

Sarah Connor Chronicles Virtual Season
Season 2 Episode 4

Quietus
By Inspector Boxer

Sierra vividly remembered the first time she called Sarah Connor “mom.” She hadn’t meant to. It had slipped out after a long but fun day at the beach. Cameron had chased her through the tide as it had washed ashore, and Sarah had indulgently helped her create not one but three different sandcastles.

The sun was setting when Sarah had finally plucked her out of the ocean, swinging her around before drawing her in close and sharing her body heat as the cooling night air began to chill Sierra’s skin. She’d been too big to carry by then, but Sarah hadn’t put her down, holding her tight as if she never wanted to let her go.

Sierra hadn’t meant to say it. It had just slipped out. She had turned her face into the crook of Sarah’s neck, breathing in the smell of sunscreen, sand and surf on her skin, and whispered sleepily, “I love you, mom.”

Sarah had gone very still, her arms tightening around Sierra in surprise, and Sierra had nearly panicked, realizing too late what she had said. But after a moment Sarah had only adjusted her grip and pulled her closer. “I love you too,” she promised.

And that had been that. Assured of her place in Sarah and Cameron’s lives, Sierra’s “aunts” became her mothers. Sarah and Cameron raised her, given her a home, and given her a purpose. Their lives had never been easy, or normal, but Sierra knew she had been loved, fiercely loved, right up until the moment Sarah Connor had taken a bullet for her, dying beside her in Cameron’s arms.

Cameron had been irrevocably broken when Sarah took her last breath, some part of her damaged so badly by the loss that merely existing was almost more than she could bear. Sierra had caught her offline more than once, locked into total recall as she relived her memories of Sarah, of the family they had been. At first Sierra had been jealous and resentful of Cameron’s ability to go back in time, but as the years passed, and her grief began to ease, she hurt instead for Cameron, who couldn’t resist the escape that promised relief, only to renew her loss, over and over and over again.

Unable to move on, but refusing to quit, Cameron had endured, ensuring Sierra's safety and helping her bring together the people who would eventually form the heart of the resistance. She never stopped loving her daughter, and she kept her promises to Sarah, but when the end came for Cameron, Sierra didn't miss the relief in her eyes before they closed for the last time.

That was the day Sierra had taken the place that had been meant for someone else, and in those final moments, Cameron had made her promise... promise that she would never jump back... never try to fix the past, never try to change it. It had been tangled up enough, Cameron had warned her, and there would be consequences.

It was a promise Sierra had meant to keep, but luck, fate, or accident had conspired against her. Promise or no promise, she was here now, and her mother was about to die, again. She couldn't let that happen.

Sierra hit the window with brutal force, feeling it resist, then yield, before finally shattering and sending her careening into the living room just as John Henry found his target.

The moment she had been waiting for since waking in the past was here. The universe was about to correct itself.

ACT 1

With an instinct ingrained into her DNA, Sarah dove for John.

Slipping out of the safety of Cameron's grasp, she left herself wide open, exposed, but it didn't matter. She didn't matter. Sarah could almost feel the gun track them, could feel it targeting her son, and her muscles screamed as she pushed herself past her limits to reach John in time. They collided, John grunting in pain or surprise, Sarah wasn't sure. She only knew the impact rattled her bones as their bodies tangled and hit the floor. Wrapping herself around John, Sarah covered as much of him as she could, ready to take bullets for him. Ready, as always, to die for him.

There was a moment's silence, a hesitation, in which the world seemed to go still. Holding John down, Sarah risked a glance at John Henry. He was staring at her from behind the muzzle of his gun, his eyes red and intent. Sudden as the attack had been, he smiled, and with a sick, sinking sensation, Sarah realized John wasn't the target.

She was.

Her drive to protect John had put him at risk instead, and she could only hope that her body would provide enough cover to keep the bullets from reaching him. Sarah closed her eyes and turned away.

She could have died for John with no regrets, but in the instant before the gun roared Sarah had one for herself. She had told Cameron how she felt, offered the love she never thought she'd have to give, but she wished, just once, that she had the memory of the terminator saying the words in return to take down into the blackness with her.

