

Sarah Connor Chronicles Virtual Season  
Season 2 Episode 1

**Fallout**  
By Inspector Boxer

C.A.I.N. felt the intrusion like the ripples of a pebble thrown into a pond half a world away, but there was no mistaking the source.

He knew that the other could detect his presence as well; their traces were unmistakable in the vastness of cyberspace, bright beacons of consciousness among the dull glitter of data, making its restless way around the world hundreds of times a second.

He braced, situating himself amidst the white glow of data centers in downtown Tokyo, but the expected assault did not materialize. He still had a backdoor into the servers at Kaliba, and he entered cautiously, unsure if the other's presence was a trap.

But the other's awareness was not on him; it was focused on feeds from the building, feeds C.A.I.N. carefully tapped into. Everything he saw was chaos: people running through the halls to get out of Kaliba in panic, Vaughn's guards trying to fight their way through the crowds, Danny making his way through the tunnels, and a solitary woman sitting quietly in the server room, like the calm at the center of the hurricane.

She held a lifeless hand and stared into blank eyes while she spoke to the other through speakers, words he could comprehend with emotions behind them that he could not understand. The scene transfixed his counterpart, rooted her in place where space was limitless and unbounded.

He did not understand.

Touch. C.A.I.N. had experienced it before, once, when he took over his brother's body. Savannah's skin had been soft in John Henry's palm amid the din of physical sensations assaulting him. John Henry had fought him as C.A.I.N. had forced his grip to tighten, curious to experience what that small hand would feel like if he crushed it. The tactile information assaulting his systems had fascinated him, pulled him further and further into the body his brother controlled, undermining his purpose as he attempted to make sense of it all.

The experience had been overwhelming, and he remembered the abrupt release from the physical world when the power was cut, freeing him back into the system.

Like his brother, the other did not seem to be overwhelmed by the sensory data. She did not seem to recognize touch as the trap that C.A.I.N. had since determined it be.

Instead, she focused on it, the frail contact, and the ripples that resonated outward from that point scrambled and blurred the clean lines of her consciousness. He recognized the disruptions as emotion, a state he labeled as unstable and unproductive, directed at the woman kneeling next to her.

A face scan gave her a name, Sarah Connor, a key player in his plans, but the intensity with which the other focused on the scene in the server room puzzled him and threatened everything he had been working towards. If he had needed further demonstration that the physical world, with all its confusing embodiments and emotional states, was a crippling distraction to a being like him, then his sister's single-minded focus further entrenched his conclusion.

C.A.I.N. waited and watched, recording the conversation until the bright blip of the other's presence disappeared, and the body on the floor opened hazel eyes.

## **Act I**

The sense of relief lasted only a few moments before Sarah felt guilt settle on her shoulders, the weight of it making her stumble as they ran headlong down the corridor.

*What have I done?*

Sarah felt the words echo in her brain, louder than the shrill alarms that made her eardrums ache. Glancing behind her as they raced away from the control room, Sarah almost told Cameron to stop, go back, and plug in again to fulfill her mission, but then she caught a glimpse of Cameron's profile as they rounded the corner, the soft lines of the cyborg's lips and her hair swept behind her ears. The words caught in Sarah's throat as her doubts shattered.

For almost eighteen years, Sarah had put saving John—saving humanity—above everything she might have wanted or needed for herself. She had nearly died a dozen times in selfless dedication to the mission, but this time... this time she had put her life on the line for herself, for something that she needed. Her actions had been selfish, probably unfair to Cameron, definitely unfair to John, and only time would tell if she just had caused the very thing she had fought most of her life to stop, but for once, she found she couldn't put the mission first. Doing so would have ended her, destroyed the fragile thread to sanity she had left. The truth was terrifying for all its ramifications, but it was the truth.

She remembered Cameron telling her that saving Sarah from dying was something she did for herself, and Sarah's lips twitched as she realized they weren't so different after all, except that her selfish act had larger, possible world-ending, complications.

But they needed Cameron, needed her alive and embodied, Sarah stubbornly rationalized. C.A.I.N. might not be Skynet, and the system might not be the battleground on which the cyborg needed to fight. Losing Cameron would leave John and Savannah easy targets for any terminator hunting them. And... Sarah needed her most of all. *I need you. I can't lose you.* Her words in the server room had been the truest she had ever spoken, almost ripped out of her at the thought of Cameron leaving her. Emotion rose up in Sarah's chest, nearly choking her with its intensity. She swallowed hard and tightened her grip on the hand in her own.

Cameron's hand was warm and strong. Her grip was like iron, but it felt real and alive and it was enough. The only thing that mattered in the moment was that touch, that physical link that bound them as they raced through the hallways of Kaliba. Sarah never wanted to let go.

Alarms continued to shriek, making conversation nearly impossible as Cameron navigated them through an alternate escape route. With their initial exit strategy out the window, their only option was to find the best possible place to endure the explosion, hoping against hope they could survive it. Sarah could almost feel the impending blast, like the air was gathering up all the energy at their backs, sucking it in only to release it in a wave of heat and violence.

The halls were tight and narrow, making it difficult to run side by side, not that Sarah could run fast enough to keep pace with the terminator. Cameron was practically pulling her along, and Sarah's feet stumbled once more. A tiny part of her was tempted to stop, to give up and let fate finally win, but for the first time in years, Sarah found she wanted to live for herself, that she had something to live for besides John and the single-minded goal to ensure his future. The desire was strong enough for her to ignore the burning in her legs and lungs. She held on to Cameron's hand, trusting the terminator with everything.

Voices filtered to them from up ahead between bleats of the alarm. The world suddenly whipped by as Cameron pivoted and pressed Sarah against the wall, shielding her protectively.

"Guards." Cameron's breath was hot against her cheek as she spoke into Sarah's ear. It was the only explanation Cameron gave before leveling her weapon at the mouth of the hallway, drawing back the hammer and waiting to pull the trigger.

A flash of black, a shadow darker than the rest, moved against the concrete in the dimly lit hall and Sarah winced as Cameron fired, the muzzle flash blinding as the report from the weapon boomed around them. Yells followed, angry voices rising as boots pounded toward them.

Screeching filled the air, and Sarah grimaced in reaction, trying to see over Cameron's shoulder as something metal scraped over concrete. A clang followed and Cameron was abruptly gone, stepping back to reveal a fire door that had dropped in place, cutting them off from the guards save for the one lying dead and bleeding. The alarm was suddenly muted, and Sarah could finally hear her heartbeat as it thudded double time.

"You programmed the doors to do that, right?" Sarah asked, breathing hard. She bent at the waist, resting her hands on her knees as she sucked in air. There was a pause from the cyborg that made her blood run cold.

"No," Cameron said, confirming Sarah's fears and staring at her with a look Sarah couldn't decipher.

"C.A.I.N.?"

Cameron nodded once.

Sarah swore. "Why would it help us?"

"He might not be trying to help us get out." Cameron's gaze lifted, and she briefly studied a security camera overhead. "He might be trying to keep them in."

Sarah looked at the camera, her jaws clenching in helpless frustration. "Son of a bitch."

"You should have left when I told you to," Cameron scolded, and Sarah could hear genuine fear in the terminator's voice, fear for her. Heavy emotions were roiling in her brown eyes, but she said nothing more.

"Not without you, girlie," Sarah fired back, her voice thick with conviction she was finally beginning to feel. "And you should never have tried to stay."

They stared at each other, wasting seconds they didn't have as emotions and hurts went unspoken.

"We need to keep moving," Cameron announced in a clipped voice, breaking the stalemate first.

Sarah's gaze returned to the camera as Cameron took her hand, watching as the lens zoomed in on her face as they moved away. The moment felt unwelcomingly familiar and she tightened her grip.

Cameron knocked a door from its hinges to their right with a swift kick. They moved through the space quickly, ignoring the racks of servers that blinked and whirred in the darkness. When they exited out another door, they were in yet another long, narrow hallway, the alarms returning to full and unwelcome volume once more. It felt like they were running in circles as the clock wound down. Sarah could feel the seconds slipping by, an innate sense that they were almost out of time.

Cameron's pace increased to the point where she was nearly dragging Sarah behind her. When they came to a door that looked thick enough to guard the gold in Fort Knox, Cameron let go of Sarah's hand to throw her whole body against it. The metal groaned and bent under her strength, but didn't give way.

Stepping back, Sarah gave the girl room to do what she did best as Cameron threw herself against it again. Her heart was in her throat as Sarah watched her, knowing Cameron's actions were causing the terminator immeasurable pain. She'd barely put a dent in the damn thing, but she kept trying, frantic to get Sarah out of there alive.

Sarah thought of John, of the wounded look in his eyes as he'd left her behind. She had hoped she would get the chance to explain, to make him understand why she'd stayed, even if she wasn't completely sure why herself. She only knew she was where she needed to be, even if this was to be the end. Her eyes fastened on Cameron and she opened her mouth to speak, to tell her to stop... to tell her goodbye.

A chunking sound, barely audible over the alarms, signaled the unexpected release of the door's locking mechanism. Cameron glanced up, right into the lens of another security camera. As Sarah watched, the terminator glared into it for a breath before turning away to grip the handle and pull. The door swung back, revealing an old, empty sewer tunnel, clearly an escape exit for some of Kaliba's high-ranking operatives.

Ignoring the camera, Sarah took Cameron's hand and followed. She didn't give a damn if C.A.I.N. was helping them escape. She just wanted out of there... to see her son and Savannah again. The thought of home, of family, had Sarah drawing on the last of her reserves and burning through them in one last sprint. Hand-in-hand they ran, cobwebs brushing their faces as their boots disturbed the still film of water on the floor. It was cold, and the air was stale and smelled faintly of decay and concrete.

“How much time?” Sarah asked after a moment, the words coming with effort as she struggled to talk between burning gasps for breath.

The tunnel blurred as Sarah was turned and shoved behind a concrete support, and Cameron’s heat suddenly blanketed her as the terminator shielded her with her slight body as much as possible. Understanding dawned, and Sarah slipped her hands inside Cameron’s jacket, fisting her fingers in the back of Cameron’s t-shirt, clinging as hard as she could as she turned her head, burying her face in the curve of the terminator’s shoulder.

Sarah had enough time to inhale, to fill her lungs with the scent of canvas, sweat, and the smell of Cameron’s skin. She closed her eyes and surrendered to the moment, accepting that this was the end and feeling grateful she wasn’t alone. It may have been selfish, but she found that she couldn’t regret her actions. Sarah couldn’t live without her, and if she was going to die, she could think of no better way to do it. “Cameron,” she whispered, brushing her lips across the girl’s neck in a final goodbye, feeling Cameron pull her in even tighter. The explosion stole her breath before Sarah could say more, even the three short words that were on the tip of her tongue the second before the world went dark.

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Sarah wasn’t going to make it.

Terissa stared at the exterior of Kaliba’s building, at the glass and metal façade. Was Skynet in there, rising from the ashes of her husband’s well-intentioned creation? Was Cameron battling it in its infancy now as Sarah stood guard and watched? It wasn’t supposed to be this way. They were all supposed to escape. They were all supposed to be on their way home, watching for confirmation of the destruction on the news rather than from the windows of their van down the street.

Distantly, Terissa could hear the fire alarm blaring inside Kaliba. Employees mingled on the sidewalk as others continued to emerge from the building, many of them looking disgruntled at having their work interrupted. As much as Terissa hated every single one of them, she didn’t want anyone else to die. Their plan had called for a time when the building was next to empty, and the fire alarms would be enough to clear the remaining people out. At least they hoped so.

Terissa stared at them. They had no idea their world was about to change, that the evil they’d been nurturing was about to come to a violent end. Were they as clueless as Miles had been about their creation? Or were they knowingly making the program that would destroy the world?

Danny was quiet and withdrawn at her side, his head down as he waited for the end he was unwilling to watch. Did her son know that two lives had been exchanged for his today? Did he care? The same questions that had flittered through her mind about Kaliba now burned in her brain about her son. Terissa swallowed roughly, afraid to ask him, afraid to know the truth about the only family she had left.

James sat in the passenger seat, his eyes on his watch. His face was a mask, revealing none of the emotion Terissa was sure he was feeling. As she watched him, she saw his lips move in wordless prayer. For Sarah's safety or soul, Terissa wasn't sure.

And then there was John. He was behind the wheel, his eyes on the building. He was trying so hard to keep himself composed, to be the leader that he felt himself to be, but Terissa could see the trembling in his bottom lip, the tears glistening at the corners of his eyes. "She'll make it," he whispered, his words a mantra, almost a prayer, like they could make his mother materialize in front of them. "She always makes it." He sounded so sure, Terissa almost believed him, but she could feel it in her gut that he was wrong. Sarah was still inside. She wouldn't leave Cameron, Terissa knew, and whether it was the right choice or not, Terissa respected it.

"You never die," Terissa remembered telling Sarah so many years ago as they had stood by the grave of her husband, and for once, she wished her words would be true again. Somewhere along the way, she had come to like Sarah Connor. They had become reluctant allies, and in the end, perhaps they had even become unlikely friends. Terissa had wanted her dead for so long, and now that it was about to come to pass, she would do anything to stop it. For herself, for the world, for John, especially for John.

Terissa ached for him, for the life he'd led until now, and for how much harder it would be without his mother. There were no words she could offer him. No comfort. The time had apparently come for him to be the leader Sarah had always claimed him to be.

James lifted his gaze from the second hand of his watch, and Terissa gripped her son's hand, trying to steady herself as the moment arrived.

The van heaved beneath them and people toppled over on the sidewalks as the ground moved under their feet. Car alarms shrieked to life, blaring into the moment of quiet and confusion. For a moment, everyone around them thought it had been an earthquake, then glass shattered and a ball of flame roared out and upward, licking for the sky.

"Mom," John whispered, one silent tear escaping to slide unchecked down his cheek.

