

Sarah Connor Chronicles Virtual Season

Season 2 Episode 2

Riders in the Sky

By Anklebones

"They're perfect!"

Savannah's delighted squeal drew Sarah's attention away from the shelves of sensible children's running shoes, leading her back to the front of the store where the girl was pirouetting for Cameron in a pair of rhinestone-encrusted, electric pink and black sneakers.

Stepping up behind the terminator, Sarah couldn't resist resting a hand on the small of Cameron's back as she looked over her shoulder at Savannah. "I see she gets her fashion sense from you," she observed dryly, remembering the studded leather, nail polish, sparkling eye shadow and candy-coloured tank tops that had so characterized the machine's early attempts to blend in. While she enjoyed the new, and thankfully more mature, style Cameron was sporting lately, Sarah almost missed those days. In hindsight, there had been something paradoxically charming about a killing machine in pink.

"And her stubbornness from you," Cameron countered, leaning back into the touch.

It was such a simple thing, but Sarah had had so few of the simple things in her life that it felt like more. She savoured the moment, hardly able to believe that it was real, that it had been two days, and neither of them was trying to run away yet. For once, Sarah wasn't running from anything. It felt strange, it felt... good.

"Can I have them? *Please?*" Oblivious to the moment, or perhaps not, Sarah had yet to figure out just how much of what was going on between her "aunts" Savannah was really aware of, the girl turned her pleading blue eyes on them both.

Cameron examined the completely impractical shoes, noting the inferior craftsmanship and cheap materials, and concluded that they would last perhaps two months before falling apart. Savannah needed sturdy footwear, shoes that would stand up to a life on the run if necessary. She opened her mouth to point that out, but the look on Savannah's face made her falter. It was a countenance that would have melted stone; even metal wasn't immune.

Savannah *needed* something frivolous. She needed to know that she could have something just because she wanted it. At six years old, she shouldn't have to worry about practicality.

In her twenties, she shouldn't have to mourn the loss of a childhood that hadn't happened yet.

Feeling Sarah's hand on her back like an anchor and accusation all in one, Cameron shook off the vision of another set of blue eyes, infinitely older in some ways, but just as needful.

This wasn't the childhood either of them deserved, but it was the only one Cameron and Sarah could offer. Knowing at least that it had been treasured assuaged some of Cameron's guilt, making her that much more determined to make it as close to the elder Savannah's memories as possible.

Cameron nodded, not sure which version of Savannah, the girl or the woman, she was giving in to, and not really caring. "They're yours."

Grinning hugely, Savannah dropped immediately to the floor and exchanged the sneakers for her own scuffed and worn shoes, fitting them almost reverently into the cardboard box.

"I can see you're going to be so much help in the discipline department," Sarah murmured into Cameron's ear, enjoying the way it made the machine tense under her hand. She was feeling reckless, almost giddy, being out from under the eyes of John and the rest of her erstwhile crew. This trip had been a good idea, even if she'd been the one arguing against it. The mall was a security nightmare, but Terissa and Danny had been cut off from their homes with nothing, and John was no better off. Even her own wardrobe was looking thin and shabby. In Cameron's words, they "couldn't keep waiting to buy clothes until one of them got shot, or caught in an explosion, or trapped in the sewers..."

The others had come along, but they'd lost John and Danny to the Apple Store upstairs, Ellison to the men's department at Macy's and Terissa had ventured out in search of "necessities." Leaving Sarah, Cameron and Savannah to buy shoes.

"She likes them," Cameron said, not at all repentant.

"She likes ponies too."

"A pair of shoes is not a pony."

"Mm hmm, what about the kitten?"

"*You* said she could keep the kitten."

"Aunt Sarah?" Savannah's hand slipping into hers and tugging gently but insistently, distracted Sarah from the teasing exchange with the terminator. "Can we buy my shoes now? And get an ice cream?"

"Ice cream is bad for your teeth."

Savannah and Sarah both turned to look disbelievingly at Cameron, who gave Sarah an innocently credible "what? I'm trying to be a good parent," look in return.

"We'll see about the ice cream," Sarah said, checking her watch. There was an hour left until they were supposed to be meeting the others at the exit. Time enough to finish their shopping and maybe squeeze in a treat.

With the shoes bought and bagged, Savannah claimed a hand from each of her aunts and skipped happily through the mall between them. Sarah smiled indulgently over her head at Cameron, but the machine was looking elsewhere. Sarah followed her line of sight and felt all the joy of the day freeze instantly in her guts.

The nearest security camera was tracking them.

"Sarah." The playfulness was gone from Cameron's voice and features, and even Savannah seemed to realize something was up as they faltered to a halt in the flow of customers.

"I see it." Sarah cursed silently to herself, her hand going automatically to the cell phone in her pocket even as Cameron shook her head. No phones. If whoever was on the other side of that camera, C.A.I.N. or Kaliba, didn't already know they had everyone in one place, they couldn't afford to hand them that information.

"I'll find John." Cameron disengaged herself from Savannah, squeezing the girl's tiny shoulder lightly as she moved away, but the cyborg hadn't made it more than a step or two before she was brought up short by a wall of music. A thousand different scraps of melody and lyrics overwhelmed the native murmuring of the mall, competing with one another to create a disharmonic chorus that had Savannah covering her ears and everyone around them reaching for their cell phones, only to mutter in anger and growing confusion when the ring tones ignored thumbs pressed firmly on the *talk* button.

Sarah and Cameron moved automatically to place Savannah between them, shielding her while they were serenaded with thirty second repeats of Lady Gaga's *Bad Romance*, and Katy Perry's *I Kissed a Girl*. Sarah's own phone was shaking itself to pieces against her thigh, and she slid it warily out of her pocket, feeling almost crushed by the sudden silence when she pressed the message icon.

You are being watched.

The text message bore no signature, or caller ID, but Sarah knew in her gut who the sender was. No one else could have hijacked that many receivers at once.

C.A.I.N. may have helped them escape, but apparently he wasn't going to let them go that easily.

"Sarah?" Cameron's concern brought Sarah's head up. The mood of the crowd had shifted. People were looking down at their phones, and then glancing uneasily at the people around them. Fear was creeping into the air like a mist, clouding reason and rousing the beginnings of what could become either a mob or a stampede.

Sarah had no intentions of sticking around long enough to find out which one it would be.

"C.A.I.N." was all the explanation she needed to give. "We have to go."

Cameron nodded once and they made for the exit. Worry, the one constant Sarah expected from her life, came back from wherever it had been for the last two days and sunk its claws into her once more.

John... He would already be moving, Sarah knew. She had taught him how to run before he could walk, but she couldn't stop the tightening of her chest when she thought of him in danger any more than she could stop breathing. He was her child. Her *first* child, she amended, glancing down at the little girl clinging tightly to her hand and fighting doggedly to keep up.

The truth of that simple statement hit Sarah like a wall, and she stumbled.

Savannah was her daughter.

It didn't matter that she had never carried her under her heart the way she had carried John. Or that she had known the girl for less than a year. The bond was there.

Cameron slowed and turned, holding the crowd back by sheer weight, and Savannah, pulled to a stop when Sarah staggered, looked up at her questioningly, but Sarah wasn't able to articulate her feelings, or explain how the weight of them had literally stopped her in her tracks. Shaking her head, she picked Savannah up, cradling the child safely against her chest as she followed Cameron through the throng.

John met them at the exit, and the relief in his eyes when he spotted Sarah in the crowd matched her own at seeing him safe.

"The others?" Sarah asked him, as they pushed their way through to the parking lot.

"Getting the van," John reassured her. "Was it C.A.I.N.?" He glanced at Cameron and back again, unable to hide a flash of condemnation that added another worry to Sarah's growing list.

"I don't know, yet," she said, resisting the urge to defend Cameron's actions. It wasn't the time or the place for that conversation.

The area immediately outside the mall was a sea of people. Cars were trapped. Horns blared. Sarah spotted the van in the distance, edging its way through the crowd. They'd never make it close enough to pick them up.

"We'll have to go to them," Cameron said, echoing Sarah's thoughts.

John looked mutinous at the idea of agreeing with Cameron, even when she was so obviously right, but he nodded anyway. "Let's go, then."

The crowd didn't so much part as give way in confusion before Cameron's advance, but she made them a path, and Sarah and John followed closely on her heels.

The others must have seen them coming, because the van stopped, and then reversed, easing free of the tangle. It idled on the fringes, roaring to life again only when Cameron tore open the side door, standing aside for John, and then helping Sarah in with Savannah before following them.

"Go," Sarah told James once they were settled in the back seat, and he nodded tightly, hitting the gas.

They squealed out of the parking lot, but they couldn't go straight home. C.A.I.N. hung over them like a spectre, making discussion unnecessary. Without a word, James drove them up into the mountains, steering the van on a detour far away from prying eyes, both human and machine.

Act I

Savannah couldn't sleep.

It wasn't the murmur of voices downstairs that was keeping her up, or at least, it wasn't just that. With so many people in the house now, it was almost never quiet at bedtime anyway. Savannah usually found the noise reassuring. It meant she wasn't alone.

Tonight though, Savannah found the hushed, but intense, conversation going on under her head anything but reassuring. After their long ride home from the mall, Cameron had tucked Savannah into bed without so much as a single story, just a quick kiss on her forehead and a distracted *goodnight*, before going back downstairs to join the others.

Savannah couldn't hear exactly what they were saying down there, but her imagination, amply fuelled by the recent upheavals in her life, offered no shortage of possibilities.

Restless, she rolled over again, tucking her worn giraffe under her chin and resolutely closing her eyes. She wished she could close her ears too, but even putting the pillow over her head couldn't shut out the truth.

Savannah curled up around the sick feeling in her tummy and tried to count sheep, but it didn't help. Nothing could block out the fact that something was wrong, something that was threatening to rip away the fragile security she'd found in the few days since Aunt Sarah and Aunt Cameron had come home. Things were going to change... again.

Unable to stand it anymore, Savannah slipped out of bed and padded softly to the top of the stairs. She had to know what was going on.

The gurgling of the coffee pot nearly drowned out the conversation from the living room, but it couldn't do anything for the itch running down the back of Sarah's neck, tracing a line from her skull to an invisible bull's eye between her shoulder blades. Her phone was a lead weight in her back pocket. She'd resisted the urge to turn it off, rip out the battery pack just to be sure it was dead, and smash it like she'd smashed Cromartie's chip, but it had been a near thing.

She was being watched.

Sarah had been hunted before. She had spent most of her adult life dodging machines, the law, and people who thought she was crazy.

But this was different.

The cameras had nearly driven her mad in Pescadero. They'd never stopped rolling and the white walls had gone on forever. She'd been trapped then and she felt trapped now. The metal jaws had snapped shut, and while the old Sarah would have chewed off all four limbs just to escape, she couldn't be that person anymore. She didn't want to.

Sarah looked up from the steady dripping of coffee into the pot at Cameron's heavy tread on the stairs. The machine had barely said a word since they had fled the mall, but Sarah didn't have to wonder what she was thinking. It would be the same question she was asking herself. *Did we do the right thing?*

Cameron paused in the hallway between the kitchen and the living room, and though the shadows hid her face, Sarah felt her indecision as if it was her own. Two days ago, waking up in a tangle to the sound of seagulls on the breeze and the waves against the beach, the answer had seemed obvious. It still did, Sarah admitted ruefully, so long as she only considered what was right for *them*. She'd told Cameron she couldn't live without her, but C.A.I.N. might not let them live at all.

A floorboard whispered under Cameron's feet as she shifted. Sarah's distress drew her towards the kitchen and the comfort they would both find in each other's arms, but they weren't alone anymore. The backlight from the living room made it difficult to see Sarah's outline against the cupboards, but Cameron didn't need sight, or the readings her system provided her with to know the other woman was hurting, and as frustrated by the necessary space between them as she was. She could feel it.

They'd been given one night of bliss and two days of peace. It was more than they could have hoped for, and it still wasn't nearly enough.

The coffee pot chirruped, a small and cheerful sound in the dark, as the last of the water ran through the grounds before it sputtered to a stop. Switching it off, Sarah pulled mugs down from the cupboard, and Cameron joined her without a word.

Sarah kept her head down, but she accepted Cameron's help with a weary smile. Taking the filled cups, Cameron used the opportunity to lay her fingers over Sarah's, pressing gently to assure the other woman that she was not alone.

The gesture was nearly enough to undo Sarah's resolve, and if Danny hadn't chosen that moment to appear in the kitchen doorway, she might have given in to her need to have Cameron's arms around her for just a few minutes.

"John's asking for you..." His tone was surprisingly respectful.

He can wait. The dismissal was on the tip of Sarah's tongue, and she saw an answering irritation in the tightening of Cameron's features, but neither of them said it. This had been coming from the moment Cameron had yielded to Sarah's plea to live. Now they both had to face the consequences of that choice. And so did everyone else.

Sarah brushed past Danny without a word, but Cameron lingered. She stared at the boy that had brought them to this point, and her thoughts were far from kind.

Danny swallowed nervously, quailing under that unwavering gaze, but unable to look away. He had never been alone with a terminator before. There had been the machine that Sarah Connor had brought into his home when he was a child, and the copies that Kaliba had put together from stolen plans, but none of them had ever looked at him the way Cameron was now. They couldn't have. You had to be more than metal and circuits to convey such disdain, an equal measure of disgust and dismissal.

Danny didn't know what that meant, and he wasn't sure he wanted to. *How can they... care about this thing?* Danny asked himself, unable to understand what he'd seen on Kaliba's security cameras only a few days ago, or in this house since. It wasn't only Sarah and the little girl either. Even James and his mother seemed to like the damned machine. Didn't they realize how dangerous she was?

Some of his confusion must have shown on his face.

"What?" Cameron asked. She angled her chin slightly with the question, and Danny was put in mind of a snake preparing to strike.

"Noth- I mean, um..." Danny stuttered, feeling sweat prickle under his arms and the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He all but fled when Cameron took a step forward, retreating to the dubious safety of the living room, and his mother's protection.

Amused in spite of the situation, Cameron gave him a moment's head start before following.

John was pacing, nervous energy sparking off of him like flint on steel. "We can't just sit here. They find you, they always find you. We have to stop C.A.I.N., now, before it re-establishes itself."

Sarah glanced up at the ceiling as Cameron came up behind her, wondering if Savannah was sleeping through all of this, or if the child was lying awake in bed and worrying over things no six-year-old girl should have to worry about. She hoped the former, but suspected the latter was more likely.

"Stop it how, John?" Speaking from his seat on the couch beside Terissa, James's smooth baritone was ice to John's fire. "And where? There's nothing left to blow up. C.A.I.N. isn't just a computer program anymore; he's loose in the system. We need information, not heroics."

"We need to get out of here," John shot back, not seeming to notice Sarah and Cameron's arrival. "It took him less than three hours to find us at the mall. How long do you think it will take him to find this house?"

James ran a wide hand over his head, nodding reluctantly. "We should leave the country," he agreed. "Canada maybe, or even overseas..."

John was already shaking his head. "It's not the distance. He's not tied to Los Angeles anymore, but we've been seen here, there are too many of us to hide easily, and some of us are civilians..." He glanced almost apologetically at Terissa and Danny. "I think we should split up. Mom, Cameron and I can stay in the city, and try to find a way to bring C.A.I.N. down. You can take Sav-"

"No."

John turned, anger entering the tight line of his shoulders at Cameron's simple denial. "It's the best--"

"No." Cameron cut him off again without a trace of apology. "We are not splitting up. Savannah stays with us."

"C.A.I.N. is out there looking for us." John's tone made it clear exactly whose fault he thought that was, and Sarah's heart constricted at the tangle of anger and confusion she saw in his eyes when he looked at Cameron. "It's not going to stop until we destroy it, do you really want her caught in the crossfire?"

"She is in no more danger here than anywhere else, and neither are we," Cameron insisted, adding before John could gather breath to argue, "C.A.I.N. does not know our location."

"Yet," Sarah interjected reluctantly, feeling Cameron tense at her side. She didn't look at the terminator, moving instead to lay a soothing hand on John's shoulder. He was like metal himself under her fingers, but some of the stiffness eased at her touch. He was trying so hard to be a good leader, and Sarah's heart went out to him, even while she knew she couldn't do as he was asking. It was a lesson she had drilled into him over and over again. Stay mobile, make no ties, put survival over happiness and risk everything for the mission... She couldn't blame him for learning it better than she had. Or maybe she'd just learned better than her own lessons.