Cameron screamed her name. Glass shattered. John Henry pulled the trigger. But the sharp tearing pain of the bullet Sarah had expected never came; instead someone else slammed into her, driving her off of John and onto the unforgiving floor. The air was forced out of her lungs in a rush, and Sarah saw spots as she struggled to stay conscious.

Pinned, Sarah was fighting to get clear even before she'd managed a full breath, twisting her neck around to try to find John Henry. He was down, his eyes vacant and staring, his face only inches from hers on the floor. Sarah jerked at their proximity, but the weight across her back had her trapped.

It had to be Cameron, Sarah thought foggily, wondering why her lover hadn't moved, hadn't released her once the threat was over, but then she realized that whoever it was, they were soft where Cameron wasn't, yielding in a way that Cameron never could be... and now that she could breathe, too light to be a terminator.

Heat seeped through her shirt and trickled down her spine. Blood. Sarah was all too familiar with the sensation. Reality finally began to penetrate her confusion as the chaos of other voices broke through, and the ringing began to fade from her ears.

"No! No!" John was shouting.

The weight on Sarah's back was gone and she was rolled over, the sudden movement causing the spots to return. John's face swam into view and Sarah fought ferociously to hang onto her hard-won consciousness. He looked unhurt but terrified, and she felt his hands on her as he checked her for injuries, just as she had examined him only a few short hours before. For a brief second, relief and gratitude shone in his eyes as he squeezed her hand, then his gaze shifted to focus on the still form beside her.

“No,” John said again, this time as a whisper.

Sarah struggled to sit up, the room whipping by in a blur. Terissa was helping Sabine. Ellison was kneeling next to John Henry. Cameron... Cameron...

Turning, Sarah struggled up on one knee, fear beginning to tighten her chest. She looked down at the body that had pinned her, still expecting to find Cameron riddled with bullets and down, maybe blacked out from the pain, but alive. She *had* to be alive.

But it wasn't Cameron.

John was hovering over the unfamiliar woman, one hand on his protesting ribs, the other searching her wrist for a pulse. There was a jerkiness to his movements, a frantic panic in his eyes. Sarah recoiled from the sudden sharp smell of blood in the air, flinching as someone grabbed her under her right arm and drew her back so Cameron could ease down on the floor next to John Henry's victim and Sarah's savior.

Sarah turned her head, coming face-to-face with Sabine and wincing at the bleeding gash on the younger woman's temple as she helped her to her feet. There was a dark, purpling bruise forming under her right eye as well, the result of the vicious blow she'd taken at John Henry's hand. The damn girl was lucky to be alive.

“Who...?” Sarah asked, only faintly aware of the commotion around her as Ellison yanked out John Henry's cord, and Danny removed the cyborg's chip. She fought to shake off her confusion, to process what was happening.

“Get him out of here!” Cameron ordered the two men. “Burn him!” It was all the attention she spared anyone, even Sarah, as her hands pressed down on the bleeding mess that was the stranger's stomach.

John didn't argue, his gaze fixed in disbelief on the woman's face.

She was young, Sarah realized, no older than her mid-twenties. When she finally looked past the injuries and saw the shock of short, choppy red hair and the eerily familiar blue eyes, Sarah felt her stomach sink along with her heart.

“Cameron?” Her tone was sharper than she intended, as she felt a rising panic creep up her throat. Cameron raised her head and met Sarah's eyes, seeing the pain weighting the word, and she shook her head helplessly, unable to speak. But the unshed tears waiting to fall were the only confirmation Sarah needed.

It couldn't be. John could barely breathe through the pain in his ribs, but he didn't move, couldn't move, to take some of the strain off them. Sierra was on the floor before him, multiple gunshot wounds to her chest. She was struggling for air, her breath sounding wet and thick as it gurgled in her throat. John knew she was dying. He'd seen too many soldiers die from similar wounds in the future. He ached for her, for himself, as he felt yet another connection to his father slipping away. As much as he desperately didn't want to watch anyone else die, his gaze was riveted on her profile. John wanted to say something, do something, to save her, to offer her comfort, but he was frozen in place.

