supported during the contest.

Tina came back from Thailand as a complete woman and married Ryan. Hannah was her Maid of Honor, with me (dressed as a bridesmaid) as Best Man. She was the host of the second season which had a nationwide call for applicants. To no one's surprise, all but two of the foreign language songs were from animes. One was a Danish Lullaby, the other a song about love in Hawaiian.

Chris is now writing songs professionally. He's done songs for everyone from the original shows; he got a Grammy for Best Newcomer his first year; the same year

Tina and I received a shared Best Alternate Performer; there were too many protests from females we would have beaten to give us best female vocalist. Dana is in Hollywood where she is busy with the designs of the new Star Wars movie.

Mike married Connie, and seeing her in heels towering over him caused a lot of laughs. Chris was his Best Man, and Connie scornfully replied, 'That's the best you could find? I could break him in half with one hand!'

I still have the video where Connie picked him up to carry him over the threshold, then, since she's Texan and her family had decided on a Shivarree, when she came out dressed only in her bridal lingerie and fired off a magazine load of blanks from her Uzi before shouting, 'Do you mind? I'm busy here!'

That's followed by Mike imitating Eddie Murphy's aunt falling down the stairs by screaming 'Help me, help me!' in a falsetto. He is in Japan where he is writing scripts for six new animes for which they are going to do English and Japanese releases simultaneously. He has also been asked to write and do voice direction for the English dubbed version of Jumong. His English version of the love song with Ryan doing the male vocal and Tina doing the female went gold a month after release and went platinum before the end of the first year.

My father never saw prison; at his arraignment he screamed a diatribe at the judge claiming that the 'bitch' had gotten them to help keep him from what he deserved, and that I would rescue him if they only let him call. He's been committed to a hospital for the criminally insane.

I still sing in women's clothes, but at home with friends I'm the man I am.

"There's pride in every American heart
And it's time we stand and say: Sing it with me!

I'm proud to be an American where at least I know
I'm free,

And I won't forget the men who died who gave that
right to me,

And I gladly stand up next to you and defend her still
today,

'Cause there ain't no doubt I love this land God Bless
the U.S.A.!"

I stood there at the applause, smiling brightly.

Dreams do come true. Sometimes in odd ways.

But they do come true.

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