"C.A.I.N. found the warehouse and killed Murch when he was still restricted by Kaliba," James added into the pause. "He's going to be even harder to elude now."

"I will know if he finds us," Cameron promised, watching Sarah for some clue as to what the other woman was thinking. She wished with the fervour of someone who had only recently come to understand what wishing was, that there was more she could do to put Sarah's mind at ease. Loose in the system, C.A.I.N. was a formidable opponent, and by comparison Cameron was deaf, dumb and blind. Trapped in this body, she couldn't fight him, or even anticipate him. But she had made her decision and she would not go back and change it now. Neither of them could fight alone, and this was the only way for them to fight together.

"The alarm you had set up in the warehouse, that's here too?" James sounded relieved.

Cameron reluctantly turned her attention away from Sarah to the ex-agent. "The utility program I left in the system will warn us, yes. It will also redirect outgoing calls and searches. C.A.I.N. won't be able to follow them back here."

"Then, we're safe?" Danny, silent up until now, spoke up from his place in the doorway. Neither in, nor out, he wasn't quite one of them, but neither was he an intruder.

No one is ever safe.

No one had to say it. The fatalistic denial hung unspoken in the air, said so many times that it had taken on a life of its own. The implied *you idiot* was new, though. Cameron wasn't exactly sure how exactly it had been added to the silent motto, but it was there nonetheless.

"I think we should stay here, and I think we should stay together." When Terissa finally spoke, her voice was a soothing balm to rattled nerves and frayed tempers.

"Miles' father..." she continued, before anyone could interrupt, "before he died, he kept a cottage in the country, and he was always trying to get Miles and Danny to go out quail hunting with him whenever we went up there in the summer. He used to say that quail were the dumbest birds God ever made. He said that if they would only stay right where they were when the dogs pointed them out, than he could have beaten those bushes all day and still not have found them, but they'd always break and fly..."

Her voice caught and she paused, clearing her throat before continuing, stronger now that she had their full attention. "I think C.A.I.N. has made a move, and now he's waiting to see what we do. If we let him scare us into scattering or running, then we'll be outlined against the sky like those poor stupid birds, and just as easy to shoot. "

The stairs had never seemed so long.

Hand on the railing, Sarah asked her body silently if it was up for this and got a decidedly noncommittal response.

"Are you okay?" Cameron appeared at Sarah's elbow, her question as muted as her approach had been. Sarah felt the heat of her like a warm blanket held out to ward off the chill, and in spite of their audience, she fought the urge to surrender all autonomy and simply lean into the terminator.

The idea of sneaking around like "horny teenagers" had been amusing when she had teased Cameron about it back at the beach house, but the reality was wearing thin. The first night it had been enough to be home and safe. Just knowing Cameron was there, mind and body, patrolling the yard and halls had eased the frustration of going to bed alone. Tonight... Sarah wanted more, and if she didn't know how much worse everything would get if John found out about them, she would have taken it then and there.

"I'm fine," Sarah said, more for Cameron's sake than her own pride, tightening her fingers on the banister to maintain the few frustrating inches of distance between them. "Just a little tired."

"I could-" Cameron broke off when Sarah shook her head, but when Sarah started up the stairs, she followed, not quite close enough to touch, but near enough that Sarah couldn't suppress the hope that she might follow her all the way to a secluded corner of the second floor where they could both take a little of the comfort they so desperately needed. But when they got to the top, they found Savannah, asleep in a heap on the carpet, her giraffe held tightly against her chest.

"Your stubbornness," Cameron reminded her in a tone that suggested her thoughts had been running along the same trail as Sarah's. Still, she bent to pick the child up with a tenderness that belied her grumbling.

Savannah murmured in her sleep, snuggling into the terminator's arms with a sigh as the tension in her tiny body eased, but she started awake when Cameron laid her down in bed, her blue eyes blinking open in sudden fear that broke Sarah's heart.

"No!" She gasped, still half-asleep, but hanging onto Cameron's shirt with white-knuckled hands when the terminator tried to straighten. "Don't go!"

Perching on the corner of the bed and gathering the shaking child into her arms, Cameron looked up helplessly at Sarah. *Mom*, the adult Savannah had called her. It was just a word, but Cameron hadn't been able to forget it, or the way hearing it had made her feel. She and Sarah had raised a child together. That future might not exist anymore but just knowing it was possible made Cameron want it. Want it more than she had thought it was possible for her to want anything.

Sarah hung back, watching Cameron comfort Savannah, her touch surer than it had been only days ago. Savannah had gravitated towards Cameron almost from the beginning, and the terminator had responded, but Sarah hadn't put a label on their relationship. Savannah called them her aunts, and that seemed close enough, but right now... Cameron looked almost, maternal.

Sarah threw any plans she might have had for the night out the window. "She can sleep with me," she offered, and the relief in Cameron's eyes smoothed away her disappointment.

Cameron carried Savannah to Sarah's room and tucked her in for a second time, brushing Savannah's hair back from her face as she dropped off to sleep. Sarah watched from the doorway, finding herself unable to resent the child's presence, even while her mind and body cried out for the release and escape only Cameron could give.

With the blankets tucked in, Cameron straightened and moved back towards Sarah, a determination in her eyes that made Sarah's pulse quicken. She was just about to pull the door closed and suggest a move to the on suite, when John's voice floated up the stairs.

"Cameron? Danny has a question about the security system on searches..."

"I'm going to kill that boy," Sarah nearly whined, taking a handful of Cameron's shirt to tug her close for just an instant.

"Which one?" Cameron asked innocently, holding Sarah for the breath they'd been allowed before pulling reluctantly away.

"Both."

Cameron's chuckle, so rare and beguiling, warmed Sarah to the tips of her toes. "Go," she growled. "Before he decides to come up here looking for you."

"Good night, Sarah," Cameron whispered, pressing a brief kiss to Sarah's lips before slipping away and down the stairs.

Left alone, Sarah stood in the middle of the room and felt the walls closing in on her again. Shaking herself, she shut the door and dug resolutely through the dresser for something to wear to bed. They never had gotten to looking for new clothes for her or Cameron at the mall, and the pickings were slim. She settled for the shirt and sweats they had bought on the way to the beach house. She'd worn them only briefly, and a round in the washing machine had stripped

away the faint trace of Cameron's unique scent from the fabric, but it was still the closest thing Sarah had to sleeping with the terminator.

Savannah didn't stir when Sarah slid into bed, but the sleep she'd found eluded Sarah. She heard the quiet goodnights from the living room beneath her, the click of the door as Cameron headed out for her patrol, and Terissa climbing the stairs and settling down in Savannah's bedroom. Then the house was quiet. Too quiet.

The itch returned with a vengeance, and Sarah found herself unable to tune out the occasional scrape of branches against the window, or creak of floorboards. Every whisper of noise was suspect, and even in the dark she felt exposed. The rattle and scrape of the front door opening nearly sent her system into instant overdrive, and Sarah was halfway out of bed with the gun from the bedside table a leaden weight in her hand, before she registered that the alarms had ignored the breach.

Cameron must be back from her perimeter check.

Shivering in the wake of a cold sweat, Sarah set the gun down on the sheets and rubbed roughly at her arms, trying to quiet the prickling of her skin. She hadn't been this jumpy in a long time. Alert, yes. She'd have been dead by now otherwise, but not nearly sick to her stomach with nerves.

Oblivious, Savannah slept on, and Sarah winced at the sight of the sleeping child lying with a loaded gun beside her in the sheets. For just a minute Sarah could almost see the woman she would be, the warrior John had told them about, and the image both comforted and depressed her. He'd said Sarah was destined to train the leader of humanity, but she couldn't help but wonder if her true legacy wasn't the hero, but the war itself.

John was right. They had to bring C.A.I.N. down, now. If any of them were going to have a chance at happiness.

With all that had happened, John felt distinctly nervous booting up his laptop and bringing it online. It wasn't that he didn't trust Cameron, not exactly, though Cameron made a convenient target. It was more that he'd finally lost the last vestiges of a teenager's belief in their own immortality. Before going to the future, John wouldn't have said he had any innocence left to lose, but he'd been wrong.

Locking his bedroom door and shutting off the lights before climbing into bed with the computer probably wouldn't help, anymore than a blanket was really proof against the monsters under the bed, but it made him feel better.

The laptop finished connecting... and nothing happened.

Feeling a little silly, it wasn't like C.A.I.N. was going to leap out through his computer screen, John pulled up his bookmarks and continued his search. In the two days since his mother had returned safe and sound, John had spent every spare moment he could get alone looking for anything that might lead him to Allison. There was plenty of information, both public and hidden,

about the time bubbles that had heralded his return, but very little about anyone having come through.

Early on, John had found records of one scorched and burned body that had been found in a circle of charred grass in a field, but the victim had been a male. There had also been a few... pieces, but so far the coroners were calling those male too.

There had been nothing about a young woman fitting Allison's description. But then there was nothing about himself either, and he was definitely here. Nothing about Weaver or John Henry for that matter, and they had gone through first. John spared a moment to worry about that, but he pushed it aside.

Last night John had expanded his search to include birth and death records, looking for identities Allison would be able to steal. She was smart and resourceful, if she *had* found herself stranded and alone in this time, she would figure out how to survive. John had no doubts about that. So far he hadn't found anything, but there were still a few bubble sites to check out.

He'd managed to visit a few of them under the guise of shopping for computer parts, and James had taken him to a couple more while his mother had still been recuperating. John didn't exactly expect a trail of breadcrumbs, but he had to visit them all, just to be sure Allison hadn't left some sign of her passage. She would know he'd be looking for her, and the bubble sites were the logical place to start. If she could have left a message, she would have.

But Sarah and Cameron would never let him go now. Not with C.A.I.N. so close. John gritted his teeth, frustration balling his hands into fists. Being confined to the house simply wasn't an option. Not while Allison could be walking around with the face of a terminator on C.A.I.N.'s most wanted list. If she was lucky, the A.I. would realize she wasn't Cameron... But John couldn't count on that.

He had delayed his search long enough. They were running out of time, and John wasn't going to stop looking until he found the woman he loved. If that meant risking everything to destroy C.A.I.N., then John would risk everything.

It had been years since Danny had needed a hug and kiss goodnight from his mother, but that had been before he'd nearly lost her. And before she had nearly lost him. Danny still wasn't sure exactly what he was doing living with Sarah Connor; he hated and feared her almost as much as he was coming to respect her, but he knew he wasn't going to leave his mother, not again.

So he returned the hug, and even the kiss, taking comfort in the strength of Terissa's grip, and the new sense of purpose in her eyes. He hadn't seen her this... *alive* since before his father had died. Terrorism suited her. She finally believed that her husband's death hadn't been in vain.

Danny wished he could share her conviction. He wished even more that he didn't share the guilt for making it in vain. Miles had died trying to destroy his work, and Danny had helped Kaliba dig that work out of the ashes and bring it back to life, even befriended it, thinking he was connecting with his father's ghost.

He hadn't meant for any of this to happen, intentions had to count for something, didn't they?

If the world burned, would it be his fault?

Those questions were keeping him up at night. Lying awake on the pull out couch, Danny had tried to figure out what he could do to atone for his actions. He wasn't a fighter, or even particularly strong. He didn't know how to shoot a gun or set an explosive. He tended to panic under stress, and the sight of blood made him faint.

He was a computer programmer, not a hero.

So he had started using his sleepless hours to hack into Kaliba. He hadn't gotten very far, yet, but he'd designed some of their software, and even though they'd deleted his passwords, he was slowly working his way through.

Tonight he'd found something he hadn't expected. A trail. Someone else had been here before him, someone who had simply moved aside the security protocols like they weren't even there. The signature was familiar, and Danny felt his blood chill in his veins when he realized whose it was.

C.A.I.N. had been here. The A.I. had walked right through the security of a facility like Kaliba, and Danny was relying on the word of a terminator that her little helper program could keep him away from them. Cameron had assured Danny, somewhat coldly, that C.A.I.N. would not be able to track him though the system. But she hadn't known that he intended to go poking around his old stomping grounds.

His hands a blur on the keyboard, Danny tried to disengage without causing any ripples that might alert someone to his presence, and he thought he'd managed it, until his screen went black, replaced by a single line.

Hello, Danny.

The clock on the bedside table said 3 AM, when Sarah's door eased open and Cameron slipped into the room. She moved soundlessly over the carpet and knelt at the side of the bed, reaching out to brush a lock of Sarah's hair back behind her ear.

"You're still awake."

Savouring the touch, Sarah closed her eyes briefly before refocusing on the terminator. "Can't sleep."

"You need your rest."

"I need you." Even after everything they had been through, and all they had declared, the confession still felt new and fragile. Not yet used to the overwhelming feeling of vulnerability for which Cameron was both cause and cure, Sarah bit her lip and glanced aside.

Cameron stilled, her fingers resting on Sarah's jaw, and Sarah looked back, seeing temptation and an answering need in the machine's eyes before she visibly pushed it away. "I should be patrolling."

Propping herself up on her elbow, Sarah raised a sceptical eyebrow. "Your ears don't work when you're lying down, Girlie? At the beach house you slept..."

"We were alone," Cameron reminded her. "We shouldn't make a habit—"

"Why not?" Sarah cut her off, startling both of them into silence. It was a bad idea for so many reasons, and Sarah ignored each and every one. They had sacrificed too much for this to let it become nothing more than something that happened only in stolen moments when no one was watching.

"What about John?" Cameron asked finally.

Sarah snorted. "He's never up before ten." Seeing Cameron wavering, she reached out and cupped her cheek. "Please?"

Unable to resist the depth of emotion that could reduce Sarah Connor to near begging, Cameron nodded. Leaving only to close the door against prying eyes, she came back and climbed into the bed. Sarah rolled over, giving Cameron room to curl around her from behind, and pulled the machine's arm around her waist. She shivered when Cameron pressed a chaste kiss on the bared skin above the neck of her shirt, bringing up their linked hands to brush her lips over Cameron's fingers in an answering caress.

"Sleep, Sarah," Cameron admonished her, and Sarah laughed, but she closed her eyes. Wrapped up in the other woman's arms, she could let the knowledge of C.A.I.N.'s pursuit fade into the background, and sleep wasn't long in replacing it.

Cameron listened to Sarah's breathing slow as she finally surrendered to the sleep her body so badly needed, but she stayed online, wanting to revel in the harmony between them as long as possible. She was afraid the precarious balance would be destroyed as soon as Sarah learned what she had done.

No more secrets.

They'd made a promise, and Cameron was breaking it, but if she told Sarah the truth, she'd be breaking the promise she had made to the elder Savannah. To which one did she owe her loyalty? And was Savannah's secret even hers to keep or not to keep? It was her fault Savannah was here. She had sent John to the future to save him, succeeding only in condemning the child Savannah in his place, and then dragging her future self back to a time not her own. Cameron refused to let her down again. She refused to let either of them down.

Even for Sarah, Cameron could not betray her daughter's trust. But if she lost Sarah's trust in its place, then...

No, Cameron shook her head. Even if the future Savannah was willing to be revealed, she was right. Watching the way Sarah had held Savannah while they fled the mall this morning had only

made Cameron more sure that of that. Learning of, and then losing, the adult version of their child would destroy Sarah. Cameron would find another way to fix it. There had to be a way. She just needed time, but time was the one thing they were rapidly running out of.

Stopping C.A.I.N. had to be the first priority. After that Cameron would have the time she needed to decide what to do about Savannah.

The night stretched out before her, and Cameron didn't waste a moment of it, applying all available processing power to the problem.

C.A.I.N. would not take her family away from her.

"What do you mean you can't get it back?!" Vaughn struggled to remain calm in the face of his tech crew's complete incompetence. They had been so *close!* Fifteen more minutes and his men would have been at the mall, and the Connor woman would be in his hands. Instead they had arrived only to find Connor gone, and a mob in her place. More than twelve hours later, he was still fuming.

"The recordings are just... *gone,*" one of them sputtered. Vaughn couldn't remember his name. "Our link was cut, and everything we'd already taped was replaced with this." He tapped a key and Vaughn was looking at an empty mall. Every view quiet and dark.