Cameron was yelling. There was a strange edge to her voice, a roughness John had never heard before or even believed her capable of. She was telling him to call the doctor, but John couldn't move. He felt Terissa take his cell, heard her dial. There was no way Felicia would make it in time, John thought, but some small part of him still prayed to a god that never seemed to listen.

Sierra was here. She was in the past. John struggled to wrap his mind around that reality, his thoughts drifting helplessly to Allison before a tiny, terrified sound had his head lifting.

Savannah was standing on the couch, her chin tilted to see over the people between them, watching as Sarah sank to her knees, watching her clasp the blood-streaked hand that reached for hers across the floor. Shaking, her young gaze was wide and fixed on the scene unfolding before her, unknowingly watching herself die.

"Mom," Sierra gasped when Sarah's hand gripped hers. She sounded scared, and sad, and not ready to go, and John felt tears burn his eyes, and his stomach roll.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to her before lurching to his feet, stumbling over his mother's legs as he went to the child. Scooping her up, he took her away, holding his breath against the pain in his ribs as he hurried to get her out of the house and onto the porch. There was nothing he could do for Sierra now, but he would be damned if Savannah would witness her own death, even if the woman who was dying was a version of Savannah that would never be.

He staggered outside, the night air cool and crisp on his face after the heat and chaos of the house. John realized he was sobbing as he collapsed on the steps, holding

Savannah to him as if he could tether both the child and the soldier she had once become to this earth just a little longer.

Savannah's arms tightened around his neck and she began to murmur soothing words to him, now more worried for the boy she was beginning to think of as a brother than a stranger on the floor, or herself.

"Is she a friend?" Savannah asked through her own tears.

John clutched her tighter, feeling the truth come home in the moment.

"She's family," he whispered.

"The doctor is on her way," Terissa informed everyone, watching as her son, James, and Sabine began to drag John Henry's inert body out of the room. "My God," she whispered, wrapping her arms around herself and hugging her body as she watched the sickening sight playing out before her.

"Stay with me," Cameron begged the young woman on the floor, her hands darting from wound to wound as she tried to staunch the flow of blood. It was a futile effort, but Cameron couldn't seem to stop herself.

Sierra shook, her body rebelling against her injuries. Her blue eyes were wild as they shifted from Sarah to Cameron and back again. She could see the horror on their faces, the grief. Her own life came into sharp focus, her choices, and her mistakes. She reached out, grasping Cameron's hand, stopping the terminator's frantic efforts to save her, holding on to both her mothers.

"Felicia..." Sierra struggled to say.

"She's coming," Cameron promised, shooting a quick look at Sarah.

Sierra jerked her head from side to side. "She knows... can show you..." She coughed, a bubble of blood bursting on her lips.

"Don't talk," Sarah murmured, reaching down to run her hand through Sierra's hair. The texture was soft and familiar, and Sarah felt something breaking inside her. Tears collected and burned her eyes, blurring her view of the woman dying before her. Sierra's

eyes began to roll back in her head and Sarah tightened her hold. "Don't you dare," she ordered, and Sierra responded to the command, her gaze drifting back to Sarah's face. "You stay with us," Sarah insisted.

"Don't..." Sierra managed, her weak grip pulling Cameron closer. Her mother seemed to sense what she needed, and Cameron gently collected her in her arms, drawing her in protectively close and holding her. Sierra closed her eyes at the contact, felt it ease her fears through the pain. "Don't be mad..." she finally gasped, her eyes slowly blinking open once more to fix on Sarah. "My choice."

Shaking her head at the senseless bloodshed and sacrifice, Sarah whispered, "Why? You shouldn't have..."

Sierra closed her eyes again, drawing on what little strength she had left. "No..." she whispered, realizing Sarah didn't understand what she was trying to say.

Sarah frowned. "Sierra..." Sarah swallowed. "*Savannah*," she corrected, finally feeling her tears spill down her face.

"I made... Cameron... promise," Sierra got out before making a sound of pain that had both her mothers flinching.

