

Vertigo

Teaser

Sarah snuck another sideways glance at Cameron, splitting her attention between the road and the seemingly sulky terminator beside her. Her initial impression had indeed been correct: the cyborg was pouting, her perfect bow lips pushed out in a perfect replica of petulant annoyance. These new mannerisms disturbed Sarah more than she wanted to admit, and she'd been doing her damndest to ignore them ever since Cameron had returned to her body. Modifications, Cameron had called them, and Sarah was reminded yet again that she needed to find out just what Cameron had altered about her programming and why.

Was it all a facade, an impression of human emotions, like a parrot repeating words with no comprehension of their meaning, or was Cameron really experiencing the emotions that gave rise to her expressions? Was she, in fact, annoyed, and if so, what other emotions might she feel? Cameron had changed, that much was clear, but Sarah had no idea what that change entailed. She was both terrified and – she hated to admit – intrigued.

Their relationship had changed as well, growing murkier and more confusing by the minute. Whatever boundaries had been established between them were gone, swept away by an impulse that Sarah still struggled to explain. Further, it cast a shadow over everything that had happened since the last sparks had faded from the basement at Zeira Corp. All of Sarah's motivations were now suspect. Why had she rescued Cameron from the rubble? Why had she been so insistent on getting Cameron back in her body? Had she had ulterior motives that she herself hadn't realized? It made her head hurt and kept her perpetually off-balance, with all the questions and constant second-guessing of her motives and actions. For a brief moment, she regretted not pulling the trigger in that basement, blasting the Turk and everything contained on those silicon chips to hell. Life would be much simpler if she had.

Cameron turned her head, catching Sarah's scrutiny, and for a second, Sarah could have sworn that Cameron knew exactly what she had been thinking. The terminator gave no sign, instead opting to repeat her question, "Why won't you tell me where we are going?" The end of the question pitched up into the beginning of a whine, and Sarah resisted the urge to bang her head against the steering wheel.

The day had started normally, or at least as normally as it could considering the motley crew assembled in the warehouse. Sarah's initial foray downstairs for coffee had been temporarily halted when she'd walked in on Savannah serving Cameron tea from a tiny porcelain tea set, the miniature pitcher and its matching cups and saucers elaborately decorated with pink roses. Savannah and the assortment of stuffed animals around the table were dressed in a child's vision

of finery, with dresses, hats, and white gloves, and the bright pink feather boa Savannah had obviously insisted the terminator wear clashed dramatically with Cameron's drab green fatigues and faded black tee-shirt. Finger sandwiches were cut to match the small dimensions of the plates, and the military precision with which the corners were sliced indicated Cameron's involvement in the preparations.

Sarah cocked an eyebrow at Cameron, meeting the terminator's eyes over Savannah's head as the little girl chattered small talk at the stuffed rhino sitting to Cameron's left, but the terminator gave no indication she shared Sarah's amusement at the absurdity of the situation. Instead, she picked up her cup with exaggerated care and took a tiny sip, listening seriously to Savannah telling her stories about the stuffed animals.

Leaning against the counter as she took a cautious sip of steaming coffee, Sarah wondered idly if she could find a camera somewhere. John would love... Pain, as sudden and intense as a gunshot, caught Sarah in the gut... John. It didn't get easier, the feeling of loss, and she wondered if it ever would. She just wished she knew that he was warm, well-fed, and safe, since he couldn't be there to share in her amusement.

An alarm blared just above her head and Sarah nearly came out of her skin. "Fuck," she growled as coffee scalded her hands and she grabbed a dishtowel hurriedly. She was aware of two sets of eyes on her as she blotted her burned skin and reached for her gun, one wide with shock and the other mildly reproaching.

Behind her, Sarah could hear Cameron ordering Savannah to her room and then a heavy tread as the terminator followed. They reached the door simultaneously and slammed into the wall at either side. Sarah wrenched it open and Cameron swung into the breach, shotgun at ready, their coordination needing no words or planning.

Cameron scanned the entrance and dock for several tense seconds while Sarah braced against the wall and covered the back exits, waiting for an attack. Nothing moved, except for the pink ends of the ridiculous boa, blowing in the salty breeze off the water.

A moment later, the alarm cut off mid-squeal and Sarah relaxed fractionally, only to snap into readiness again as Murch burst out of his room and onto the catwalk. The laptop in his hands nearly dropped to the metal plates as both guns zeroed in on him, and he tried to put up his hands up in surrender and retreat back into his room at the same time. "Cyberattack," he blurted, speaking so fast the words blurred together.

"Cywhat?" Sarah lowered her weapon, staring at the computer scientist in confusion.

“Cyber attack.” Cameron spoke from her side. “We were attacked through cyberspace.”

“And that rang the alarm?” Sarah asked in surprise.

“Yes.”

Sarah took a deep calming breath, trying to slow the beating of her heart. To think, just a few moments ago, she had been enjoying a quiet moment. “Go check outside,” she said, growling the order to Cameron. It bothered her to think that there could be attacks she couldn’t see or defend against, and the feeling made her snippy. When Cameron hesitated, she snapped, “That cyberwhatsit could be a first strike for a real attack. Go check.” Cameron nodded, and turned to walk to the door. “And take that damn thing off before you go,” Sarah said as she gripped one end of the boa and flipped it up in Cameron’s face.

Cameron regarded the fluorescent pink boa for a moment before pulling it off slowly, turning, and looping it over Sarah’s neck, her fingers brushing over the pulse points at Sarah’s throat in a near caress. Her face was an emotionless mask as Cameron paused for a moment to admire her handiwork, but Sarah caught a hint of humor in those brown eyes before she turned and marched out, the door slamming shut behind her. Sarah took another calming breath and glanced up to Murch eyeing Sarah and the actions of the cyborg with an expression caught between horror and amusement. Sarah sighed and shook her head, ripping the offending garment off and tossing it among the debris of the disrupted tea party.

Murch hurried down the stairs and settled into the workstation. He pulled up window upon window of streaming characters, the lenses of his glasses reflecting the jumbled mess of letters and numbers. The flow of characters slowed, and then stopped, and Murch frowned thoughtfully.

“What?” Sarah asked.

“This can’t be right,” he muttered, more to himself than to Sarah as he reversed the flow of characters and looked them over again.

Silence stretched as he looked through several screens, and Sarah’s patience evaporated—she was tempted to shake him... or pull her gun. “What? What can’t be right?” She looked at the gibberish on the screen again, as if glaring would somehow make it achieve some kind of coherency.

Finally, just when she thought she might have to throttle him, Murch said, “It’s Cameron.” He half-turned in his chair, the words suddenly spilling out of him. “She’s, I mean, it’s not her, all of her, but she’s in there.” His hand gestured at the computer. “It’s like she...”

Sarah felt her blood freeze in her veins, and she kept her eyes squarely on the computer scientist. “Cameron is outside.” Her voice was low and had a hint of a threat.

“Yeah, but she’s also in there. Part of her, anyway.” The look on Sarah’s face seemed to penetrate, and he shrank back in his chair. “It’s like she made a copy of herself and left it in there when she downloaded. It’s what raised the alarm and fought off the cyber attack.”

“She copied herself?” Sarah’s voice dropped an octave and her gaze darted to the door as her jaw clenched, pulsing beneath the skin.

“She was virtual; copies are easy to make. But not all of her, just a part, like...” He struggled to find the words that would explain. “A helper program, a watch dog. It’s not really sentient, not like she is, but...”

Sarah could almost feel the muscles of her back strain as her chest tightened and threatened her ability to breathe. After all the discussion of Cameron becoming Skynet, after all the difficulty to get her into her body, she had left a copy of herself online. And not only that, but she had kept it a secret. Again.

Only the sickly green look on Murch’s face kept Sarah from immediately storming out and confronting the terminator then and there.

“What else?” she demanded, and Murch flinched a little at her tone.

“It’s not just her. Or rather, she’s not just her. During the attack, I got snippets of code from the attacker. C.A.I.N., I think. Some of it, it’s in her. Or she’s in it.” His cadence sped up again. “It’s like that old Reese’s commercial, ‘you got your peanut butter on my chocolate, you got your chocolate in my peanut butter.’” He glanced up at Sarah with a grin that quickly faded when she did not appear to share his amusement at the cultural reference. “She’s infected.”

“Infected? Like a computer virus?” Murch nodded, glad she understood, because he wasn’t sure he could dumb down the explanation much more. “In there?” Sarah jerked her head at the computer. “Or out here?”

Murch shook his head. “In there, definitely.” He waved at the monitors. “Out here?” He sighed and looked at Sarah worriedly. “I don’t know.”

“What’s going on?” Ellison stepped up behind them, looking ruffled and groggy, his voice still rough from sleep. The alarm had obviously caught him by surprise. Murch nearly sighed in relief

as Sarah's attention shifted to the former FBI agent.

"Cameron... might be infected. Like a computer virus." Stress tightened the muscles across her forehead painfully. "By C.A.I.N."

Ellison realized the import immediately; he crossed his arms across his chest and, glancing meaningfully at the quarters above their heads, asked, "What could the infection do? Is she dangerous?"

"I don't know," Murch replied in a subdued voice.

"Find out," Sarah snapped, trying not to worry about Cameron and forcing herself to worry about the rest of them instead. She hadn't damn near died to bring Cameron back just to have her go bad from a computer virus. Her eyes drifted, almost of their own volition, to the discarded feather boa amid the remnants of Savannah's tea party.

"I could analyze the code, maybe trace the infection..." Murch shook his head mournfully. "I'm not sure..."

"Just do it. Let us know what you find." Sarah started to draw Ellison away, but the computer scientist's voice stopped them both in their tracks.

"There's more." His voice sank to a whisper as he imparted the last of the bad news. "I managed to perform a back trace on the attack to a server farm outside of LA. But they might have done the same thing to us. I think that was the reason for the attack." He looked up first at Sarah and then Ellison. "They might know our location."

It only took a minute for Sarah to formulate a plan, years of habit dictating the course of action. Protect Savannah, now in place of John. Keep the terminator away from those she holds dear. Put herself in the line of fire instead of anyone else. "Get me the address of that server farm." She turned to Ellison. "Get out. Take only what is essential and find someplace safe. I'll take Cameron. We'll deal with the server farm, see if we can distract them." She glanced down at Murch. "I'll call from the road, to find out the results of the analysis." Ellison nodded once, acknowledging the plan, before bounding up the stairs and calling for Savannah.

Sarah closed her eyes for a second, trying to block out the other plans already formulating if the results brought more bad news. "Take only the essential computer equipment you need. We can buy more." Sarah half-turned before she thought of something and swung back to face the computer scientist. Her eyes fastened on the rubber duck sitting amid the fantasy action figures. "And Murch, leave those damn toys!"

Act 1

Silence stretched in the truck cab as Sarah concentrated on searching for the side road they needed to turn onto. She knew that Cameron, with her robotic eyes, could see the road sign much easier, but Sarah refused to be the one to break the quiet.

“There.” Cameron’s voice seemed to echo in the small confines of the truck, and Sarah strained to make out a road sign through the streaked windshield and blowing dust. “Sonofa…” Cursing Cameron’s enhanced eyesight and the inefficient effectiveness of her own, Sarah swung the truck into a hard right at the last second, the vehicle threatening to tip as it roared into the turn.

“How did you know that?”

“Tire tracks,” Cameron reported matter-of-factly. The hard-packed dirt stretched out in front of them, a narrow line between twisted wire fences, heavily traveled if the deep ruts were any indication. “I could help more if you would tell me where we are going.” There was that whine again, grating on Sarah’s nerves.

“It’s need to know,” Sarah snapped, feeling, in spite of everything, marginally guilty for not trusting Cameron.

“You want me to tell you everything.”

Sarah could feel her jaw tensing as she resisted the urge to bring up Cameron’s virtual copy left on the Turk and the many other times Cameron had withheld information, or to point out that what she wanted and what Cameron actually did were two entirely different things. “That’s different.”

“Why?”

“It just is.”

A flash of emotion, a tiny glimmer in brown eyes and a tightening of lips, that was gone as quickly as it appeared, told Sarah more than she wanted to know about Cameron’s emotional development. Inside, outside, chicken or egg, physical expressions of emotion or true emotional response… It seemed immaterial, her earlier thoughts, as Sarah realized she had just hurt Cameron and Cameron was trying to hide it.

“You don’t trust me.”