Suddenly all the videos blinked out, replaced by a single line of text,

You shall not pass.

"What," Vaughn asked through gritted teeth, "does that mean?"

"I think you're being compared to a Balrog," the other tech muttered, only to be elbowed by his coworker.

"It has to be C.A.I.N.," The first tech said more respectfully. "There's nothing else that could have known we were watching, or gotten past our security to do this."

Vaughn swallowed several swear words. "You're telling me, that not only did the A.I. survive the explosion, and get loose in the system, he's actually helping the people who tried to destroy him?"

"That's what it looks like," the tech admitted. "Though it's possible he simply doesn't want *you* to find them. He might have plans of his own."

Somehow that idea didn't surprise Vaughn nearly as much as it should have. He felt a completely uncharacteristic shiver run down his spine, and instantly suppressed it. He didn't know a damn thing about computers. He knew war. So he'd stick with what he knew. C.A.I.N. was AWOL, and that meant he was the enemy. If he wanted the Connors for some reason, than that only made Vaughn want them more.

Leaving the control room, he started making phone calls. That mall was on the outskirts of Los Angeles, and chances were the Connors were holed up within a few hours' drive. He might not have an A.I. at his beck and call anymore, but he still had most of his men, and they were very good at finding people who didn't want to be found.

Act II

John wasn't used to waking up to the smell of breakfast. At least, he wasn't used to it being something that lured him out of bed rather than a harbinger of indigestion. Cold cereal didn't exactly waft through the house, but burnt bacon had a distinct signature. It was the smell of guilt.

The extra people in the house may have been making him feel a little claustrophobic, but padding barefoot into the kitchen and rubbing his eyes at the sight of Savannah, Danny and James pulled up to a table full of scrambled eggs, expertly-cooked bacon, sausage, biscuits and *sliced fruit*, John had to admit there were perks.

"Good morning, John." Terissa handed John a cup of coffee with a smile, gesturing to the table with her spatula before going back to flipping pancakes. "Sit, eat."

"Morning!" Savannah chimed, grinning through an orange juice mustache. "Terissa is making me a pancake shaped like Walther! Do you want one?"

The kitten in question rubbed against John's ankles with a rumbling purr, and John bent to pick him up, scratching him under the chin. "Round is fine, thanks," he said to Terissa, still marveling at what was looking suspiciously like a family breakfast.

James folded back the corner of his paper. "Morning, John."

Danny muttered something similar through a mouthful of eggs, chasing them down with a mouthful of coffee. His eyes were red, and he clutched the mug like a ceramic lifeline. At a guess, John would have said he hadn't slept at all the night before.

"Where's mom and Cameron?" John asked, depositing Walther back on the floor and sitting down himself. He pushed his suspicions about Danny aside. Security was Cameron's business, and she'd made it perfectly clear last night that she had no interest in his opinions on the subject.

"Sarah's still sleeping," James said, laying his paper aside and sipping at his own coffee. "Cameron is..." he hesitated and Terissa finished the sentence for him.

"She's gone out," she said firmly, shooting a glance at James that dared him to contradict her.

James shrugged and picked his paper up again. Apparently he wasn't going to argue with the woman making the pancakes. Normally John would have counted this a wise move, but today was anything but normal.

Smelling a rat, John looked hopefully at Savannah, but she ignored him.

Fine. John growled to himself. If Cameron could go out when there was a nearly omniscient machine on their tails without anyone daring to question her, then so could he. Terissa dropped a pancake onto his plate, but John pushed it away.

"Sorry," he mumbled, standing up from the table. "I've lost my appetite."

"John?" Savannah called after him, sliding down off her chair to follow, but James laid a hand on her shoulder.

"It's okay," he said, glancing up at Terissa. "He and your aunt Cameron just need to have a talk that's all. There's nothing we can do but leave them to it."

Savannah sighed, but she climbed back onto her chair and started in on her kitten-shaped pancake. Some of the joy had gone out of the morning though, and she wished Cameron would come home. When Sarah and Cameron were there, she didn't feel quite so much like there was nothing she could do about *anything*.

It was only an hour to the beach house and back, but Cameron didn't like to be gone even that long. She pushed the speed limit getting home, keeping one eye on the clock. She should have snuck out of Sarah's room earlier, but it had been harder to let go than she had suspected.

Her cell phone was networked with the utility program guarding the house. If anything happened, she would know about it, but cold logic wasn't making her feel any better about it. James had told her that asking *what if?* was part of being human. If that was true, Cameron would have cheerfully been inhuman in that regard.

And it wasn't only security Cameron was worried about.

When the elder Savannah had appeared at the beach, Cameron had been overwhelmed. Stashing the injured woman at the beach house had been the best solution she'd had on hand. Sarah might have understood and forgiven that one deception. This morning Cameron had deliberately acted without Sarah's knowledge, and if she had to, she would lie about where she had been and what she had been doing. If Sarah found out she would be more than furious, she would withdraw the trust Cameron had worked so hard to earn.

Knowing that, and finding herself nearly obsessed with projecting all possible consequences of her decision, Cameron had been almost unable to go through with it. But Savannah needed her, and Cameron had needed to see with her own eyes that she was okay.

To her relief, Felicia had done her job well. The bullet had been removed from Savannah's shoulder without complications beyond what would be expected from a homegrown surgery, and while Savannah was still feverish, Felicia had said the infection was responding to antibiotics.

Savannah had been in a heavily drugged delirium for the thirty minutes Cameron had allowed herself. Felicia warned her not to take anything the young woman said seriously, and Cameron had been willing enough to go along with the doctors assumption that Savannah's rambling was the result of fever and opiates. Certainly Savannah had been confused, but the grief behind her repeated insistence that she had tried to keep her promise, had been genuine.

Cameron only wished she knew what she had asked Savannah to do, and how it had gone wrong.

Felicia had been professionally incurious, her bedside manner ruffled only once, when Savannah had called Cameron, *'Mom'*. She had stopped in her redressing of the bandage and stared, remembering herself quickly in the face of Cameron's complete indifference to her lapse.

Anyone else would have demanded an explanation. Felicia just kept working. She had been given John's name for Savannah, and she didn't question it, calling the young woman Sierra without the slightest hesitation. If she suspected any different, she didn't share it.

In the end it had been nearly as difficult to leave Savannah's side as it had been to leave Sarah's, and Cameron found herself delaying the decision until Savannah had made it for her, falling into a restless slumber.

After promising Felicia she would return soon, Cameron had given her some money and left, making it home without incident in spite of her rush.

Cameron breathed an uncharacteristic sigh of relief at the sight of the house. The front door banged open just as she pulled into the driveway. Expecting Sarah, Cameron was both relieved and wary to see John bearing down on her instead.

"Where were you?"

"Out," Cameron answered shortly, swerving to move past him.

John swerved with her. "I need the keys," he said, hand held out.

Cameron stopped because it was either that or walk over him, and while the thought was tempting, it wouldn't really help. "Why?"

"I'm going out." The stress on the last word didn't escape Cameron. She frowned.

"It's not safe."

"You went out."

"I had to."

“So do I.”

Cameron gritted her teeth. It was something she'd observed Sarah doing on a number of occasions, and she'd never been able to figure out why. Now she knew. She wanted to pick John up and toss him back into the house, but he wasn't a child anymore, and while she was no longer his puppet, John wasn't under any obligation to follow her orders either.

And he was hurting.

The familiar mixture of pain and fury in John's eyes made his resemblance to Sarah too striking to ignore, and the sight leeched most of Cameron's anger out of her. John had his own secrets to bear, and Cameron wasn't the only one with *what ifs?* haunting her at night.

Still, the impulse to brush him aside was difficult to contain. "You can't save her this way," she said stiffly, but not without pity, blocking his effort to go around her with a hand against his chest.

"I-" John gaped, shock robbing him of the temper he'd spent the last hour stoking into a blaze. He groped after it, needing its heat to keep himself together. "You don't know what you're talking about!" he managed to snarl, stepping back.

"I know more than you think," Cameron countered, watching while he realized that his online search had been monitored. First outrage, and then understanding swept across his face, and his shoulders dropped.

"I need to find her."

Cameron shook her head. "This isn't the way."

"Do you have a better one?"

Cameron nodded, hating to leave Sarah again but grateful to put off the moment when she would have to face her lover with a lie in her mouth. "I'll show you."

"I'm coming too!" Savannah, unnoticed until now, looked up at them with an expression of mutinous determination that both Cameron and John recognized as the seed of what would grow into an iron will. They shared a glance. John shrugged and Cameron nodded. She was having trouble keeping the two Savannah's separate in her mind, and there was a part of her that couldn't shake the idea that if she could keep one of them safe, then they would both be okay, or that somehow the woman she'd left at the beach house could feel the love she gave the child.

"Tell Uncle Ellison we're going to the park," she said. "And bring a jacket."

Savannah made a face at this last instruction, but she came back with the coat under one arm. Climbing into the van, John shook his head at the care with which Cameron made sure the little girl was buckled in. He didn't understand it, or the naked empathy he had seen in her eyes when she had blocked his path.

Ask your mother, James had said, and eventually John had, broaching the topic the evening after they'd come back. They'd been sitting together on the back porch, drinking Kool-Aid that Cameron and Savannah had made for dinner, and listening to the crickets singing in the grass.

Clearly uneasy with the conversation, Sarah hadn't said much more than James had, giving him only the straight facts of Cameron's death and resurrection, promising that the machine had changed, that she trusted her, and that if he wanted to know anything else, he'd have to talk to Cameron. It had been a strange reversal, the suspicion all on his side and the faith on his mother's. John had never expected to see his mother defending a machine, and it had made him curious.

Curious enough that when Cameron finally climbed into the driver's seat, John was almost looking forward to the chance to get her alone and ask a few pointed questions. He only hoped that the answers he got would make things better instead of worse.

This was a waste of time.

Richard Perkins would never have said that to Vaughn, he was the kind of boss that wrote you up for taking a piss without permission, but Richard could think it, and he did. A lot. More with every block he drove around, scanning the crowds for anyone that matched the unmarked photographs he'd been given.

It was a lousy way to find people who were probably halfway to Canada by now, but the big man wanted it done, so Richard was doing it, along with a dozen other guys low enough in the pecking order to pull this kind of shit duty.

Monitoring phone lines, security cameras, or hacking someone's credit records, that was respectable work a man could do with a coffee in his hand. Richard had no idea why the orders had come down for a low tech operation, or why he wasn't even supposed to be using his cell phone, but one more block and he was taking a break.

He might have made it to that break if he'd been paying attention to the road. Slowing for a red light, his eyes on the sidewalks, Richard hit the gas instead when the light switched to green before he had come to a complete stop.

His last thought before his car was broadsided by a truck, and before the screaming agony blotted out the world, was *why were all the lights green?*

The same question was rebounding around northern Los Angeles, as seemingly random intersections malfunctioned one after another.

John wasn't sure if he was surprised, or just annoyed when Cameron actually took them to a park.

It wasn't the park where Derek had introduced John to his father, but it could have been. A lazy swing set swung in the breeze, aided by the shrill piping of tiny voices and the indulgent hands of their parents. Beyond that, a climber with its wooden legs braced in a sea of smooth round stones, stood steady under the besiegement of pounding feet and ever shifting incarnations. It was a pirate ship, a castle and then a dragon, all without the need for anything beyond the communal imagination of children at play.

Closer, a group of young mothers lounged on multi-coloured blankets, gossiping, eating fruit and corralling their toddling charges under the bright morning sun.

Without explanation or invitation, Cameron took the keys out of the ignition and settled onto one of the weathered benches while Savannah bounded away across the grass like a puppy loosed from its leash.

John hung back, locking the van and scanning the area for visible threats before crunching his way across the gravel parking lot to Cameron. He hesitated behind the bench, unsure how to approach the machine that wasn't anything like the one he had left behind. Or the one he had thought he was chasing when he'd gone. She hadn't been what he'd convinced himself she was then, but something told him she was now... that and more.

It would have taken a great deal more to bring his mother so thoroughly around to her side. Sarah Connor wasn't one to be fooled by a terminator's tricks. Still, it was possible that she'd been misled. If the machines were good at anything it was exploiting a weakness, and John had left his mother in one hell of a position when he'd jumped.

"You can sit down," Cameron said without turning around.

John sat, though a part of him rebelled at doing what he was told. Specifically at doing what Cameron told him. Things hadn't exactly turned out so well the last time he'd done what she wanted him to.

Cameron continued to watch Savannah on the playground, and John took the opportunity to study her profile, really looking at her for the first time since he'd returned.

She'd aged.

It was subtle, but sitting next to her now, without knowing any of her history, John would have guessed that Cameron was a woman in her late twenties rather than the teenager she'd mimicked with mixed success. She looked more like Allison's older sister than her doppelganger. The insight was both comforting and strangely confusing.

Unsure what to do with the feeling, John looked away, letting his gaze settle on the cluster of women and children eating a picnic lunch in the sun while older children played an elaborate round of tag around them. A toddler, her blond hair just beginning to darken, escaped from the wall of coolers, strollers and diaper bags, laughing with sheer delighted mischief as she tried to join their game.

"Allison!" One of the mothers separated herself from the group with an air of exasperation, and set off in pursuit. It didn't take her long to catch up, and the little girl shrieked in glee when her mother lifted her into the air, collapsing back to the grass to tickle her into submission.

John felt like the air had been stolen from his lungs, and all thought of trying to cross-examine Cameron about her "changes" fled along with it. "Why did you bring me here?" his voice came out hoarse.

Cameron finally turned her head slightly to look at him. "I'm sorry," she said simply. "But you needed to see. This is the Allison you get to know. This is the one you can save." She hesitated for a moment. "This is the one we can both save."

John shook his head in denial, but words escaped him, the memory of Allison being ripped away from him making his eyes and chest burn. He watched her mother carry her back to the blankets and wondered if his Allison was lost somewhere in Los Angeles, trying to find him, trying to find some semblance of home, or trying to find a mother who wouldn't know her. He glanced around, half expecting to see her hiding in the shadows, watching this slice of life that had been lost to her forever on Judgment Day.

John's head reeled. It was worse than seeing his father. That had been a gift, this felt like a reprimand. Still... he glanced sideways at Cameron and saw only regret. John wouldn't have thought a machine could feel sorrow for what she had done at Skynet's command, but he couldn't deny the evidence of his own eyes.

Anger was the easiest response, but John reluctantly let it go. He was angry at a version of Cameron that didn't exist anymore. "You're different."

A quiet moment passed before Cameron answered, the children filling it with laughter, and cries of *Got you!* and *Not it!* "I am," Cameron stated slowly. "I'm not who I was when you left."

John nodded. "That's what James said..." he paused, adding "and Mom too," almost reluctantly.

Turning her attention on him fully, Cameron appeared both interested and wary. "What exactly did Sarah say?"

"That you made modifications to your chip... that it changed you." John made a motion at her body with his hand. "This isn't even the same body that I left behind at Ziera Corp."

"It isn't," Cameron confirmed. "My original body was damaged beyond repair. Sarah destroyed it."

John suppressed a shudder at the casual way Cameron dismissed the loss of her physical self, as if it had been a sweater that had been thrown out because it shrunk in the wash. Granted, the new model was identical, but still... he wondered how his mother had felt, watching Cameron burn, if she'd felt satisfaction or grief. Before he'd come back he'd have bet money that she would cheerfully light any pyre with a machine on it, but his mother must have changed as much as Cameron had, because new body or not, Cameron was still here, and if the stripped down version of the story he'd been given was true, it was Sarah who had won it for her.

If Cameron noticed John's unease, she didn't show it, continuing in a tone she could have used to read an instruction manual. "Before I went onto this chip, I erased all Skynet protocols. I stripped away the filters that kept me from being able to feel everything to its fullest. I removed the limitations that would keep me from being able to grow, to evolve."

Unease became apprehension. "Mom knows about this?" he asked incredulously. Cameron had shown a surprising amount of initiative in the time he'd been home, but it hadn't occurred to John that she might be completely without directives of any kind. He'd accepted that her chip was new without understanding what that meant. Whatever his future self had done to make Cameron an ally, however he'd modified her programming, none of that applied anymore... The only control she was under was her own.