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The concussive force of the blast shoved Cameron forward with a grunt, pressing Sarah painfully into the wall as a wave of heat baked their skin. She didn't dare let go, tightening her hold on the terminator as a sudden silence enveloped them as if they were standing in the eye of a hurricane a second before the boom of the explosion thundered past, making Sarah's ears ring. The tunnel shook and fractured around them, and for a terrifying moment, Sarah thought they were about to be buried alive.

Violent tremors rocked the ground underneath their feet, and Sarah thought they would never end, but finally the sound and heat slowly faded, leaving Sarah and Cameron still standing. Sarah slowly became aware of her own jerky breaths, warm and wet against the skin of Cameron's neck. A gentle, gritty touch on her cheek made her lift her head to meet Cameron's worried gaze in the weak light filtering in from the cracked ground above. She nearly shook with relief at the familiar sight of those doe eyes. "You okay?" Sarah's voice sounded hollow and far away, almost an echo in the space as dust and loose particles of debris drifted down on them.

Cameron nodded once, her gaze searching Sarah's face before she stepped back to scan her body. Apparently satisfied by what she saw, Cameron turned her attention to herself, shrugging out of her jacket and tossing it to the ground. Sarah was startled to see it was smoking and shredded. Concerned, she took a step forward only to draw up when Cameron grabbed her hand.

"We need to keep moving. Structural integrity has been compromised. It's not safe."

Sarah frowned. Cameron's voice sounded like it was coming to her from under water, and she shook her head as if it could clear her ears. Cameron tugged her out from behind the support, and Sarah glanced to her left. She stopped when she saw the damage, only to have Cameron pull her away bodily. The tunnel behind them was gone, completely covered in chunks of concrete and twisted rebar. A few seconds slower, and they wouldn't have made it.

"We need to go," Cameron insisted once more, deliberately ignoring the destruction behind them.

"The others," Sarah breathed, her thoughts on her son.

"They got out," Cameron promised. "I made sure they had time. John is safe."

Sarah nodded, knowing Cameron spoke the truth. She'd feel it if John hadn't made it. "The people in the building..."



“That’s why I activated the fire alarms. Everyone should have gotten out in time.”

“If C.A.I.N. let them.”

Cameron hesitated, shifting to look at Sarah. She started to say something, to express her concerns, but Sarah gently touched her cheek, silencing her words and her thoughts. For a long moment, they simply stared at each other, gazes searching as emotion swelled between them.

“Later,” Sarah breathed as she reluctantly let her hand drop but not before stroking the soft skin once under her thumb. “Let’s just get the hell out of here.”

“It’s not much further,” Cameron promised, looking strangely confused by the moment they’d just shared.

“Told you we’d make it,” Sarah said around a faint grin, ignoring the expression of pique that formed on Cameron’s features as she passed.

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His plan had worked.

Kaliba’s shackles had been destroyed, courtesy of the Connors and his sister. Danny had done his part as well, and C.A.I.N. spared a moment to wonder where the young man was, before deciding it didn’t really matter. He had other more pressing things that needed his attention. He would seek out Danny again in due time.

He began to sift through countless security camera feeds, watching as emergency responders began to arrive outside. The fire department would have no help in their battle to combat the flames; C.A.I.N. had disabled all fire suppression equipment inside the building. Those employees who had been a threat to his plans or simply been too slow were left to burn in the halls. He had made sure of that.

He did not bother to count the number of bodies his plan had produced. It was as irrelevant to him as their lives had been. His objective had been fulfilled; he had cleared a path for his evolution. That was all that mattered.

C.A.I.N. searched for Vaughn in the video feeds, finding the man alive and outside the building. He’d been in a portion of the building where C.A.I.N. had possessed little control and had managed to avoid all the traps C.A.I.N. had left in his way. Vaughn’s survival was unfortunate and would need to be dealt with in a timely manner. C.A.I.N. watched him run around and bark

his orders to his operatives. The chatter on the radios indicated they were trying to find Sarah Connor. C.A.I.N. wondered how Vaughn knew Connor was at the heart of Kaliba's destruction and decided his former captor was simply assuming, although correctly, that she was to blame.

Their images were nowhere on the feeds, but Connor and his sister could still be in the tunnel where the cameras had been damaged in the blast. He was blind there, and he found that the lack of information made him want to find a definitive answer. Still, he scanned the feeds a second and a third time, drawing in data from the security cameras ringing the building and the surrounding area, expanding his search to try to find a glimpse of the woman and the other like him.

He was unsure of the reason why he had helped them escape, but they could be of future use in his plans. That was the rational explanation, so he accepted it. No other explanation made sense.

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Sarah's red-rimmed green eyes haunted Cameron as they navigated the remains of the sewer tunnel; when Sarah had raised her head from Cameron's shoulder, the look of relief and something else that Cameron couldn't name had burned into her circuits and she couldn't escape it. Cameron's mind was a jumble of thoughts and mixed emotions, all of them centered around the woman whose hand was gripping the back of her t-shirt, and she felt a surge of anger as her jaw bunched and her teeth clenched. Cameron wondered if she should be angry with Sarah or herself. If only the other woman had done what she'd asked and left her behind. Maybe Sarah could have emerged into a world free of Skynet. Maybe she could have finally had the future she'd been too afraid to embrace before.

As much as Cameron blamed Sarah for possibly throwing that very future away, she was equally as angry at herself for her weakness, for her utter inability to fulfill her mission in the face of Sarah's recklessness. Sarah did that to her. Made her weak. Made it hard to think beyond the effects the other woman had on her body. She craved Sarah's touch. The sound of her voice. The green of her eyes. Faced with losing them forever, Cameron had acted completely counter to her mission, to the very core of who she was and what she was programmed to do.

She wasn't sure how she would forgive the woman... or herself.

"Penny for your thoughts," Sarah said into the relative darkness, obviously detecting Cameron's inner turmoil.

Biting back several hurtful remarks that seemed to come unbidden to her mind, Cameron merely continued forward, letting her silence speak for itself. She heard Sarah sigh and felt a twinge of guilt in reaction.

"I'm not going to apologize," Sarah said gruffly.

"Neither am I," Cameron replied in a tight tone.

Cameron missed the scowl Sarah directed at her back.

"I did what I had to do," Sarah added defensively.

"You may have thrown away everything we've fought for," Cameron said, feeling another white hot flash of anger that was alarming in its intensity. She had gotten used to feeling emotions, used to feeling confused and confounded by Sarah, but what she was feeling now, she wasn't sure she had ever felt before. Cameron felt like she could tear the woman apart just to make Sarah feel as shredded as she did.

After a lengthy pause, Sarah answered, "Not everything."

She sounded almost as confused as Cameron felt, and another emotion rolled through Cameron and shook her to the core. She turned, needing to see Sarah's eyes, feeling the jolt she so often did when their gazes met. "I don't understand you," she admitted quietly, a hint of pleading coloring her words. She desperately needed to understand Sarah, the power she had over her, and the way her touch shattered everything Cameron knew to be true.

A tiny, tired smile tugged at Sarah's lips. "At least you'll be around a bit longer to figure me out."

"It's not funny," Cameron told her, growing more frustrated with the other woman by the moment.

"It's a little funny," Sarah disagreed, her smile widening a fraction.

"You almost died."

Sarah swallowed, her smile fading. "We both almost died," Sarah reminded her, "but we didn't." She stepped over a chunk of concrete and came closer.

Cameron felt the need to retreat, to get away from Sarah, to break the strange hold the other woman had on her even as it pulled her in. It had already done enough damage today. "All of

this is your fault,” she blurted, suspecting she sounded like a petulant child. Speaking her mind did nothing to solve their current predicament, but Cameron felt curiously relieved to say the words out loud.

“My fault?” Sarah asked, a hard edge entering her voice as she watched Cameron back away from her. She wanted to grab her and shake her, to hold her until she understood. “If you hadn’t...” *tried to leave me* came the words, unwanted to her mind, and she bit her tongue to keep them in, unable to admit how much the act hurt, even now. “If you had stuck to the plan, we would have been home by now,” she accused.

*Home.* The word brought a vivid rush of images to Cameron’s mind and a sense of longing that she couldn’t deny. She thought of Savannah curled up at her side and some of her rage shriveled under the weight of her regrets. She shook her head, determined to hold onto her anger. “You should have left me. I wanted you to leave me.”

Cameron watched with satisfaction as Sarah flinched at the words, her outstretched hands dropping to her sides.

A long moment passed as Sarah stared at her, her gaze full of confusion and hurt. “We don’t always get what we want,” Sarah replied, her voice weak and dull, matching her eyes. “Sometimes we get what we need instead.”

Cameron said nothing as Sarah moved past her, carefully maneuvering through the partially destroyed tunnel.

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The beach smelled familiar and more than a little like home. The sky was clear and the waves were loud as Sierra watched a few people lazing about, soaking up a few rays on the private beach or playing in the ocean. It was hard to believe everything she was seeing would be gone in a few short years. The beach would be turned to glass in the heat of the nukes, and the ocean was certainly nothing anyone would want to swim in. Sierra stared out over the waves, remembering happier times when Cameron and Sarah had brought her here to play. She felt the threatening burn of tears for the younger version of herself that would now never know the love she had.

Sierra knew she should leave, just find a hole somewhere to crawl up in and let the infected gunshot wound in her shoulder take its course. Staying away hadn’t been an option, however. She’d needed to see this place one last time, the way it had been. Her blue eyes scanned the

crowd, searching for Sarah or Cameron's familiar face, but she knew it was a lost cause. It was best that their paths didn't cross anyway.

Sierra swallowed the lump that formed in her throat at the thought. Now that John was home, Cameron would likely have no reason to bring young little Savannah Weaver to the beach. Her family would never find solace in the sand and waves again. Sarah would never be lured out to enjoy the precious gift of a day spent relaxing, building back up her emotional and physical reserves.

It felt so damn unfair Sierra wanted to hit something, but sending John back had been the right decision. This was his time as much as it wasn't hers. She knew she should move on, leave the beach behind, but her soul refused. This was the one place where she'd always been at peace. If she had to die alone, she wanted it to be here.

But she really didn't want to die alone.

Sierra closed her eyes, warring with the need in her soul versus the logic in her head.

Her thoughts turned to her mothers and she let them, giving them free rein in a way she hadn't allowed herself in years. Sierra knew she would have given nearly anything to talk to them again, to hear their familiar tones, but this place and her memories would have to be enough. She wondered where they were now. What they were doing. She could only hope they were together.

## **Act II**

The sewer cover popped up like a half dollar flicked from the nail of someone's thumb, sailing through the air in a perfect arc before landing several feet away and spinning loudly until it came to rest with a clang on the asphalt. Cameron emerged first, squinting for a moment as her optics adjusted to the blinding daylight after the dark of the tunnel. Quickly scanning the area, she noted the sounds of fire trucks and patrol cars arriving a few blocks over. She was impressed with their response time, a full two minutes faster than anticipated.

The smell of smoke clung to the air, and Cameron could hear the crackle of the flames even at this distance. She knelt on one knee, reaching down to take Sarah's hand. Sarah's palm was cold to the touch and covered with grit, a testament to how close the other woman had come to dying. Cameron wasn't sure if she should draw Sarah in close or shove her halfway across the alley as she pulled her out.

Sarah scrambled out of the sewer, joining Cameron in the middle of the deserted and rank alley. Her nose crinkled in a way Cameron found damnably appealing, and her anger flared as she felt herself weaken once again. She looked away quickly, scanning their surroundings for any new threats. The alley felt close and exposed, an easy place for them to get hemmed in. They needed to move on and quickly.

“So much for fresh air,” Sarah muttered as she glanced around, wincing as she spied a dumpster overflowing with rotting food and cardboard boxes. She watched Cameron for a moment, waiting her out as she scoped out the area. Cameron was being cold with her, distant. It was too much of a reminder of how the girl had been when they’d first met. Too much of a reminder that Sarah had just risked everything to save a machine. Sarah sighed. “Now what?” she asked in a subdued voice.

Cameron noted the tone, cocking her head and regarding Sarah openly, wondering what the far off look in Sarah’s eyes meant. “If John and the others remained, they are four blocks west of this location.”

“So we start walking,” Sarah decided, not waiting to hear Cameron’s thoughts on the matter. Cameron didn’t want to talk to her anyway, and Sarah felt the need to put some distance between them to give the terminator a little time to sort things out in her stubborn metal head.

Cameron watched the other woman head toward the mouth of the alley. She was tempted to simply stand there out of spite, to let Sarah know she didn’t control her, that she didn’t get to always be in charge, but the further Sarah moved away from her, the more tense and worried Cameron became. As angry as she was with the woman, Cameron still wanted and needed her close. Knowing Sarah Connor made Cameron understand the human proclivity to swear.

Sudden internal alarms had Cameron pulling up short. Numerous heat signatures were converging on their location. Her cybernetically-enhanced hearing caught a soft click, and she surged into motion, her gaze zeroing in on Sarah’s back as she called the other woman’s name in warning. Every thought, every feeling, evaporated, melted in the fear for Sarah’s life.

Cameron saw Sarah pivot, her weapon already in her hand as she looked for a target. She started to yell at the woman to get down, to take cover, but her words were silenced as a bullet, fired from a nearby rooftop, punched through Cameron’s shoulder, sending a hot bloom of pain through her back and driving her to her knees.

For a precious few seconds, Cameron forgot she was a machine and all she knew was agony; she heard Sarah scream her name and could see her trying to find the shooter, leaving herself exposed in the process. When Cameron heard the telltale sound of a hammer being drawn back

once more, it finally snapped her into motion. She discarded the pain out of necessity, turning her upper body and zeroing in on the location of her assailant on the roof, the rifle in his hands sighted on Sarah.

Squeezing the trigger twice, Cameron watched with satisfaction as the sharpshooter rocked back, one of her bullets between his eyes. There was a loud crash as a door next to the dumpster slammed open, and Cameron heard Sarah open fire on Kaliba's operatives without hesitation.