Sarah didn't even try to explain the reasons for her doubts. What could she say? Cameron, this Cameron, wasn't the one she had lived with for almost two years... wasn't even the one she had been getting to know in the system. Something had happened, and Sarah was afraid the hints of emotion and the increasing independence were just the beginning, and she had no idea where they would end. Cameron had said she had made modifications, but so far they had danced around the touchy subject. As much as Sarah wanted answers, she feared the ones she would get, keeping both her and Cameron in an odd, charged limbo.

It had been a weird few days: Sarah had spent her time trying to put some distance between the two of them, and Cameron had spent her time trying to find any excuse to be near Sarah. The brush of their shoulders as they passed on the catwalk, the seemingly innocent touch of their fingers as Cameron handed her the first cup of coffee in the morning... and the moment this morning, when Sarah had had a split-second of trepidation when Cameron had pulled ever so slightly on the boa, threatening to pull Sarah to her... against her. That trepidation had mixed with a pang of disappointment when it didn't happen.

Sarah cast another sideways glance at Cameron, her face in silhouette, accentuating the full, pouting lips. She could remember all too well what that mouth had felt like, what it had tasted like... and how she had lost herself for a few seconds as she kissed a machine. Shaking her head vigorously, Sarah banished the images that came unbidden in her mind and threatened her equilibrium.

Aside from whatever was happening with Cameron and her modifications, there was still the threat of C.A.I.N., possibly a ticking time bomb in Cameron's head. Was she infected? Would the modifications make it harder or easier for her to resist if she was? Would Cameron even know that she'd been compromised and what would she do if she found out she had been? For the first time in her life, Sarah wished she knew more about computers and programming to understand what the possibilities and dangers were. She thought of John, wished desperately that he were here to inform her of all their options, and felt another stab of guilt when she imagined his reaction to the way she'd been treating Cameron over her own fears.

"It's a server farm, Murch said," Sarah finally revealed, relenting a little bit and feeling her conscience ease with the admission. "He traced the cyber attack back to it. It's possible C.A.I.N. is based there."

Cameron nodded, staring distractedly out the windshield. "Not all of him. He's spread out, in the system. But the loss of a processing center might hurt him."

"Might?" Sarah winced as the truck dipped into a deep rut, putting the vehicle's shocks to the

test and rattling her teeth.

“I don’t know for sure.” There was a significant pause, and then, “If you had told me your plans, I could have found out.” Cameron turned her head and leveled a look of stern disapproval in Sarah’s direction.

The whine of a motor reached them, and a four-wheeler crested a hill to their left, both the rider and the bike caked with dust. It paused on the hill and Sarah could see the person tracking them, the helmet following their path down the deserted lane. But after a second’s scrutiny, the rider gunned the bike and peeled off, heading down a track leading to the road.

“This is a bad idea,” Cameron told her as the high-pitched sounds of the bike receded into the distance. “The target is of negligible strategic value and we don’t have any reconnaissance.” Her gaze caught Sarah. “You take unnecessary risks.”

“I told you before, I’m not for you to understand.” Sarah’s jaw clenched and she focused on the road.

“I know. You do ‘stupid, illogical, inefficient things.’”

For a second, Sarah wondered if Cameron was about to bring up the kiss, the latest in a long string of stupid, illogical things, and she sucked in a breath to cut her off.

“I’m still not used to it, but I think I understand it,” Cameron finished.

Sarah let loose the breath she was holding, wondering how Cameron had managed to come to such a comprehension. “So you understand why we’re going to do this.”

“No.”

The truck skidded to a stop just in sight of a large metal building, the terminus of a thick bundle of cables and electrical wires. “End of the line,” Sarah murmured as they stared at the building. “See anything?”

Sarah watched as Cameron scanned the structure. “No. I can’t tell if anyone is inside.”

“Why?” Sarah asked in alarm.

“The temperature is extremely low. I am sensing no heat signatures.” Cameron turned and looked at Sarah. “You’ll want your jacket.”

Sarah reached back behind her seat, her hand gripping the handle on a bag holding the explosives. She ignored Cameron's advice about the jacket. "Let's do this."

Cameron caught her arm as Sarah started to get out of the truck, her grip strong and unyielding. "It's not a good idea," she repeated.

Sarah tried to shake free. "Cameron, let go." For a long moment, Cameron simply stared at her, holding her there, keeping her there, her face a blank, emotionless mask, but her eyes held the same concern they had during their quixotic quest for the John Connor who wasn't hers and Sarah could almost hear Cameron saying, 'I can't protect you from yourself.' For a second, Sarah wanted to relent, to let Cameron be in charge for once, but Cameron might not be Cameron, and Sarah couldn't trust her motives. "Damn it, Cameron, let me go."

Sarah nearly fell out of the truck when Cameron suddenly complied.

The elevator pinged. Danny Dyson stepped out, his eyes darting around the unfamiliar hallway. Deep, dark wood paneling lined the walls leading to a set of glass doors, where Vaughn was deep in conversation with the new head of security.

Vaughn looked up as Danny approached, and his smile of welcome showed too many teeth, like a wolf readying for an attack. He waved a hand when Danny hesitated at the door, and Danny reluctantly joined them.

The executive levels were off-limits to almost everyone Danny knew, and the rich surroundings were a sharp contrast to the utility of the floors he was used to. He glanced around the room, seeing himself reflected in the black expanse of a plasma screen a second before a cheery 'Hi Danny' flashed across it, the words almost blinding in the muted light.

Vaughn's smile lost a little of its forced friendliness at the enthusiasm C.A.I.N. exhibited, the edges of his mouth turning down to give his face a feral cast, and Danny once again wondered who he had fallen in with in his quest to revenge and redeem his father. He knew he didn't belong there in the rich, wood-paneled office, but then, he wasn't sure he belonged anywhere anymore.

"What's up?" he asked, trying to keep a note of casualness in his voice.

"We found her." Danny heard the first note of real happiness in Vaughn's voice as the head of

security handed him a semi-automatic. “Want to go with us to capture the psychopath who killed your father?”

For a second, the cold intensity in Vaughn’s eyes gave Danny pause, and the word ‘capture’ seemed so benign in comparison to the anger he saw there. He didn’t know when the hunt for Sarah Connor had gotten personal for Vaughn, but something in those eyes promised a very real, very violent, payback, and Danny wasn’t sure he could be a party to that. Then he remembered his father, lying in their living room, bleeding, pleading as the gun in Sarah Connor’s hands pointed at his head. It wasn’t just any person they were after, and Danny had some payback due him as well.

He didn’t notice how his eyes mirrored Vaughn’s as he nodded his head.

The motel wasn’t much, but it would do for a day or so. Ellison studied the area as he retrieved his bag from the bed of the truck he’d ‘borrowed.’ Unlike Sarah, he had every intention of returning this one to the parking garage where he’d found it. As soon as they had relocated, of course.

There was a pool and a small playground, the colors of the swings and slide faded to a drab shade of their original bright hues. Savannah wouldn’t mind. Toys were toys, and James wondered if she would enjoy the opportunity to be outside for a change. She so rarely got to leave the confines of the warehouse, and James made a mental note to find them a place that was much more conducive to raising a child.

The late-morning sun beat down on him as he walked past the pool, breathing in the scent of heavy chlorine. Murch passed him on the sidewalk, heading back to the truck for another haul. They’d parked at the back of the building, paying a little extra to check in early. Not a soul was present, not even the cleaning crew, although James could hear their vacuums from the other side of the motel.

He found Savannah sitting on the edge of the bed, her small frame slouched and listless as she watched a fuzzy image of Sesame Street on the small television. James hesitated in the doorway, swallowing hard, his heart aching for the child. He knew he’d done the right thing in bringing her with them, but it didn’t lessen the guilt of dragging her into this way of life. At that moment, James knew he was getting a taste of what Sarah must have felt about her son every day for the last sixteen years. The feeling was smothering in its raw intensity.

“Hey,” James said gently, waiting for Savannah to look over at him with sad blue eyes. “Want to

go play on the swing set? Or I can read some more of *The Wizard of Oz* to you...” He trailed off as Savannah shook her head and returned her gaze to the TV.

Sighing, James dumped his bag on the floor and came closer, settling next to the girl. He watched her watch Elmo, a character that normally brought a smile to Savannah’s face, but there was no smile today. “What’s wrong?” James asked.

“I want Aunt Sarah and Aunt Cameron,” Savannah confessed with a pout that would have been adorable if it hadn’t been so sincere.

“They’ll be back soon,” James promised, hoping he wasn’t lying to the child. “We’re going to meet them in our new home.”

Savannah turned her head to look at him fully, knowingly. “Are we going to another warehouse?”

James hesitated, thrown by the question. “I would imagine so. Your Aunt Sarah gave me a list of a few places to check out.”

“I’m not going to another warehouse.”

James’ lips twitched. He’d seen Savannah imitating both Sarah and Cameron lately, especially the way Cameron would strut around like a prize pony. Apparently Savannah has also picked up on both women’s penchant for being stubborn. “Is that right?” he drawled.

“I want a house,” Savannah declared. “One with a big back yard where I can play.”

“Do you now?” James continued, crossing his arms and listening with a faint smile as Savannah laid out her demands.

“And I want a dog... or a cat...”

“Your Aunt Cameron might not be too keen on that idea. Do you understand why?” he asked, curious as to how much Savannah comprehended about the world she was currently living in.

“Because she’s a Tin Miss,” Savannah replied easily. “Like my other mommy.”

James went still, a chill chasing down his spine. He had never realized that Savannah had known the truth about Weaver and he didn’t know what to say to her now that he did. “Savannah...”

“A child is supposed to have a home,” Savannah told him, returning to the original topic without

missing a beat. "A warehouse is not a home."

James swallowed, floored by a five year old's wisdom. "No," he agreed gently. "It's not."

Savannah turned back to the television. "No more warehouses," she insisted.

Slowly, James lifted his hand and let it stroke down the child's back, hoping the touch was soothing to them both. "No more warehouses," he agreed. Sarah was going to kill him for changing her plans, but so be it. Savannah needed a taste of normalcy. Maybe they all did. He decided he would do his best to make sure she got it.

Murch stepped into the room and dropped a bag of cables on the floor. He was sweating slightly as James got to his feet and came toward him. He glanced at Savannah and then back at the former FBI agent. "She okay?"

James glanced back at Savannah and nodded. "She will be. What's up?" He looked at Murch, noting the way the man's eyes wouldn't meet his own.

"I forgot a few things," Murch explained. "I need to go back."

"No." James was emphatic. "Too dangerous."

"We don't know that C.A.I.N. managed to locate us," Murch argued. "And there are some things I need."

"Murch..."

"I need half an hour tops." Murch turned and picked up the laptop, flipping it open and setting it down on the small desk inside the motel room. "Look." He clicked an icon and James leaned forward to see the images from the various cameras located inside the warehouse. "You can watch me from here. I won't be long."

James glanced back at Savannah and discovered her watching them both knowingly. He sighed again. "Make it fast."

Murch nodded as he pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose. "I will." He smiled at Savannah. "Want me to bring you a shake when I come back?" he offered, hoping to make the little girl smile.

Savannah shrugged, but her interest was clear in her bright blue eyes.

James snorted. “Get me one while you’re at it. Vanilla.”

Murch rolled his eyes as he took the car keys from Ellison’s hand and then waved goodbye to Savannah, shutting the door behind him.

“He’s weird,” Savannah announced, but it sounded like a compliment.

James picked up the paper he’d purchased when he’d checked them in. He settled into a chintzy chair and flipped it open, turning his attention to the classifieds rather than the sports scores.

He had a new home to find.

The elevator took them to another floor Danny had never seen, and he marveled at the vast cavern filled with black SUVs and military-style trucks. A contingent of security guards milled around a small armory in the corner, gearing up. They handled their guns with a causal negligence, their voices echoing in the bay.

The chatter quieted immediately when Vaughn stepped out into the room, and Danny saw several straighten up, their shoulders pulled back in a rough approximation of attention. Even though his crisp Italian suit contrasted vividly with the pseudo-military garb of the guards and the drab concrete walls, Vaughn seemed much more at home among these dangerous men than he did in his opulent corporate office.

He didn’t even have to say a word in command; he simply nodded at the gathered men as he directed Danny to a dark Suburban with tinted windows. They obeyed the command instantly and headed for the trucks standing at ready.

Minutes later, a small fleet emerged from a parking garage on the outskirts of Los Angeles and sped off.