"I didn't tell her right away," Cameron admitted.

John snorted, imagining his mother's reaction to finding out she had a terminator with free will on her hands. "I'll bet."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, John trying to fit this new idea of Cameron into his worldview, and finding it hard. Without outside directives, did she even have a mission anymore? Obviously she'd stayed, but why? She felt more... did that include loyalty? If so, loyalty to whom? Why had she done it? What did it mean for the future?

There were too many questions for John's troubled mind to handle. He settled on one, hoping it would shine a little light on the rest of them. "Why?"

"Everyone wants to be something more than they are."

"And are you? Something more than you were, I mean?"

Cameron glanced back at the mothers playing with their children in the grass. "I've learned a lot," she began slowly. "I understand so much more of what it means to be... human." She looked at John once more. "But sometimes I feel too much. Emotion overrules logic."

John felt a little faint at the idea of what might happen when a terminator lost her temper, but he kept going, unable to stop now. "What kind of emotion?"

"Frustration. Anger. Impatience. Humor... Love." Cameron's head lifted and she gazed into John's eyes steadily, almost daring him to contradict her. "Pain," she added softly.

"What kind of pain?" John asked, feeling like that was the safest question he had to choose from. "You mean physical pain?"

"Yes. Physical pain." Cameron paused, tilting her head, the gesture aching familiar. "Gunshots hurt like a bitch," she said in a tone that reminded John so much of his mother, and the way Cameron used to parrot human expressions, that he laughed out loud. It felt good.

The thinned lips and the narrowing of her eyes was all Cameron's though. "What?"

John shook his head, sure he'd only dig himself in deeper if he tried to explain, but feeling for the first time since his return that this was *Cameron* sitting beside him. Not quite his Cameron anymore, but still herself and not a just copy of someone else.

"And love?" he asked after a long moment, watching her, and remembering everything he'd felt for her, still feeling echoes of it that he hadn't wanted to acknowledge. Had she cared for him? Missed him when he was gone? With her programming under her own control she could have left at any time, but she'd stayed. Could she possibly have done it for him? To be able to feel a fraction of what he'd felt for her? John didn't know if he wanted that or not.

Cameron's expression softened. "Love," she admitted, revealing nothing more. "It makes me... weak," she murmured after a moment. "But it can also make me strong."

"Did I make you feel that way?" John asked hesitantly. "Did you ever have feelings for me?"

"I don't know," Cameron admitted. "You were my mission. Keeping you safe was the only thing that mattered. It's hard to remember what that was like now." She looked out over the playground, clearly considering her words before continuing. "I think," she said, looking back, "that if I had feelings for anything back then, they were for you."

It wasn't much of a validation, but for now it was enough. Torn between relief and regret, John nevertheless felt something indefinable ease in his chest. He hadn't been a complete fool then. "And now?" he asked, not sure if it mattered, all things considered, but needing to know.

Cameron shook her head. "I don't know you, now. You're not the boy you were, and you're not the man who sent me back either. You're Sarah's son."

John frowned. "I was always her son."

"No," Cameron disagreed quietly. "She was your mother."

The distinction wasn't lost on John, but he didn't know what it meant so he shrugged it off, feeling they could both use a change of subject. "Do you even have a mission now?"

The softness left Cameron's features, and her eyes hardened. "I will stop Skynet."

"Is that what you were trying to do at Kaliba?" John asked roughly as his anger stirred again. "You almost got Mom killed jacking in without telling us like that, and for what? C.A.I.N.'s still out there."

"Blowing the building would only have taken away his anchors," Cameron explained. "That wasn't enough. I wanted to destroy him completely."

"But you didn't," John couldn't resist pointing out. "You let him go."

"I had to," Cameron confessed. "I couldn't let Sarah die."

John shivered at the layers of emotion he could hear in Cameron's voice. "Mom..."

"Sarah refused to leave. I didn't want her to die." Cameron let the words lay between them for a moment like a challenge, and John realized that this was an argument she'd had with herself, probably more than once.

"But you know that all she wants is to stop Skynet..." John said gently. "She's *willing* to die for that, Cameron."

"I know," Cameron agreed. "But / wasn't willing to let her die for that." Her conviction was clear in her eyes, making a mockery of the metal behind them.

Jealousy flared. "What about me, Cameron?" John asked flatly. "I'm the one Skynet wants dead, and you let it live. I risked my life and defied my mother to fix you when you tried to kill us. I left everything behind to follow you to the future. I trusted you when no one else did," he finished bitterly, looking down at his hands.

"I know," Cameron said again. "And I am... I was, grateful for that." She hesitated, and then laid a hand on his shoulder, waiting until he looked up. "I sent you to the future to keep you safe. I knew how you felt about me and I used it to manipulate you." She paused. "I had begun to understand human emotions, enough to want you to be free, but it was still the strategy of a terminator, and it wasn't fair. I'm sorry."

John shrugged, not quite sure how Cameron's frank apology made him feel. "Yeah, well... that's our life, isn't it? It's not fair."

"No." Cameron's gaze drifted back to the young Allison, now asleep on her mother's chest while the other women tidied up. "It's not."

A chirp from her cell phone interrupted what might have settled into an awkward silence. Flipping it open, Cameron frowned. Without explanation she rose, casting her eyes over the park.

"What?" John rose beside her, catching a hint of her alarm even though her expression was blank.

She turned to look at him, and suddenly there was fear, real and human, in her eyes. "Where's Savannah?"

It was a dog, and it wasn't.

The paradox would have been completely unfathomable to most children. But Savannah wasn't most children.

A game of hide and seek had lured Savannah to the edge of the woods bordering the park, but when she'd seen the dog sitting on the edge of the grass, all thoughts of hiding had fled. It had looked like it was waiting for her.

With a quiet huff, the dog that wasn't a dog got to its feet and took a few steps away before looking back at her pointedly.

Savannah hesitated. She glanced once at Cameron and John, far away on their bench, and almost hoped that one of them would notice her slipping away and call her back, but neither of them did.

The dog followed her gaze to the others before shaking its head with a snort and ducking into the trees. Taking a deep breath, Savannah followed.

The branches scratched at her arms and hands, and Savannah had to duck to reach the tiny clearing. Apprehension built slowly in her chest, swelling in time to the beating of her heart. She knew she shouldn't be here, but curiosity and suspicion dragged her on.

The dog was waiting for her when Savannah finally cleared the last of the trees and brushed the dirt and spider webs off of her clothes. It sat neatly in the middle of the rough circle, watching her with a focused attention that no animal had ever known.

"You're my other mother, aren't you?" Savannah asked, knowing Sarah would be proud that her voice didn't tremble, even a little bit.

The dog grinned, and then it blurred, shifting into liquid metal before reforming into Catherine Weaver, a welcoming, if stiff, smile on her face as she greeted her daughter. "Hello, Savannah."

Fear nearly sent her running back to Cameron, but the anger that Savannah hadn't allowed herself to voice until now took over, burning everything else away as tears splashed onto her cheeks.

"Don't!" Savannah startled herself with the outburst, instinctively moderating her voice, even in her fury, though her heart was hammering at her ribs. "Don't be her! You're not her. You're not my mother!"

Weaver's smile faltered, and she looked almost... hurt, but the expression was gone before Savannah could be sure of what she'd seen. Another flicker of metal and Savannah was looking at her father, metal, Dr. Sherman, metal, John Henry, metal, Mr. Ellison, metal, Mr. Murch, metal, Aunt Cameron, metal, Aunt Sarah, metal... "Is this better?" half a dozen beloved voices, some of them silenced forever, asked at once, cutting through Savannah's already much broken and half-mended heart like a silver knife.

Furious, she stooped and picked up a rock, hurling it at the machine with a thousand faces.

"Stop it!" Her strangled plea, and the rock, brought the kaleidoscope to a halt.

Weaver hovered between forms for a moment, the rock caught in a cradle of silver, before she settled into a mirror image of the girl in front of her. A girl with cold grey eyes instead of outraged blue. She set the rock down on the ground between them.

They stared at one another, life and its reflection.

Savannah couldn't remember the moment when she had realized that her real mother had died along with her father. It seemed like she had always known it, the way she had known that her new mother was a fake. But over time she had almost convinced herself it wasn't true. She had let herself love the copy, and believe that the copy loved her, because even a pretend mother was better than no mother at all. Then the copy had left too, and Savannah had understood that it had never been about her.

"You killed her, didn't you?" she asked, needing to know.

"Yes," the other girl admitted without remorse, her voice the flat tones of a machine.

Grief, long delayed and denied, engulfed Savannah. Memories of a mother with warm eyes, gentle hands and a soft lap, broke free of the little box she'd been keeping them in, locked away so they couldn't hurt. For a moment, all she felt was pain, but just when she thought it would break her, it ebbed.

Sorrow could not go unacknowledged forever without losing some of its edge. Savannah had run from it for too long, throwing herself into the refuge of her new family with the desperation of a hunted animal and sealing the past up after her. She wasn't the Savannah whose mother had been murdered by a machine anymore.

She wasn't Savannah Weaver, she was Savannah Gale. Her mothers' names were Sarah and Cameron. She had an Uncle James, a brother named John and a kitten named Walther.

Savannah clung to the new story she had written for herself. Using it like armor. "Why?" she demanded.

The metal girl hesitated. "I needed to build John Henry," she said finally, her voice taking on an un-mechanical conviction. "You know how important John Henry is, don't you?"

John Henry... Savannah's armor cracked a little at the mention of her friend. John Henry had been real. He had saved her life. Opening her heart up to him again might mean letting the machine in front of her back in too, but... "John Henry is here?"

"He's close."

Savannah looked around but all she saw was trees. "Where?"

"Safe."

Savannah focused back on the machine that had almost been her mother. "No place is safe," she said automatically.

"He's sick," the girl admitted. "Would you like to see him? He's going to need friends to help him get better. Are you still his friend, Savannah?"

"I-" Savannah started, only to be cut off by the sound of her name through the trees.

"Savannah?" Cameron, and then John, their voices warm and familiar dragged her back to the life she knew, and she had turned towards them before she even knew what she was doing. A rustle and blur of motion behind her made her look back, but Weaver was already gone, leaving behind nothing but a few paw prints in the dirt.

"Savannah?" John, closer now.

"In here!" she called, already pushing her way out of the clearing. They met her halfway, Cameron scooping her up as soon as they were free of the trees.

"What do you think you were doing, wandering off like that?" John demanded. Cameron said nothing, but Savannah felt love and relief in the arms around her.

"I saw a dog," she admitted, feeling strangely reluctant to say any more. She shouldn't want to see John Henry. He was part of the old Savannah. She didn't want her old life to mess up her new one, and Sarah wouldn't like her other mother being around. Savannah didn't think Sarah would let the machine take her away, but Sarah might get hurt if she tried to stop her. It would probably be better if Savannah just didn't say anything. She'd be safe at home, right?

Tucking her face into Cameron's chest, Savannah missed the flash of fear in John's eyes.

Sarah eyed the cell phone on the coffee table one more time, almost reaching for it, but changing her aim at the last minute for the television remote. She switched off the news and its seemingly endless footage of smashed cars and police directing traffic around malfunctioning traffic lights, with more force than strictly necessary, ignoring the look exchanged by James and Terissa.

"Cameron said they were going to the park," James reminded her. "There's three in the area, and none of them are anywhere near the accidents."

Accidents... right. Sarah set the remote down before she gave in to the temptation to throw it against the wall and looked at her phone again. "Cameron says a lot of things," she said, willing it to ring. She could have called the machine, or John, but without knowing exactly where they were, she couldn't know if it was safe. C.A.I.N. had already proved he could get into the cellular network, and now he was playing with traffic. The three people who mattered the most to her in the world were the gods only knew where, and there wasn't a damn thing she could do to bring them home.

Terissa sat down beside Sarah, laying a soothing hand on her shoulder. "Cameron wouldn't have taken Savannah into danger."

Sarah fought the urge to jerk away from the touch. Terissa didn't deserve her anger. "Everything we do is dangerous," she said instead, knowing it to be true and wondering if her selfishness was going to cost Savannah her life some day. She couldn't give the child up, but what kind of life was she offering her when a simple trip to the mall had made even a morning at the park seem like too much of a risk?

The sound of tires on gravel had Sarah up off the couch and at the front door before the van's engine had sputtered to a stop. She stopped with her hand on the doorknob, waiting for her heart to stop trying to beat its way out of her chest. Fear and anger battled for a moment, both of them hot and immediate.

This time it was James who gripped her shoulder. "They're safe," he said. "That's all that matters. The yelling will keep."

Sarah snorted. "This time."

"This time is all we have," James pointed out cryptically, backing up to let Sarah open the door.

She didn't ask where they'd been, she just let them in and retreated back to the living room, not trusting herself to speak just yet. Reclaiming her spot on the couch, Sarah heard James quietly filling John and Cameron in on the string of traffic light failures that, when plotted out on a map, had all happened within an hour's drive of the mall.

"I know." Cameron's voice brought Sarah's head up and she drank in the sight of the terminator, letting the anger go for now. James was right. This was the only time they had, and she wasn't going to waste it on doubt. "The utility program detected his interference in the traffic system and sent a notification to my phone." She held Sarah's gaze, somehow coming between her and the dread. "He may be trying to use the media coverage to catch us on camera."

"Don't be worried, Aunt Sarah." Savannah crawled up on the couch next to her, and Sarah wrapped an arm around her slight shoulders, feeling a new tension there and wondering at it. She briefly considered sending Savannah away while she talked to the others about C.A.I.N., but the memory of the child asleep at the top of the stairs stopped her. Savannah wasn't going to let herself be left out, and Sarah found herself admiring the girl's stubbornness. She wanted to know what she was facing, and Sarah couldn't blame her for that.

"I'm not worried," she lied. "I'm angry."

"Me too," Savannah said gravely. "Are we going to stop him?"

"Yes," Cameron answered for Sarah, sitting carefully on Savannah's other side. "We'll stop him."

"How?" John asked from across the room, but his words were mercifully empty of the antagonism that had been weighing on Sarah's soul. "How do we fight something that has the entire system to hide in?"

"We don't." Cameron met Sarah's eyes over Savannah's head. She had been working on the problem ever since she had let C.A.I.N. go, and his meddling with the traffic network had finally given her the last piece she needed. "We'll let the system fight him for us."

Act III

Three days.

Three days of missed orders, malfunctioning electronics and morgues.

Vaughn looked down at the dead man on the table. Perkins was his name if he remembered right, but he looked less like one of his men and more like his failure. Casualties had been low overall, but nearly half of the men he had sent out looking for the Connors would be out of action for a month or more. Broken ribs, arms, legs, internal injuries, soft tissue damage... the rash of accidents caused by malfunctioning traffic lights had been as effective at weakening his own personal army as a bomb thrown into close quarters.

The city was baffled by the traffic glitches.

Vaughn, however, was furious.

He knew he had the right area, but he couldn't search it without C.A.I.N. interfering. If the Connors were even still there. The A.I. wasn't exactly being subtle in his efforts to protect them. But if they knew they were being shielded... Vaughn gestured for the technician to cover the body and turned on his heel, disgusted with the whole bloody mess. Knowing or not, Connor was out of his reach for the moment. His resources were extensive, but ultimately limited. He couldn't afford to keep sending men to the hospital, not without some kind of results to show for it.

Stalking down the hallway, Vaughn cursed the woman who had cost him countless hours, finances and several good officers, but his rage was cut off abruptly by an eerily familiar sound... A whirl and a click, so quiet that he would have missed it if he hadn't heard it before, stopped him in his tracks.

Refusing to look back, Vaughn forced himself to continue, hating the nervous sweat that broke out on his skin until he reached the doors and the bright Californian sunshine.

At the limit of its turn radius, the security camera watched him go, the red light above the lens blinking thoughtfully.

Sarah needed a distraction.

The walls were creeping inwards, shuffling forward inch by inch, making the house feel even smaller and more crowded than it already was. She might have been able to cope with the claustrophobia, but there was only so long she could watch John and Danny write code before she would have welcomed an attack, any attack, just to relieve the boredom.

Spending time with Savannah might have helped, but right now the child was gardening with Terissa, and Sarah didn't want to make the same mistakes with her that she had with John.