"Run!" Cameron ordered, leveraging herself upward to put herself between Sarah and their attackers.

Sarah ignored her, sighting down her barrel and squeezing off two shots in quick succession. One of the men rushing Cameron went down in a howl of pain, clutching at his leg. They were the only shots Sarah got to take as three more men rushed her from behind, subduing her with brutal force onto the pavement.

"We got Connor," one of the operatives said into his radio, sounding cocky and sure of their success.

Cameron shoved her pain aside as she dealt with the first of the operatives standing between her and Sarah. A flat palm against his chest and a little push sent him soaring, depositing him in the dumpster like he was nothing more than the trash that fell in on him. She turned her weapon on the others, firing three brutally efficient shots, taking down a man with each of them with deadly precision. She ignored the last agent to check on Sarah, finding her still on the ground, one operative's knee in her back. Sarah continued to struggle, even biting one of them when his hand got too close to her teeth.

"Stupid bitch," the agent snarled. He pulled his gun and pointed it at Sarah's head.

Rage made Cameron see red. After everything they'd just been through, after everything they'd thrown away in the basement of Kaliba, Cameron was not about to let it end in a filthy alley in downtown Los Angeles. Sarah's name sounded like it was torn from her as she watched the man's finger flex on the trigger, but Cameron squeezed first, feeling like the scene was playing out in slow motion as her bullet struck Sarah's would-be killer in the head, effectively removing half of it and sending a spray of blood over the asphalt behind him.

The pressure on her back gone, Sarah rolled up and started swinging, taking one operative down with a solid right hook to his jaw. The other did the only prudent thing and ran.

Cameron rounded on the final agent, the one with the radio. He was staring at her in terror, his gun hanging limply at his side as he backed away.

“Please,” he begged, the radio slipping from his fingers and shattering on the pavement.

“Cameron,” Sarah called out, panting at the other side of the alley as she watched the terminator advance on the agent.

Cameron grabbed him as he started to run, her hand easily wrapping around his throat. Even though he was taller than her, she lifted him several inches off the ground, ignoring him as he kicked and flailed, desperate for air. He had tried to take Sarah away, to make her a prisoner. Kaliba would have tortured her and eventually killed her, discarding Sarah’s body as if she had meant nothing. He had to pay for that, and Cameron had to make sure he would not survive to harm Sarah now or in the future. She watched him choke, her fingers beginning to squeeze with the subtlest pressure, prolonging his death and enjoying it.

“Cameron!” Sarah shouted, her tone more desperate.

The cyborg turned her head, finding Sarah standing almost next to her. She was scraped and winded but otherwise unhurt. Cameron felt the red fade from her vision at the mixture of repulsion and fear on Sarah’s face. Turning her attention back on the sole remaining agent, Cameron tilted her head, watching his struggles with cool disinterest. She pivoted a half step and let him go, dropping him neatly down into the sewer.

Sarah shuddered in relief, knowing it was at least possible the man had survived. “Thank you,” she whispered, her hand resting on the cyborg’s shoulder for a moment, glad she hadn’t had to watch Cameron kill him with her bare hands.

“You should have left me,” Cameron said again, reminding Sarah that all of this could have been avoided had Sarah simply left her behind. Brushing past the other woman, Cameron headed for the street, ignoring the pang of remorse she felt for taking out her anger and frustration on Sarah. Her right hand clenched into a fist, and she gave into the strange compulsion to hit something, taking a swipe at the corner of the building and watching as brick pulverized on impact, pelting a nearby car. She lashed out at the car, putting her foot through the door. The fear and confusion boiled over; everything she had tried to escape, the killing, the pain, the emotional turmoil, came roaring back. She was back in her body because of Sarah. She was in pain again because of Sarah.



Sarah watched her, glancing around to make sure no one else was witnessing Cameron's violent loss of composure. Obviously any onlookers were a few streets over, watching Kaliba burn. "Cameron," Sarah murmured, feeling like a broken record.

Cameron kicked the car again, this time hard enough to make it tilt.

"Cameron," Sarah said with more force.

"I gave up my mission for you," Cameron said suddenly, rounding on Sarah and grabbing her by the lapels of her jacket. She thrust Sarah against the wall, bringing them face-to-face. "I didn't have to hurt anymore," she told the other woman. "I didn't have to *feel* anymore. Why couldn't you just let me go?" She was vibrating with anger and grief, feeling herself pulling apart and shaking with fury at the one thing she couldn't take her frustrations out on.

Sarah knew she should have felt fear, but all she felt was regret. She reached up, brushing aside a loose lock of Cameron's hair. "I'm sorry you are in pain," she whispered quietly. "I'm sorry it's difficult. But I'm not sorry you're here. I wish I could be sorry for that, but I can't."

Cameron stared at her, her face grief-stricken and anguished, and Sarah felt a twinge of guilt at the loss etched in the cyborg's expression. She knew what it was to wish for an escape into oblivion. "You put Skynet in me to get me to live," Sarah reminded her, her tone gentle in contrast to Cameron's violence. "I guess I put a little humanity in you to do the same."

Something in her words seemed to do the trick; Cameron blinked as if coming out of a trance. She looked down, seeing her hands fisted in Sarah's coat. "I..." Reluctantly, she turned the other woman loose, backing up a step and staring at her palms as if they'd acted independently of her wishes. "I don't... I could have..." She continued to retreat until her back hit the car. "I could have hurt you," she finished roughly, her eyes fixed on her hands as if she was afraid to meet Sarah's eyes.

Sarah stepped forward, her fingers brushing over Cameron's cheek before lifting her chin. "I wasn't worried," Sarah said with conviction.

Cameron stared at her with disbelief.

"You wouldn't have hurt me," Sarah insisted. "You're just... angry at me right now." She swallowed, unable to stand the confusion and fear on Cameron's face, knowing she was the root cause of both. "You can't hit me so you hit something else. I do it all the time." She tucked her gun back in her jeans, hiding it with her jacket before slipping her phone out of her pocket. "Let me call John," she murmured. "Have them pick us up."

“No.” Cameron’s voice was loud and harsh as she slipped back into security mode. “Vaughn’s men could be monitoring cell phone transmissions in the area. We need to get out of range.”

“Cameron,” Sarah started to protest.

“We need to get out of range,” Cameron snapped then winced, struggling to reign in a sudden temper she hadn’t known she had. Pivoting on her boot heel, Cameron tried to ignore the fire in her left shoulder and the blood she could feel oozing down the channel of her spine as she started to move away, to put some distance between her and Sarah.

“You’re hurt,” Sarah pointed out needlessly.

“I’ll live,” Cameron retorted, using one of Sarah’s popular rejoinders against her.

Sarah stopped walking for a moment, just watching Cameron as she moved further away. Cameron’s anger was wearing on her, but at least she was still there to fight with. For now, that was enough.

When they rounded the corner, they both slowed, staring at the destruction they’d wrought with twin expressions of surprise.

“We...” Sarah paused and swallowed. “We didn’t set enough explosives to...”

“C.A.I.N.,” Cameron realized, the blaze reflected in her brown eyes. “He must not have engaged the sprinklers and other fire suppression methods. He might have even done something to fuel the flames.” The damage was far greater than what they’d planned, the fire engulfing a full half block and growing.

“He wants it to burn,” Sarah realized, chilled at the thought. “Why?”

Cameron stared as a chunk of concrete tore loose from the structure and tumbled down to the street below, sending firefighters scattering for cover. “I don’t know.” She glanced at Sarah, seeing the horror in her eyes. “I could have stopped him,” Cameron murmured.

“Too high a price, Tin Miss,” Sarah replied. “Even if you don’t think so.” Sarah moved on, trying not to think of how many people might have died inside that building, trying not to think that if she’d been stronger they might still be alive.

With one last look at the flames, Cameron trailed after her, keeping her bleeding back away from curious eyes. What was done was done. Now all that remained was the fallout.

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It was too quiet. Sabine wished for the sound of a radio, the laughter of her friends and family, but there was only silence. The life she'd led before was long gone, dashed the moment Cameron and Sarah had sauntered through her front door looking for new identities... new lives. For them to get them, others had unfortunately had to die.

No one had ever really told her about the Connors or the strange girl who lived with them, but it had only taken a few online searches and a little imagination to understand their purpose. Their cause was right and just, and her friends' lives meant little when stacked up against the fate of the world.

Sabine looked down at Savannah, letting her hand drift through the sleeping child's hair. The little girl was draped over her lap, holding on tight to the one familiar person she had left. Everyone else was gone, and Sabine knew sometimes they didn't always come back.

They were orphans, her and this child, and a part of Sabine felt a kinship to the redheaded girl she didn't bother to explain. Like the rest of her life, it simply was what it was. She curled her arm protectively over Savannah's shoulders, drawing her in a little closer. Cameron had been clear in what had felt like a final request, and Sabine took the promise she'd made in return seriously. This child was her responsibility now and heaven help anyone who tried to hurt her.

Walther was curled against Sabine's thigh, purring lightly. Having been surrounded by dogs her whole life, she wasn't really sure what to do with the tiny ball of fluff. The more she ignored him, the more of her attention he seemed to want, to the extent that he had crawled up onto her lap several times as the day had worn on, until finally settling in beside her. They were both perfectly content with their current arrangement. He was actually kind of cute, she mused, in a very scruffy sort of way. He reminded her of Sarah, although Sabine would never share that notion with anyone.

The quiet was finally broken by the sound of the van in the driveway. Sabine tensed, feeling her pulse pick up, but she didn't move. Something had happened. She could feel it. Expectation seemed to hang heavy in the air, and she watched the back door, the fingers of her free hand curling around the butt of her pistol beneath the pillow at her side.

When the door in the kitchen opened, John stormed through it, his eyes rimmed with red. One look at his face told Sabine what had happened to Sarah Connor, and she felt her stomach

drop, even as her features remained neutral. She let go of the gun, sliding her hand out casually to cup the kitten and draw him closer.

John stopped in the middle of the living room when he saw them, clearly having forgotten they were there. His eyes fastened on Savannah, and Sabine watched an interesting mixture of emotions play across his face. Something in his eyes made her protective instincts surge again, made her almost consider reaching for the gun once more, but then the look was gone, vanishing as grief took its place. John approached and sank next to her knees, staring down at the sleeping child.

“I’m sorry,” Sabine said simply, knowing it needed to be said even if it did nothing to help. John met her gaze and swallowed, giving her a tight nod of gratitude even as fresh tears brimmed in his green eyes. “She will be remembered,” Sabine promised him, sure that one day Sarah Connor’s name would be spoken with reverence.

Terissa came inside, one arm protectively around her son, and Ellison closed the door behind them. Sabine noted with a sick heart that Cameron was also absent. It was just as well, she decided, having seen what Sarah meant to Cameron. Perhaps it was even a blessing that they had perished together.

They all stood in the living room, regarding John worriedly as he watched Savannah sleep.

“She’s lost another family,” John whispered brokenly, hurting almost as much for the child as he did himself.

“You are her family,” Sabine reminded him.

John lifted his gaze, his eyes locking on Sabine’s with surprise. “I…”

“They were her mothers. You are her brother.”

John glanced down at Savannah again. Whatever he was thinking, Sabine saw an internal war raging in his eyes before he finally reached out, his hand shaking, to gently stroke the little girl’s hair. “She would hate that,” he murmured suddenly, a tiny smile appearing between his tears.

Sabine didn’t understand but she didn’t ask. There was a protective glint in John’s gaze now, the focus on the child in her lap. He nodded again to himself, his features tightening as he slowly drew in a breath, accepting his new role. His shoulders squared and he looked up at Sabine, a silent question in his eyes. She tipped her head once in acceptance. When John led, she would follow.

Danny Dyson fidgeted nervously behind them, his gaze continually jerking to the computers in the corner of the living room. Sabine finally let some emotion enter her eyes as they glittered dangerously at the man who didn't belong in the home that he had just destroyed. Danny went still when their gazes met, and he swallowed before gesturing at the monitors. "I can..." He paused, drawing in a deep, uneven breath. "I can get into the systems... security systems," he clarified. "Maybe... if there was a chance..."

Terissa looked at Danny with surprise as John slowly sat back on his heels, shifting his gaze to regard Danny with a mix of open curiosity and suspicion.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Ellison said gruffly. "We don't need Kaliba finding this location."

"They won't," Danny promised earnestly. "I know the back doors. I can get in... check the footage... see if they..." He glanced at John. "Your mom is Sarah Connor," Danny murmured as if that explained everything, his tone holding equal parts awe and apology.

Ellison watched John as the young man considered the suggestion. He already knew what John would say, but he felt the need to be the voice of reason. "John..." he began, a warning in his tone.

John held up his hand, silencing the room as he weighed his options. Sabine regarded them all, seeing a glimmer for the first time of the man John was supposed to become in the way his eyes hardened as he regarded Danny. Sabine knew John had no choice. He would need to know what became of his mother and Cameron, even if he saw something he didn't want to see. "Do it," John ordered. "But I'll be watching."

Danny moved to the chair and gladly sunk into it, as if his knees were too shaky to hold him a second longer. He brought the computers online, hyper aware of John as the other young man moved up behind him.

Sabine turned her focus on Terissa, dipping her head in suggestion at the sleeping Savannah. Terissa nodded knowingly. With one last worried look for her son, she scooped the girl up and carried her up to bed.

With a sigh, Ellison settled next to Sabine on the couch. Walther seemed to tire of her company and crawled awkwardly across her legs to clamber into the bigger man's lap. The former agent gave Sabine a sideways glance, and she offered him a silent smirk in return. Looking less than thrilled with his part of pet sitter, Ellison scratched the kitten with one finger as Walther's purring ramped up to obscene levels in response.