It was taking too long to set the explosives, Sarah thought, but the building was much larger than she had expected, forcing them to be more strategic in placing the charges. Maybe if she had stopped to ask Murch about it or told Cameron where they were going, she might have been better prepared. She blew out a sigh as she carefully attached the last device, glancing up just in time to see Cameron walking away from her, heading, not toward the door, but deeper into the

maze of computer racks.

“Where are you going?” Sarah hissed, trying to keep her voice at a whisper. They hadn’t seen anyone, but the super-cooled air of the building limited the effectiveness of Cameron’s scanning ability.

“I’ll be right back,” Cameron replied, disappearing around a corner.

“Dammit,” Sarah muttered under her breath, rubbing her hands together to warm them before reaching for the Glock in the waistband of her jeans. Straightening, she hurried to where she had last seen Cameron, but the machine had vanished. Running now, Sarah turned into the central aisle that ran the length of the warehouse. Several rows down, she caught a flash of color out of the corner of her eye, and she skidded to a stop.

Her breath caught at the silent figure sitting motionless at the end of the row, and for a second, she saw Cameron’s body sitting there, tethered to the computers by a thick cable, before the image resolved itself into a bigger, bulkier, and distinctly less humanoid shape.

A sharp footfall behind her warned her of a potential threat, but her preoccupation with the machine cost her a few seconds; she had no time to turn and bring her gun up before she was grabbed from behind and pulled backward.

Murch loaded the last of the components into the truck before taking a final swing through the warehouse. He paused at the workstation he considered his and picked up an Orc that had fallen over when he had disconnected the Turk that morning. He set the green-skinned action figure back in its place among the other models, his fingers hovering reluctantly.

He sighed wistfully as he took in his collection—his replacement collection, he thought, for the one he had left behind when Sarah had practically hijacked him into this life. Glancing around the quiet, almost peaceful space, Murch frowned. He had already given up so much. It didn’t seem fair that he had to give up everything just because Sarah was paranoid to near lunacy. It’s not like it wouldn’t take more than a few minutes, anyway. Making up his mind, he started looking around for one more box.

“Shhhh.” Sarah wasn’t sure what she recognized first, the voice or the feel of Cameron’s body pressed against hers, but she stopped resisting as she was pulled into another of the seemingly

endless rows of computers. For a second, the only things Sarah was aware of were her breath, coming fast and shallow, and the warmth of the terminator at her back. Then, the immovable arm around her waist released, and Sarah whirled to face Cameron.

“What’s going on here? Is that a…” In the eerie hush of the warehouse, Sarah’s voice sounded loud, almost deafening. In her mind’s eye, she visualized the black screen on the oversized head she had seen spark to life and glow an eerie red. The machine under the plastic didn’t look like the woman in front of her; it was big, bulky, and encased in a white and blue plastic exoskeleton, but the humanoid shape and the way it sat there, connected to the computers, was enough to sketch a faint ancestral relationship between it and Cameron.

“A prototype.” Cameron’s voice was pitched so low, Sarah had to strain to hear her. “Don’t worry, it’s not active.”

“Active?” Sarah shook her head in confusion. “Can it hear us?” she asked, stepping closer so she could talk even quieter.

“No.” Cameron’s attention seemed only partially on Sarah, and Sarah tried to catch a hint of whatever it was that had alarmed the terminator over the white-noise hum of the air conditioning units, but she couldn’t hear or see anything.

“So why are we whispering?” she finally asked.

Raising a finger, Cameron shushed her, the two of them standing stock still until Sarah finally heard it, faintly at first, but then growing: the sound of tires on gravel.

The blacked-out window of the Suburban rolled down and Danny watched the security team deploy around a low, long building. They very quickly and efficiently took up stations at every possible exit, guns at ready.

“Come on,” Vaughn commanded as he stepped out of the SUV and walked to the head of the group at the main door.

Act 2

Cameron’s touch circled Sarah’s bicep, her hand warm against the chilled flesh under Sarah’s thin t-shirt. With an inward curse, Sarah let Cameron lead her further into the structure as the sound of a motor choked off and died outside. The pair retraced their steps, winding their way to

another aisle that ran the length of the building. From their position at the intersection of the two main passageways, they had the drop on anyone coming through the main door, but Sarah didn't relish the idea of a shootout in a building packed with C-4.

"Is there a back way out?" she whispered, her voice barely loud enough to be heard over the constant hum of the air conditioning.

The expression Cameron gave her was one of pure annoyance. Sarah marveled at it for a moment, curious if Cameron was mimicking someone or if the terminator's level of pique was truly high enough to shape Cameron's features in such a way. The expression was almost cute rather than intimidating, however. Faintly, Sarah wondered how much processing power it required to keep from saying 'I told you so' about the reconnaissance. If the look in Cameron's eyes was any indication, it was a lot.

"I don't know." Cameron didn't bother to be quiet, irritation crisp and clear in her voice. She opened her mouth to say more when they heard a heavy tread rattle the stairs leading to the landing outside the main door. Reluctantly, Cameron loosened her grip on Sarah, using familiar hand signals to indicate they should separate.

Sarah didn't like the plan, but she accepted it, deciding that she'd been the one to put them both in this mess and Cameron had a better chance of getting them both out of it. With a nod, she pivoted on one foot and headed for the back of the building, all too aware that Cameron was remaining behind to deal with the unwanted company while Sarah looked for another way out.

She wasn't moving fast, far from it, but Sarah still felt strangely winded, a light sweat breaking out on her skin as she cautiously made her way through the maze of computers, trying to remain as quiet as possible. Aching from the cold and cursing herself for ignoring Cameron's advice about a jacket, Sarah shivered as a bead of sweat trickled down her back. She listened intently for Cameron's familiar tread coming up behind her, but there was nothing but the whoosh of the air conditioner and the purr of the computer fans.

Vaughn positioned himself near the head of the team, the semi-automatic held at ready in his hand. He glanced back and saw Danny, and their eyes locked for a wordless moment. Danny saw Sarah Connor's death in those eyes, her and anyone who was stupid enough to help her, including his mother if she was unlucky enough to be behind the door. He shivered as a chill made its way down his back and Vaughn made the signal to move.

Rounding a corner, Sarah was relieved to see a second door. She glanced back over her shoulder, wishing she could call out to Cameron or, better yet, to see the cyborg come around the corner behind her. Giving the shadowed corridor a quick scan, she headed for the door, her gun up and ready with one eye on the way she had come, hoping they could both get out of there in one piece.

Her hand had just gripped the cool metal of the doorknob when she heard a voice from behind. “Hands up!”

Sarah cursed quietly under her breath. A firm hand shoved her roughly up against the locked door and a chilled barrel pressed up against the base of her neck as her gun was ripped from her grip. “Don’t move, bitch, or I’ll blow your head off.” The pressure between her shoulder blades increased as she was jammed further up against the door; there was no way she could move without her captor knowing and she had no doubt that he would deliver on his promise if she tried. His intentions were clear in the rough edge of his voice. “Where’s the other one?”

“Other one?” She asked mildly, but wondering the same damn thing herself.

The gun butt connected with the back of her head with a sharp crack, slamming her forehead against the door’s glass window. Sarah saw stars and slumped a little against the door, stubborn will the only thing keeping her conscious and on her feet.

“I saw two of you slinking around on the security cameras, so don’t play games with me.” His voice was low and hissed right near her ear.

Sarah blinked away the pain, listening for Cameron, wondering if Murch had been right and she’d been compromised. Would she simply leave Sarah? Had she walked right into the enemy’s hands again and Cameron had let it happen? She closed her eyes, unwilling to accept that possibility, especially in light of Cameron’s worries about the risks. “I don’t know. She was here a minute ago.” She could almost feel his finger tightening on the trigger.

“I’m right here.” Cameron’s quiet voice coincided with an immediate relief of the pressure against Sarah’s back.

There was a heavy thud, followed a second later by the sound of a thundering crash.

Head still ringing, Sarah sagged against the locked door for support. “Took you long enough, girlie,” she sniped, her fear giving way to dizzying relief.

“I...” The sound of a gunshot boomed through the room, and Sarah swung around in time to have Cameron stagger into her, pinning her against the door once more. For a brief moment, they were eye to eye, and Sarah saw a flash of surprise and pain flicker over Cameron’s features before they shut down and went terrifyingly blank.

“Run,” Cameron ordered dispassionately before shoving off the wall and away from Sarah, making herself the target and putting herself in the path of any potential bullets.

A three-second rush had Sarah braced behind a support column and looking back toward the door, frantically searching for her weapon, but there was no need. Sarah winced when a second blast staggered Cameron as it struck her shoulder, but the terminator squared herself like a gunslinger from the old West, her body still as she calculated her shots. Her gun hand snapped up and she fired three shots in quick succession, the first shattering the man’s head like an overripe melon and the second two striking his dead body as he fell.

There was a moment of silence after the echo of the last shot faded, and they both strained to hear any hint of another person or attack. Finally, Cameron lowered her gun and moved to check the first guard, and Sarah leaned her head back, only to recoil in pain. “Damn.”

Cameron was at her side in an instant. “How badly are you hurt?” The emotion that had disappeared from Cameron’s face was not absent in her voice. Sarah could hear the machine’s concern.

“I’m okay. Just a little dizzy.”

Cameron grabbed Sarah’s hand to pull her to her feet, and Sarah’s fingers came away slick with blood, Cameron’s blood, she realized. She pressed her hand against Cameron’s shoulder, feeling Cameron flinch away from her touch. Sarah grimaced in sympathy. “The question is, how badly are you hurt?”

There was a weird, inexplicable look in Cameron’s eyes as she replied, “I’m a terminator. I don’t get hurt.”

“You told me you feel pain,” Sarah argued, remembering Cameron’s reaction the last time she’d been shot, the last time Sarah had had to pry bullets out of her body. She’d seen the look in those brown eyes this time, when they’d been body to body against the door, the unveiled agony in them before Cameron had shut down. That look had twisted something in Sarah’s guts.

“Cameron...” Sarah began.

Cameron shook off her concern. “We need to go.”

Sarah wasn't ready to let the topic go so easily, but she accepted that this wasn't the time or place. "What about him?" She waved her hand vaguely in the direction of the first guard.

There was a pause before Cameron answered. "He's dead."

Sarah glanced over Cameron's shoulder, at the broken body lying like a discarded ragdoll. He certainly looked dead. She shook her head, trying to remember the sequence of events. "How?"

"I threw him. He hit a wall." Although her words were bland and emotionless, Cameron looked angry, but at herself for killing or at Sarah for putting them in this position to begin with, Sarah wasn't sure. Sarah's eyes drifted to the second guard, to the gore of what used to be a human head. Cameron followed her eyes and dispassionately surveyed her handiwork. "It's what I do."

Sarah's gaze shifted back to Cameron, hearing something in the terminator's voice that made her heart lurch in empathy, but she ruthlessly forced the emotion down. A tug on her arm pulled Sarah off the wall and toward the main entrance, and Sarah let Cameron get her way. She wanted to argue with her, wanted to dig her heels in and have the conversation they had both been putting off, but Cameron was propelling her toward the door with obvious determination and purpose.

They stumbled outside onto the small loading dock in the harsh afternoon sun, the ATV they had seen earlier parked beside their truck. Sarah frowned; obviously, the rider had been an exterior guard, and she, distracted by the cyborg beside her, hadn't thought to protect their escape route or consider him to be a viable threat.

It wasn't until they were about to slide inside their sun-warmed vehicle that Sarah remembered the lurking figure hidden among the rows of computer equipment. "What about that thing? Do we need to..."

"The explosives will take care of it." Cameron's voice was short and clipped, from pain, annoyance, or anger, Sarah had no idea which. Guilt settled heavily in Sarah's stomach. It pissed her off that she felt bad for leaving Cameron out of the loop and that, in doing so, things had ended this way, but damn it, Cameron could be compromised, Sarah reminded herself. And she was just a machine. Just a damn machine.

Their gazes met over the hood of the truck, and Sarah felt her conviction falter as her heart rate seemed to do the same. Emotion was roiling in those deep brown eyes, and Sarah knew whatever modifications Cameron had made to her programming, the terminator's feelings were real, as real and volatile as her own. She swallowed, held in Cameron's intense regard until the

terminator looked away and opened the truck door.

Slowly, Sarah nodded, deciding it was better to trust Cameron on this one; she was too tired to argue or go back in the building anyway. She swung the door open and rummaged under the seat, tossing the first aid kit to Cameron. "Patch yourself up while I drive." Cameron opened her mouth to protest, but a raised eyebrow from Sarah shut her up.