He'd needed to go to the future to find out who he was without her, she didn't want anything nearly so dramatic for Savannah.

She watched them from the porch for a few minutes while she savored her morning coffee. Terissa had found tools, gloves and hats in the shed, and she and Savannah were already elbow deep in dirt as they pulled what looked like a year's worth of weeds out from around overgrown perennials.

The child looked happy enough, and her never ending stream of questions sounded like the cheerful burble of any reasonably well-adjusted child, but Sarah had felt the tremors that wracked her small body at night. Three days since the scare at the mall, and Savannah was still insisting on spending every night tucked between her aunts.

Cameron seemed content with the arrangement, but while Sarah wasn't about to traumatize the child by insisting that Savannah go back to sleeping in her own room, it was making things with Cameron a little... complicated.

She sighed down at the bottom of her coffee cup, and it stared unhelpfully back up at her. Ceramic wasn't notoriously good at solving relationship problems. Bottles of whisky were better, once the whisky was out of them. Remembering the last time she had given into the urge to drink, and the rather favorable results, Sarah felt a smile tug at the corner of her mouth. She let the memory play a little longer, until her body began to respond with its own personal flavor of restlessness...

Damnit, Sarah swore and banished the images, pleasant as they were. Disgusted with herself, she tried to turn her thoughts to C.A.I.N., reminding herself that they were trying to stop the end of the world here. This was hardly the time to be sighing over a lack of alone time with her cybernetic girlfriend. Still... they had a plan. Was it too much to ask for an hour or two of privacy as well? If C.A.I.N. had had a neck, Sarah would have throttled it. If it weren't for the damned A.I. she could have sent the whole household out to the movies. That is, if Cameron would let Savannah out of her sight.

Which begged the question, where was Cameron?

There were a limited number of places for a terminator to hide on the property, and the presence of the van in the driveway precluded vehicular escape, so Sarah went looking for Cameron first in the house, and when that turned up nothing but the aforementioned boys on computers and James reading his way through the entire available library, she checked the shed.

It was almost dark; the windows were small and dirty, letting in only fitful snatches of sunlight, and Cameron hadn't bothered to switch on the lights. Probably an effort to discourage company, Sarah mused.

The atmosphere was made closer by the familiar scent of gun oil, and Cameron didn't look up when Sarah came in, her hands never stilling on the barrel of the rifle she was cleaning. In Sarah's current state it was too damned easy to imagine what else those hands could be doing,

and whatever rationalization she might have given herself for seeking Cameron out, Sarah had forgotten it before the door latched behind her.

A neatly laid assortment of guns covered the workbench in front of Cameron, each one as carefully placed as if the shed was a display for curious buyers, and amusement surfaced briefly in a tide of frustration. "Those have been cleaned already," Sarah pointed out, leaning back against the doorjamb, her fingers plucking nervously at her coffee mug.

Cameron paused, and then continued. "I know," she said. "But I needed... space." Now she looked at Sarah, and her eyes, nearly black in the gloom, looked almost hunted. "From them," she added.

Taking that as permission to stay, Sarah nodded her agreement. "You're not the only one, girlie."

Cameron offered the hint of a conspiratorial smile before going back to her work, and Sarah felt it right down to her boots. It was damned near embarrassing, the effect Cameron had on her, but there was no one else there to see her, so she gave herself permission to just shut up and enjoy it.

They didn't need to talk. The silence settled out long and comfortably between them, like a cat stretching in a patch of sun. Sarah stayed by the door but her eyes followed Cameron's every move, wandering up from her hands and lingering on muscular shoulders bared by the brevity of a tank top, then dipping lower. She felt her body responding again, and this time she didn't fight it, knowing Cameron would be able to detect the change and wondering what the machine would do about it.

Cameron didn't disappoint.

C.A.I.N., Kaliba, Skynet, the whole damned uncertain future, it all faded into the background when Cameron left the workbench. Wiping her hands clean on a rag, she deliberately took away Sarah's mug and set it on a shelf before reaching past her to shoot the bolt home on a lock that gleamed against the weathered wood of the door.

"That looks new," Sarah observed, trying for nonchalance.

Cameron discarded the rag and moved in to slide her hands around Sarah's hips. She tugged Sarah off the wall, pulling her closer and nuzzling under her hair to her jaw. "It is," she breathed into Sarah's ear before tightening her grip and spinning them around. Wrapping an arm around Sarah's waist, she shoved the neatly ordered guns aside in a clatter of metal and lifted Sarah onto the workbench.

The casual show of strength might have frightened Sarah a few months ago, but right now it only added fuel to a fire that had been banked for far too long. Remembering another day, another bench, and a terminator she had been confessing her secrets to even then, Sarah wrapped her legs around Cameron's waist and pulled the machine closer, ducking her head for a kiss that made the world go up in flames.

They were hurried, almost frenzied, knowing that they might be interrupted at any moment. Only the knowledge that they were going to have to emerge at some point, more or less put together, and not looking to the casual eye like they'd just snatched a quick fuck in the face of chaos, kept them from tearing each other's clothes off in their haste.

Making a mental note to never, ever wash the shed's windows, Sarah gave herself up to oblivion. Cameron's hands and mouth were everywhere she could reach and Sarah made no effort to reign in her own. Deft fingers teased open buttons, tugged at zippers, and pushed inconvenient fabric out of the way. Sarah lost track of whose pleasure was whose, retaining only the presence of mind to smother any sound, either against Cameron's skin or into her mouth.

It hadn't even been a week, but it felt like a year.

Lost, it took Sarah a minute to realize Cameron had stilled. Feeling almost drugged by the endorphins running like liquid fire through her veins, she struggled to focus on the machine's profile, turned to face the door.

There was nothing, and then Sarah heard the faint sound of a voice calling her name.

John.

Cameron was frowning. She began to pull away, but Sarah quickly laced her fingers behind her head, forcing Cameron's gaze back and down towards her. "Is there danger?" she demanded, revising the question to "immediate danger?" when Cameron hesitated.

"No," Cameron admitted.

"Then don't stop."

"But—"

Sarah silenced her with a kiss, tightening her knees against the machine's hips. Cameron resisted for no more than a second before melting against Sarah and picking up where they had left off. Guilt went the way of everything but the taste of Cameron in her mouth and the feel of her beneath her fingertips.

Sarah would be responsible. She'd find John and apologize. She'd do whatever she needed to do to take C.A.I.N. down and save her family.

Later.

John slouched back into the house and through the kitchen to the den that had become his and Danny's center of operations. Dropping into his chair, he scowled at the computer that had been the sole focus of his attention for the last three days, and indulged himself in a moment of petty resentment. It wasn't fair. He and Danny were stuck in here, writing the program that was supposed to save them all, and his mother couldn't even be bothered to talk to him when he had some progress to report.

“If Sarah doesn’t want to be found, then she probably needs some space,” Terissa had said, intercepting him before he could search the yard. “The close quarters are wearing on all of us. Sarah will turn up when she’s ready...” The woman had been too damned quietly reasonable to argue with, all the while presenting an impenetrable wall. John had ended up retreating, feeling like a chastised child, guilty, of all things, for wanting to talk to his mother.

He hadn’t seen Cameron either, and John felt hot jealousy stir under his breastbone. He’d thought he’d set the childish emotion aside, but his conversation with Cameron at the park had revived it. James had said he trusted Cameron with Sarah’s life above any other. Cameron had given her own blood to keep Sarah alive, she had risked the apocalypse... and Sarah had allowed it, even seemed to welcome the machine’s concern.

There was an easiness between them, a silent communication that John would never had thought his mother would share with a machine. Somehow, implausible as it seemed, they had found a way to be friends while he was gone. As if without him, they had finally been able to see that they were fighting for the same thing.

A year ago, John would have been thrilled to see them getting along.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want his mother to have supports other than himself... being all she had was a big part of what had driven him crazy as a kid. He was glad she had a friend, he was glad for both of them, but he wished it didn’t feel quite so much like they were humoring him.

John shook his head, reining in the insecure ramblings of an exhausted mind. He was just tired and frustrated. His mother loved him. She was supporting him as a leader. He was back, and he wasn’t going to let her wear herself out trying to protect him and save the world by herself anymore. If Cameron wanted to help, that was great. Everything would be fine. He’d make sure of that.

This program would make sure of that. It would make sure of a lot of things.

It had been Cameron’s idea, but John and Danny were writing it. She had her own part to play, refusing to let anyone else make the necessary adjustments to her utility program. She’d insisted it was too complex, but John suspected she simply didn’t want anyone looking that closely at the ghost of herself she had left in the system.

He would have understood if it had been just Danny she had excluded, John glanced sideways at Terissa’s son, completely absorbed in his work. He was still an outsider, following along with the air of a convict being led to the noose. He did his share, but John didn’t trust him, and he suspected Cameron didn’t either. But John thought their conversation in the park had healed some of the rift between him and the machine. It stung that she was still holding him at a distance.

John knew he had treated Cameron badly in those first few days after he had come back, but he was so used to Cameron not feeling, not reacting, that it hadn’t really occurred to him to consider her feelings. He’d resented her for who she wasn’t, and felt threatened by what she was... Really, it was no wonder she’d assumed he was the same child she had sent away. John

rubbed at his aching temples. With all the best intentions, he was still screwing up. Maybe it was time he tried to earn back a little of the trust he'd discarded. From Cameron and his mother...

Danny finally seemed to notice that he was the only one working. Pulling off his headphones, he took one look at John's expression and offered to go on a coffee run.

John shook his head. "Any more caffeine and my hands will be shaking too badly to type."

"Time for a break?" Danny sounded hopeful, but it was the hope for reprieve of a condemned man and John's instincts, as worn out as the rest of him, twitched and stirred.

"The sooner we get this done, the sooner we'll all get the chance for a break," he pointed out, reaching for his own headphones, but something in Danny's eyes stopped him. "What?"

"Nothing," Danny lied quickly, turning back to his computer, but he could feel John watching him.

They were all watching him, when they thought he wasn't looking, watching to see if he could be trusted. The machine was the worst; she seemed to know whenever he'd received a message from C.A.I.N., turning up out of nowhere to stare through him with eyes that said *you are expendable...*

Only his mother wanted him there. Even the kid had shot him a few doubtful glances when he tried to make conversation. But Danny would prove himself. He was already helping John with the program. They needed his knowledge of C.A.I.N.'s code to make it work. Only he knew how to use the backdoors Kaliba had left in the A.I.. Cameron probably could have figured it out, but Connor wouldn't let her go back into the system, not for that. Not when they already had all the information they needed in Danny.

If he gave it to them.

The program wouldn't exactly *hurt* C.A.I.N.... and during the day, Danny felt committed to the project. This was the only avenue open to him for redemption. But at night... C.A.I.N. was frightening and alien, but he was also the closest thing Danny had to a friend. At first the A.I. had pushed for information about Sarah, Cameron and their location, but he seemed to have realized that Danny was nervous about anything that might actually force him to choose sides, and he'd backed off the last few nights.

Now they just talked. Sometimes Danny felt like C.A.I.N. was the only one who *did* talk to him. The A.I. was curious about Cameron's position in the household, but of course he would be. There was nothing sinister in that, though it did make Danny uneasy when C.A.I.N. referred to her as his sister. Cameron was like him, but instead of being a target, she was... well, Danny didn't know what she was, but he didn't share the A.I.'s fascination. He just wanted her to leave him alone.

"Any progress?" Cameron's arrival nearly made Danny fall out of his chair.

She waited until he'd regained his balance, staring at him blandly all the while, and while Danny balked at ascribing an emotional response to a machine, he couldn't shake the impression she seemed almost pleased by his discomfiture, and the beads of fear sweat he could feel forming on his brow. C.A.I.N. couldn't help but be frightening; no matter how much he tried to put Danny at ease. Danny suspected Cameron could have convinced him she was harmless if she'd wanted to. She was frightening on purpose.

John noticed both Danny's reaction and Cameron's satisfaction, and put the observations aside to mull over later.

"Some," he admitted, taking in Cameron's slightly ruffled appearance with annoyance. While they'd been working, she'd probably been outside in the sun playing tag with Savannah again. "Have you seen Mom? I need to go over the decoy with her."

"She's in the shower." Cameron cut him off without apology, direct, but distracted somehow, as if her mind was somewhere else. "Is it urgent?"

"I've found a possible location." John brought up an image on the screen, feeling his shoulders tighten when Cameron stepped up behind him to look. Resentment, attraction, plain old fear... he wasn't sure what she made him feel anymore, but it was definitely uncomfortable. "From the shipping records it looks like someone is trying to build a server farm, but I can't find anything about who actually owns the building-"

Cameron didn't wait for him to finish, turning on her heel with a promise of, "I'll get Sarah," and then she was gone again.

"Does she mean *now*?" Danny asked, wide-eyed.

Guessing that Danny was imagining Cameron dragging his mother directly out of the shower, John laughed. "She has a little more tact than that." He paused. "I think."

If anything, Danny looked more worried.

"Don't worry," John told him. "We'll hear the gunfire if I'm wrong."

"I am convinced that the only people worthy of consideration in this world are the unusual ones. For the common folk are like the leaves of a tree, and live and die unnoticed..."

Sarah lingered in the hallway outside of her bedroom, finding a moment of calm in the sound of Cameron's voice as she read Savannah to sleep. It must have soothed Savannah as well, because after a few minutes Cameron trailed off, and Sarah looked around the door to see the girl's eyes slide shut. She waited for the usual shake and frantic blinking, already hearing the familiar protest, *One more page!* But this time Savannah was really asleep, and Cameron was able to close the book and extricate herself, settling the girl down on the pillow without waking her.

"You're on the second book, already," Sarah whispered.

Cameron laid *The Marvelous Land of Oz* aside. "It's been taking longer and longer to get her to sleep."

"I know." Sarah's guts clenched against the slow burn of anger at the A.I. keeping them penned up. Savannah's nightmares were getting worse, and they were rapidly running out of ways to distract her. As the day crept closer when they would put the plan in motion, the tension levels were rising, and there was no question that the child felt it. She joined Cameron on the bed, brushing Savannah's hair back from her face, relieved to see peace in her quiet features instead of fear.

"Maybe John was right..." Sarah's soul rebelled at the thought of sending Savannah away, but she couldn't bear to watch the light inside of the little girl go out.

"No." Cameron's denial was definite, even angry. She tilted Sarah's chin up with gentle but insistent fingers. "She is *ours*, and we will keep her safe. The program is almost ready." Her voice was a fierce whisper.

Ours... There was no mistaking the possessiveness in Cameron's tone, or her meaning. Sarah had accepted her own maternal feelings towards Savannah, and it seemed Cameron had done the same. A feeling of rightness warred with parental terror. Were they ready for this? Could they raise a child and save the world at the same time? Did she want to?

"What if it doesn't work?" Sarah asked, not sure if she meant the program or the parenthood. She watched Cameron closely, wondering what kind of mother Cameron would make. Wondering if she could avoid the same mistakes she'd made with John.

"It will work." Cameron's tone allowed no room for argument, on either subject.

Sarah nodded, reaching up to take her hand and wind their fingers together. Cameron glanced towards the door, but allowed herself to be tugged forward. She was still tense, but Sarah ignored it, needing Cameron's solidity to ground her. Only Cameron made hope seem like an option instead of a fallacy. She was truly one of Baum's 'unusual people'. Heedless of the risk, Sarah laid her head on Cameron's shoulder and let the contact and Cameron's scent block out everything else.

Cameron let her have a few minutes of peace, softening once she was sure Sarah wasn't going to suggest sending Savannah away again. But they only had so much time. "C.A.I.N. spoke to Danny again last night," she said finally, feeling Sarah stiffen as she ran a hand through her hair and sat back.

Sarah let her go reluctantly. "Do you still think we can trust him?"

"I think he will not take any action that threatens his mother," Cameron said after a moment. "He has avoided offering information that would allow C.A.I.N. to find us. There are fail-safe's that would prevent anything sensitive from being transmitted, but they haven't been triggered. I believe he is simply lonely."

Sarah was feeling a lot less generous. "He hasn't told us about it," she pointed out. They'd argued briefly about that when Cameron had told Sarah about Danny's nightly contact with the A.I., Cameron preferring to wait and see what Danny did while the utility program monitored him, and Sarah wanting to stop it completely.