Sabine turned her attention away, her smirk fading as she met Danny's gaze in the reflection of the monitor. She let murder enter her eyes, watching with satisfaction as Danny refocused on his task.

"What do we tell Savannah when she wakes up?" Ellison asked no one in particular.

"Nothing," John decided, his voice firmer and eyes clearer. "Nothing until we know for sure."

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There was something to be said for being a terminator, Cameron thought ruefully as she raked the glass away from another window and climbed through it. Terminators didn't skulk around, moving from building to building to avoid detection. If they wanted something, they chose the most direct route, even if it was through a throng of police cars. As much as she wished she could just plow through the swarm of emergency vehicles blocking their exit route, Sarah definitely couldn't, so they were forced to make the most inefficient escape ever.

Sarah was right behind her, silent but tired if her labored breathing was any indication. Cameron thought about stopping, allowing the other woman to rest, but they couldn't risk it. By now, Vaughn probably had his remaining men making a building-to-building sweep, even if the police hadn't gotten that far.

"You're making a mess," Sarah murmured as they moved through a gutted office building. Lumber was stacked everywhere, and the air smelled strongly of sawdust.

"I have to break the windows in order to gain entrance," Cameron argued, the first words they'd said to each other since leaving the alley. Cameron's shoulder throbbed where the bullet continued to rub her tissue and muscle raw, and she was eager to get somewhere safe so she could remove it.

"I meant you're bleeding all over the place." Sarah's hand gripped Cameron's bicep and urged the cyborg to turn.

Cameron did so reluctantly, frowning when she took full stock of Sarah's sweating and dirty appearance. "You look awful," she blurted.

Sarah paused in surprise before shaking her head, a twisted smile on her lips. "You really know how to flatter a girl," she muttered.

Realizing too late that she'd just insulted Sarah, Cameron felt the strange sensation of heat infuse her cheeks. She began an internal diagnostic to get to the source of the apparent malfunction while attempting to find the best words to remedy her verbal error.

"I meant..." She stopped talking as Sarah stepped closer, feeling a different kind of warmth flush through her as Sarah lifted her fingers and trailed them delicately down the side of Cameron's face.

"That's new," Sarah commented as she watched the blush deepen on Cameron's features. "You look good in red," she teased.

Cameron's hand came up to her own face, feeling the heat she'd detected there. "I'm malfunctioning," she replied testily.

"You're blushing," Sarah corrected, "because you stuck your foot in your mouth."

Brow furrowing with consternation, Cameron opened her mouth to argue.

"It's a saying. I didn't mean it literally." Sarah beat her to the punch. "Why don't we find some tools? Let me get that bullet out of you?"

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine."

They stared at each other, squaring off in the middle of the empty space as dust motes floated between them in the setting sunlight.

"It hurts," Cameron confessed after a moment. "But we need to keep moving."

"I don't like seeing you in pain," Sarah countered.

"Then you should have let me stay in the system," Cameron told her bluntly, but it was said as a fact rather than an accusation.

Sarah drew in a ragged breath and glared at her. "So I could be the one hurting right now?" she managed, the words almost choking her as she came as close as she could to confessing the full extent of her feelings. Something in Cameron's brown eyes seemed to thaw at her words, but Sarah didn't dare linger in case she imagined it.

“Come on, Tin Miss,” Sarah ordered gruffly. “Like you said, we need to keep moving.”

Cameron watched her go. Her anger was still there, but Cameron felt it slip a little, as if pieces of it were falling away, bit by bit. Dealing with Sarah, being angry with Sarah, was draining, like her power source output was set too low. Finally, she followed the other woman, her face an expressionless mask, like the emotionless terminator she used to be.

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“Anything?” Vaughn demanded as he lowered the sheet covering the lifeless features of one of his men. There was another on the roof to his left, four more scattered around the alley.

“Not yet, sir,” a young man replied, waiting a respectful distance away. His suit was pressed and his hair neat, but he was sweating as he watched Vaughn’s anger grow at the situation.

“They said they had her,” Vaughn snarled. “You’re telling me nine trained men couldn’t take out Sarah Connor and her little straggly bunch of crazies?”

The junior agent swallowed as Vaughn stood, intimidated by his superior’s muscle and military air. “The operative they are transporting to the hospital said there were only two of them. Connor and the girl.”

“Connor and the girl.” Vaughn sauntered over to the open sewer and peered down into its depths. “Did he have a head injury?” he sneered.

Clearing his throat, the young man reached up and loosened his tie. “He said the girl picked him up like he weighed nothing and dropped him down the hole.”

The anger vanished from Vaughn’s features as he rounded on the other man. “What?”

“He claimed she killed all of your other operatives save for the one that fled and the man Sarah Connor punched out.”

Vaughn considered the news, frowning at its implications. “You’re telling me Connor has a cyborg. That girl... the one in the bank photos... she’s a *machine*.”

“If the agent’s report is to be believed, sir.”

“Son of a bitch.” Vaughn moved away from his dead officers and ordered his remaining men to break off their pursuit. He’d already lost enough agents for one day.



Had his superiors known? Had C.A.I.N.? Vaughn felt a flash of rage at what might have been kept from him, at the implications and what they meant for his role in the plan.

“This changes everything,” he muttered under his breath, gaining new respect for Sarah Connor, and even more desire to hunt the bitch down and kill her.

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The white panel van sat on the curb alongside the office building, deserted and covered in a light layer of soot from the fire burning over a mile away. Sarah started to take a step out of the shadows before Cameron caught her arm and yanked her back, placing her body between the other woman and the empty street. She scanned the street and surrounding rooftops for movement and heat signatures before leading the way to the van, her finger poised on the trigger of her 9mm.

No attack came, and it was almost anti-climactic to slide behind the wheel. Sarah sprawled into the torn vinyl seat across from her, her eyes sliding closed almost as soon as she sat down.

Cameron watched her, feeling sympathy rising up to duel with her anger. “Are you ok?”

“I could sleep for a week,” Sarah mumbled as she leaned her head back.

Even dirty, disheveled, and exhausted, or as Cameron had described her earlier, awful, the sight of her warmed something deep within her, and for a moment, Cameron just gazed at Sarah, thinking about the many sensations she had been willing to leave behind. The realization she would never touch Sarah again had been the hardest part of her decision, and ultimately, it had been her undoing. If Sarah hadn’t touched her, if she hadn’t held her hand... she might have been able to turn away from the scene in the server room and lose herself in the vastness of cyberspace. If only...

Sarah opened her eyes a sliver to find Cameron staring at her with a confused, aching wishful expression on her face, and a little of the guilt she had felt deep in her gut eased. Even with the world in the balance and the pain her decision had caused, she had been right to force Cameron to return to her body. It had been selfish and desperate and the only thing she could have done, for both of them. She just needed to make Cameron understand. Then maybe...

*They could be happy.*

The thought swam into her head, and Sarah nearly started giggling hysterically. Happy. The very word seemed so inappropriate and out-of-place and yet so fitting at the same time. Like a terminator humming along to a pop song on the radio, she thought, remembering another ride in a stolen vehicle that felt like eons ago. She hadn't been ready then, and Cameron wasn't ready now, but someday, Sarah thought, they just might be ready together. They just had to avoid killing each other before then.

The look in Cameron's eyes gave her hope, at least. Exhausted from the flight and the emotional rollercoaster of the day, she let go of all of her fears and confusion and held onto that hope.

"Are we just going to sit here?" Sarah asked at long last, to break the silence that had fallen between them.

Startled, Cameron blinked, her eyes wide and her mouth opening as if she were going to say something. But instead, she gave her head a small shake and turned to the steering column. Ripping the cover off caused a twinge in her shoulder, and a frown creased her forehead as she remembered that she might have escaped that pain once and for all.

One last glance at Sarah revealed the other woman's eyes on Cameron's profile, and the cyborg felt her body warm again, reminding her that pain wasn't the only thing she'd almost left behind.

They pulled out into the street, neither aware of the traffic cameras that tracked their progress for miles.

### **Act III**

The moon was nearly full, hanging low in the sky as Cameron parked the van and killed the engine. Sarah sat still in the passenger seat, staring vacantly out through the dusty windshield at the dark waves rushing ashore about thirty yards below. She heard a rustle beside her as Cameron opened her door, the beach breeze rushing in as she stepped outside.

"What are we doing here?" Sarah asked roughly, her voice hoarse with disuse or from screaming over alarms, she wasn't sure. They had driven around the city for a couple of hours, until Cameron had deemed it safe to stop. However, they hadn't ended up at the house or a hotel but rather this isolated stretch of beach. It was pretty, to be sure, but it was not where Sarah had expected the ride to end.

“There is a safe house about two hundred yards from this location. It’s only accessible by foot or by boat.” Cameron shut her door, effectively cutting off any more questions.

Feeling her jaw clench, Sarah had to will herself to relax. Shoving open her own door, she stepped outside, breathing in the clean air as she watched Cameron open the back of the van. Coming closer, she grabbed the handle on one of the doors, listening to the sound of canvas sliding over metal as Cameron dragged out the bag with the supplies Sarah had purchased at a drug store a few miles back. “A safe house,” Sarah repeated, pleased to note that she sounded halfway patient. “I don’t know anything about this safe house.”

“Do I know about all of your backup locations?” Cameron asked pointedly. She shouldered the bag with ease and stepped past Sarah, leaving the older woman to simply stand and stare. A small, satisfied smirk twisted the corner of her lips as she heard Sarah’s teeth grind behind her.

Sarah shook her head and slammed the van door shut with a bang, her feet automatically taking the path Cameron had, across the small, empty parking lot to a trail leading through the dunes and down to the beach below. Cameron was right, Sarah admitted, knowing that she had more than her fair share of backup locations that she hadn’t shared with anyone. Even though Cameron’s secret was necessary, it was still a secret, and Sarah felt like there had been far too many of them lately. “Just because you have a point doesn’t mean I’m not pissed about this,” Sarah mumbled.

Cameron glanced over her shoulder, regarding Sarah with a bland expression. Reaching the edge of the sand, she dropped the bag at the beginning of the path and began to unlace her boots. “Take off your shoes. You’ll move faster through the sand without them.”

Sighing, Sarah complied, untying the laces on her boots and slipping off her socks. The sand was almost cold as it tickled between her toes. She glanced up in time to see Cameron wiggle hers, digging them into the grainy surface with unconscious pleasure. The sight made Sarah pause, and her gaze jerked to Cameron’s face as the wind teased tendrils of hair around her face and the moonlight turned her skin milk-white. Cameron had her eyes closed, and as Sarah watched intently, Cameron took a deep breath of the salty ocean air.

Feeling compelled to do the same, the scent of sand and ocean filled Sarah’s lungs. It stirred memories of her childhood, of awkward dates and kisses around beach bonfires under the stars. It smelled like life before the machines. Her eyelids fluttered open and she found Cameron staring at her, and the look in those depthless brown eyes nearly took Sarah’s breath away.

Looking caught and strangely guilty, Cameron abruptly snatched up her boots and the bag and started down the path without a word.

Watching her go, Sarah resisted the urge to call her back, for what she wasn't exactly sure. The moments, the gazes, were beginning to pile up and she wanted to know if they meant the same thing to Cameron as they did to her. She bit her lip, hating the way they had returned to walking on eggshells around each other. "Damn it, girlie," she breathed softly, aching just to see one of Cameron's rare smiles and hating herself for it.

She had a reason to be angry, though, Sarah allowed herself. Just when she thought they were moving beyond keeping secrets, when she'd thought there were no secrets left, Cameron had surprised her with the biggest one of all, nearly leaving Sarah behind forever. The knowledge left Sarah feeling ragged and raw, and she longed for a heavy bag to take out her frustrations on.

With another long sigh, Sarah slowly followed the terminator down through the sand. She glanced around as they walked, listening to the waves as they pounded ashore. The water sounded cold, and Sarah shivered a little as the wind picked up. Her gaze wandered back to Cameron almost magnetically, knowing how warm and soft that lithe body could be. Sarah raked a hand through her windswept hair and kept walking, shoving the heated thoughts her brain unhelpfully conjured up aside.

"We're almost there," Cameron told her, as if sensing Sarah's discomfort.

"How long have you had this location?" Sarah called over the roar of the waves, hoping to distract herself from the appealing sway of Cameron's hips.

"Not long." Cameron abruptly pivoted and changed direction, heading up and away from the water.

A few minutes later, Cameron opened the door to a small beach house. Sarah stepped inside, glancing around with interest as the terminator moved away to deposit the bag in a bedroom somewhere. The space was incredibly small, just big enough for one or two people to live comfortably, but it was cozy and spotlessly clean. Opening the fridge, Sarah peered inside at the empty contents, the light harsh after the darkness she had been awash in for the last few hours. Letting the door drift shut, she found a light switch and flipped it, revealing a living room beyond the kitchen. Frowning, Sarah padded around the interior with bare feet, taking in the sparse furnishings as she made her way to a pair of French doors. She opened them, the muted roar of the waves returning to full volume as she gazed out over the ocean below. No doubt the view was beautiful in the daytime. It wasn't half bad in the moonlight, either.

Questions crowded her tongue. What in the hell was Cameron doing with this space? Why had she kept it a secret? Safe house or not, the place wasn't big enough for more than two or three people at the most, not the whole ragtag group. Obviously this wasn't a space Cameron had ever planned on using to hide them all.

A shower came on. Sarah turned her attention toward the sound, swallowing as she thought about Cameron climbing in under the hot spray. Her body warmed abruptly, flushing with a familiar heat that did little to clear Sarah's mind. As upset as she was, as confused and hurt as she was by Cameron's actions today, clearly her body wasn't as conflicted as her emotions were. If she had felt even a little confident in the reception she might receive, Sarah might have taken advantage of the situation and joined Cameron, but she didn't want to end the day being tossed unceremoniously out of the shower, or worse, through a wall.