They were halfway to the main road when Cameron blew the building, the blast shaking the ground beneath them.

Like a well-oiled machine, the guards burst through the warehouse entrance, Danny following closely on their heels. It only took seconds to surround the surprised man in the center of the main room, whose hands immediately shot to the ceiling, scattering figures and toys all around him. Danny heard harsh footsteps pounding up the stairs and the reports of 'clear' through the earpiece Vaughn had insisted he wear.

The obviously frightened man stood in the center of the ring of guards, several red dots targeted and bouncing across his chest. Danny glanced at Vaughn in amazement, wondering when he would tell the guards to stand down. He seemed in no hurry to do so; in fact, he looked like he wanted to shoot the man himself when one of the guards reported that the building was empty.

The trembling in the man's hands got worse the longer Vaughn stood silently watching him.

"Where is Sarah Connor?"

"I... I... I don't know." Vaughn's eyes narrowed and the captive seemed to shrink into himself. "Not exactly. I... I know... where she was going..." Vaughn slowly nodded, and encouraged, the man continued to stammer out words in short bursts. "I... I can help, I can help... you find her. Just don't..."

"Yes. You will help me," Vaughn told him quietly. "You're Murch. You worked on John Henry." The man's head nodded vigorously in agreement. "First, you'll help me *find* Sarah Connor..." Danny shivered at the stress Vaughn placed on the word 'find'; it didn't promise anything good. "And then you'll help me with my AI. Right, Mr. Murch?" Murch nodded again as Vaughn gave a signal and the guards lowered their guns.

Danny wasn't sure if he was the first one to hear it, a sound pitched somewhere between the hum of a motor and the whine of a high-powered turbine, but Vaughn's head whipped up to the

skylight a second before it blew out. Glass rained down, and Danny saw a piece slice through the skin of Vaughn's cheek before he felt a stinging in his arm and realized he had been cut as well.

A hollow thumping sound hammered through the warehouse and Murch jerked several times. Wetness splattered against Danny's face, and it took him a second to realize that it was blood and that the percussion sound he was hearing was gunfire, shot from a strange hovering machine. His mind catching up, Danny took in the scene: Murch, lying in a pool of blood; Vaughn, sternly ordering the guards not to shoot; and the machine, blissfully floating above them.

Suddenly the flying device lurched to the side, stabilized, and then plummeted to the floor of the warehouse, scattering the guards as they dove out of the way. It crashed a few feet from Danny and Vaughn.

There was a general buzz of voices as the guards picked themselves up, and Danny heard the same word repeated by several of them: 'HK.' He also heard C.A.I.N. mentioned, and he put the pieces together, catching confirmation in the expression on Vaughn's stunned face. Whatever this thing was, it was made by the company he worked for and controlled by their AI, who had just gone off the script in a big way.

C.A.I.N. was not under their control, and the information staggered Danny to his core.

Gravel crunched beneath the tires as Sarah swung into the lot of a rundown, roadside motel. What had once been blue paint had been beaten down by dust kicked up by 18-wheelers and faded by the harsh sun until it was a uniform grey. The neon sign was fashioned with the broad geometric shapes of 1950s futurism, but only a few sparked to life to illuminate the yellow arrow pointing to the registration office. It was cheerless and bland, the kind of place where truckers brought hookers from the truck stop down the road and nobody asked any questions. It was, in a word, perfect.

Parking behind a big 18-wheeler to hide their truck, Sarah turned off the ignition and slipped the key into her pocket. "Wait here."

"Why are we stopping?"

"I'm exhausted and you're a mess." And it was true; Sarah's body felt heavy and tired, and her eyes had blinked closed several times during the short drive to the outskirts of whatever nameless town this was. Blood had seeped through Cameron's shirt, jacket, and jeans and into the seat, the smell of which was starting to make Sarah nauseous.

“I can drive.”

“Cameron, just...” Sarah felt her hands clench and she had to force herself to relax. “Let it go, okay?” Her desire for a conversation had evaporated during the drive, and she just prayed for a few moments’ peace. She hoped Cameron caught the warning in her voice, and she felt the tension in her body ease a little when the terminator didn’t say anything more. “I’ll be right back.”

The bored woman in the office barely looked up from her gossip magazine as she took Sarah’s money and slid an actual key attached to a large purple square of plastic across the desk. “Only get one key for the room,” she explained in a nasal ‘take it or leave it’ voice.

“It’s fine.”

The bright sunlight struck Sarah’s eyes the second she stepped from the office, and the pounding started again at the back of her head. She slipped her sunglasses down over her eyes and headed for the truck, her legs leaden. All she wanted was a dark, quiet room to close her eyes for a few minutes. Seeing Cameron watching her from the cab with an irritated expression, she wondered if even that was asking too much. “Lucky number 7,” she told the cyborg, handing her the key. Grabbing the small bag she had packed before they left the warehouse, Sarah followed Cameron to the room.

The room looked at least somewhat clean, even though the sickly yellow-and-green bedspread made Sarah dizzy when the light from the open door hit it. Cameron sniffed suspiciously, but even her analytics could not separate out the different smells that bleach, industrial cleanser, and air fresheners tried—but failed—to hide. Sarah closed the door quickly and pulled the curtains, cranking up the air conditioner to its highest setting for good measure. For a second, she just closed her eyes and tried to let the relative quiet and coolness seep into her. It felt good to not be moving, to let the world under her feet be still, if only for a moment.

Standing just inside the door, Cameron surveyed the room and then watched as Sarah stepped further in and dropped her bag on a chair. “What?” Sarah asked in exasperation.

Cameron simply stared at her for a long, uncomfortable moment before turning away. “I’m going to take a shower,” she announced, ignoring Sarah.

Sarah felt something like panic flood her limbs, but it was coupled with an edge of anger. She lurched forward, grabbing Cameron’s arm and jerking the younger woman around to face her. Cameron could have resisted easily, but she didn’t, going with the motion and turning toward

Sarah, a blank expression on her face that bothered Sarah more than the emotions she'd seen in the terminator's eyes earlier. "Don't you walk away from me," she hissed, suddenly no longer wanting peace but answers. "Just say what's on your mind."

Cameron's eyes and voice were emotionless and dull as she took in the scrapes and bruises from their latest adventure. "You take unnecessary risks. We need to be more careful in the future." There was that 'we' again that Cameron had been using with more frequency, making it sound like the two of them against the world.

"We do, huh?" Sarah spat, her anger flaring hotter and burning off her exhaustion. "I'm supposed to take orders from you, is that it?" Sarah shoved the terminator, feeling the heavy body give way under her hands. She shoved again, harder this time, but Cameron suddenly caught her wrists and pivoted, swinging them around in an odd approximation of a dance. Sarah collided with the thin plasterboard, her bruised head bouncing off the wall and the breath leaving her body in a rush. She blinked the blurriness from her vision to see a matching anger in the terminator's brown eyes.

"No," Cameron told her quietly, seriously, as she pinned Sarah against the wall. "I'm not your punching bag, not anymore."

For a moment, they simply stared at each other across the few inches that separated them and Sarah tried to read the jumbled emotions that lurked just beneath the anger in Cameron's eyes, emotions that she had no idea how Cameron felt or processed to be expressed. The change in the cyborg, the change in their relationship, suddenly felt less like a shift and more like a cataclysm, like a gaping hole had torn open beneath their feet. Sarah felt like she was teetering on the edge of something vast and cavernous, and she was very afraid of the free fall, afraid of what had been put into motion by her actions. She was the one who had brought the Turk out of that basement, who had made it possible for Cameron to have a body, who had kissed the terminator in a moment of weakness and need. All of this... madness was directly attributable to her and her alone.

"Cameron..." Sarah warned, her voice shaky, "let me go or so help me..."

The terminator's gaze dipped to Sarah's mouth before meeting her eyes again, and Sarah felt the hunger and need Cameron had sated for a few brief moments in the warehouse flare up and threaten to overwhelm her. She twisted, trying to get away from the cyborg, trying to get away from whatever in the hell was happening between them.

"Not until you listen to me." Cameron's voice was low and held a note of entreaty.

Cameron's fingers didn't exert any more pressure and her body didn't move any closer, but the nearness already felt claustrophobic to Sarah, like she was seconds from being smothered.

"You can't keep treating me like a machine, a thing. I won't let you. Not anymore."

Fear and anger mingled to give Sarah an extra surge of adrenaline, but her struggles did nothing to remove Cameron's hands. It was hard to breathe, hard to think. "You don't dictate to me, girlie. We'll do what I say, when I say it. Now let me go!"

"No."

"I didn't risk my life to get that body so you could use it to throw me around," Sarah snarled.

"And I didn't leave the system to watch you kill yourself." There was an edge of emotion in Cameron's voice, and Sarah recognized it at last. It was fear, fear for Sarah, fear for herself. It cut through Sarah's anger like a scalpel, and the tension that held her body up relaxed. Sarah went limp in Cameron's hands and slumped back against the wall.

Cameron's voice choked with emotion as she continued, "I watched, when you fought... this body. I watched through a camera and there was nothing I could do. I came out of the system so I could be here with you, so I could help you. So you didn't have to fight alone." The words shook Sarah to her core; she had known that watching the fight had affected Cameron, but not the extent that Cameron had just revealed. "I can help now, but you have to let me. You have to help me."

The pressure on Sarah's wrists eased and her hands dropped limply to her sides. The wall at her back kept her upright, absent Cameron's strength. Sarah rubbed at her wrists distractedly, trying to buy time to think. "Help you?" she asked.

"By being more careful... taking better care of yourself."

"And not treating you like a machine?"

Cameron nodded her head, and the simple, human gesture frightened Sarah more than anything. Sarah wasn't sure what it meant, to treat Cameron as something other than a machine, other than a terminator. She wasn't sure she even knew how to begin, and it didn't help when Cameron shifted closer, so close Sarah could feel Cameron's body heat. It felt seductive in the icy chill of the room and she closed her eyes, wondering if she'd finally lost her damn mind. While her mind struggled to understand Cameron as more than a machine, Sarah's body seemed to have figured things out just fine.

Shaking her head, Sarah changed the subject, desperate to take the emotion rising between them down to a more manageable level. “Back at the server farm, you said you were a terminator...”

A shadow briefly seemed to flicker over Cameron’s gaze. “I... I am, and I’m not. I’m still made to be a terminator; this body is still a terminator’s body. There’s nothing I can do to change that.”

Sarah remembered the anger in Cameron’s eyes, directed both at Cameron’s own body, at its killing strength and reflexes, and at Sarah herself, for the position she had placed them both in, to kill or be killed. “What happened back there?” she asked in a quiet voice.

“He hit you and I threw him, harder than I needed to. Harder than I intended to. I didn’t plan on killing him. I just wanted him away from you.”

Sarah swallowed and digested that. “And the other one?”

Cameron’s head tilted to the side as she considered her answer. “He shot me. I didn’t like it.”

Protection, of herself and others, and an almost adrenaline-fueled response to the situation. Whatever modifications Cameron had made, it seemed her body and mind were more aligned than they had been, more influenced by each other, and Sarah wondered what that meant for the unstable, unpredictable circumstances they found themselves in. She wondered what it would be like to find out.

“If you aren’t a terminator, what are you?” Sarah finally asked the question that had been weighing on her mind, needing to know the answer for more reasons than she cared to think about.

“I don’t know. Even if I feel emotions, even if I am sentient... I’m not human.” Cameron’s chin dropped and her eyes were suddenly obscured, and she started to move away.

“Cameron...” Sarah reached out, her fingers brushing back Cameron’s hair. She didn’t know what she had been about to say or do, but Cameron jerked her head back and stepped away, breaking the contact between them.

“I’m going to take a shower,” she announced again in a bland, emotionless voice. A second later, the door between them clicked shut.

Sarah sighed and slid down the wall, drawing her knees to her chin and closing her eyes as she listened to the water come on in the room behind her.

James watched in horror as the grisly scene played out in front of him on the tiny laptop screen. He hadn't been able to hear the audio, thank God, but the images were clear enough. Murch had reached some agreement with the men who had caught him at the warehouse, and it didn't take much to deduce what he had agreed to. James would never know if the scientist would have actually ratted them out or done his best to protect them. Regardless, James' lips moved in a silent prayer for the dead man.