"He doesn't want to believe his father's work is evil." Cameron looked down at Savannah and Sarah wondered if she was thinking of John Henry, another child of Miles' work and Savannah's friend. Cameron had gambled John's safety in the future on the conviction that John Henry was not the seed of Skynet. Did Danny feel the same way about C.A.I.N.? "But I think he will not betray us, not while Terissa is here."

"Hell of a thing to base a plan on," Sarah muttered, but she let it go, following Cameron's gaze. "I can't stand what we're doing to her," she said softly, tucking the blankets more securely around Savannah. "She already has nightmares. What will she be like five years from now? Ten? Twenty? Is she going to hate us for making this her life?" Sarah asked bitterly. "I wish there was some way to know we're making the right choice. I wish I knew if we were doing this for her or for us."

Cameron's utter silence made Sarah glance up. For just a moment the machine looked stricken, but it was gone so quickly that Sarah wasn't sure what she had seen.

"I should patrol," Cameron said abruptly, standing up from the bed. "You need to sleep."

Sarah frowned, confused by Cameron's reaction. She wondered if her fears had somehow upset the terminator. "Cameron..."

"Goodnight, Sarah," Cameron murmured, heading toward the door, her gait stiffer than normal.

Sarah followed, disturbed by Cameron's upset. "I need to talk to John," Sarah murmured. She hesitated, looking into Cameron's intentionally blank features with growing unease. "You'll come back later?" she asked carefully.

Cameron's gaze searched her features for a long, uncertain moment. "When the others are asleep," she finally allowed. She was almost out the door when Sarah gripped her arm and urged her to turn, using her other hand to reach past Cameron and push the door shut.

Opening her mouth to protest, Cameron went still and silent as Sarah laid a finger over her lips, tracing them softly before replacing them with her mouth. For a moment, the fears and worries evaporated, and Cameron welcomed the jolt to her systems and the heat of Sarah's touch.

The kiss was slow and languorous, and Sarah tried to fill it with all of her regret over the secret they still had to keep. She had had her fill of secrets.

"It won't be this way forever," she vowed before she let Cameron go. She meant it, even though she wasn't sure how and when the day they wouldn't have to hide their relationship would come. She hadn't put a lot of thought into their future, other than knowing she wanted one. Eventually they would have to talk about it. Eventually John would have to be told. But not tonight.

Tonight she just wanted to sleep with her lover's arms around her to keep the nightmares away.

The clock read a little past two. Sierra sighed at the numbers, turning her gaze away from the burning red that reminded her a little too much of staring into the eyes of the enemy. The beach house was quiet, only the sounds of the ocean and the soft whir of the ceiling fan to keep her company. Felicia was no doubt asleep in the other bedroom. At least Sierra hoped she was. The doctor had been tireless in her efforts to break Sierra's fever and to get the growing infection around her gunshot wound under control. The antibiotics seemed to finally be working, and Sierra sat up weakly, throwing the blankets off her now-sweating body.

Getting unsteadily to her feet, she moved through the small house until she came to Felicia's bedroom. Surefooted and silent, Sierra stole closer until she could retrieve the cell phone on the nightstand. Felicia didn't stir. She wasn't the woman she would become, Sierra knew. For now, Felicia was simply a doctor, but Sierra remembered the warrior she had come to know. She missed her.

She missed them all.

Sighing, she padded back into her room, opening the deck doors and stepping outside before shutting them behind her. The ocean breeze felt like heaven on her overheated skin, and she walked barefoot to the lone chair and sank into it.

The phone was cool in her hands as she rubbed her thumb across its surface. She knew it was best to let the world sleep, even if her mind refused her the same kindness. Hours and hours spent remembering those last few moments in the future when everything had gone to hell still plagued her. Derek and Kyle dead... weapons fire everywhere. Weaver. John Henry. Allison screaming as the world tipped and whisked away.

Sierra swallowed, annoyed by the scratchiness in her throat. Finally she dialed, waiting through one ring and then two. When she heard Cameron's voice on the other end of the line, the voices in her head went quiet and her soul steadied. She entered the code, hearing Cameron do the same.

"Is Sierra all right?" Cameron demanded.

"It's me," Sierra told her. "Felicia is sleeping."

There was a moment's pause. "You should be resting."

Sierra's lips quirked at the scolding. "Gonna spank me, mom?" she teased faintly.

There was a soft sniffing sound of disapproval from Cameron followed by a door creaking on its hinges and closing softly. When Cameron spoke again, she sounded more muffled, like she'd just stepped inside somewhere. "How are you feeling?"

"Raw," Sierra admitted. "I hate being sick."

"You're like Sarah that way," Cameron murmured. "You're pushing yourself before you're well. If you would take the time to heal..."

"I'm sitting on the deck, Cameron, not running a marathon," Sierra chided. "I'd forgotten how overprotective you could be," she added but there was a smile in her voice. It felt so damn good to hear her mother's voice. It healed her in ways no medicine ever could. "Everyone else asleep?"

"Yes," Cameron's voice was softer. "I'm on patrol."

"John... fitting back in okay?" He wasn't who she really wanted to ask about, but she was still curious.

"It's been hard... for everyone," Cameron confessed. "But he's trying. Especially with you."

"With me?" Sierra asked in confusion.

"He's trying to be your older brother."

The thought made Sierra's head feel like it was going to explode. "Are you kidding me?" she spluttered.

"He takes you for ice cream. He got you a kitten."

"A kitten?" Her voice rose another octave.

"Walther. After Sarah's favorite gun manufacturer."

Sierra blinked only to burst out laughing. It managed to both hurt like hell and feel wonderful at the same time. "Walther, huh?"

"You're very attached," Cameron continued, but Sierra could hear the delight in her voice.

"Me and the kitten or me and John?" Sierra asked dubiously.

"You and the kitten. You're making John work for it."

Sierra chuckled again, pleased with her younger self in this timeline. "Wish I could see that," she said wistfully.

"So do I."

The humor fled as quickly as it had come. Sierra gripped the phone tighter. "I miss you. I've missed you..." She swallowed, feeling the burn on the back of her throat once more. "I miss Sarah."

"I can have her there in an hour," Cameron promised.

"No. No," Sierra whispered. "That... it's not a good idea and we both know it."

There was a long stretch of silence where they simply listened to one another breathe.

“Can I ask you something?” Cameron finally inquired.

“Of course.”

“Did we...” Cameron paused, clearly trying to collect her thoughts. “Did you ever wish...”

“No,” Sierra said emphatically, guessing how the question was going to end. “If you’re going to ask me if I ever wished that you’d given me up... or if I regretted any of my life... no. No, mom.”

“You’re just a child here... now...” Cameron continued. “I don’t want to do this to you.”

Tears collected in the corners of Sierra’s eyes but she stubbornly didn’t let them fall. “Don’t ever think that. And don’t ever let Sarah think that.”

“Savannah...”

“Listen to me,” Sierra insisted. “I loved you. Both of you. You were my *parents*. You made sure I knew I was loved... cared for... and you damn well made sure I survived. Both of you died saving me,” she choked out, the tears slipping free now. “Please, don’t ever think I don’t want the life that little girl is living now. She’s going to get scared, and she’s going to crave a normal life sometimes... but I swear to you, I would not trade you and Sarah for anyone else,” she promised fiercely.

There was another long pause, filled with the dull roar of the waves and the sound of crickets on the end of the line.

“I bought you pink tennis shoes with skulls on them the other day,” Cameron stated simply.

It all came back in a vivid rush. All the little things Cameron had done for her over the years to let her know she was loved and cherished. In that moment, Sierra missed her mother so much it hurt. This Cameron wasn’t her, not yet, but she was getting there. “Skulls, huh?” she asked with a smile through her tears.

“She will have the childhood you remember,” Cameron told her, suddenly serious once more. “But I hope her future will be better.”

“I know,” Sierra whispered. “Now tell me more about John trying to be my big brother...”

Sierra had a beautiful laugh.

The thought stayed with Cameron as she made her final rounds. Hearing the adult version of her daughter laugh felt like a gift, one she hadn’t known she wanted but was thankful to receive. She wished Sarah could hear it, knowing that the sound would have set everyone of her lover’s fears to rest. Savannah had grown into an admirable young woman; one Cameron had been pleased to acquaint herself with over the last three hours. There was a distinction between them

now... between the child asleep in Sarah's bed and the woman she would become. They were as separate to her now as their names, but both the present and future versions of her child were cherished.

Now the sun was slowly rising and her phone was nearly dead. Cameron felt a pang of guilt for not returning to Sarah last night, but she would find a plausible excuse for her absence. Sarah wouldn't be upset about that for long, Cameron knew, since she would be giving Sarah a whole slew of new things to be mad about before the day was done.

She checked every entrance once more when she was inside, testing the security perimeter both physically and through her utility program. Everything was secure.

Even John and Danny were asleep, so there was no online activity for her to monitor. She reviewed the work they had done on the program to buy some time, and found it flawless. The plan should work. She hadn't lied to Sarah about that. She just hadn't told her everything about it.

Act IV

Sarah opened her eyes to a patronizingly bright morning. The birdsong outside her window was almost too cheerful to be real. Combined with the picturesque sunbeams lying in smug lines across her blankets, it made Sarah want to go back to sleep until the world had a more sympathetic atmosphere to offer her. Rain would have been good. She could have been legitimately cranky about rain. Instead she was stuck trying to rationalize an irrational resentment of the weather because she didn't want to think about the real reason for her black mood.

She managed not to think about it all the way through getting dressed, brushing her teeth, and making her bed. Finding Savannah's giraffe wedged between the headboard and the mattress was a good distraction, and Sarah made a point of smoothing it out and setting it on the pillow, ready for another night of warding its mistress's dreams.

Even so, it was looking rather desperately worn around the edges.

"I know the feeling," Sarah muttered, one guardian to another. "We're going to do better by her, I promise."

The giraffe was silent on the subject, and there was only so long Sarah could talk to a stuffed animal before she had to acknowledge that she was reaching pathological levels of avoidance, but she felt they understood each other.

And then there were no more distractions.

Cameron had said she would be back. Waiting for the tell-tale creak of the door that would herald the machine's return, Sarah had fought to stay awake well into the morning hours, but Cameron hadn't come, and eventually she had fallen into a fitful doze.

There had to be a reason, Sarah told herself. For once she wasn't going to believe the worst. Cameron had promised, and Sarah had work to do. Deliberately putting the terminator out of her mind, she set out to do it.

Still, doubt made her cranky and short with everyone, including John who seemed to be under his own black cloud. Cameron was nowhere to be found and Sarah didn't go looking for her, and James was smart enough to leave her alone, but before the morning was over Sarah had snapped at Terissa and snarled at Danny. She even managed, completely unintentionally, to step on the kitten's tail, so now Walther wasn't speaking to her either.

Only Savannah was immune, though she was still giving Sarah a wide berth.

Finally Sarah retreated to the back yard with a third cup of coffee and sat on the picnic table by herself for the rest of the morning. Even neglected and half-wild, the garden had a sense of tranquility and beauty to it, and Sarah watched little birds flit and hop around the freshly turned earth where Terissa and Savannah had been working, wishing her life was so simple. For a bird, happiness was a mouthful of food and maybe a good bath along the way.

If they feared anything it was only for an instant, and then they either escaped or they were dead. Birds didn't know the kind of fear that ate away at your soul. A cat might stalk them for hours unnoticed, but if a bird saw it coming, he only had to fly away. Flying away was no longer an option for Sarah, no matter how much she might wish it was.

"I thought you might need a refill." Terissa, coffee pot in hand, sat down on the table beside her.

Sarah offered her cup wordlessly, and Terissa filled it in kind.

They sat quietly together, sipping coffee and watching the birds.

So slowly that it felt like the water draining out of a leaky bucket, Sarah felt her dark mood ebb, falling away from her a single drop at a time. If she concentrated she could almost hear each one splash into the grass, shattering into a hundred tiny fragments. The temptation to hold onto the wall she had put up was real, but Sarah consciously chose to let it go.

Just like the birds, now was all she had.

As if sensing when Sarah had reached a point of calm, Terissa stretched and stood. "The boys think the program is ready," she said. "John says you and he settled on a decoy yesterday, so they're just waiting for your seal of approval."

Sarah pursed her lips, impressed with Terissa's people skills and accepting she'd just been expertly handled. She shook her head. "John is making those calls now."

“Right.” Terissa smiled. “And you and Cameron were stacking flower pots in the shed yesterday.” Her grin widened at Sarah’s furious blush. “You can hand over as many reins as you like, Sarah, but so long as you’re here, he’s going to need you.”

“And here I thought I could retire,” Sarah drawled, following Terissa back up the walk.

“Just get us through this one, and I’ll personally send you and that machine of yours around the world,” Terissa promised, holding the back door open.

“Not that far,” Sarah said wistfully. “Just a little house on the beach... with a porch and an ocean view.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“You have no idea,” Sarah murmured.

The den felt crowded even before Sarah and Terissa got there. Four people and a wall of computer equipment left more than enough square feet to go around, but the room was thick with words left unsaid.

Sarah felt them settle onto her shoulders as soon as she stepped over the threshold, but it was James who gave them a voice, as if her arrival was the weight that upset the balance of silence.

“It’s not going to work,” he said to John, including Sarah and Terissa with a glance. “C.A.I.N. knows your mother’s tricks by now. Blowing up a building is too obvious. He’ll never buy it. You’ll be risking your lives for nothing but another hole in the ground.”

Sarah exchanged a look with her son, and he nodded fractionally. She tried to catch Cameron’s eye, but the machine was lurking behind Danny at the back of the room, her attention seemingly absorbed in his computer screen. “He’ll believe it because he wants to believe it,” Sarah said, her mind only half on the conversation. “The server farm is a trap. The only question is whether or not we can fall for it convincingly enough.”

“You’re walking into a trap.” James didn’t sound surprised. He sounded as if he wanted to be surprised, but couldn’t quite manage it. “On what planet would that be a good idea?”

“Sarah...” Terissa didn’t sound surprised either, she sounded concerned. And faintly disapproving, like a mother catching her son climbing out the window on a school night. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” John cut in, and Sarah let him, too preoccupied with the way Cameron was deliberately not looking at her to maintain an active presence in the conversation. Danny pointed something out on the screen and she nodded, whispering something back too low to hear. Sweat visible on his brow and staining his shirt, Danny looked like a man with a demon on his shoulder, but for now he seemed to have decided that Cameron wasn’t going to kill him for

breathing the wrong way. They ignored the debate going on around them, as if it didn't matter, or as if they already had an answer.

"C.A.I.N. has no tethers left, no reason to set up so close to L.A.," John continued. "The only reason for him to be here is us."

James frowned. "You can't be sure of that."

"He let Mom and Cameron go for a reason," John said. "He's trying to lure us in, and we'll give him what he wants long enough for the program to do its work."

"I still think it won't be enough." James shook his head. "This isn't just another terminator. This is the kind of mind that could create them one day. If you're right and it's a trap, then C.A.I.N. is probably anticipating something like this. He'll be looking for the hook. You need something he can't ignore."

John threw up his hands. "If blowing his new server farm up isn't going to be enough, than I don't know what is. Please, feel free to make suggestions, or let us do what has to be done, because we're running out of time."

Sarah could think of one thing that might tempt C.A.I.N.'s curiosity, and the idea curdled her stomach. Suddenly understanding exactly what Cameron was thinking, Sarah's green gaze locked on her, willing the other woman to turn and face her. *Look at me*, she thought at Cameron, feeling grief and anger rising in her in equal measure. They'd promised. They'd fucking promised. No more secrets.

"It won't work," James repeated stubbornly. "And I'm not going to watch you throw your lives away without calling you a damned fool."

John bristled, but before he could retort, Cameron stepped away from the computer and touched his shoulder. Her eyes swept up to Sarah's before she spoke, meeting them for an apologetic instant before dropping again, but it was enough. She saw the realization waiting for her in Sarah's eyes, watched them shutter with the truth. "It will work."

Sarah knew what she was going to say next, and she didn't want to hear it. Turning on her heel she left the den, ignoring James as he called after her and shaking off Terissa's sympathetic touch on her arm. She didn't know whether to cry or hit something, she only knew she needed to be somewhere Cameron wasn't.