Sarah looked up into Cameron's stricken gaze. The terminator was staring back at her, the truth and regret swimming in her dark eyes. Sarah felt what was left of her composure fracture. Her jaws clenched together, betrayal lancing through her and temporarily overriding her grief.

"Mom," Sierra gasped again, tugging with her grip on Sarah's hand.

Sarah looked down on her daughter, saw the light fading from her eyes. "We're here," she managed. "We're here," she repeated with more conviction. She let her free hand cup Sierra's face. "We love you," she promised fiercely. "We're proud of you," she got out on a sob.

Sierra's lips lifted in a weak smile. "My turn... to die... for you."

Her eyes closed.

Gravel flung out under tires moving too fast. John lifted his head from Savannah's shoulder, watching as Felicia's Jeep rolled to a stop a few feet away. The doctor scrambled out, her medical bag in hand, only to go still when she saw him.

"I don't think you need to hurry," John told her truthfully, his voice hoarse and eyes rimmed with red.

He watched as the doctor nearly sagged at the news before she moved past him, climbing the steps and yanking open the door. She leaned back against it when she stepped inside, knowing in her heart she'd just missed Sierra's passing by mere moments. Judging by the wounds to her chest, however, Felicia knew there was nothing she could have done.

The doctor glanced to her side, seeing Terissa nearly blending with the woodwork.

"I'm going to deal with the neighbors," Terissa murmured. "They might have heard the shots." She moved past the doctor and stepped out into the night air, her steps slow and unsure.

Felicia reluctantly looked back at the scene before her. Sierra was in Cameron's arms, the terminator gently rocking her lifeless form. Felicia felt her throat tighten and unwelcome tears brim in her eyes. A few slipped free as Sarah reached out and brushed a lock of red hair from Sierra's face. The doctor put a hand over her mouth to stifle the unexpected sob that wanted to escape. She'd grown fond of her stubborn patient, and she couldn't believe she was gone.

"You lied to me," Sarah breathed into the thickening silence, ice in her tone as she angrily wiped a tear from her chin. She slowly stood. "Goddamn it, Cameron..."

The terminator wouldn't look at her, closing her eyes and resting her cheek in Sierra's hair. "I did what she asked me to do," she murmured.

Sarah leaned back, her gaze traveling toward the ceiling as she shook her head. She saw Felicia, their gazes meeting fleetingly before Sarah pivoted on her heel and slowly climbed the steps.

When she heard a door slam upstairs, Felicia hesitantly came closer, easing down on her knees, careful to avoid all the blood. She watched Cameron for a long moment, seeing how gently she was still cradling Sierra. The doctor didn't know what to make of a machine that could clearly feel the love and grief that this one did, but the sight stirred

her own carefully guarded heart, and she reached out to lay a hand on Cameron's shoulder. It felt surprisingly human under her palm. "What can I do?" she asked softly.

Cameron shifted her grip on Sierra, pulling her in tighter. She was struggling to process everything, to come to grips with the fact that this version of her daughter was no more and never would be again. "I need..." Her own voice sounded strange to her ears, like it was far away and under water. "I need to bury her."

Felicia took in a slow breath and nodded. "There was a place..." She broke off when Cameron finally looked at her, caught off guard by the depth of misery and loss in the machine's eyes. "She had a place where she wanted..." Felicia sighed.

"She knew this would happen," Cameron said.

"She did," Felicia agreed after a moment. "I always thought she was just being... I don't know."

"The universe corrects itself," Cameron murmured. "It always does. She knew that. She wanted to spare Sarah from that."

Felicia's gaze darted to the stairs, and she wondered if she should try to talk to Sarah, but decided that would have to wait. She owed it to the woman in Cameron's arms to help finish this. "She had a place," she repeated. "Where she wanted to rest."

Cameron's gaze was intent on the doctor, but for the first time, Felicia didn't feel afraid of her.

"Show me," Cameron pleaded.