Slowly, his gaze slipped from Murch, the scientist's eyes wide and vacant behind his shattered glasses, to the device that had ended his life. It was one of those things that had attacked Zeira Corp, and from the shock on the faces of the mercenaries, they had been as surprised as James had been. He didn't know what was going on, but either their assumption that Kaliba was behind the initial attack was wrong, or there were factions working against each other within the organization. Either idea was unsettling.

He was distracted from his ruminations by the sound of the bathroom door opening and the light clicking off. Hands shaking, James hurriedly closed the laptop and turned, managing a tight smile as Savannah skipped through the room. He caught her and swung her around, saying, "Uncle Murch is going to be longer than he thought. What do you say we go get that ice cream now?"

Savannah nodded and smiled and James gave her a small hug before setting her on her feet, taking a measure of comfort in the uncomplicated ways of children after the massacre he had seen. Gripping her hand, he let her pull him out of the room, hoping he could hide his upset from her. Savannah was nothing if not perceptive for a child. She'd already experienced too much death for her age, and James wanted to spare her that feeling of loss, if only for a little while longer. "And maybe we'll find a park with a nicer swing set," he suggested.

"Will Uncle Murch meet us there?" Savannah wanted to know, her blue eyes open and trusting as they gazed up at him.

"Not today, sweetheart," James said around a rough swallow. "Not today."

Act 3

Sarah rested her head against the wall, staring up at a yellow water stain covering a significant portion of the ceiling. A dull ache spread from the back of her head until it enveloped her entire body. In all her years of running, she had never felt as bone-tired as she did in that moment. It

was never just easy or simple, she thought as she let out a long exhalation, but she had only herself to blame for this latest complication. There was no way to put the genie back in the bottle. Cameron was back and embodied, and whatever had happened to her within the system, whatever she had done to herself in the system, she had come out changed.

And perhaps, not even herself, Sarah reminded herself sternly. She had tasted fear when Cameron had thrown her against the wall, and she had searched Cameron's eyes for a flash of red, for a hint of C.A.I.N. looking out of those hazel brown eyes. Was the other AI already at work, deep within Cameron's programming, changing her, corrupting her, bit by bit? Did she, like Sarah, have a ticking time bomb lurking inside her?

But all that had been reflected back at her from the depths of Cameron's eyes had been worry and frustration, both directed at Sarah in equal measure. Sarah knew a part of her would have almost welcomed the concern, would have been grateful someone actually cared whether she lived or died, but she couldn't allow herself the luxury. Not until she knew where she stood with Cameron. Maybe not even then.

Shivering a little as the cold of the air-conditioning crept up her arms, Sarah slowly leveraged herself up from the floor, her back popping painful as she stood. Sarah felt the vertebrae of her spine slowly align as she eased back to sprawl onto the lumpy mattress and breathed deep into her stomach. The desire to sleep was nearly overwhelming as the muted sound of running water washed over her. Her head found the pillow of its own accord and her eyes closed, but instead of peaceful release, her mind whirled.

Sarah didn't need to be told that Cameron was no longer an unfeeling machine; all she had to do was look into those eyes. In so many ways, they were the same as before, honeyed brown with specks of gold, illuminated by an inhuman light. But they were no longer blank and expressionless, reflecting nothing from within. That was the real problem, Sarah admitted to herself. Even if Cameron wasn't human, she was sentient and feeling, and as she pointed out, no longer Sarah's punching bag, no longer simply an object of Sarah's whims and frustrations. She was no longer simply a machine.

And that changed and complicated everything. Sarah wasn't sure what she had expected when Cameron returned to her body, but she hadn't expected her to matter, not like this. She hadn't expected to have to take Cameron's feelings into consideration or to be responsible for her actions with regards to the cyborg. Before, Cameron had been a thing, unfeeling when a bullet struck her body or when Sarah threw her up against a wall, and Sarah had treated her as such. When Cameron had been in the system, it had been easy to ignore the hints of emotional development or at least to negate what they'd meant. It had been as easy for Sarah as closing her laptop or pulling her earpiece out.

It was much harder when those emotions were literally staring her in the face.

Sarah couldn't imagine what it felt like to Cameron, and deep down, some part of her resented the fact that she had to consider her at all. Like she needed one more set of eyes to watch her expectantly, one more set of obligations to weigh her down. One more person to disappoint. She had already been buckling under the pressure even before John had left and his departure had fractured her already shaky psyche. She had wanted something solid, firm, something she could have at her back when the ground shifted beneath her feet, and she had hoped Cameron could be that.

Or had she wanted more? Had she really risked so much just to have her cyborg sidekick back? Or had she wanted a warm, familiar body to stand beside her through this hell that was her life?

Sarah pulled the pillow tighter and admitted a part of her desperately wanted to do that, to give in and let someone else shoulder even a fraction of her burden. But seventeen years of running from the machines had ingrained the rock hard belief in her that she could never, ever, trust a terminator.

In every one of those seventeen years, that knowledge had only fueled her hate, her inner fire. Now it just made her feel cold and alone.

Cameron could count every drop of water that struck her body. Determine the temperature of the liquid sluicing down her skin and the cooler air where steam hung like a heavy cloud. But for once, Cameron simply focused on the sensation of the fine droplets of hot water spraying her back. A cold shower would do the trick as well as a warm one, she knew, but she'd been surprised to find the cold water... unpleasant. That was new, as were so many other sensations. She scrubbed at the wound on her shoulder to remove the crusted blood, the pain as jarring as the water was soothing. It would be easy to block the sensation, but Cameron had been unfeeling for far too long. She could not appreciate softness without hardness. Pleasure without pain.

Cameron turned, easing her face under the spray and lifting her chin. Sarah had always lingered in the shower. Cameron no longer wondered why. It felt... nice, she decided. Relaxing was probably the better word for it. She glanced down, wiggling her toes as the soap rinsed the blood from her body and swirled down the drain between her feet. The tiles were chipped and the shower curtain smelled faintly of mold, but the water was hot and that was enough for now.

Sarah often took long baths or showers and came out with a plan or a decision, and Cameron

supposed that the solitude and the hot water easing tense muscles worked to clear and compose her mind. Cameron wondered if it would work for her, if she stood there long enough. Maybe it would calm the turmoil that roiled through her at the mere thought of Sarah. Of everything she had experienced since she had returned to her body, only Sarah made her feel so confused, so powerless, so... angry. It was new and frightening, that she could have so much strength and not be entirely in control of it. That fear had kept her in the system, and she had been right in her fear.

Cameron was back in her body to help Sarah, but she wasn't sure she was. She could shield her from bullets and touch her when she needed comfort, but Sarah continued to spiral out of control and act unpredictably, alternatively pulling Cameron close and pushing her away. And the kiss... Cameron didn't have enough experience with emotions to describe how that made her feel, but she was finding that it was making her act irrationally. She spent time figuring out ways to come into contact with Sarah, precise calculations of approach angles and speeds to maximize the nanoseconds of each brush of their fingers, with each encounter slowly replayed, analyzed, and categorized according to a complex algorithm of length, intensity, and location. It was, she knew, an inefficient use of her time, but she had yet to stop.

Reluctantly, Cameron shut off the water and simply stood there for a moment, watching as gooseflesh rose on her skin. It was absolutely fascinating to feel the sensation that went with it, no longer filtered through programming that helped her approximate human feelings without really feeling them.

It had been like that at the server farm as well. She had seen the guard strike Sarah and Sarah collapse against the door, and the perception and accompanying emotions gave rise to immediate, swift action. For a few moments, she had not been in conscious control of her own body, the careful calculations of force, direction, and speed gone as she grabbed the man's jacket and pulled, flinging him off of Sarah with all the effort and care she would have shown a bug.

The restraints were gone now. The overlay of programming no longer walled off access to the full range of feelings and emotions, and she was slowly learning to handle the influx without becoming overwhelmed by it all. The good and the bad, even the pain. She was getting used to the split-second of stunned incomprehensibility that blazed her optics and threatened to deactivate her whenever a bullet struck home. She was even learning to use the feeling to propel her to action, to help her do what needed to be done.

Grabbing a towel, Cameron carefully dried around the wounds, the thin, cheap motel towel tearing at her skin. The white cloth came away stained, and she threw it onto the floor with her discarded clothes.

Sarah struggled to sit up as the water switched off, her eyes landing on the first aid kit Cameron had brought in from the truck. The manual task of patching up the Tin Miss was at least something easy and uncomplicated she could focus on. She rummaged in the kit, noting that it was running low on both gauze and butterfly sutures.

The door opened, and Sarah turned, her hands full. Cameron stood framed in the doorway, steam curling out of the bathroom from behind her. Her body was rosy and clean and completely and utterly bare. Sarah swallowed hard and blinked several times, hoping that the apparition in front of her would suddenly re-arrange itself into something besides a dripping and naked terminator. Unnoticed, a roll of gauze slipped from Sarah's suddenly nerveless fingers and bounced away to parts unknown.

A strangled sound came out of Sarah's throat instead of the words she had planned, and Cameron glanced at her curiously. Sarah cleared her throat. "I... uh..." She gestured at Cameron's naked body, her gaze drifting down before jerking back up. "I thought we decided it was better."

Cameron frowned in confusion. "Better?"

"When you wear clothes," Sarah added with a weak smirk.

"I don't have any." Cameron's eyes tracked to the pile of sodden, bloody clothes on the bathroom floor. "Mine are ruined."

"Get a towel, then," Sarah snapped as she felt a hot blush rushing up her cheeks. The room, which seconds earlier had been too cool, felt suffocating and warm.

"There's only one left. I thought you would need it."

"Get it," Sarah grounded out between clenched teeth. "I can get more."

Cameron tilted her head to the side and gazed at Sarah for a long moment, and Sarah imagined that she was analyzing physiological signs like respiration and heart rate. It didn't take much analysis; Sarah was gasping and sweating like a runner in the last mile of a marathon. Cameron didn't seem inclined to hurry her leisurely perusal of the flustered woman in front of her, and if Sarah had to give a name to the look in those hazel eyes, it would have been pleased.

"Now?" Sarah prompted impatiently.

Cameron almost seemed to smirk before nodding and stepping back into the bathroom, giving Sarah a few seconds of much-needed breathing room. Whatever the hell was going on between them, there was no mistaking her body's response to Cameron, Sarah thought bitterly. But she had acted on an impulse once and it had only complicated things between them, unbearably so. She couldn't make that same mistake again. She wasn't sure her sanity could survive it.

Sarah swore under her breath when Cameron stepped back out, the worn, thin bath towel covering about as much area as a handkerchief. Feeling the walls closing in on her, Sarah hurriedly dropped the medical supplies on the low dresser that stretched the length of the room and grabbed the room key.

"I need more..." She waved her hand at the supplies. "I'll be back. You... stay."

With that, she made her escape. She was a good half-a-mile down the road before she even gave a thought to where she was going.

The back of the black SUV was deathly quiet. Danny would have looked out the windows at the scenery, but they were impenetrable. Much like everything else in his life. Sneaking a sideways glance at Vaughn, who sat ramrod straight in the rich leather seat, his eyes eclipsed by dark glasses, Danny understood that he was surrounded by a vast network of inexplicable people working at purposes he couldn't fathom. The existence of that machine only confirmed a growing suspicion he had had that he'd only seen a miniscule fraction of the vast entity that was Kaliba.

But deep down, at the heart of all the activity and pursuits, was C.A.I.N., the AI based on the careful re-engineering of a broken computer chip found in an assembly plant in 1984. His father's work.

He wasn't sure who had recovered the bits and pieces of what had been destroyed in the blast that had killed his father and blown his family apart, but he knew someone had. It wasn't Vaughn who, for all his other skills, was not an engineer or a scientist like Miles Dyson, who had both the practical and theoretical knowledge to understand the technology and piece it back together.

Vaughn shifted in the seat beside him, stripping off his glasses and fixing Danny with a penetrating gaze. "You are to say nothing of what happened back there. You understand?"

Danny nodded. He would say nothing. There was no one for him to tell. He lived in his sterile,

secure apartment, hidden from the world but not from the prying eyes of his employer, his movements and associations carefully tracked and recorded. Even if he could escape the apparatus that surrounded him, he couldn't imagine anyone he could tell without endangering them.

Vaughn's eyes were still on him, suspicious of his acquiesce, his silence.

"That thing was controlled by C.A.I.N., wasn't it?" Danny asked in the quiet. Vaughn didn't say anything, but the muscles in his jaw tightened perceptibly. "Why? That guy, Murch, was going to lead us right to her."