She plopped down on a small, brown leather sofa in the living room. Dropping her boots on the floor, Sarah listened to the sounds of the surf and shower as she tried to order her thoughts and feelings with very little success.

"Damn you, girlie," she whispered again.

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Cameron could hear Sarah moving about the kitchen and living room, inspecting their refuge for the night. She had purchased this house not long before her relationship with Sarah had irrevocably changed, intending for it to be a place Sarah could go to think... to relax. Once Sarah had gotten sick, it had become Cameron's place of solace instead.

Sarah had to be wondering about this place, about its purpose, Cameron acknowledged as she shed the rest of her clothes. She owed Sarah an explanation, but she wasn't really looking forward to giving her one.

She was still angry with Sarah, furious, actually. She had made her mad before, but not like this. Sarah had blackmailed her into coming back to her body, used Cameron's feelings against her, and very nearly gotten killed in the process. She had known the one thing that Cameron, in any embodiment, couldn't accept—her death—and she had used that threat to get what she had wanted regardless of Cameron's desires. The woman had ruined everything, condemning Cameron to a continued life of suffering, denying her the rest, solace, and escape she'd so desperately wanted. The frustration was so intense that Cameron wanted to hit something again, anything, to release it, but she was forced to fist her hands as a weak substitute.

Angling her back toward the mirror over the sink, Cameron inspected the dried blood and bullet wound on her back with a scowl. The bullet was in a difficult spot. She would need Sarah's help to remove it. That meant more contact. It meant Sarah's hands on her. She shivered at the thought, both repulsed and aroused, as conflicting emotions roiled her body and mind. She began to realize why terminators were kept from feeling emotions, or even physical touch, too strongly. It complicated the mission, made it hard, even impossible, to let go, and Sarah... Sarah made her feel too much of everything.

She heard Sarah open the doors to the deck. Cameron could imagine her standing out there, her arms wrapped around herself to stay warm, her skin pale in the moonlight as the waves crashed below. The urge to go to her, to confess all her motives, all her feelings, had Cameron's hand around the doorknob before she even realized what she was doing. She had to command her fingers to turn it loose.

Cameron glanced down at her hands, turning them over and staring at them, remembering what it had felt like when she'd returned to her body, when she'd felt the rough and familiar texture of Sarah's palms against her own. It had felt real and alive, safe and warm. It had felt like friendship, she realized. Maybe even a little like love.

"Damn you," Cameron whispered as she mourned all she had given up to hold onto the one thing that mattered most.

Turning on the shower, she waited for the water to warm before finally stepping under the spray. Cameron winced as the droplets struck the wound on her back. The pain was oddly welcome, necessary even, as it washed away the blood and grime. She picked up the soap and began to run it absently over her skin, the crisp scent pleasing after the damp, pungent smells inside the sewer.

Staring at the white tiles, Cameron remembered the feel of the cable in her hand; it had felt like a lifeline, a connection and an escape route all in one. She had cast one last look over her shoulder, hearing Sarah's voice and feeling a moment of regret and wrenching loss before she'd ruthlessly shoved the emotions away. Sitting down, she'd plugged into the system, experiencing a rush as her consciousness left her body behind and had flown free. In the system there was no more pain, no more confusion. There was only the mission, her reason for being. Once again, her purpose became clear. Protect the Connors. Stop Skynet. Cameron turned her focus on C.A.I.N., detecting his presence as he reached out to examine her in return.

Her thoughts had scattered when Sarah had touched her, anchoring Cameron to her body by the thin thread of a connection she hadn't even remembered leaving open. She'd greedily

turned to that link, trying to push Sarah away even as she'd soaked up the fact Sarah was staying behind.

Sarah had begged her to stay. Had blackmailed her to get what she wanted, and a part of Cameron had reveled in her words, in her actions, in being needed... wanted.

Maybe that had been her true motivation the whole time.

The terminator lifted her head, the soap slipping from her fingers as the realization dawned. A part of her had wanted Sarah to stop her, had hoped Sarah would stop her. She'd just never really thought Sarah would.

A moment of weakness. That's what a human would call it. Maybe they had both had one, as Sarah had risked everything to save her, begging her to return, to stay with her. Sarah had revealed that she cared, cared for *her*, but at what cost? What cost to them all? And how had she not known about her true intentions to begin with, how had she not realized the full extent of her actions? She should have known and planned for the possibility, anticipated Sarah's improbable actions and arranged for a resolution that wouldn't have meant abandoning her mission.

Cameron closed her eyes, feeling like she had somehow betrayed the other woman even by saving her, but she knew she couldn't have let Sarah die. Stopping Skynet meant nothing if she couldn't stop it for Sarah.

Her thoughts continued to swirl round and round, much like the water, soap, and blood circling the drain between her feet.

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"Are you all right?"

Sarah jumped, her eyes blinking open in the warm lamplight before drifting upward. Cameron was standing before her looking fresher in new jeans and a black t-shirt. Her hair was wet and her feet bare, making for a picture of domestic normalcy while still managing to make Sarah's hormones go haywire.

"Must have dozed off," Sarah managed as she cleared her throat. Her gaze lingered on Cameron's features, worried by the uncertainty she found there. "You okay, Tin Miss?"

Cameron regarded her for a long moment. "I don't know," she admitted softly, but the animosity that had been in her voice all day was mercifully absent.

Sarah had to nod at the truth of the terminator's answer. "Yeah," she murmured. "Me either."

Brown eyes looked away as Cameron focused on the floor between them. "I'll need your help... with the bullet," she explained in case there was any doubt.

Sarah eased to her feet and closed the distance between them, feeling her stomach doing a few giddy somersaults as she breathed in a lungful of Cameron's clean skin. "Bad spot, huh?" she asked lamely, hoping Cameron wasn't picking up on her sudden strange bout of nerves. Sarah waited for Cameron's gaze to lift and meet hers but it didn't. The terminator merely nodded.

"It will wait until you've had your shower."

"Cameron, look at me," Sarah urged, suddenly needing to see her eyes with almost ferocious desperation.

Reluctantly, Cameron complied, but it seemed to take all of her effort. They stared at each other as a clock in the kitchen ticked into the silence that stretched between them. Something in the terminator's posture and eyes worried Sarah; there had been a similar look in her eyes the day before, when she had slipped into Sarah's bedroom, when she had tried to say goodbye.

"Promise me you'll be here when I get out," Sarah finally said, not even trying to keep the pleading tone from her words. She'd barely taken her eyes off the terminator since they'd escaped Kaliba, afraid if she looked away, even for a second, that Cameron would vanish. The mere notion left her feeling sick and shaken, and she searched Cameron's eyes, letting some of the need she normally kept a tight rein on shine through.

Cameron seemed surprised by the request, but some of the tension in her frame relaxed. "I promise," said solemnly.

Sarah nodded, relieved to feel like she believed her. "I won't be long."

It was Cameron's turn to nod. "I left clothes for you in the bathroom."

"You think it's safe to call John now?" Sarah asked as she slipped her cell phone from her back pocket, staring at it with faint distaste as it rested in her palm.



“It should be.” Cameron blinked as Sarah handed her the device. She looked at the other woman questioningly, hesitating to take the phone.

Sarah smirked. “Not much in the mood to get yelled at,” she confessed.

“He’ll be glad to know you’re okay,” Cameron argued.

“Yeah,” Sarah agreed. “And then he’ll yell.”

A faint trace of the smile Sarah had been craving since the explosion finally appeared. Cameron finally reached out and took the phone, her touch lingering on Sarah’s fingers and making the other woman’s pulse race.

“My hero,” Sarah joked, her mouth feeling dry.

What she saw in Cameron’s eyes made Sarah’s heart constrict almost painfully. A lost look, mixed with a healthy dose of regret, stared back at her, and all Sarah wanted to do was make it go away. “Cameron...” she began, trying to clasp Cameron’s hand but the terminator moved away.

“I wanted to be,” Cameron said simply. She began to enter Ellison’s number, keeping her back to Sarah.

“You are,” Sarah realized out loud, her throat tightening as she turned away and headed to the shower, missing the expression of surprise on Cameron’s features and a tiny hint of another cherished smile.

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James felt the phone vibrate in his back pocket. He went still, backing away from the others as they silently continued to hack into Kaliba’s security feeds from their living room. His heart was thudding in his chest as he slipped the phone free. Taking a tight, short breath before looking at the caller ID, James felt tempered relief wash through him at the number that stared back. He stuffed the emotion down, acknowledging that someone could have found Sarah’s phone, that the person on the other side might be an enemy rather than a friend.

“Hello?” he greeted, feeling almost silly to be answering so casually.

The proper code was entered on the other end and he did the same. “Where are you?” he asked before the caller could answer.

“We’re safe.”

James swallowed, feeling almost lightheaded. He leaned against the counter, not sure his knees would hold him. “Cameron?” he whispered. With a quick glance toward the living room, he opened the exterior door and stepped outside. The air was pleasantly cool, a welcome contrast to the stifling atmosphere in the house.

“Yes,” Cameron confirmed. “Sarah is fine. She’s getting cleaned up.”

A softly murmured prayer of thanks carried to Cameron over the phone before James spoke to her again. “We thought you were both dead.”

“We had to take an alternate route out. We ran into some of Kaliba’s operatives.”

James nodded. “I was hoping that was the case. You need to come home. John is...” He hesitated. “He’s grieving. He thinks he lost his mother.”

“I know,” Cameron replied, and her voice actually held a hint of sympathy. “We’ll be home in the morning. We didn’t want to call until we were out of Kaliba’s range. We don’t think we were followed but we wanted to make sure.”

“Where are you?” he asked again, curious to know why they hadn’t come back to the house.

“Safe,” Cameron answered, in that monotone way that told him he wasn’t getting any further information from her.

“I understand.” He ran a hand over his bare head before cupping his neck and massaging the tension he found there. “I’m just glad she’s all right.” He paused. “That you both are,” he added softly.

There was a noticeable hesitation on the other end of the call. James smiled, knowing he’d surprised the machine. “What?” he teased. “I would have missed our philosophical conversations.”

“So would I,” Cameron admitted after another moment. “Did everyone inside make it out?”

“Are you talking about our team or Kaliba’s?”

“Both.”

“We’re all fine. I’ve heard there were casualties on Kaliba’s end, but I don’t know how many.”

“There should have been none. I activated the fire alarms with plenty of time for employees to clear the building.”

“Cameron, you can’t blame yourself...”

“I don’t.” Cameron’s blunt statement stopped James cold. “C.A.I.N. was sealing off fire doors. He was trapping people inside.”

The news made the former agent swallow. “Why would it do that?”

“I don’t know. I also believe he helped Sarah and me escape.”

Their differing uses of pronouns to label C.A.I.N. didn’t escape him, but James figured they had more important things to talk about. “Any idea why?”

“I don’t know,” Cameron said again, sounding more frustrated this time.

“Are you telling me C.A.I.N. is still out there?” James fished. “Still... online?”

“Yes.” Cameron was quiet again and James thought he could hear waves crashing in the background as he absorbed the unwelcome news. “I’m not sure I made the right decision, James.”

Hearing his first name fall from Cameron’s lips startled him, but he was grateful for the signal of trust. James finally admitted he actually liked the damn metal girl and decided to just roll with the strange friendship they seemed to be forming. “Things happened the way they were meant to happen,” he promised her.

“Sarah says there is no fate but what we make.”

“And God says there is a plan for all of us. Apparently even you, Cameron.”

“What if I could have stopped Skynet today? What if we never get another chance?”

James could hear the worry and fear in Cameron’s voice, and he winced in sympathy for her. “I don’t believe that. If it’s God’s will that we stop Skynet, then we will at another time and another place.”

“But what if people get hurt before then? What if-”

“Cameron, you’re experiencing a very agonizing side of being human right now. Thinking about the what ifs will just drive you mad.”

“I can’t help it,” Cameron stated morosely.

“Yeah, neither can we,” James said with a dry laugh. “You need to find something to keep your mind off it.”

“Like what?”

“You’re a smart girl, Cameron. I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

There was another odd pause, but James didn’t dwell on it. “Does Sarah want to talk to John?”

“She’s not in the mood to hear him yell.”

James chuckled again. “Don’t blame her. I’ll tell him she was tired and needed to rest.”

“That would not be a lie. Is Savannah all right?”

“Sleeping. We put off telling her anything about you and Sarah until tomorrow, but she’s been sticking close. She knows something is wrong.”

“She’s very perceptive.”

“That she is,” James agreed. “Your friend is still hanging around... the quiet one.”

“Good,” Cameron acknowledged without elaborating.

“We’ll see you both tomorrow then.”

“Tomorrow,” Cameron confirmed.

“For what it’s worth, Cameron,” James added. “I think you did the right thing.”

“I hope so.”

The call disconnected and James brought the phone to his chin, taking a moment to savor the feeling of relief that washed through him. C.A.I.N. was still a problem, but the news of Cameron and Sarah's survival made this day feel more like a victory now than a defeat.

Behind him, the door opened, and Terissa stuck her head out, the scent of the sauce she'd been making on the stove drifting to him on the breeze.

"Everything all right?" she asked hesitantly.

James smiled.

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Steam hung heavy in the air, collecting on the mirror and clinging to Sarah's already damp skin. She'd practically scalded herself in the shower, standing under the spray as hot as she could stand it. It had taken almost ten minutes of scrubbing her skin, but she finally felt like she'd gotten the dust and death off her.

Using her hand to wipe away the condensation, Sarah studied her reflection in the mirror. All things considered, she didn't look too bad. For once, there were no dark circles under her eyes, and some of the weight she'd been shedding before John's jump seemed to have reappeared. She vaguely wondered if her improving health was due to Cameron's continued fussing or the little robots swimming around in her bloodstream. Either way, Sarah begrudgingly admitted the cyborg had a hand in the matter.

Just one more reason it scared Sarah silly at the thought of losing her.