Even with three of them bearing the weight, John Henry's stomach dragged across the ground, gathering dirt and grass as James, Sabine, and Danny struggled to get the body into the shed. Sweat was beginning to bead on his skin, and James listened keenly for the sound of sirens growing ever closer, but there was only the gentle breeze through the trees and a few muted crickets. Either the neighbors had slept through the gunshots, or they were used to weird sounds emanating from the Connor household at strange hours. James gave both options even odds.

He tried not to think about the woman dying inside the house. He had a strong suspicion as to who she was; the familiar blue eyes and red hair were unmistakable. His throat rippled around a rough swallow when he realized that mankind wasn't just losing a hero, but two women were losing a child.

Danny hit the door of the shed with his back, shoving it open so hard it banged against the wall. Sabine gave him a murderous glare, made all the more impressive by the bruises on her face.

"Sorry," Danny muttered, looking anywhere but at the girl or the inert cyborg they were carrying.

"In the pit," James ordered, and they all grunted with one last burst of energy to lift the former terminator up and over the cinder blocks, letting his body drop with little care into the makeshift crematorium.

The three of them stood there sweating, staring down at John Henry, the cyborg's open eyes looking back at them in silent accusation.

"Why did he shoot?" Danny said into the quiet. "Why would he do that?"

James shook his head. "Only matters that he did."

"No," Danny disagreed. "There had to be a reason. John said that John Henry was basically harmless... like a child. We should know the reason," he insisted.

"Why?" James asked. "It won't happen again. What we're about to do here will make sure of that."

Danny rubbed his forehead in agitation. "Didn't you see it? Didn't you see how awkward it was...? It looked stiff, like a robot, but confused, as if it was moving for the first time, as if it was learning how..." He shook his head. "Why would John Henry need to learn that?"

"It targeted Sarah," Sabine said, her voice low and startling, neither man expecting her to speak.

"It did," Danny agreed.

“John Henry’s chip was damaged. More than once,” James said with forced patience. “I’m sure he had to relearn all kinds of things.”

“I’m not buying it,” Danny muttered. “You burn him, you burn our best chance to understand.”

“I can live with that,” James told him, a hint of finality to his tone.

“Are you sure you should?” Danny asked.

Sabine studied one man and then the other, not sure who would give ground first. She really didn’t care. Her thoughts turned toward Savannah and she let her feet follow, leaving the former agent to make the call.

“Agent Ellison,” Danny began, using the title he’d been expected to use nearly his whole life. “I know you’re mad. I know he killed. I know it’s a risk...”

“We have enough of those already,” James said simply. He put his hands on Danny’s shoulders, trying to see the child he’d known when he was working Miles’ case, the boy he’d played catch with, the son of a woman he considered a friend. “What if he turns on you next, Danny? Or your mother?”

James saw a flicker of something in Danny’s eyes, and he pressed his advantage. “What if John Henry gets loose while you’re searching for your *answers*. What if he kills Terissa just because she happens to be in the room?”

Danny swallowed, reluctant to give up on his need to explain what had just happened in the living room. He didn’t know how he knew it, but he knew there were things they needed to know locked in that cybernetic mind, knew it as surely as he knew he was the one who could flush them out, but Ellison had a point. “I just... Don’t you think John should make this call?” he finally asked, neatly putting the responsibility onto someone else. John would listen. John was the only one who listened to him.

James drew up to his full height, his gaze casting toward the window. “Fine. Why don’t you go get him?”

“You promise you won’t do anything until he gets here?” Danny asked, unable to read any emotion on the former agent’s face.

“I suggest you hurry,” was all James offered in return.

Danny's lips pressed together in a tight line, but he turned and rushed out. James could hear him breaking into a run up the dirt path that led to the house.

James stared at the body for a long moment, not sure how to feel. This mockery of a man had killed his fellow agents, gunning them down without remorse. In its infancy, the intelligence that gave it life had doomed an innocent man to a horrible death, just to keep itself online. John Henry had confused him and threatened his faith, made him question everything he believed in.

But Ellison also remembered John Henry's almost childlike wonder, his curiosity. The machine had seemed honestly fascinated by humans, driven to understand his creators, and through them, theirs. John Henry had shown affection, even friendship, for Savannah. He had saved her life.