Vaughn shifted again, the leather creaking as he settled back. "I'm going to answer your questions," he warned. "Just this once. Because I want you to understand." He didn't have to voice the threat; it was implicit in his words. "That was an experimental prototype of an unmanned recon and combat drone. The command-and-control module is tied to C.A.I.N.'s systems, yes. It was launched to provide aerial support for the raid on that warehouse. What happened..." His fingers twisted the glasses in his hand, straining the metal. "What happened was an unfortunate glitch in the system, the result of an instability we've been trying to identify and fix. That's why it attacked and why it crashed. We thought we had corrected the problem, but obviously it wasn't ready for a live field test."

The glasses flashed up to point at Danny like a weapon, and in Vaughn's hands, Danny believed they very well could be. "That's the whole story. Got it?"

Danny nodded again. He hoped it looked believable. He doubted he would leave the SUV alive otherwise.

The florescent lights in the drug store did nothing to improve her pallor, Sarah noticed as she caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror at the cosmetic counter. She grabbed a pair of fingernail scissors and turned away hurriedly, locating the first aid supplies with the ease of one who made the trip entirely too often. The menial task of selecting gauze and tape did nothing to quiet her mind, as she imagined the sight she must have presented to Cameron as she fled the motel room. It was impossible to deny anymore, the effect Cameron was having on her, especially after that embarrassing performance. Sarah shook her head in disgust, at herself, at Cameron, at the whole fucked-up situation.

Detouring through an aisle with a limited clothing selection, Sarah grabbed sweats and a few t-shirts before heading for the food aisle. She could feel the anxiety tighten her chest as she neared

the end of her shopping. She didn't know exactly when the last vestiges of her control had slipped away—and she didn't know how to get it back. Had it been when John left? When she'd dragged a broken terminator out of a burning building? When she'd risked her life to give that terminator another chance? Or when she'd kissed her?

The mission had always been her solid ground: no matter how crazy the world had gotten, she had known what she had to do: protect John, stop Skynet. Now, what was the mission? Everything she had done since he had left made no sense and had no strategy. In that, Cameron was right. She was doing things and taking risks she never would have done had John still been there, just out of a desire to do something.

She reached the counter and gave the clerk a tight smile. She wondered if she looked as crazy as she felt.

“Is that it?” he asked, his teenage features showing complete disinterest in her seemingly random purchases.

Spying something on the shelf behind him, Sarah pointed and said, “And one of those.”

Back at the motel, the woman in the office asked several suspicious questions before reluctantly getting up to hand Sarah two more flimsy towels. Juggling the towels and the bag, Sarah fished for the key in her pocket and took a deep breath before opening the door. Cameron looked up from the bed where she was sitting, nodded to acknowledge Sarah, and turned back to Animal Planet on the TV. It was a relief to Sarah that seeing Cameron in the towel again was almost anticlimatic and she hoped that it indicated that she had wrestled her hormones into some semblance of control. The voiceover droned on about gazelles while Sarah unpacked and laid out the first aid kit, finally turning to Cameron with a near-smile.

“Ok, Tin Miss, let's get you patched up.” Sarah sized up the bullet holes, one on the left shoulder and one on the right thigh, both gaping and raw looking.

Deciding to deal with the more strategically-placed wound while she still seemed to be in control of herself, Sarah knelt beside the bed and smoothed the edge of the towel up and out of the way. The brush of her fingers against skin seemed to get the terminator's attention and the TV clicked off. Using a penlight, Sarah located the bullet, flattened against the long protective cover over the hydraulics of Cameron's leg. “It's a deep one,” she muttered almost to herself, and then realized that prying it out would cause Cameron considerable pain. She glanced up and saw the realization in Cameron's eyes as well. “I'll be gentle.”

“You always are.” There was a pause. “Even when you think I don't feel it.”

Sarah stilled, growing more aware of the warm, firm skin under her fingertips by the moment. “What?” she almost whispered.

“Like that first night, at the warehouse.”

Swallowing hard past the lump in her throat, Sarah carefully met Cameron’s eyes. “You... felt that?”

Cameron nodded solemnly. “It was one of the only times I accessed that body after I downloaded.” She carefully avoided mentioning the other time she accessed it. “You removed 47 bullets and cleaned all the blood off.”

Sarah remembered the quiet work of cleaning up Cameron’s body and the care she took to stitch up every bullet hole. Throughout, the faint hope built in her chest that maybe it would help her heal. At the time, she hadn’t had any real reason to do it, except that she couldn’t leave Cameron looking like that, but now she remembered running her fingers over the areas where the skin was undamaged and wishing Cameron would open her eyes, almost needing her to with a quiet desperation Sarah was becoming all too familiar with around the cyborg.

Her breath caught as she traced back more moments like that, a careless flip of Cameron’s hair from where it had slipped down to cover the eye-patch, the occasional touch to check Cameron’s temperature. Clamping down on those thoughts ruthlessly, Sarah’s fingers gripped the needle-nose pliers. “This is still going to hurt,” she warned in a strangled voice as she moved to the task at hand.

The shoulder was easier, but Cameron sighed in genuine relief when Sarah covered the sutures with a bandage and patted her uninjured shoulder softly. “All done.” She knelt on the floor and began to gather up the discarded packaging and bloody gauze. “I picked you up some sweats,” she said. “You can change in the bathroom.”

A soft touch on the side of her head stilled Sarah’s movements. Carefully, Cameron parted blood-stained hair, sliding her fingers around the cut caused by the gun butt and probing the bruise. “You should let me clean this,” Cameron said quietly as her fingers lingered, gently massaging the tight muscles at the nape of Sarah’s neck.

Dangerous heat flooded through Sarah’s body at the contact, and the desire to yield to Cameron’s knowing touch had her head dropping a scant inch before she snapped it back up. “It’s ok.” Sarah could almost feel the weight of Cameron’s displeased frown and she backtracked. “I mean, I will, after... after you change.”

“You swear?”

Their gazes met and Sarah recalled the last time Cameron had sworn to her. She’d been lying, Sarah remembered all too clearly, and the memory cooled her mind and body just enough for Sarah to jerk her head in acknowledgment.

Stepping outside to breathe in some fresh air, Sarah leaned against the motel door. The sun felt hotter than it should have, and Sarah gripped the collar of her t-shirt, pulling it away from her sweaty skin. Before she made any more decisions about Cameron, about anything for that matter, Sarah knew she needed to know where things stood with Cameron and C.A.I.N. Terminators were built to lie, to use whatever means necessary to complete their mission. If Cameron had been compromised, then all bets were off. Sarah knew she would have to destroy her or die trying; she told herself that Cameron would want her to if she were capable of expressing that need.

Breathing out slowly, knowing that she would cut out the ball of fear in her chest with a knife if she could, Sarah reached into her pocket and flipped open her cell phone, punching in Ellison’s number by memory. It rang three times before he answered, Savannah’s light-hearted laugh filtering over the receiver before James’ deep baritone.

Sarah punched in the code and heard it repeated back to her. “Where are you?” she asked without preamble.

“A playground,” James answered in a subdued tone. “Few blocks from a motel we’re holing up in for now. Where are you?”

Sarah raked a hand through her hair and squinted into the decaying sun. “A motel at the ass end of nowhere,” she admitted.

“Sounds nice,” James drawled like he meant it, but he couldn’t keep the edge out of his voice.

The ball of fear turned colder and tightened. “Where’s Murch? Did he finish the analysis? I need... I need to know if I can trust... I need to know what’s going on with Cameron.”

James didn’t answer immediately and Sarah could hear his shoes crunching across gravel as the sounds of children playing receded into the distance. He finally took a deep breath. “Sarah, Murch...”

Swallowing, Sarah braced herself. “Did he leave?”

“He’s dead.”

Sarah blinked, feeling like she’d just been sucker punched. “What?”

“He went back to the warehouse for a few more things. One of those... things... that device that attacked us at Zeria Corp, it came through the roof and killed him. Practically cut him in half it shot him so full of holes,” James murmured, the memory making him feel cold all over.

Pushing away from the door, Sarah walked out into the parking lot, needing to put more distance between herself and Cameron as she processed the news. “God damn it,” she hissed.

“Dyson was there with some men from Kaliba,” James continued. “At least we’d removed everything that was traceable to us.”

“Did we?” Sarah asked, her voice harsh as she gripped the support on the truck’s side mirror. “Did we?” she demanded again.

There was a painful silence on the other end of the line, and Sarah wanted to hurl the phone in frustration. She settled for turning and kicking the truck instead, stirring up rocks and dirt that drifted on the breeze around her ankles. “Sonofabitch,” Sarah said wearily. “Sonofabitch, James.”

“I know.” His voice was soft and full of understanding for the bleak situation they were in.

“What about Cameron? Do we know if she’s compromised?”

His silence spoke volumes. She leaned against the hood of the truck, not caring that the metal was scalding hot and that it was burning her skin through her jeans and t-shirt. She was too overwhelmed, too tired, and too filled with the bitter taste of failure. She would have to kill Cameron... again. Shaking harder, the tears came despite her desperate attempts to hold them back.

Finally, he spoke. “What will you do?”

Sarah shook her head. “I’ll have to...” She had to swallow again. “We have to be sure.”

Her thoughts in chaos and her soul at the end of its tether, Sarah merely closed her phone, gripping it tightly in her palm as she returned to the motel room. The confrontation that she and Cameron had skirted around time and time again was about to come to a head. There were no

more excuses. No more lies. There couldn't be.

For the first time, Sarah knew they would have to be completely honest with each other. The knowledge that one of them could end up dead once the truth was out in the open didn't matter.

The bathroom door opened and Cameron stepped out, snapping off the light. Her brown gaze immediately went to Sarah before drifting to the phone in Sarah's white-knuckled grip. "What's wrong?" she asked with concern.

Act 4

Sarah felt the weight of the world come crashing down on her as she gazed at Cameron. In her mind's eye, she could already see the fires blazing up to engulf those familiar features, burning white-hot like a halo around her body. Sarah sucked in a harsh breath, swaying a little as she shook her head, gripping the phone even tighter. "It's..." She found she couldn't find the words to begin what might be the end. "It's nothing," she lied, feeling Cameron's eyes bore through her. "Just something with Murch." She grabbed her bag, her whole body shaking. "I'm going to get a shower." She dodged around Cameron and headed to the bathroom, feeling Cameron's gaze follow her.

"Okay." The word drifted through the thin plywood door as Sarah leaned up against it, needing any support she could find to stay on her feet. She could almost feel Cameron hovering on the other side, half expecting the terminator to knock or just force her way in. The slight barrier wasn't enough to hide the confusion and worry in Cameron's voice, and Sarah closed her eyes, wishing this hell she found herself in would just go away, if only for a little while.

A few moments later, Sarah heard the retreat of familiar footfalls, and the sounds of Animal Planet began again.

Sarah gripped the sides of the sink, feeling sweat trickle down her back like cold fingers sliding down her spine, and took slow, deep breaths, trying to steady herself against a sudden sensation of dizziness. The tears that had begun out in the parking lot threatened again, and she hurriedly turned on the shower to drown out the noise. Her clothes joined Cameron's on the floor, and she let the spray take her as she lost the fight to hold herself together and sobs racked her body.

She tried to tell herself that Cameron was just a machine, just like she had thousands of times before, but now the words rang hollow in light of her actions over the past few weeks, culminating in the disastrous kiss that she couldn't escape no matter how hard she tried. She felt like she was teetering on the brink between damnation and salvation, and a tiny little nudge was all it would take to tip her one way or the other. She wasn't sure it really mattered. Either necessitated a long fall from a terrible height, and she was one wrong step or one stray glance

away from losing what remained of her balance, of her sanity. Acting on whatever she was feeling surely led to madness, not only because they seemed destined to destroy each other, but because she would surely lose what remained of her self.

The shower did nothing to clear her head or soothe her body. She shut off the water, listening to it trickle down the drain. Drying herself quickly, she used the remainder of her energy to dress. Jeans, tank, shirt... gun. Sarah's fingers closed on the grip without thinking, feeling comfort in the weight as she tucked it into the small of her back. She stepped out into darkness, the muted pinks and yellows of the neon sign reflected against the blinds the only light in the room. Sarah could just barely make out the terminator's silhouette by the window, still and silent. Cameron's eyes flashed blue as she glanced out, scanning the parking lot. A sharp edge of panic pushed aside Sarah's lethargy, and she stepped up behind Cameron, her eyes searching for anything that might be a threat.