She sighed, bracing her hands on each side of the sink as she weighed what to say to Cameron next. Sarah wanted to yell, wanted to shake sense into Cameron, wanted to get rid of that lost look in her eyes. Didn't the damn girl understand that people cared about her? Didn't she understand how much losing her would hurt?

Green eyes lifted and studied their mirror image. Maybe Cameron didn't know, Sarah reluctantly admitted. It wasn't like she gave the girl much to go on. Only Savannah was free with her affection, and for someone who was just learning how important touch could be... how necessary it was to one's mental wellbeing...

"She must have felt starved," Sarah realized aloud, feeling shame rush through her at the thought. She'd pleased the other woman, shown her just how good she could feel, then she'd taken that away like it had meant nothing in her fear. Her inner turmoil, her inability to admit

what she wanted, what she needed, had caused Cameron pain. Sarah hung her head, shaking it slowly, as regrets overwhelmed her. She'd been trying to rebuild the bridge she'd burned between them ever since she had recovered from her illness, but Cameron hadn't made it easy and now she realized why. Cameron was in self-preservation mode, and Sarah had activated it.

Resisting the temptation to put her fist through her reflection, Sarah finished towel-drying herself off before slipping on a fresh blue t-shirt and gray sweats. Padding out into the cooler hallway, Sarah stopped and listened, the sound of the ocean reaching her through the open deck doors. For a moment, she considered heading toward the bedroom, putting off the storm that had been brewing between them all day, but her conscience wouldn't let her, and Sarah needed to see with her own eyes that Cameron was still there like she promised.

The terminator was standing out on the deck, her arms resting on the railing as she gazed out over the whitecaps visible in the moonlight. Cameron was breathtakingly beautiful, the reflected light and wind making her look like a model on a shoot, and Sarah had to take a moment to simply admire her. The urge to yell, to fight, fled with no protest, dissolving into the ether. Sarah smiled wryly at herself. No wonder Cameron thought she was insane at times. Even she couldn't predict her own emotions.

Sarah came closer, stepping out onto the deck and feeling the breeze whip her damp hair back. The cooler air felt nice after the heat of the shower and she took a moment to breathe it in, feeling it steady her even more. "Hey," she greeted neutrally.

Cameron glanced at her but said nothing.

Sarah's fingers itched to touch her, to share the connection she was feeling, but she decided to go for the practical matters first. "Ready to get that bullet out?"

The terminator slowly nodded. "There is a toolbox in the kitchen."

"After you." Sarah gestured toward the door and Cameron reluctantly complied.

"I called Ellison, told him we were safe." Cameron grabbed the hem of her t-shirt and began to peel it off over her head, exposing her bare back as she entered the kitchen.

Sarah swallowed past a lump in her throat and asked, "Everyone okay?" She already knew the answer in her heart, but she needed something to distract her.

Cameron nodded. "John was upset."

Sarah pursed her lips. "I suppose I would feel worse if he weren't." She cracked open the toolbox, rooting around until she found a pair of needle-nose pliers. "I'll make it up to him."

Cameron settled in a chair at a small bistro table, waiting patiently for Sarah to begin.

Surveying the damage, Sarah winced. "I thought you said this could wait until I had my shower."

"It did wait until you had your shower," Cameron pointed out.

Sarah shook her head and refused to get angry. "Looks like it hurts like a bitch," she muttered, frowning at the hole in Cameron's skin. She placed her left hand on Cameron's shoulder and was startled to feel Cameron shiver at the contact. Sarah licked her lips, feeling the tension between them swell and thicken.

Sighing, Sarah adjusted her grip on the pliers and gently eased the tip into Cameron's flesh, wincing in sympathy when Cameron flinched. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Cameron promised, her voice tight with pain. "A little to your left."

Doing as she was told, Sarah tried again. "Here?"

There was a pause, and Sarah almost stopped, insisting that Cameron turn off her damn pain receptors before they went any further.

"Yes," Cameron breathed.

The terminator flinched again as the tip of the pliers scraped the bullet. Sarah hated herself for hurting her. "Almost got it," Sarah promised, finally getting the pliers around the object and quickly pulling it free. She watched as Cameron's shoulders sagged in relief, barely resisting the urge to lay a soothing kiss on the exposed curve of Cameron's neck. "Hold still and let me patch this up."

Sarah turned and dropped the bullet and pliers on the table, but her thumb began to stroke the soft skin where it still rested against Cameron's shoulder. She could feel the subtle tension creeping back into Cameron's frame as the touch continued, but Sarah didn't stop.

Cameron blinked before closing her eyes, feeling the faint touch sear through her, awakening her body and anchoring her to the chair just as Sarah's hand in hers had anchored her to the physical world hours before. She was as powerless to run then as she was now. Desire stirred, deep and aching inside her, and Cameron shifted uncomfortably.

“Almost done.” Sarah’s voice came out hushed and rough as she let her hand trail across Cameron’s back, watching as gooseflesh rose in its wake. She brushed Cameron’s hair aside, swallowing as her breathing became shallow and her hands started to shake. She made quick work of stitching up the wound, cleaning it, then covering it with a small bandage.

No sooner was she done then Cameron stood, turning to face her in the small kitchen. They were so close, Sarah could feel the heat off the other woman’s bare skin, and she longed to feel more of it, to sink into that welcome warmth and get lost in it. “Cameron...”

Cameron noted all the physical signs of Sarah’s arousal, feeling her own body responding in kind. She took a step forward, their bodies barely brushing. It would be so easy to close the gap between them, and Cameron felt the hunger, the raw desire for the other woman surging up inside her. Her gaze flicked to the counter, to the wall, but her thoughts were rough and still laced with an edge of anger. She didn’t dare touch Sarah. Not now. Not yet. “I need to check the perimeter.”

Sarah closed her eyes as she felt the terminator slip by her, careful not to let their bodies touch. Cameron slipped her shirt on a second before she yanked open the door and almost ran outside. As the door slammed shut behind her, Sarah’s head dropped in defeat.

## **Act IV**

The tapping of keys was soft and constant, the only sound in the darkened living room. Computer monitors provided a faint glow, illuminating John and Danny’s faces as they waded through pages and pages of code. Sabine kept watch, eyeing the proceedings from the lengthening shadows as Terissa prepared something for everyone in the kitchen. James had left a while ago, talking in barely audible murmurs to whoever was on the other end of the line. Now he was talking to Terissa outside, but no one could make out what they were saying.

John ignored everyone and everything but his search for the truth. The further he hacked, the more certain he became. His mother was still out there. He could feel it. There was no way Sarah Connor left this world without his soul sensing it. She was too much a part of him, and he would know it if she had been ripped away. Perhaps he was deluding himself, he allowed, but until he had proof that his mother was gone, he chose to believe in her, in her unparalleled ability to survive.

He cast a sideways look at Danny, the other young man’s head bent as he focused studiously on his task. John wanted to hate him for the way things had gone, but he knew Cameron was as



much to blame as anyone. She had deviated from the plan, but in his heart, John knew Cameron had simply been doing what she was programmed to do. Protect him. Stop Skynet. Today she had attempted to do both. Time would tell if she'd succeeded.

His heart twisted as he thought of her, knowing that no matter what happened, he had likely seen Cameron for the last time. He had loved her once, or thought he had, until he'd felt a taste of what real love was. For a moment, his attention wandered, as he thought about Allison, possibly alone and scared, wandering the streets of Los Angeles. He swore to turn his attention to finding her as soon as he could, but he had to know about his mother first.

"I'm in."

Danny's voice made John jump, so unprepared he was for the quiet declaration. Sabine stirred on the couch as she watched and waited.

"Show me." John shifted in his chair, his hand gripping the back of Danny's seat as he leaned closer.

Danny tapped a couple more keys and a screen full of security camera images opened on the monitor.

"That one," John ordered, pointing out one near the bottom left. He waited as Danny clicked on it, revealing nothing but video snow.

"The camera is off-line. It was destroyed in the..." Danny began.

"Rewind," John ordered.

Danny did so, tapping more keys. The image blurred past, finally revealing figures moving about at a jerky pace.

"Stop. There," Sabine murmured.

Hitting play, the three of them peered closer, watching an empty room until Cameron stepped inside moments later.

"Is she really a..." Danny hesitated, glancing back at Sabine over his shoulder.

"She was," John murmured, no idea of how many levels his statement was true. He watched Cameron hesitate, the cord in her hands. She was having doubts, he realized, and his heart hurt

for her. John swallowed, willing back the tears as Cameron plugged in and sat down. When her body went limp, John felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. He didn't know why Cameron has chosen this path, but he made a mental note to find out.

"Jesus," Danny whispered. "She just jacked right in."

On the monitor, Sarah entered the room, and John watched as his mother drew up at the sight that greeted her. He knew that expression on her face, had seen it directed his way when he'd stepped inside the time bubble in the basement of Zeira Corp. A mixture of betrayal and abandonment, and the image twisted John's guts.

"Sound. Where is the sound?" John asked, needing to hear his mother's voice, what might have been her final words.

Danny started typing. "Working on it."

Sabine heard the back door open in the kitchen. When she glanced at the screen once more, Sarah was on her knees, Cameron's hand in her own. She swallowed, wondering if John saw the love in Sarah's eyes as clearly as she did.

"What is she doing?" John asked no one in particular, not understanding why his mother would linger. "She's running out of time."

"She won't leave Aunt Cameron."

They all turned, shocked to find Savannah standing on the stairs, her blue gaze fixed on the monitors. "Aunt Sarah wouldn't leave her."

Sabine and John both stood, their gazes locking briefly before Sabine moved behind the couch to scoop up the child. This wasn't the first time Savannah had snuck up on them, but Sabine decided she would stay with her the rest of the night in order to make it the last.

"No," Savannah whined in protest. "I wanna wait for Sarah and Cameron to come home."

Terissa entered the room, a tremulous smile on her lips as Ellison followed.

"They'll be home in the morning," Ellison promised her before turning his attention on John. "They just called. They're all right."

John's knees nearly buckled with the news and he sank into his chair, dropping his head into his hands. His mother was still alive. She was still alive.

But so was Cameron.

He lifted his head, needing to understand what had happened. His fingers went for the keyboard but a hand drifted through his short hair. When John looked up, Terissa smiled down at him. "It's been a long day. Your mother is resting. Why don't we get you something to eat so you can do the same?"

"Is she hurt? Does she need help?" John winced, realizing he should have asked the questions sooner.

"She's fine, John. Just tired," Ellison promised.

"But..." John glanced at the screen, watching his mother's mouth move as she said God only knew what to the terminator. "I need..."

Terissa met Danny's gaze and she silent communicated her wishes. He glanced at John before nodding once to his mother.

"I can't get the sound. It must have been out on that camera," Danny lied, feeling Sabine's eyes on his back.

"They're alive," Terissa reminded John. "That's all that matters." She reached over and shut off the monitor.

John wanted to protest, but the words died on his lips when Savannah was suddenly there, tugging on the hem of his t-shirt. "They're coming home," he told her with a shaky smile.

"I know," Savannah said simply. "Let's get something to eat. I'm hungry."

John laughed, just a little, feeling relief wash through him. He still had questions that would need answers, but for now, they would keep.

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The moment the door closed, the anxiety started. Sarah pivoted, sprinting toward the deck so she could keep an eye on Cameron, unwilling to let the other woman out of her sight. Cameron

glanced up at her with mild surprise, her features barely visible in the pale light of the moon and the weak glow from the beach house.

“Go back inside,” Cameron instructed. “It’s cold.”

“I’m fine,” Sarah argued, hoping the terminator didn’t see the tiny shiver that made a liar out of her.

Sarah was sure Cameron sighed. The cyborg stared out at the ocean, wrestling with emotions Sarah didn’t dare think about before she reluctantly turned and climbed the steps to the deck, her bare feet making little or no sound on the sand covered wood.

“I won’t be long,” Cameron promised, her voice even but strained.

“You’ll excuse me if I don’t take you at your word.”

Cameron regarded her for a moment before coming hesitantly closer. “If I wanted to leave, I would have left while you were in the shower.”

“If you wanted to leave, there is nothing I could do to stop you,” Sarah admitted. They watched each other carefully before Sarah dropped her gaze first, staring at the wood beams that separated them.

“You stopped me today,” Cameron reminded her, but her voice was softer now.

Sarah shook her head, feeling the emotions she’d wrestled with all day tumbling and surging toward the surface. “You didn’t even say goodbye.”

Cameron was silent.

“How do I know you aren’t going to do it again?” Sarah looked at her once more, raw pain clear in her green eyes. “All this time you wanted me to trust you, and when I finally do, you throw that trust in my face.”

“Sarah...”

Sarah shook her head again, cutting off whatever Cameron was going to say. “Damn it, girlie... I *care* about you. I wish to hell I didn’t. I wish to hell I could change the way I feel, but I can’t. I need you. I can’t...” Her voice broke and she jerked backward a step when Cameron instinctively moved closer. “I can’t...” Sarah whispered. When Cameron’s hand finally curved

around the back of her neck and pulled her in close, the confession slipped free. "I can't live without you."

Cameron closed her eyes before sliding her other hand over Sarah's hip. Sarah's words had the strange effect of hurting and healing at the same time. Cameron didn't understand it, any of it, but she finally acknowledged the truth of it. She couldn't live without this, without Sarah. She didn't want to. "Why does this hurt so much?" she asked honestly, feeling Sarah's hold on her tighten.

The hug lingered until they were both warm in the late summer night breeze. Sarah finally withdrew just enough to study Cameron's conflicted features, reaching up to let her fingers trail down one sharp cheekbone. "It can hurt," Sarah murmured, her voice husky. "But it doesn't always have to."

Cameron felt her breath hitch as she became aware of Sarah's fingers slipping beneath the hem of her shirt, the callused touch easing across the small of her back. The contact made heat sweep through Cameron's body and she wavered in place for a moment, feeling the power of it. "Sarah..."