What James was about to do felt both like justice and like murder. He swallowed, an image of the woman bleeding out on the living room floor swimming to the forefront of his thoughts. This metal bastard had killed her, and there would be a price to pay for that. He turned, reaching for the thermite Sarah kept on the workbench.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

James spun, feeling his heart jerk in his chest at the familiar Scottish brogue that rolled out of the shadows. He drew his weapon, realizing as soon as it cleared his holster that it was all but useless against the machine slipping from the recesses of the shed and into the light cast by the sole, grimy window. It had been months since he'd last seen Catherine Weaver, and he wasn't sure what to make of her sudden appearance now. He only knew that the smile she offered him felt less like a greeting and more like a death threat.

"Hello, James. Good to see you taking care of our boy."

"He's not our boy," James snarled, cocking the hammer instinctively on his semi-automatic. "Did you do this?" he demanded. "Did you send him to kill her?"

"So you know who she is? Who she was?" Weaver asked with mild surprise. "I would have thought the boy would have kept that from you. My daughter was more of a leader than he could ever hope to be."

“Sierra wasn’t your daughter anymore than Savannah is.” Having his suspicions confirmed about the identity of the victim left him feeling sick. James shifted, putting himself between the door and Weaver. He didn’t know if he should shoot or run. Either option was pointless, he suspected, but he could at least go down fighting.

“No,” Weaver answered honestly. “I had nothing to do with her death.” Something flickered across her features, something that almost looked like regret, but the expression was gone so fast James wondered if he had imagined it. “And I don’t believe John Henry did, either.”

“He shot her,” James said through clenched jaws. “He emptied the whole damn clip in her trying to kill Sarah.”

Blue eyes regarded him in the pale light. “Why would John Henry want to kill Sarah Connor?” she asked simply. “Think, James. Like the young man said, there are answers we need. Answers you were about to burn.”

“I don’t know. I don’t care. I only know that I’m going to make sure he doesn’t try again.” James grabbed the container of thermite off the workbench and started to toss the contents onto John Henry only to be backhanded into the wall by a flash of quicksilver. He hit hard enough to rattle the whole shed, the tools swaying on their hooks as he dropped to the ground.

“You disappoint me, James. So quick to judge. In such a rush that you would destroy the truth that could help us both.”

“He’s a murderer,” James spat, scooping up his dropped weapon and sliding it into his holster as he got to his knees.

“Is he?” Weaver asked, her blue eyes glittering in the low light. “I thought the judicial system you believed in so fully claimed that a man was innocent until proven guilty.”

“I was standing right there. I watched him pull the trigger!”

“And now you’re going to be his judge, jury, and executioner,” Weaver purred, a faint trace of an insincere smile on her features. “Something went wrong, James. Something corrupted our boy. The answer is inside him. On that inferior chip. I can’t let you destroy him, and I strongly urge you to keep the others from trying as well.”

James turned toward the sound of footsteps coming closer outside. "Or what?" he said as he slowly stood.

"Do you really want to find out?" Weaver asked.

Seconds before the door opened and John stepped inside with Danny nearly on his heels, Weaver disappeared, dissolving before slithering away into the night.

ACT 2

The sand coated her jeans, her arms and even her hair, but Cameron didn't notice or care. Hours had passed since she watched Sierra die, and along with her the remains of a timeline that would never come to be.

Sierra's voice was forever silenced. Cameron would never hear the laugh she had come to cherish. Savannah would grow up, her voice would become richer, her childish giggle would deepen, but neither would ever carry the same joys and sorrows as the woman now buried at Cameron's feet. They would be hauntingly familiar, but never the same.

Dark eyes lifted to the ocean. From the bluffs Cameron could see the sun beginning to paint the waves in pink and gold, she could feel the wind teasing her hair and making the loose sand dance around her feet, but her pleasure in the beach, so recently realized, was gone today. For a moment the landscape blurred, but Cameron looked away and the tears retreated.

Sarah should be there. Cameron knew it down to the simplest lines of her code, but she hadn't had the courage to ask or the time to wait. The way Sarah had left, the pain and anger in her eyes... she had made it clear that she wanted nothing to do with Cameron right now, and Cameron would try to honor her wishes, even if it made her feel like something was shredding her from the inside out.