More cars and trucks were packed in the lot, obscuring lines of sight and shadowing large swathes of the ground, and Sarah leaned closer to the cyborg and craned her neck. "What's going on?" she asked. Overbalancing as she tried to see over the terminator's shoulder, Sarah caught Cameron's arm to steady herself, feeling a jolt from the incidental contact travel all the way down her body.

Cameron shivered under Sarah's touch and her head dropped to gaze at the hand on her arm. "Nothing."

The sense of urgency subsiding, Sarah settled back on her heels, but she didn't remove her hand. Seemingly of their own accord, Sarah's fingers trailed down Cameron's bicep. They stood there for a long moment, headlights from passing trucks and the slow caress of Sarah's fingers the only movement in the room.

"Why are you standing here in the dark?"

"It's peaceful."

"It is," Sarah agreed, the feel of the soft skin under her fingertips soothing her into a near hypnotic state. She only needed to lean forward to press a kiss to Cameron's shoulder, as if she needed the reminder of what Cameron tasted like, as if the unique flavor wasn't burned into her lips. Sarah lifted her gaze and found Cameron watching her with an expression that made her breath catch. They stared at each other, Sarah becoming all too aware of the fact that she was stroking Cameron's skin, but she didn't seem to be able to stop.

The sound that interrupted them was intermittent at first, an odd squeak that gnawed at the edges of the silence they had wrapped themselves in. Then it settled into a rhythm, punctuated here and there by a pig-like grunting: the sound of worn bed springs straining under a combined weight and the steady pounding of the headboard through the paper-thin walls of the motel.

Cameron turned her head toward the sound, and Sarah wondered what was going through the terminator's mind as she cocked her head and listened with open interest.

The mood broken, Sarah snorted before stepping away from Cameron and dropping into the single chair in the room, her foot knocking the discarded pharmacy bag over. Remembering her earlier purchase, she fished around in the bag until her hand closed on a bottle. She pulled it free and twisted the cap, taking a long pull and letting the alcohol burn all its way down her throat. Her head swam and her vision blurred before snapping into sharp clarity. She had forgotten that first swallow of tequila always made the world seem to halt on its axis for a brief, dizzying second while everything freeze-framed. She took a second sip, the warmth easing the hard lump in her chest, and she leaned back in the chair and relaxed for the first time since the alarm had interrupted her coffee.

Cameron frowned at the bottle in her hand. "What are you doing?"

Sarah raised the bottle for another drink, her mouth quirking upward as Cameron's frown deepened. "Having a wake."

"You are drinking."

"That's what you do at a wake." Sarah saluted her with the bottle.

"A wake is a 'watching, or a watch kept, especially for some solemn or ceremonial purpose, or a watch or vigil by the body of a dead person before burial, sometimes accompanied by feasting or merrymaking.'" Cameron tilted her head thoughtfully. "Who died?"

Sarah shrugged. "Maybe I did. Maybe I died and didn't notice." She took another sip, taking an almost childish pleasure in Cameron's disapproval. "Maybe I died in that basement when John left and these are just the death spasms."

"I've never seen you drink."

"I don't. Or, I didn't, not for a long time, not when John was with me. But I have no one to protect anymore." Sarah watched as Cameron's jaws clenched, a pulse of movement behind her flawless skin. It was so disturbingly human she had to look away.

"Savannah..." Cameron started to argue, her voice sounding tight and pinched.

"Not my problem," Sarah cut her off, feeling a pang of guilt but refusing to acknowledge it as she took another sip.

"What about yourself?" Cameron asked.

"That's what you are here for, girlie." Sarah took another swallow before gazing up at Cameron. The terminator was still watching her, but she looked *defeated*, Sarah realized. Her heart lurched, and she opened her mouth, not sure if she wanted to apologize or twist the knife in some more.

Cameron straightened and turned to the window, peering out from behind the blinds, purposefully ignoring Sarah. Sarah capped the bottle and stowed it; the artificial warmth of the alcohol felt good seeping into her muscles, but years of vigilance wouldn't let her drink too much. Darkness closed in and Sarah's head fell back on the headrest, listening to the springs squeal in the next room. Finally, she spoke, almost without thinking, almost as a way to cover the sounds from the next room. "I want to trust you," she confessed in a quiet voice. "I really do." She felt rather than saw Cameron turn back to her. "Of everyone who is left, you are the only one..." she trailed off, afraid of what she might whisper in the dark. She shook her head. "You make it hard."

"I do?" Cameron's voice was strangely hushed.

"Murch..." A sigh and a pause. "Murch found a copy of you, in the system. He said you must have left it there when you downloaded."

"Not a copy," Cameron corrected, and the hope Sarah had been holding out that Cameron hadn't lied to her—again—was dashed. "Not a complete copy. Not me."

"Whatever it is, you left it there," Sarah snapped. "And you didn't tell me."

Cameron continued as if Sarah hadn't spoken. "It's a utility program, with limited intelligence. It monitors the net, detects attacks or unusual activity..."

"Helps you surf?" Sarah spat, remembering those long fingers dancing over the keyboard.

"Yes."

The sounds from the next room reached a new intensity, and the headboard rattled against the wall in rapid staccato. Finally, after one last loud cry, both rooms descended into a blessed silence. Even in the thin light through the blinds, Sarah could see Cameron watching her speculatively, and she found she really didn't want to know what the machine was thinking at that moment.

"You know why I wanted you out of there, all of your intelligence. So you can't be used to become Skynet." Sarah didn't even try to keep the accusation from her voice even though she knew she wasn't speaking the whole truth. "You disobeyed and you didn't tell me."

"It can't be used to create Skynet. There is no danger. I didn't tell you because it didn't matter."

"Bullshit!" Sarah rose and advanced on the cyborg, her hand striking the wall beside Cameron's head. "C.A.I.N., he, it, whatever... it's in there. In your damn program. Murch saw it, he saw it, parts of the code all mixed up with yours."

"I know."

Sarah sucked in a breath. "You... know?"

“Yes.” Cameron’s voice evened out and gentled, like she was trying to calm a spooked stallion.

“And... what? That’s ok? Do you interface with it? Does it...” Sarah balled up her fist, feeling her fingernails dig into her palm. “I need to know, Cameron, is it, could C.A.I.N., be in you? In your programming? In... this body?” There, it was said, everything was out in the open, and Sarah braced herself for the response, unsure if it would be words or a physical attack that would end her life.

“No.”

“No? Just, no? How can you be sure?”

Cameron’s fingers brushed back the damp hair along Sarah’s temple, and Sarah wasn’t sure which of them was more startled by her action. “How do you know what’s in you? How do you know yourself?”

There was that gaping hole again, the ground shifting under her feet. Who was she, really? What was she doing? She was no longer Sarah Connor, protector of John, nor was she the ruthless destroyer of machines. The terminator standing in front of her, alive and intact, proved that. “I don’t,” Sarah admitted. “I don’t know who I am anymore.”

“You are Sarah Connor,” Cameron said with conviction, as if that explained everything. And maybe it did. The fingers tracing circles under her hair made it hard to think.

“This isn’t about me. It’s about you. How do you know? How do you know that that piece of you in the system won’t become Skynet? And that C.A.I.N. isn’t in there somewhere, like... like an infection? Corrupting you?”

“The utility program is designed to learn about C.A.I.N. It captures samples of code and analyzes them.”

“What?” Sarah blinked, feeling a dangerous flicker of something that felt like hope ignite in her chest.

“It also has a terminating code that is triggered if any attempt is made to integrate it into another intelligence.” Cameron’s hand came to rest at the back of Sarah’s neck, heavy and solid, and Sarah sagged a little under the weight, her head falling forward to rest against Cameron’s. “I can’t become Skynet. I won’t,” she promised.

“And C.A.I.N.?”

“I would know.”

“How?”

“I told you, I made modifications. I... know myself.” Cameron’s voice in the dark was a

whisper. "I removed the barriers that kept me from knowing the full extent of my programming, of myself. It's why I feel, it's how I feel." She paused before continuing. "I would know if I wasn't myself."

"Are you sure? He could be..."

"I would know," Cameron repeated, whispering the words like a promise in the dark.

"How do I know? How do I know what you are telling me is the truth? You've lied to me before."

"You have to trust me."

"I don't know if I can," Sarah confessed.

"Because I am what I am?" Cameron asked, her fingers flexing against the back of Sarah's neck, her nails scratching seductively against warm, wet skin.

Sarah smiled bitterly. "Because I am what I am," she breathed. "I..." She swayed slightly, unsteady on her feet, as if Cameron's body was exerting a faint gravitational field, pulling Sarah off-balance, pulling her in.

The subtle pressure on the back of Sarah's neck intensified, but she held her position, bracing her hands against the wall. It was only a small step forward, as easy as giving in to gravity, but Sarah knew that it was really a pitch into the abyss, and she wasn't sure she would survive the landing.

"Cameron..." The word was meant to be a command, but it came out like a plea, for Cameron to release her or pull her closer, Sarah wasn't sure. The trembling in her arms increased, as if all the pressure that had been building for days, for weeks, came down to this moment, this dark motel room at the edge of nowhere. And maybe it had, maybe all of her actions since the blue light fizzled and died, taking her son away and leaving her alone, had led to this. She raised her head, found Cameron's eyes in the faint light, and finally asked the question that she had been afraid of, knowing that up until now, Cameron had not fully, completely, given her a truthful answer.

"Why did you go back into your body?"

Cameron reached out her other hand, her fingers feather-light as they slid over Sarah's eyelids and across her cheek before brushing over Sarah's lips and down over the pulse point in her neck. "For this."

The touch was hesitant, shy, as Cameron slid her hand down to rest on Sarah's hip, and Sarah supposed she had given the cyborg plenty of reason to doubt her uncertain moods. She was transfixed by the emotions swirling in those darkening brown eyes, so clearly Cameron's emotions that Sarah wondered how she could have thought they were mimicry or some cheap facsimile. Apprehension mingled with desire, shot through with a hint of awe and wonder as her

fingers edged under Sarah's tank to stroke the skin there.

"For you," Cameron whispered.

The world was spinning again around them, revolving fast but uneven, lurching on its axis. Letting go suddenly seemed easier than holding on and Sarah pitched forward into the abyss, into free fall. Air seemed to whiz past her ears in a dizzying rush, and the only thing solid and real was Cameron, closing the distance between their bodies and pressing her lips to Sarah's. Sarah threaded her hands through Cameron's hair, holding her there, holding them both there in stillness at the center while the world whirled and tilted around them.

It had always been her against the world, trying to stand between her son and the danger that surrounded him, and it felt odd, but surprisingly exhilarating, to let down her guard and maybe, just maybe, let someone hold her up for a change. The fact that that someone was Cameron, a terminator, a machine, was not something she wanted to dwell on at that moment. Right now, Sarah needed a release of all the tension and complication that surrounded her, and Cameron was a willing, warm body.

The sound that intruded upon their solitude was, by now, familiar, squeaking and grunting and pounding, and Sarah broke the kiss to mutter, "Round two." This time, she didn't need to guess what Cameron was thinking as she leered, actually *leered*, at Sarah. Sarah spared a moment to wonder where Cameron had learned that particular expression and another to question whether this would restore her sanity or send her flying off into the deep end for good. But she didn't have much time to ponder as Cameron began to walk her backward toward the bed.

The second fall was shorter, and the bed frame groaned under the stress as Cameron's weight settled on top of her. Sarah wrapped an arm around Cameron's waist and urged her closer, feeling the tension from the last few days bubble up close to its breaking point. Cameron didn't seem to feel the same intense need, and she resisted the pull to stroke Sarah's hair back from her face, the apprehension returning to her eyes. It was oddly endearing, the tentativeness in her touch.

The skin under her fingers was hot, overheated in the cool room. Cameron didn't think it was normal, and she opened her mouth to say something, but Sarah pulled her in for a kiss before she could. Sarah clung to her like a drowning woman grabbing a life preserver, her hands knotting in the cheap fabric of the t-shirt so hard Cameron could hear a muted tear as the seams gave way. She shrugged out of the shirt and watched in fascination as Sarah's eyes darkened perceptibly. She had known how Sarah had reacted to her body, had deliberately provoked her numerous ways, capturing and filing away each encounter, but the look in Sarah's eyes now, she had never seen that before, and her body trembled in reaction. A spasm of fear froze Cameron in place, as she recalled other moments of lost control.

Sarah's hands stilled on her back as she caught the change in mood. "What?"