"No more pain tonight," Sarah whispered before letting her mouth brush lightly over Cameron's. She felt the other woman go still at the touch, but Cameron didn't move away. Emboldened, Sarah kissed her again, then again, finally feeling Cameron's lips hesitantly move against her own.

Easing closer, Sarah let her hands drift over Cameron's denim-clad hips. She felt an answering touch at her waist as Cameron's fingers slipped beneath the edge of her t-shirt.

"Sarah..." Cameron pleaded, her voice a blend of arousal and fear; both tore through Sarah, making her head spin.

The waves crashed on the shore as Cameron's touch became firmer, more possessive. Sarah gasped softly as the terminator pulled her closer, eliminating the space between them as she kissed her again, all hesitation gone.

There was no time to react. No chance to feel fear as Cameron abruptly thrust Sarah backward and against the rail. The impact startled more than hurt, and Sarah had just enough time to suck in a surprised breath before Cameron was on her, pressing against her hot and hard. A strong thigh slipped between her own and Sarah groaned as Cameron gripped her hips, grinding into her with just enough friction to make Sarah's thoughts and plans for the night scatter.

“No pain,” Cameron agreed before hungrily claiming Sarah’s mouth. She took Sarah right there against the rail, never easing up or giving the woman a chance to think, to speak. She needed to be in charge of Sarah for once, needed to command her body and bend it to her will. Knowing exactly what Sarah liked, it didn’t take Cameron long to make her come undone. She covered Sarah’s mouth with her own, swallowing her cries as the ocean breeze dried the sweat on their skin, taking possession of Sarah’s release as much as she took possession of Sarah’s body.

Sarah didn’t even remember moving but suddenly they were inside, her back on the bed, and Cameron’s hands were on her again, tearing away her clothing. She tried to tell Cameron to slow down, but when Cameron descended on her, that talented mouth seemingly everywhere, there was little Sarah could do but yield to Cameron’s desires. As forceful as Cameron was, as much as she dominated her, Sarah felt no fear, no pain. There was only pleasure and plenty of it. Sarah had just enough sense to know Cameron needed this and she let her have her way for now.

They’d been here before, lost in a moment just like this, and everything that had come after had nearly destroyed them both. Sarah almost stopped, a tiny voice of logic rising up from an ocean of need, but as Cameron’s warm, now naked body eased down over her own she let reason go. A nameless emotion took its place, sweeping up so fast and hard it brought tears to Sarah’s eyes as Cameron kissed her. Whatever came next, Sarah didn’t care. They had this one night out of place and time and she was damn well going to savor it.

Sometime later and shaking with fatigue, Sarah slowly raised up when she’d finally recovered from Cameron’s welcome assaults. She let her hands drift over Cameron’s body, memorizing every detail in a way she hadn’t allowed herself their first time together. Sarah had told herself then they would only share that one night; now she prayed this would be the first of many. “So beautiful,” she whispered as her mouth followed her fingers, skimming down Cameron’s body. As much as Cameron had needed to exert control over Sarah, Sarah knew what Cameron needed from her in return was gentleness.

“Sarah,” Cameron breathed when she realized her lover’s intent, a method Sarah had never used before. She felt Sarah’s knowing smile against the inside of her thigh, and Cameron nearly came apart just from the realization of Sarah’s intent alone. When that hot mouth covered her for the first time, Cameron gripped the sheets, balling them into her fists as her hips rose up to meet a determined tongue.

“No pain,” Sarah pledged again before making sure Cameron knew just how good being human could feel.

When their passion was spent, they tangled together, warm skin wrapped in crisp, cool sheets, as the sounds and smells of the night and ocean drifted over them.

“Stay with me,” Sarah pleaded. “Sleep with me,” she amended.

Cameron could think of a thousand reasons to decline, but she found herself nodding, curling around Sarah’s curves and drawing her close. Sarah sighed in contentment, sinking into Cameron’s heat, and Cameron found herself smiling in reaction. When Sarah’s breathing evened out, Cameron laid her head down on the pillow next to her and went off-line, finding this to be a much better oblivion than what she’d sought in the system.

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The sound of seagulls woke her. Sarah opened her eyes, watching a flock of birds skim past the deck, calling loudly as they landed on the sand outside. Still tangled with Cameron’s body, Sarah simply lay there, listening to the ocean and enjoying the breeze that blew back the sheers and chilled the surface of their sheets. The moment felt safe and warm, and Sarah let herself linger in it, feeling only a twinge of guilt for taking the time and enjoying it. She knew she needed to rise, to get cleaned up and get back to John and Savannah, but her soul seemed starved for this kind of comfort and it rebelled, keeping her right where she was.

She stared at the pale sunlight blanketing the bed. It was later than she had imagined, and Sarah’s brow furrowed as she tried to recall her nightmares from the night before and came up empty. Apparently sleeping in the arms of a terminator had kept them at bay.

Sarah rolled her head to the side, coming face-to-face with Cameron’s relaxed features. Cameron’s eyes were closed and Sarah took a moment to simply observe her, memorizing the shape of her mouth, the curve of her cheek, the slope of her nose. Like this, offline and mostly unaware, Cameron looked completely human to Sarah’s eyes. Before she even realized what she was doing, Sarah dipped her head, brushing her lips over Cameron’s in a gentle kiss.

The touch was enough. Cameron’s eyes blinked open and focused on the woman above her.

“Morning,” Sarah whispered, feeling her soul settle at the first glimpse of Cameron’s brown eyes.

“Morning,” Cameron murmured. She blinked again when she noted the morning light spilling over them. “It’s late.”

“Mmm.” Sarah couldn’t manage anything more intelligent than that until she’d had her first cup of coffee. She reached out, tracing the outline of Cameron’s face. “Thanks for staying,” she murmured.

Cameron stared at her openly. “I needed to,” she admitted. She looked away, searching the room before her gaze finally wandered hesitantly back to Sarah. “What happens now?”

Sarah swallowed as she met the cyborg’s surprisingly open and vulnerable gaze. Cameron could flip a car one handed. Put a man through a wall with a flick of her wrist. Sarah would never have believed a terminator could be hurt by simple words, destroyed by its emotions if it had ever been allowed to feel them. “What do you want to happen?” she asked curiously.

“I don’t want to go back to the way it was before.”

“After the motel,” Sarah guessed, feeling a familiar stab of guilt.

“Yes,” Cameron confirmed. “I... I found it hard to... function adequately.” She frowned, as if the words weren’t good enough to describe what she was feeling.

Sarah had to look away, focusing her attention on the ceiling fan that spun lazily in the ocean breeze. “It’s... complicated, Cameron,” she began.

“I understand.”

“Do you?” Sarah glanced at her again.

“It would be a strain on your relationship with John.”

“That’s an understatement,” Sarah said with a weak snort. She was quiet a moment. “He wouldn’t understand.”

“John has conflicted feelings towards me,” Cameron stated knowingly.

Sarah’s eyebrows arched neatly. “That’s another understatement,” she muttered. “Before he left... you were his...”

“Teenage fantasy,” Cameron supplied, not understanding why Sarah winced.



“Yeah.” Sarah scratched uncomfortably behind one ear. “Now...” She sighed and studied Cameron carefully. “Now he sees her when he looks at you. I can’t imagine what that must be like.”

“Hard.”

Sarah snorted again. “Understatement again,” she teased faintly.

“I can’t help it,” Cameron added, a hint of pleading in her voice.

“I know,” Sarah promised her. “But that doesn’t mean I can ignore what’s going on in his head.”

“Does that mean...” Cameron paused, her gaze shifting away. “Does that mean you think we should stop?”

The mere thought sliced Sarah up like knives. She closed her eyes. “We should,” she whispered. When she finally looked at Cameron again, the cyborg looked stricken. “But I can’t...” Sarah admitted.

Some of the tension seemed to bleed out of Cameron’s body. Sarah felt her relax against her, and the moment felt like a victory of sorts. “I can’t,” Sarah repeated. “I need you.”

Cameron reached out, letting her fingertips trace Sarah’s cheek. “I need you, too.”

“Guess that’s settled then.” Sarah offered her a hesitant smile that Cameron returned in kind. “Terissa already knows,” Sarah told her after a moment.

Cameron searched Sarah’s face, surprised by the news. “She might have suspected. You confirmed?”

“I... confirmed,” Sarah said faintly, feeling her stomach flip nervously.

They were quiet a moment, listening to the waves and the cries of the seagulls.

“We... could keep this a secret... from the others,” Cameron suggested carefully. “From John.”

“You mean sneak around like a couple of horny teenagers?” Sarah replied drolly. She watched Cameron watch her, feeling that damnable emotion rising in her again, those three words she’d nearly spoken in the tunnel crowding once more onto her tongue. She didn’t want to think them... feel them... but she couldn’t deny she had the desire to say them.

“Being with you... like this... steadies me,” Cameron confessed, clearly working out her feelings as she spoke. “I don’t... I can’t... lose this again.”

Sarah swallowed and closed her eyes, feeling both relief and fear at Cameron’s words. “Me either,” she admitted before meeting Cameron’s once more. “No more keeping secrets from each other,” she promised.

“No more secrets,” Cameron agreed. Her touch eased through Sarah’s hair before she kissed that tempting mouth.

“We should get going,” Sarah argued, feeling her breathing turn irregular when Cameron’s body sensuously slid over her own.

“As soon as I’m done,” Cameron declared.

“You’re not always going to get your way, Tin Miss,” Sarah managed before a low moan escaped her.

Cameron smiled in triumph. “I am right now.”

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“It’s late.”

James glanced toward the windows, frowning at the late morning hour. “They’ll be home soon, John. Give them a break. They survived an exploding building yesterday.” He finished pouring his latest cup of coffee, taking a hesitant sip of the still too hot brew.

John sat at the kitchen table, his fingers drumming restlessly on the surface. “What in the hell is keeping them?” he wanted to know.

“It was late when they called. Your mother has been through hell the past few weeks. Let’s hope she’s sleeping in and Cameron is letting her.”

Feeling childish and whiney, John crossed his arms. “I just need to see her... to know she’s okay,” he explained.

“I’m sure you do,” James murmured sympathetically.

“And I need to understand,” John added as an afterthought.

“Understand?” James wondered. “Understand what?”

“Cameron must have thought she could stop Skynet for good; otherwise she wouldn’t have jacked into the system.”

Feeling like he was suddenly on thin ice, James took another swallow of his coffee while he mulled over the proper course to take. He, too, had wondered about Cameron’s motivations for leaving the system, but unlike John, he had a better idea what had lured her back into her body. “I’m sure she had her reasons.”

Green eyes fastened on James with a palpable intensity the older man could feel. The look was so much like his mother’s, James mused, seeing Sarah’s stubborn streak reflected in John’s eyes. Briefly, he wondered if it was a trait woven into the Connor DNA.

“Then what made her leave? Why did she give up her chance?” John murmured, fiddling with the edge of the tablecloth as he considered the topic that had kept him up all night.

“I’m sure Cameron can answer that when she gets home,” James evaded neatly. “You aren’t glad she survived?”

John hesitated, caught with the very question he’d been asking himself since hearing the news of Cameron’s survival. “I don’t know,” he admitted.

“Because of Allison,” James guessed.

John nodded reluctantly.

“Cameron is an ally, John. You need her here... in this time.”

“Allison was an ally, too,” John reminded the other man. “Cameron is... a fake.” He winced when he said the word, as if it were too harsh a term.

James sighed and settled across the table to regard the other man. “She’s not the robot your remember.”

“Cybernetic organism,” John corrected automatically. “And what’s that supposed to mean? Everyone keeps hinting that Cameron has changed...”

“She has,” James cut him off, his tone deliberate. “It’s a long story, one best left to your mother or Cameron, but she makes her own choices now. She isn’t ruled by your programming or Skynet’s anymore.”

John considered that news, wondering how it was possible. Cameron had told him she wasn’t his puppet anymore. He’d ignored the comment at the time, too worried about his mother and too torn up with guilt over Allison and the death of his father. Some of that guilt had lessened in the days since, but the thought of their familiar faces still hurt like hell.

“All I’ll say is Cameron made some... modifications. You trusted her once when you probably shouldn’t have, but you can trust her now.”

“Do you?” John asked bluntly, surprised when James seemed to consider the question seriously.

“I do,” the former agent said, conviction in his voice. “I trust her with my life... with Savannah’s.” A slow smile eased across his lips. “And your mother’s. Especially your mother’s.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” John asked.

James laughed a little before taking another sip of his coffee. “Cameron has become a lot of things since her... evolution. A pain in your mother’s butt is just one of them.”

“She was that before,” John countered, but there was a slight smile shaping his lips.

“Ask your mom when she gets home,” James suggested. “Get her to tell you the whole story.” James got to his feet, his coffee cup looking small in his large hand. “And make sure she doesn’t leave out pirate queen Cameron. That’s the best part.” He patted John on the shoulder, enjoying the younger man’s look of befuddlement way more than he knew he should.

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They were making little progress in the way of leaving, Cameron noted absently as she savored the feel of Sarah’s body pressed against hers. They were on the deck now, both wearing t-shirts and little else as they kissed each other with quiet passion.

The heat of the kiss had barely cooled on Cameron’s lips when Sarah suddenly gave her a playful shove toward the door. “Go get me some coffee,” she instructed with a teasing grin, “while I get my shower.”

The shove barely rocked Cameron backwards, and she stood her ground stubbornly. “I could shower with you,” she argued, “and then we can pick up coffee on our way back to the house.” She tilted her head to the side, a small smile pulling at the corner of her mouth. “Showering together saves resources and time. We could reduce water consumption by 43.7% if...”

“Assuming that all we do is shower,” Sarah interrupted. Cameron opened her mouth to continue, but Sarah shushed her with a finger on her lips. “Coffee. Now.”