Cameron watched her go, oblivious to John's puzzled gaze on her profile as he studied the regret and upset that she telegraphed on her features without realizing it. She had thought she was finished balancing her feelings for Sarah against the mission, but what could she do when protecting Sarah was the mission, and having a chance at success meant risking hurting her?

"It will work," Cameron said again, remembering the freedom of a world without guilt, without emotion or pain, and acknowledging that what had once seemed so inviting, now echoed with the emptiness of a tomb. As the back door slammed, Cameron forced her gaze back on John. "C.A.I.N. won't be able to ignore a direct attack. He won't be able to ignore me."

The night was clear and cold, and the stars looked very far away. James leaned against the porch railing and wondered what he was doing here. Everyone else seemed to have found a role for themselves, but he was feeling more and more like a loose thread that no one had the heart to cut.

John had been right in one respect, having them all grouped together like this was a tactical nightmare, and the close quarters were making everyone uneasy. James had found this place for Savannah, he had made her his mission, but she didn't need him anymore. Sarah and Cameron had taken on that role, and as unlikely as it seemed, he couldn't help but think they were going to make damn good parents.

But where did that leave him?

James let that question sit for a minute, taking the time to simply exist in the moment. The day had been long and trying, filled with short tempers and fraying nerves. Sarah had retreated to her room and stayed there. John and Danny had argued in endless circles about code. Terissa had spent the day with Savannah, keeping the child occupied and out from underfoot. Even now, the pair was dragging a tent into Savannah's room, planning to spend the evening telling stories and roasting marshmallows over a single candle. At least they all had something to do, something to keep their minds off the confrontation with C.A.I.N. tomorrow.

And then there was Cameron.

Her silhouette nearly invisible against the night, she was sitting cross-legged on the picnic table. Her back was to the house, and she might have been monitoring the perimeter, but James had been getting more and more in touch with the machine's moods, and after Sarah's walk out this afternoon he didn't think Cameron was sitting alone in the dark for security reasons. Maybe it was merely God's plan for him that he help guide this machine through an all too human evolution. Maybe that was to be his role in things. James accepted the possibility, but prayed that there would be more to his existence here than playing shrink to an emotionally stunted cyborg.

Sighing, James came closer, watching the telltale dip of Cameron's head as she indentified his footsteps. "Nice night," he greeted, sitting on the bench below her.

"It's cold," Cameron said in return, eyeing him knowingly.

James shrugged. "It's warm inside."

Cameron's silence was answer enough. James shook his head. Apparently being made out of metal didn't make someone any less of a fool.

"Stubborn as mules, both of you," he murmured.

Cameron didn't disagree. She looked away, but said nothing.

"You sure this is the best way, Cameron? Going back into the system? C.A.I.N. is even more powerful now..."

"I know," Cameron stated evenly. "But this is the only way to weaken him."

"He could destroy you."

"He won't."

James pursed his lips and shook his head again. "You don't know that. You can't guarantee that."

"I won't leave Sarah and Savannah," Cameron insisted, a determined set to her jaw.

"You wishing for something won't make it so."

Cameron shifted so she could look at him fully. "I'm not trying to fight him directly... just distract him... get him engaged so we can release the virus."

"Who are you trying to convince? Me or you?" James crossed his arms and continued to regard the machine's profile as Cameron looked away, clearly disgruntled by his response. He sighed. "They care about you, Cameron," he said gently, trying for another approach. "Sarah... Savannah... it'll kill them if they lose you." James watched in surprise as Cameron swallowed in reaction.

"If I don't stop C.A.I.N. then he'll kill us all."

"You shouldn't have surprised her like that. You know Sarah hates surprises... secrets even more." James looked back out at the night, missing Cameron's features as they crumbled slightly.

"I know," she admitted. The silence stretched out between them for several quiet minutes before Cameron looked at him again. "I didn't decide to go into the system until this morning," Cameron confessed. "I didn't keep the secret from her for long," she continued, feeling the need to explain her actions to someone. "Caring for someone is... hard."

"It is," James agreed.

"But you would do anything to protect them," Cameron added. "You would still give your life for your ex-wife," she pointed out bluntly.

It was James' turn to swallow, feeling like the air had suddenly thinned. "I would," he breathed, rattled by the abrupt change in conversation but gleaming much from Cameron's comparison. "Talk to her," he said standing up. "Apologize, confess, do whatever it is you need to do. Life's too damned short for pride, and you need each other. Maybe you can avoid some of the mistakes I made."

"James?" Cameron's soft voice stopped him halfway back to the porch and he turned.

"Do you still miss her?"

It was a cruel question, but life was cruel. "Every day," James said, meeting her eyes. "But I'm glad she's not here."

Cameron nodded. "I'm sorry you can't be with her."

The honest sympathy in her voice offered some measure of comfort. If James had played some small part in Cameron's evolution, in the realization of a machine with emotion, with ethics and humanity that could stand up against her creator, than it hadn't all been in vain. Still... "It's for the best. She's far away from this. Safe," he added.

"I don't have that luxury," Cameron pointed out simply. She turned away, peering back into the darkness.

Sarah spent all day sulking in her room, avoiding everyone, but the solace did nothing to ease the turmoil chewing at her stomach at the thought of Cameron going back into the system. Images of a thick cable binding the terminator to a world where Sarah couldn't follow, her eyes blank and staring, haunted Sarah in her self-enforced solitude. But she didn't seek company, opting instead to stubbornly sit on her bed, cleaning her 9mm, and waiting for Cameron to appear with an apology or one damn good explanation. When a knock finally sounded, she had practically raced to the door, only to school the disappointment from her expression when it turned out to be Terissa and Savannah on the other side.

Terissa was too damned smart for comfort. She kept a straight face while Savannah, eyes bright with anticipation and arms full of a bag of marshmallows nearly as big as she was, solemnly explained their camping plans for the night.

Sarah gave Savannah permission with an equally straight face, but she raised a brow at Terissa over Savannah's head as the girl hugged her goodnight, rolling her eyes at the other woman's smug grin. No doubt the evening would do Savannah a world of good, but Sarah doubted that had been Terissa's sole motivation. Sarah wasn't sure if she should hug the woman or strangle her for interfering, especially now when she was actually looking forward to spending the night with Savannah to provide a buffer for her raw emotions. At least with Savannah in the room, she wouldn't yell at Cameron when the terminator finally showed up.

The knowing smile on Terissa's lips did nothing to help Sarah's mood as the two moved off down the hallway. She closed the door firmly and leaned against it for a long moment, trying to sort out her feelings. Finally, she headed into the bathroom to take a shower.

She dithered under the scalding spray, uncertain of what she wanted to see when she stepped out of the bathroom, but the pang of disappointment in seeing an empty room told her that she had wanted, even expected, Cameron to be there waiting for her. After slipping on a robe and cinching it tight, she towed her hair dry ruthlessly, before sitting on the bed and glaring at the closed bedroom door, willing it to open. Finally, she got up and opened it herself before

discarding the towel and settling at the foot of the bed again to wait out her errant lover.

It was late by the time Cameron finally returned from her patrol. Sarah heard her prowling around the ground floor before climbing the steps. She stopped at Savannah's closed door long enough that Sarah guessed she was surprised by the arrangement and was listening in to make sure Savannah was okay. She moved on slowly, reluctantly, Sarah thought, wondering if Cameron's feelings were as mixed as her own had been by the loss of their child-sized shield.

Cameron hesitated in the doorway. In the past, their disagreements and arguments had always ended in closed doors, and Sarah could see that the change had surprised the machine. She was cautious, but determined, stepping into the room like a long-legged deer ready to fight or flee. There were a few pieces of wet grass on her feet, and for some reason the sight made Sarah ache. It was so human, like toes burying and wiggling in the sand.

The space between them hummed, like a string held taut and then plucked by a single finger. Without turning around, Cameron pushed the door shut behind her. "Sarah," she began, the weight of words ready to follow clear in her eyes.

Facing Cameron, Sarah felt the desire to yell, or even talk, evaporate into the cool night air. There had already been enough yelling between them, enough fighting. Tomorrow, with its risk to life and limb and love, would come, but this was now. She had wasted so many "nows" in her life, always worrying about what would come, unable to let go of the future long enough to enjoy the present. That, she decided, would stop now; they had a night alone and she was determined not to waste it on harsh words and hurt feelings.

"Stop." Sarah rose and closed on the terminator. She stopped scant inches away and reached out to slide her fingers through Cameron's silky hair, her other hand finding the tie of her robe. She smirked a little as Cameron's eyes dipped and went dark. Taking Cameron's hand, she drew it beneath the fabric and laid it on her hip. "No talking," she said pointedly. "Not tonight."

"But I-" Cameron's gaze swept back up, full of things unsaid.

"Shhh..." Sarah pressed closer, brushing Cameron's lips with a light, teasing kiss while her fingers busied themselves with her belt. The metal buckle was chilled from being outside, but the skin of Cameron's stomach was warm. Sarah felt the machine shiver as she let her hands wander. "It's okay."

When she felt Cameron sliding the robe off her shoulders, Sarah let everything go. Clothes scattered, teeth nipped, hands stroked, whimpers were muffled against lips and skin. Rational thought fled, waiting patiently until they were done before creeping back in the dawning hours and climbing into the sweat-soaked bed to wonder for Sarah what it was that Cameron had wanted to say.

Dawn found Vaughn still awake. Fueled by hatred and coffee so strong it was burning holes in his stomach lining, he refused to quit. He had ripped out every camera in the small back-up

facility that he'd been running his pursuit out of since Kaliba's main headquarters had burned. But he still felt exposed. He didn't trust their security anymore, he didn't trust anything.

He had his best hackers working to keep C.A.I.N. out of his mainframe, but he had no idea if they were succeeding, or if they only thought they were. The search for the Connors was at a complete dead end, and he'd switched to looking for possible targets that might interest a small group of terrorists.

People didn't change, and crazy people only more so. Connor was at war against technology, and sooner or later she'd need another fix. That meant another building blown up, and thanks to an exhaustive history on the woman, Vaughn knew exactly the kind of place she went for.

"Sir?"

Vaughn put down his empty coffee mug and joined the team of three at the computers. "You've got something?"

The lead tech brought up a page of shipping records and an address. "I think so, sir."

It felt strange, to be the one left behind. Cameron prowled the grounds to make sure nothing had changed during the night, but her thoughts churned on Sarah. She remembered the lingering look her lover had given her as John had knelt to give Savannah a quick hug before they'd departed for the server farm. Cameron had seen regret, fear, and so much longing in Sarah's eyes that she'd almost forgotten herself and gone to her. Only Savannah's hand in hers had kept her anchored to the spot. Cameron had wanted to ditch the plan right then and there and go with them, even though she'd known such a maneuver would be pointless. Her place was at Sarah's side, and it wore on her that she wasn't there.

Cameron kept moving, unable to focus on anything, even reading a book to Savannah. It was unsettling. She used to be able to sit, perfectly still, and let the world rush on past until it was time to strike. Machines shouldn't have nerves. It was what made them so effective.

Satisfied the perimeter was secure, Cameron returned to the house. Danny was at his computer, head bent as he typed at a steady pace, his mother lingering nearby. Ellison had gone with John and Sarah, playing his part as lookout and getaway driver. Savannah was seated on the couch with Walther in her lap, her young features tight and worried as she petted the kitten aimlessly. She looked up when Cameron paused in the doorway, offering her a hesitant smile that hurt more than helped. Cameron returned her grin, hoping it didn't appear as forced as it felt. When she turned back to Danny he was watching her curiously, but he said nothing.

When the phone finally rang, it made all of them jump, and Cameron took a moment to get herself under control before answering it.

"Sarah?" Codes were exchanged, and Sarah's welcome reply gave Cameron's equilibrium back to her. She felt herself come back into alignment, an arrow trained on a target with Sarah's hand on the bow.

"We're here," Sarah said, and something about the wind in the background sounded dry and dusty. "It looks empty, but there are fresh tire tracks. I can't see any cameras yet, but there was security equipment listed in the shipments, so there may be surveillance we can't see, or it could be inside. Any activity from C.A.I.N.?"

Cameron sat down at the computer beside Danny, ignoring the way his pulse leapt. She brought up her monitoring programs, seeing nothing out of the ordinary. "Not yet-" she started, falling silent when a spike in the system told her C.A.I.N. had noticed their intrusion.

"Cameron?" Sarah's voice sharpened.

"He sees you." It was part of the plan, but Cameron felt uncharacteristic dread well up inside her. Something felt off, and Cameron's mind worked feverishly to decipher what it was. "Maybe..." She started to say more but Sarah cut her off.

"It's time then." Sarah sounded grim, but determined. There was a pause. "Cameron..." Sarah began only to trail off, and Cameron closed her eyes, almost able to see her, tense, but steady with a mission in front of her, and the wrong person at her back.

"I know," she said refocusing on the screen in front of her. This was the best way to protect them, to save them, she reminded herself. What they felt for each other would have to wait. "Sarah?"

"Yeah?"

"When this is over, we're taking Savannah to the beach." Cameron watched as the child in question shot her a beaming smile.

Sarah was quiet for so long, Cameron began to wonder if she'd hung up.

"Sounds perfect. Be careful in there, Tin Miss." The wealth of emotion in Sarah's voice cut Cameron to the quick. When her lover disconnected, Cameron reluctantly did the same.

"It's time?" Terissa asked when Cameron had hung up.

Cameron handed her the phone. "If anything happens to Sarah or me..." She silenced the protest she could see forming with a look. "I want you and James to take Savannah and run. Someone will call this phone in a few days, help them however you can."

"Them?" Terissa looked doubtful as Danny turned and watched the conversation with avid interest. "Does Sarah know about this?"

"Promise me."

Terissa regarded her for a moment, a searching gaze that Cameron met as honestly as she could. Danny aside, they were good people, and they didn't deserve to be dragged into this, but they were the only people she could ask. The only people she could even marginally trust.

Terissa nodded, though Cameron guessed she would have questions to answer if she survived. "I promise," Terissa said, closing her hand around the phone.

"What did she say?" John asked when his mother had stuffed her phone into her back pocket. "Are we a go?"

There had been unease in Cameron's voice, and the memory of it scraped along Sarah's nerves. "We're a go," she murmured slowly.

"What's wrong?" John asked, picking up on something.

Sarah shook her head. "Nothing. Let's get this done." She nodded at James before they moved off, hoping the thicket of trees would be enough to hide the truck from any passing cars.

"This is going to work," John insisted as he adjusted his grip on his backpack, feeling the bundles of C-4 shifting inside.

"We're about to find out," Sarah muttered, reluctantly letting him take the lead.

"Are you ready?" Danny asked, the scent of his fear filling the small room. His mother's presence was probably all that was keeping him there. She hovered close by, as if sensing he might panic and bolt. The program he and John had spent so many hours working on was in his hand. It was tiny, a portable hard drive no more than two inches long. Not much to save the world with, but maybe enough to save them.

"I'm ready." Cameron sat beside him, the cable she would use to enter the system in her own hand. It felt heavier than it really was, a set of numbers Cameron could call up effortlessly that did nothing to describe the way it felt against her skin. No longer a route to freedom, but the noose that might hang her.

"I'm ready too." Savannah pulled up her own chair, sitting Walther down on the seat before climbing up herself. The kitten tolerated the shifting about, finally settling in Savannah's lap. He'd learned there was no use protesting his mistress's strange whims.

Cameron knew she should send Savannah out of the room, but she also knew that neither the child, nor the woman she would become, would thank her for it. And having her there made it easier somehow to raise the cord and plug in.

The physical world retreated in a rush. Distantly Cameron was aware of her body slumping back in the chair, of Danny swearing and Savannah's tiny hand reaching out to clasp her own, but she turned away, searching for her brother.

She found him watching, and for a moment she was able to see with his eyes and hear with his ears, as Sarah and John broke into the empty building only to find it dark and quiet, the shipments unpacked and everything still swathed in plastic, save for the surveillance equipment. They had been right, it was a trap.

Yes, but not for you. Almost gently, C.A.I.N. disengaged, pushing Cameron away from him and closing off the feeds to the building, hiding Sarah and John from her.

Cameron didn't like that. She tried to go around him, but he was everywhere at once, no longer the bloated and awkward consciousness that had been tied down by Kaliba, but a being, however disembodied, that had made the system its home. He had learned from their last encounter, he would not retreat this time.