"I... I could hurt you. This body..." It was a terminator's body, a killer's, and nothing about it was designed for this. She squeezed her eyes closed, the pain evoked by the thought worse than any bullet.

Slim fingers caught her chin, held it, until Cameron opened her eyes. Sarah didn't reassure her, didn't utter words of comfort; instead, she ran her fingers through Cameron's hair, pushing it back from her face and releasing it so it cascaded down, again and again, the soft touch quieting Cameron's fears. In Sarah's eyes, she saw Sarah's understanding and acceptance of the danger, and she wanted to chastise her for risk-taking. But she said nothing. When Sarah played her fingers down over Cameron's shoulders, careful to avoid the bandaged area, Cameron relented.

A twitch of her fingers and Sarah's shirt followed her own. Cameron had scoured the system for descriptions and analyzed countless hours of video, but nothing prepared her for the way Sarah's breath caught when she trailed her fingers up along the plane of her stomach and over her ribs. Experimentally, she retraced her route, noting how Sarah's muscles tensed under her fingertips. She might have stayed there for hours, dissecting the minute changes in the long muscles of Sarah's stomach with every touch of her fingers and graze of her nails, except that she caught an amused grin and an impatient tightening of Sarah's jaw, and she allowed her hand to range higher.

Cameron seemed content to explore and play with Sarah's body, taking delight in every new variation of touch, in every new sensation she could elicit. And if Sarah hadn't already been near the breaking point before the first kiss, she might have been inclined to let Cameron continue to slowly drive her crazy. But she wasn't so inclined, so she tangled her legs with Cameron's and pushed her shoulder, neatly rolling them over.

Hands braced on either side of Cameron's head, Sarah dipped down for a searing kiss, trying to convey at least some of her urgency to the terminator. She nibbled her way down Cameron's neck to her ear, brushing the hair back and blowing softly. Cameron's head bounced up off the bed like she had been shocked, and she turned to stare at Sarah with wide eyes. Sarah's lips curved up in a smirk as she pressed a soft kiss to Cameron's forehead, her fingers sliding down her collarbone and over Cameron's chest to toy with the soft skin around her navel and then dip lower. Cameron bucked underneath her as Sarah's nails grazed Cameron's inner thigh and there was a hint of fear in Cameron's eyes as her body reacted spontaneously to Sarah's touch. They stayed glued to Sarah's as she processed the unfamiliar sensations, as if Sarah grounded her.

But the next time their lips met, Sarah tasted a matching hunger and she felt Cameron's hands on her hips, moving their bodies together experimentally. Kicking Cameron's sweats off and sliding a denim-clad thigh between her legs, she felt rather than heard a whimper rumble through Cameron's body. She raised her head and saw the pleading look in Cameron's eyes. Nodding

almost imperceptibly, Sarah kept her eyes locked with Cameron's as she built up a rhythm with their bodies. Cameron's back arched and her head lolled back onto the pillow as the first wave crested and broke, and Sarah drove her through it, until Cameron collapsed onto the lumpy mattress, her body suddenly and surprisingly limp. Sarah brushed the damp hair back from Cameron's forehead and watched as Cameron blinked her eyes open and tried to focus, a small smile curving the corners of her mouth.

Sarah answered the smile with one of her own, toying with soft hair, until Cameron flipped her over, her fingers already working on the snap to Sarah's jeans. The hesitancy and apprehension vanished as she claimed Sarah's body, her movements careful but sure. As pressure built to new and nearly unbearable heights, Sarah found herself watching Cameron's hands as they moved reverently over her breasts and down her stomach. She couldn't remember giving herself over in this way, to anyone, and as much as she wanted this to be only about bodies and release, when Cameron wrapped her in strong arms and took her over the edge, Sarah clung to her like she would never let go.

James had stayed up all night, surfing the web and searching through every classified section of the local papers he could get his hands on. He was determined to find a place that would suit their needs, one that Savannah could call a real home, but the project also kept his mind off Murch's brutal death and the questions that buzzed at the back of his brain about Sarah. She hadn't called, and James hoped she had survived her confrontation with Cameron. He'd been tempted to call her more than once, but when the company she kept was a machine that could mimic her voice and knew the current codes they used, it was a pointless exercise.

His thoughts drifted to Cameron. She could be the ultimate ally or the perfect enemy. A part of him wanted to trust the machine, even needed to, but she terrified him. What she was, what she represented... James wasn't sure he could ever get past that. He didn't know how Sarah did it.

Watching Sarah interact with Cameron never ceased to amaze him. She would get right up in the terminator's face and yell, even going so far as to shove the 'Tin Miss' around although he noted Sarah never resorted to that in Savannah's presence. James had seen Sarah Connor scared, he knew she was capable of the emotion, but she was almost fearless where Cameron was concerned.

His lips quirked as he circled another possible candidate in the *Times*. Those two certainly made a formidable pair. God help their enemies if the two of them ever figured out a way to actually get along and work in coordination.

There was a rustle of sheets behind him, and James glanced over his shoulder in time to watch Savannah settle into a new position with a tiny sigh that melted a piece of his heart. He wasn't

sure he could stop Skynet, but he knew he'd stand between Savannah and whatever demons he had to in order to give this child a chance to live. She was his purpose now, and he found he was strangely content with that.

Absently, James scratched his ear as he turned the page. He was halfway down another column of possibilities when he found a listing that made him sit up a little straighter. The right size, the right location, the right price...

James checked his watch before picking up his cell phone. He said a silent prayer that he was making the right choice for all of them. Something settled in his soul as he listened to the rings, deciding whatever happened next was in God's hands now.

"Yes," James said softly when a woman's voice answered on the other end. "Sorry to call so early, but I saw your listing in the *Times*. I want to buy your house." He smiled as he listened to the woman's exclamation of surprise and excitement, turning his head so he could watch Savannah sleep.

It didn't surprise him at all to see she was awake and looking back at him with those knowing blue eyes, a small smile on her face.

Sarah was going to kill him for this, but he had a feeling it was going to be worth it.

Light dawned on a new day, and Sarah opened her eyes, blinking as sunlight slanted through the blinds to illuminate an empty room. A second's panic and Sarah bolted upright, hearing the sound of gravel crunching under tires and a motor dying. Her hand reached under the pillow, but only scratchy sheets met her fingers, not the hard, cold steel of a weapon. Catching a glance of her naked torso in the dresser mirror, Sarah yanked the sheet up to cover herself just as the door opened.

"Cameron, dammit," she growled as the terminator stepped into the room and the welcome smell of coffee filled the space. Her heart rate began to creep down from red alert levels as Cameron crossed to the bed, extending the large take-away cup. "You scared me," Sarah accused in lieu of an apology.

"Scared you?" Cameron asked, glancing down at her sweats and t-shirt. Sarah realized she looked like a harmless young woman headed to Pilates class rather than a potentially lethal machine.

Taking a sip of coffee and wincing as the liquid burned her tongue, Sarah leaned her head back against the headboard. "Not that I don't appreciate... I just expected... I mean..." The absurdity of the situation hit, and she shook her head. How was she supposed to tell a terminator who didn't sleep that she hadn't expected to wake up alone? Or explain to herself why she wanted

that in the first place? She took a deep breath to settle herself, only to lose it again as Cameron's fingers snagged the edge of the sheet and began to slowly pull it down the length of Sarah's body, her eyes a deep brown as they tracked the slow exposure.

Sarah swallowed as Cameron took the coffee cup from her and carefully, deliberately, climbed onto the bed. Her body reacted immediately to the look in Cameron's eyes, but her brain was telling her it was a bad idea. "Maybe we should..." she began, only to break off with a gasp as Cameron nuzzled her stomach, her sharp teeth grazing sensitive skin.

"Later."

It was deathly silent in his apartment, but even in the stillness, Danny imagined he could hear the whirl of the company apparatus settling around him, diligently capturing his every breath, his every step. He looked down at his cell phone, rubbing the surface of the keys with his thumb. There were no numbers programmed into it, and he needed none. He had no one to call. The one set of numbers his fingers itched to dial was the one he didn't dare, not on that phone or in that place. Calling his mother would only get her killed, of that he was sure.

He sighed and walked to the window, staring into the bright setting sun until spots danced and blurred his vision. He wiped his sleeve across his face, hoping to hide the tears.

Sarah slept, the late afternoon sun streaming through the windshield and warming her hair to a burnished burgundy. Cameron kept one eye on the road and one eye on the sleeping woman next to her. According to her calculations, Sarah had gotten 25 more minutes of uninterrupted sleep last night than her average, so the lethargy and atypical nap were cause for concern. She also watched because the play of light across Sarah's features was beautiful and she no longer had to pretend she wasn't looking. Since Cameron had woken to the world inside the system, her chip gone and her body damaged beyond repair, she had been watching Sarah Connor. The activity had consumed an inordinate amount of her total processing time, and yet it didn't seem enough.

Sarah shifted in the seat, her forehead sliding against the glass, and Cameron captured how the shadows shifted across Sarah's face and stored the images, the same way she had tracked the progress of the sun across the curves of Sarah's body as morning slid into afternoon and Sarah slept in her arms. The memory brought a sensation of warmth and peace washing over her limbs, a new feeling that Cameron was beginning to label as happiness. She didn't even realize she was smiling until she processed an unfamiliar input.

Cameron remembered every move and every sound Sarah had made the night before. Her lithe, strong body arching up to meet Cameron's, her muscles straining and taut as Cameron's touch

drew out heavy sighs and nearly breathless moans. And when Sarah had touched her... some part of her brain was still processing the way her body had responded. She had been scared, worried how her body—conditioned to accepting pain and dealing death—would react. She had few points of reference, all involving violence, and very little emotional experience. When her body left her control, she had looked to Sarah to guide her. She remembered the slight nod Sarah had given her, and the quiet reassurance in those green eyes that what she was feeling was expected, natural... almost human. It was nothing like she expected, nor was the frustration she felt when Sarah had withdrawn after waking in her arms, avoiding physical contact like she had after their first kiss. But the confusion paled in comparison to the memories of the night before.

Cameron reluctantly returned her gaze to the road. There was no way she would ever want to return to the system after feeling Sarah's touch on her body. She had thought the sensation would fade, but the emotions that had swelled in her as their bodies had tangled together still remained. Giddy, she realized. She felt giddy, and more alive than she had ever known. Reaching over, she switched on the radio, flipping through the stations to find something to match her mood.

Sarah woke to music, a syrupy-sweet pop song that carried a familiar sentiment even though the tune was unfamiliar. Cameron was humming, an incongruous sound weaving into the lyrics of love and attraction, as she guided the truck through the thick traffic of the Los Angeles freeway. Casting a sideways glance at the humming, smiling terminator, Sarah gave her head a little shake to clear the last of the cobwebs. The movement attracted Cameron's attention, and the look she gave Sarah could only be described as possessive. Sarah gave her an uncertain half-smile in return and turned back to the window.

Resting her head in her palm, Sarah stared out at the city lights and wondered briefly what she had gotten herself into. She could feel Cameron's eyes on her, but she wasn't quite ready to address the now impossibly-complicated situation she found herself in, yet again by her own actions. And a happy, humming terminator exceeded her ability to cope, especially when the happiness was caused by the latest stupid, illogical action she had taken yet in regards to Cameron.

Cameron began humming again, and her pleasant voice, along with the drone of the tires, slowly lured Sarah back toward sleep. At first, Sarah resisted, but her body was starting to protest, feeling achy in ways that had nothing to do with last night's activities. With a sigh, Sarah let her eyes drift shut, ready to trust Cameron to get them home, wherever that was now.

There was a flash of blue light on the inside of her eyelids and Sarah's eyes snapped open just as Cameron jerked the wheel, doing her best not to plow into the sudden chaos of cars slamming into one another. Sarah could see a tree smoldering alongside the road and a large, blackened hole, the flames slowly dying as she watched.

Another flash of blue light erupted on the road a quarter mile in front of them, annihilating a car

as it burned out a perfect crescent in the asphalt. The sedan behind them careened wildly and smashed into the truck, propelling them forward into a subcompact. Sarah's arm hit the dashboard as they whiplashed.

"What..." Sarah breathed as the truck rocked to a stop, wincing as she struggled against the still rigid seatbelt.

"Time bubble," Cameron confirmed.

They both fell silent as they watched the lights stringing the freeway flash and go dark, cascading mile by mile to plunge the scene into a confused sea of broken cars illuminated by a dizzying array of headlights.

"What the hell," Sarah whispered.