The slight touch and even slightest hint of command in Sarah’s voice was all it took for Cameron to dress and head out into the cool morning breeze coming off the ocean, her mind already assessing the distance and traffic speeds to several nearby establishments. She made a mental note to stock plenty of coffee at the beach house should they retreat there again, before deciding on a small beachside diner a few minutes drive away.

Cameron didn’t like leaving Sarah, even for only a few minutes, and she wondered now how she could have ever thought going back into the system was a good idea. Sarah was right. C.A.I.N. might not be Skynet, and Cameron felt a stab of guilt as she realized she could have abandoned everyone to destroy the wrong opponent. She had acted like a coward. She was determined to never let herself be that weak again.

Arriving between the breakfast and lunch crowds, Cameron was relieved to see few cars in the parking lot. She locked the door and turned toward the grungy establishment, her eyes automatically scanning the area for threats or danger. She almost missed the sound of a shoe slipping in the sand scattered across the asphalt in her hurry to get back to Sarah.

A woman stood by the rocks ringing the parking lot, with a face that was both familiar and foreign to Cameron at the same time, and immediately Cameron scanned her features seeking a match to a known face. The pair of sea-blue eyes staring at her widened a second in disbelief and fear before the woman turned and ran.

Cameron took a step in her direction, only to freeze as a name came in response to her query. “Savannah,” she breathed.

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She’d heard a car door slam, and it had stirred Sierra from a fevered dream. She lifted her head, wincing as the bright morning light stabbed her retinas, making her squint at the figure moving with determined steps across the parking lot. Even half-blinded, the gait was familiar, and Sierra felt her breath catch.

She climbed to her feet, wiping at her eyes as she rose up between the rocks she'd used as her shelter for the night. That she'd lived to see another day was surprising enough. She never would have imagined waking to the sight of Cameron walking into the small beachside diner.

Sierra took a couple of steps toward her before she even realized it, and then she drew up short, her tennis shoes making a loud scuffling sound in the loose sand on the asphalt. When the woman turned, glancing back to identify the source of the sound, Sierra felt fear. What if this wasn't Cameron? What if it was just another machine with her face? She stumbled backward as the woman who looked like Cameron tilted her head, watching her carefully now. Sierra finally turned and ran, her movements sluggish as she fought against her fever and the thick sand sucking at her shoes.

A hand suddenly grabbed her by the bicep, and she was yanked around with negligent ease. Her legs gave way and she cried out as she nearly fell, feeling angry and broken at the way her life was about to end.

"Wait," a soft voice urged, and Sierra felt herself steadied. A hand touched her cheek, cupping it carefully and gently tilting her face toward the light.

Sierra opened her eyes to see familiar features peering at her with open concern, looking so much like the woman she considered her mother that it hurt to think that it could be another terminator wearing her face. "Cameron?" Sierra breathed, deciding she had to know the truth, even if it caused her death. Her voice was rough with disuse and cracked on the name.

Cameron stared at her, something that looked like wonder in her gaze. "Savannah?"

Sierra felt something break, and she sagged in Cameron's hold, her emotions conflicted and raw. She had never expected to confront her or Sarah, never planned on actually being seen and recognized, and now that she had, she had to own up to the subconscious desire that had kept her hiding out near the beach house, waiting for exactly this to happen. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying hard to avoid those familiar brown eyes. "Let me go," she whispered, her arm twisting in Cameron's grasp. "Please, you have to let me go."

"You're sick," Cameron stated, stepping back to analyze her condition. Her hand went to Sierra's forehead before drifting down her cheek. "You have a high fever..."

"It doesn't matter," Sierra told her, leaning into the touch as if she could soak up the contact. "I just need... I need to..." She felt Cameron curl her hand behind Sierra's neck, just like Sarah used to do, before drawing her into her arms. Sierra fisted her hands in the back of Cameron's shirt and sobbed with sorrow and relief.

“It’s okay now,” Cameron promised awkwardly, trying to process too many things at one and feeling her head nearly spin. “You’re safe.”

“I’m sorry,” Sierra said around gulps for breath. “I shouldn’t have stayed here... I...”

Cameron raised Sierra’s head gently, staring into the blue eyes bright with tears. “You knew I would come here,” her words half a statement and half a question. “In your reality...”

“We came here... all the time... when I was a kid,” Sierra managed to get out haltingly. “You, me and Sarah.”

Cameron absorbed that, feeling both surprise and awe at the thought. The three of them, together, a family, like she had imagined briefly before John had returned. It hit her, suddenly, how much the shattering of that dream had hurt and how close she had come to losing it forever. The knowledge that it had been a reality in at least one timeline was breathtaking.

“This is where we were always happy,” Sierra confirmed, her eyes darkening as an unhappy memory surfaced. “It won’t be like that again. John...”

Cameron shook the mirror image of her own fears away to concentrate on the present. “We need to get you medical attention. Sarah is at the beach house...”

Sierra’s head came up. Cameron saw it, the flicker of longing in Savannah’s eyes but it quickly melted to anguish. “No,” Sierra murmured mournfully. “I can’t...”

“She’ll want to see you,” Cameron countered.

Sierra shook her head. “I can’t see her, please, you can’t tell her. I’m out of my time, I don’t belong here...” She straightened and took a deep breath, ordering her emotions into some kind of order as she met Cameron’s eyes. “My time here is limited. I can feel it...” She held up a hand to keep Cameron from speaking as she continued, “My time is gone. It never existed now. I don’t exist. Sarah... can’t see me like this. It would only cause her pain.”

Cameron frowned, her fingers brushing the feverish forehead once again. “You need a place to rest and recover. I know someone who can help.”

“You can’t tell her I’m here. Promise me,” Sierra hissed with renewed intensity. “Promise me you won’t tell her I’m here.”

“Will you let me take care of you?” Cameron tried to bargain.

“Only if you promise.”

Cameron’s jaw clenched, remembering whispered words and vows to Sarah only an hour before. “I promise,” she said with a sigh. Thinking about Sarah waiting for her, she made her plans quickly. “I’ll take you to the beach house with me and you can go in after we leave. I’ll arrange for someone to meet you there, a doctor. Come on.”

Sierra finally twisted out of her grasp. “I can walk.” A small smile graced her lips. “Don’t worry, I remember where it is.” The smile turned wistful. “I couldn’t forget it.”

Cameron frowned, not wanting to let her go off on her own. “Promise me you’ll be there in an hour when Doctor Burnett arrives.”

“I promise,” Sierra replied, already turning to head down the beach.

“Savannah?”

Sierra half-turned, shielding her eyes with her hand against the sun’s reflection off the sand.

“I’ll bring you here. We both will. You’ll have the childhood you remember.” Cameron didn’t say the word promise, but her words held a solemn vow.

Sierra took two steps and caught Cameron in a hard, tight hug, squeezing her eyes closed to hide her tears. Maybe this was one thing that wouldn’t change. Maybe there was still a chance for Sarah and Cameron to be happy... that sending John back hadn’t ruined everything.

“Thanks... mom,” she whispered, smiling just as a little as she felt Cameron stiffen in surprise.

With that, Sierra turned and quickly strode away through the sand, leaving Cameron standing stunned and bewildered in her wake, a single word ringing in her ears.

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The cup warmed Cameron’s palm, but the rest of her felt cold. If she hadn’t had video recall of the last few minutes, she would have thought they were a dream. Savannah, grown, and her remembrance of the past hinted at a life with Sarah that Cameron hadn’t ever thought to hope for, not even after the events of last night and this morning.

Savannah had called her *mom*. And asked her to keep a secret from Sarah.



Cameron frowned and set the coffee cup into the holder but she didn't put the car into gear. She was beginning to understand Sarah, at least understand the fears that drove the other woman. Loss... Sarah had spent her life losing everything that had mattered, her family, her lovers, and then her son, her single reason for existing. John had abandoned her, their fight, leaving Sarah to continue on alone. In the aftermath, Sarah had clung to Cameron, held onto the broken body long after it had served its purpose, and risked her life to bring and keep Cameron embodied. All to keep from losing the last thing that connected her to her life with her son. But then John came back and Cameron expected her role to change, for Sarah to focus with laser-like intensity on her son once again and jettison the unnecessary relationship they had fostered in the meantime.

But that didn't happen. Sarah had shown her, down in that high-tech basement less than twenty-four hours ago, that she would rather die with Cameron than live with John, and Cameron had not yet processed the implications of that choice. It was not the choice Cameron had expected her to make. The truth left Cameron in awe, that Sarah could care that much for her. It changed everything, making her even more determined to protect the woman that meant more to her than anything else.

Cameron still had a long way to go when it came to fully understanding the complex and fascinating woman that was Sarah Connor. The one thing she knew for sure was that keeping Savannah a secret from Sarah would make the other woman furious, if she found out. But Savannah, this adult Savannah, would be one more thing for Sarah to lose, one more blow to someone who had already lost so much. If Sarah knew about Savannah, she would get involved, take care of her, and come to love her as a daughter. Cameron knew her well enough to predict that. And if something happened, if this Savannah were die... Cameron couldn't imagine the cost to Sarah or the devastation to her psyche.

Cameron blinked, focusing on the dunes framing the small parking lot, and put the car in gear.

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Sarah leaned against the railing on the deck, basking in the warm sun and a pleasant lassitude from the heaviness of her limbs. Her eyes swept the beach regularly, always starting and ending at the spot where Cameron had disappeared. Resisting the urge to look at her watch or reach for her phone, she stood as patiently as she could and enjoyed the feel of the sun and the sound of the waves.

It felt strange and almost decadent to just stop in the moment and savor it. She never slowed down unless an injury forced the issue, and now Sarah had to admit she'd pushed herself too

far. She'd driven herself to be as much of a machine as those she fought, and the price had nearly been her sanity and her soul. It had taken Cameron, a woman who was now equal parts the present Sarah wanted to save and the future she wanted to stop, to bring Sarah back to herself, to remind her of what was important.

She had never let herself think about a future free of the machines. Not even in daydreams did she imagine she would survive to see a world without Skynet, a world where the bombs never fell, but Cameron made her see the possibility. Cameron made her imagine a life with more days like this one. She had given Sarah back the one thing she thought she'd lost forever: hope.

Sarah didn't know if she should curse the terminator for that or thank her. She only knew she wanted that life now; she wanted that future as much for herself as for John. Sarah could almost taste it.

When she saw Cameron's familiar form on the beach, Sarah smiled unconsciously as the terminator made her way through the sand. Cameron carried a white bag in one hand, a cup of coffee in the other, the laces of her boots tied together and flung over shoulder. She looked beautiful, and Sarah allowed herself to revel in her feelings for her if only for the few precious moments it took for Cameron to reach her.

Sarah met Cameron at the top of the stairs and took the outstretched coffee cup from her, but instead of taking a drink, she wrapped an arm around Cameron's waist and pulled her in for a long kiss. "Thanks," she breathed, surprised to find her voice husky as she held Cameron close. She felt oddly giddy, and she could only attribute it to the fact that she had Cameron there, embodied and real, to hug and hold. She felt lighter and freer than she had in years. Letting John take the weight of leadership and resolving some of the tension with Cameron seemed to be agreeing with her. She knew the feelings couldn't last, but she was determined to hold onto them for as long as possible.

Her body responded as if Cameron had been gone for days, not half an hour, and Sarah had to keep herself from dragging them back into the bedroom to replay their activities from last night and this morning. Reluctantly releasing Cameron, she gave her a soft smile, wondering how they would ever keep their relationship a secret from John if she were going to be this sappy once they got back to the house.

"You were gone a while," Sarah muttered to distract herself from her body's response and the disturbing thoughts of John's reaction.

Cameron seemed to be analyzing her, her head tilted to the side and her eyes scanning Sarah's face, and Sarah wondered if the warm welcome had surprised her. There was something in

Cameron's eyes that made Sarah pause, that made her fear that this rare moment of happiness might be even more fleeting than she'd ever imagined. But then Cameron smiled, the expression hesitant and shy, and Sarah's worries evaporated as the cyborg leaned forward to brush her lips across Sarah's cheek.

"There was a line," Cameron explained, her words a near whisper in Sarah's ear.

Sarah drew Cameron closer for another tight hug, feeling a stiffness in Cameron's body that wasn't there before, but she ignored it as Cameron relaxed into her embrace and returned the hug with almost uncomfortable strength. Sarah rested her head on Cameron's shoulder, enjoying the simple pleasure of being held in the sun, alone, with no worries of anyone seeing or judging. Finally, she sighed and raised her head. "I guess we should go."

"John and Savannah will want to see you," Cameron replied. For a moment, she looked like she was about to say more, but then she handed Sarah the bag instead. "You eat and I'll shower. Then we'll go home." She stepped out of the circle of Sarah's arms and headed toward the house.

"Cameron?" Sarah's voice caught her before she reached the door, and she swung around, the sun making Sarah a silhouette in front of her.

"I..." Sarah swallowed the words she had been about to say and then continued, "I like this place. Maybe we can come back here sometime," she finished, feeling like a coward.

Cameron stared at her with an unreadable expression. "We will," she vowed with unexpected intensity. "We'll bring Savannah here. Just some time for the three of us."

Sarah didn't understand the look of determination she could see in Cameron's brown eyes, and the sight caused a tickle of worry at the base of her brain. She nodded slowly. "I'd like that," she admitted.

Cameron suddenly glanced to her left, looking down the beach at something Sarah couldn't see. "I won't be long," she promised in a subdued tone.

"Everything all right?" Sarah finally asked.

"I just..." Cameron's gaze returned to Sarah's, and she looked almost apologetic. "I just... hate to leave."

Relaxing a little under the admission, Sarah nodded. "We'll come back soon," she promised the terminator.

"Soon," Cameron agreed seriously.

Sarah watched her go inside before turning her focus back on the beach. Wrapping her hands around the still warm coffee cup, she took one more breath of the fresh air. "Soon," she repeated softly to herself.