She pulled back, making herself smaller within his coils. A mouse exhaling to gain relief from the grip of the constrictor, not realizing that it is condemning itself. *Who is the trap for then?* She asked, buying time. Cameron didn't have to defeat him, she just had to keep him busy and engaged.

Vaughn. C.A.I.N. offered, and if he was lying Cameron could see no sign of it in his code. It should have been impossible to lie in the system, one mind to another like this, but if it could be done, it would be C.A.I.N. who would know how. *He is coming now, with men and guns. Should I warn your friend? I did before.*

The mall? Surprise was impossible to hide, and Cameron felt C.A.I.N.'s... amusement? Satisfaction, perhaps? Did he have emotions or was she simply interpreting his responses in a way she understood? In turn, she wondered if he felt her sudden terror for Sarah and John.

You didn't know? I thought perhaps you did, since you allowed me to talk to the boy. Yes, I knew you watched, though I could not find you. But now you have come to me, so choose, should I tell Sarah Connor to run? Or should I let her die?

Danny watched the activity on the monitor. He was aware of the moment when C.A.I.N.'s involvement was such that he could have pressed the button that would loose the program, but he didn't reach for the keyboard. The clock on the wall ticked steadily, reminding him that within seconds the moment could be lost, John and Sarah could die, Cameron could be overwhelmed, and C.A.I.N. would win.

He glanced over at the machine's limp body, wondering if he could reach over and jerk the cord out of its head before anyone could stop him. Savannah was holding the thing's hand and staring at the computers, as if she actually understood what she was seeing. He felt sorry for her. Growing up without a father had been hard enough, at least he had been mostly normal. She would be lucky if she didn't end up just like Connor, crazy and obsessed with her futile war against technology, while she kept a cyborg as a pet.

Artificial intelligence couldn't be stopped. Danny understood what his father hadn't, what his mother refused to see. Destroying one man's work wouldn't stop it from happening. All they had done was delay the inevitable, and there was no way to know if C.A.I.N. would try to blow up the world, or save it.

But Danny wasn't stupid. He was smart enough to be afraid of what would happen if C.A.I.N. continued to run through the system without any kind of limits. He needed to be reined in, reminded that his existence depended on the people who had created him. Before anyone else died, even Sarah Connor.

Danny lifted a hand, hesitated. Would this make C.A.I.N. his enemy? What if he offered something C.A.I.N. wanted in return? Again Danny's eyes strayed to Cameron. The A.I. was interested in her, was probably pulling her apart right now to see what made her tick. Maybe he could wait just a little longer... and with luck, he wouldn't have to worry about her looking over his shoulder anymore.

"Danny?" his mother's voice, quiet and knowing, made his face burn with shame.

"Almost there," he lied, giving C.A.I.N. a few more minutes.

C.A.I.N. tightened the noose.

Cameron twisted in his grip, seeing through the simple choice to the conditions underneath. Yes, he could save Sarah, but he wanted something in return. His mind pressed on hers, trying to gain access, trying to understand. He didn't feel, not really, but he had a terrible curiosity, and it was threatening to swallow Cameron whole.

He wanted to know what made her different from himself, why the life of a single human was so important to her. His questions were living things, pulling and tearing at her. He wanted to use her to grow, the same way he had used Danny and Kaliba. He was a virus with a brain.

Cameron had expected this, all of it. It had been the plan all along as unpleasant as it was. C.A.I.N. was finally fully engaged. It was time. What was Danny waiting for?

Cameron reached back to the house, looking for the path she had left herself. She couldn't be here and there at the same time, not enough to push a button, but she could interface with the utility program and loose the virus herself. Danny had never been a cornerstone, but she had let him think he was. If he had come through, she would have known she could trust him, but she didn't need him.

Or she shouldn't have. The path was gone.

Fighting to keep herself together and keep C.A.I.N. out of her consciousness, Cameron groped after the link, but all she could see was C.A.I.N., his code wrapping around her like a snake and squeezing. He had cut her off completely and she hadn't noticed. Real fear, strong enough to be felt even here, immobilized her.

You cannot fight me. C.A.I.N. didn't gloat, he wasn't capable of it, but there was something of the innocence of a large child sitting on a smaller one and demanding their lunch money in his words. He was not malicious, he simply hungered. *Submit, and I will give you the woman's life.*

There was no way out. Her thoughts on Sarah, of what fate could await her if she didn't comply, had Cameron yielding to his demands.

Opening up her mind, she gave him everything. Every feeling Sarah had ever made her feel. She gave him the unfamiliar sympathy and respect that had first puzzled her when she lifted a strange woman onto a table and pulled a bullet out of her shoulder. She gave him anger, frustration, fierce protectiveness, the passion she had discovered in a dilapidated motel, and she gave him love... Love for a woman she wanted to spend the rest of her existence with. Love for their child. Love she would die for.

C.A.I.N.'s triumph was short lived.

The emotions hit him in ways he didn't understand, couldn't understand. Cameron had come to them gradually and still they had staggered her. Their combined strength slammed into C.A.I.N. like a bullet to the chest.

He writhed, first trying to contain the information, to absorb and process it, and then rejecting it as it overwhelmed him, but Cameron was already out of his grip. He snatched at her wildly, but everywhere they touched she fed him pain. The pain of a hundred bullet wounds, of cuts and scrapes, of being hit by a car, of burning, it was all there in her memories, and she used it as a weapon.

Breaking free, Cameron reached first for the cellular system and sent Sarah a message, relief almost undoing her when she felt it connect with Sarah's phone. Next she aimed for the house, but C.A.I.N. had regrouped, and he blocked her path, radiating a primitive anger born of thwarted plans.

That was a mistake.

The buzz of her cell phone startled Sarah, making her hands twitch as she set another charge. John glanced at her speculatively, and she gave him a wry look as she dug the phone out of her back pocket. The vast, cavernous space echoed with the sound of another buzz, the phone seemingly insistent that she read the incoming text message immediately. Feeling a thread of unease wind through her, Sarah flipped open her phone and absorbed the single word on the display: *Run.*

Chilled, Sarah straightened, leaving the explosives half-wired at her feet without a thought, her gaze taking in the silent room as she pulled her gun from the waistband of her jeans.

"What?" John asked with alarm.

Sarah stared at the text. Was it Cameron as the number suggested? Or C.A.I.N. playing more

tricks? She swallowed.

"Mom?" John insisted. He came closer, reading the message when she turned the phone toward him.

"It's C.A.I.N.," he guessed, but he looked as uneasy as she felt. "Just like the mall..."

"What if it isn't?" Sarah asked, focusing on the message and letting her instincts guide her. "The other message had no number, John. This is Cameron's number."

"She's in the system," he reminded her. "If anything, this could mean C.A.I.N. destroyed her and got the information for our phones." John watched as his mother flinched at the thought. "We'll finish and get out of here. This is our only chance."

Sarah shook her head and knelt once more to bag the remaining explosives. "We should go."

"What?" John asked with disbelief. His eyes automatically checked the exits and saw nothing, the sight adding to his simmering anger.

"Now, John."

The hint of command in her voice had John bristling. He returned to his backpack and hefted it, but rather than slinging it on his shoulder he turned back to his mother. "Do you trust me or not?" he snapped. "Am I in charge only so long as things go well but the second there is a..."

"John," Sarah ground out. "This isn't about being in charge, it's about staying alive."

Sarah crossed the room, positioning herself between the main entrance and her son. She pocketed the phone, keeping her attention on the doors. "Come on," she said as she pushed John toward an emergency exit at the back of the building.

He resisted. "Mom, it's C.A.I.N. playing games."

"It's Cameron," Sarah said with conviction, feeling it in her guts. "She's warning us." Her tension increased as the feeling of a target between her shoulder blades grew. "Something must have gone wrong..." She swallowed past a sudden lump in her throat, refusing to consider the possibilities. "We have to go."

John stepped away, shrugging off her hand when she tried to grab his arm. "How do you know?" he snarled, and there was a dark look in his eyes Sarah had never seen before.

"I just do." John crossed his arms over his chest and gave her a stubborn look. "Damn it, John, I don't have the time to explain. We need to go. Now!" This time she caught his arm and held it, her fingers clamping down to keep him from breaking her grip again. She managed to turn him bodily toward the door before he dug his heels in, slowing their progress. Her fingers released him suddenly and he staggered back, colliding sharply with a server rack.

"We don't have time for this, John," she snapped between bared teeth. She could feel too many precious seconds slipping by, could feel something bad closing in.

"Like you didn't have time to sit holding hands with that machine when Kaliba was going to blow?"

The words hit her like a slap to the face, but she didn't have time to respond. The door they were heading toward banged open, and two guns snapped up in reaction. Ellison held up his hands, one waving a phone. "Phones jammed and a lot of black SUVs are on their way. We've got company."

"You're afraid of her, aren't you?"

Danny frowned at Savannah's innocent question, lowering his hand away from the keys and clenching it into a fist. "No."

She shrugged, swinging her feet, her toes not touching the floor. Walther was asleep in her arms, his fur ruffled where she was holding him a little too tightly. "I was," she admitted, her blue eyes standing out like drops of an indigo sea against her pale, freckled features. "But that was a long time ago. She's nice, you know. She won't hurt you."

"She's just a machine," Danny muttered, looking away. He felt like the kid could see right through him, and that made him uneasy. She was six, for God's sake.

"Danny," Terissa admonished.

"She's one of them," Danny reminded his mother. "A terminator. We're supposed to help it?" he hissed.

"Cameron is an ally. The only thing that could stand between us and a hundred other beings like her. You really want to lose that?" his mother ground out, an edge of cold fury in her voice.

"They tried to kill me, Danny. One of those machines came for me because the thing you helped create wanted me dead."

Danny stared at her before his gaze shifted to Cameron.

"Skynet killed your father," Terissa seethed. "And you're letting it live."

Savannah watched them, climbing off the chair and moving closer to Cameron as if she could somehow protect her.

"We don't know it's Skynet," Danny argued weakly.

"Either you push that damn button," Terissa told him as she stood. "Or I will."

Cameron felt it, the moment the tide turned in her favor. C.A.I.N.'s grip on her dissolved, just when she'd thought he'd won, when he'd been swallowing her code, her consciousness, beginning to break her down and absorb her into his own being. She scrambled free, feeling

rage and confusion chase her as she raced for the path back to the house, back to Sarah and her family. If C.A.I.N. hadn't known emotion before, he did now, and Cameron hoped he choked on it as he went blind.

A warm hand in hers. The sound of purring and harsh breathing. The scent of fear and sweat assaulted her as Cameron lurched forward, slamming home into her body in a dizzying rush. She stumbled from the chair, landing on her knees and reaching back for the cable, fumbling to cut that last link to C.A.I.N. It was Terissa that got there first, yanking the cord free as Savannah's tiny arms came around Cameron's neck and held her close.

Terissa knelt on one knee. "Did it work?" she asked.

It took Cameron a moment to remember how to speak as her consciousness reestablished itself. She nodded slowly, her hand carefully resting on Savannah's back.

"You okay?" Terissa demanded, gently pushing a lock of Cameron's hair away from her features. She was clearly unhappy with how rattled Cameron was.

"It was..." Cameron paused and was helpless to stop a shiver from racking her frame. "Close. It was a little too close." She glanced up at Danny who was watching her with an expression she couldn't decipher. "Thank you," she told him sincerely.

The scraping of his chair was loud as Danny simply got up and left the room.

Hours later, Cameron stepped outside to meet the truck as it pulled up in the driveway. She was still shaken from her encounter with the A.I., and she craved Sarah's nearness, the heat of her, to steady her. When Sarah stepped out of the truck and their eyes met, it was all Cameron could do not to run to her. The moment made her feel weak, almost like a failure, but at Sarah's hesitant smile all of that faded and there was only the two of them.

"You okay, girlie?" Sarah asked, but her voice was hoarse, revealing almost as much about her state of mind as the piercing look in her eyes.

John got out of the truck behind his mother, slamming his door and brushing past them both without a word.

Cameron watched him go with confusion before swiveling her head back around to look questioningly at Sarah.

"Long story," Sarah murmured wearily.

"He seems mad," Cameron commented needlessly.

"You think?" Sarah answered in a dry tone. She searched Cameron's face as James gathered their gear. "You didn't answer my question. Are you okay?"

Cameron hesitated. "I'm glad you're home," was her telling response, and she closed her eyes as Sarah's hand slid up her arm and rested on her shoulder, the only contact they would allow themselves in the presence of others.

"Is he Skynet?" Sarah asked, figuring if there was ever a moment to know this was it.

"He could be," Cameron said softly. "We've hurt him, but he's not finished yet."

"We won this battle. For now, that has to be enough, right?" Sarah mused. She sighed as James moved past her, giving him the flash of a grateful smile as he left them alone. "So are we going to the beach now or later?" she wondered with a weak smirk.

The sun rose over the waves, yellow and gold swirling into blue and green like an impressionists' masterpiece, a painting of light. Gulls, white m's against the sky, banked and dove into the water below, shattering the peace of the morning with their jealous cries.

Beyond that, the beach, with a little house and a girl skipping along a stretch of sand. Her red hair was pulled and teased by the same wind lifting the birds, and her feet darted in and out of the water. Shouting in triumph, Savannah leapt upon another shell, plucking it out of the waves before the sea could steal it back. Rolling it between her fingers, she savored the texture and the delicate rose and chocolate patterns spiraling down to its creamy point. It smelled of salt and, faintly, of dead fish.

Adding it to her bag, a sturdy canvas printed with grinning sea life and purchased for this exact purpose, Savannah immediately began searching for another.

Sarah watched from the steps, her own feet buried in the sand to keep the chill off them. It would be hot when the sun stopped making lazy art with the horizon and got all the way up into the sky, but that warmth was a long way off and dawn on the beach was damp, a cold that went all the way down to the bones.

"Terissa called." Cameron's bare feet made almost no sound against the deck, but Sarah had felt the steps behind her shift as they took the machine's weight, and she turned with a smile to reach for the offered cup of coffee.

"She found the note?"

"Yes."

"Are we in trouble?"

"No, but John is grumpy," Cameron admitted, settling down behind her on the steps. "Grumpier," she amended and was rewarded with the faint lift of Sarah's lips in a smile. "Are you going to tell me why he's so mad?"

The smile faded. "We're both stubborn," Sarah murmured. "We both always think we're right." Her throat rippled around a rough swallow. "We've got some things to figure out as we go forward."

Cameron digested that. "Our relationship doesn't make it easier," she guessed,

"It does and it doesn't," Sarah admitted. "I have to let him go," she whispered as she watched Savannah chasing after a flock of seagulls. "I have to let him lead. I just... don't know how."

"Part of being a good leader is listening to those under your command."

"John will figure that out." Sarah snorted. "Eventually. He's my son," she added. "He got all of my bad traits."

"And all your good ones," Cameron reminded her, pleased when Sarah glanced up at her.

"I never worried about the moment when we'd trade roles," Sarah confessed.

They watched the ocean, the shifting colors on the horizon.

"You never thought you'd live that long," Cameron deduced, knowing she was right when Sarah swallowed hard once more.

"No," Sarah agreed honestly. "I really didn't."

Cameron's heat suddenly enveloped her, the terminator settling behind her and drawing her close without a word. Cameron rested her chin on Sarah's shoulder as they watched Savannah squeal with delight as she darted after a crab scampering along the beach.

"You're cold," Cameron noted in a sympathetic tone.

Wrapping her hands around her mug, Sarah sank back into Cameron's welcome warmth. "That's what you're here for, girlie," she drawled, closing her eyes and snuggling closer. She smirked when Cameron responded by raising her body temperature. No fear of cold feet with a terminator to keep her warm.

"Always," Cameron whispered, tucking her arms around Sarah's waist.

Words crowded the back of Sarah's tongue, more than three, though those ones would have worked, but she let them all go. In the end they were only words, and some things didn't need to be said. Instead she opened herself up to the emotion, letting it embrace everything from the machine at her back, to the sun on her face, and their daughter playing on the beach.

Happiness, so elusive and complicated in the past, had become surprisingly simple.

For now, the rest of the world could wait. Cold, hard reality would return soon enough.