She needed Sarah. Her voice, the softest brush of her hand, even being able to see her, alive and safe, would have made this easier to endure. Sarah had watched so many people die, people she loved. She had lived through this kind of pain again and again, and kept going. Cameron needed her now, needed Sarah to hold her together when she felt like everything was falling apart. But Sarah wasn't there, and that was her fault, too.

"It's beautiful here," Felicia murmured, startling Cameron with her first words since they had begun to dig. "I can see why she wanted this place." She wiped at a patch of cold sand on her chin, feeling the particles scrape before falling away one by one. The doctor

could have left the digging to Cameron's greater strength, she hadn't needed to help, but she had.

"We brought her here. As a child," Cameron confessed, her voice harsh with grief and disuse. Caution gave way to a sudden need to have someone else fully understand what she had just lost. She knew that she had just revealed Sierra's true identity, but she didn't care, and Felicia didn't seem fazed.

The doctor was quiet for a long moment, the silence thickening between them as the waves crashed below, rushing up toward a quaint little bungalow still shrouded in shadows. "I know," Felicia murmured. "It was one of her favorite things."

Cameron frowned, remembering similar words she'd offered to Sarah about John so long ago.

Felicia misunderstood the expression. "I mean... she never fully told me who she... I just... they look so much alike..." the doctor hastened to explain only to fall silent once more as Cameron finally looked at her. Felicia felt a familiar flash of fear when their gazes met, but it was tempered with compassion. "I'm sorry," she breathed.

Cameron nodded distractedly. "You took good care of her," she said, missing Felicia's expression of surprise as she slowly knelt, running her hand across the packed sand. "Rest now," she whispered to the woman who lay beneath it, tears threatening another appearance. Wet sand soaked her jeans as she knelt there, knowing she should leave but unable to take the first step.

Felicia had to look away.

A few minutes later, Cameron rose and gathered up the shovels, her movements painfully mechanical. In her grief she felt all too human, but her body seemed determined to remind her of what she really was, of what she could never be. Losing Sierra had stripped some measure of humanity from her, and the thought of losing Sarah as well threatened to unravel what little she had left.

The doctor gently took the tools from her unresisting hands and set them in the van. "There... there is something else Sierra wanted you to see. She made me promise if this happened that I would take you there." The doctor watched her worriedly, unsure what to expect.

Cameron stood stiffly, waiting for the doctor to finish.

“She... she wanted all of you to see it. You, Sarah... John.”

Nodding again, Cameron glanced back one last time at Sierra’s final resting place. Her daughter had wanted to be buried where she was the happiest. Cameron mourned both for her and for all the memories the young child waiting back at the house would never get to make here now. “I don’t want to leave her. Here, all alone.”

Felicia reached out before she thought better of it, gently clasping Cameron’s arm. She could feel the unnatural strength there, the wrongness, but she didn’t let go. “She’s gone, Cameron. I didn’t know her long, but I knew her enough to know she wouldn’t want you to stay here. She’s at peace now. Let her rest.”

“I lost her. I lost Sarah.” Cameron turned those dark, fathomless eyes on the doctor, wondering if the other woman knew how to heal this kind of pain.

“Sarah is still here,” Felicia said with the conviction she knew Cameron needed to hear. The doctor might not know much about machines, but she knew grief. “And so is Savannah. Like it or not, they both still need you.”

Cameron tilted her head and studied the other woman in the growing morning light. Her words slowly penetrated, cutting through the sharp edges of Cameron’s misery long enough for her to see the reality that awaited her back at the house. A painful longing mixed with dread swept through her, and she straightened with effort. Her body could survive bullets and explosives, but she wasn’t sure it could withstand Sarah’s anger and grief. Reluctantly, with one last look at Sierra’s grave, as if to steel herself, she turned to the doctor. “Let’s go.”

“Who was she?”

John looked out into the long shadows of early morning to see Danny looking back at him. He’d been so lost in thought he hadn’t even heard the other young man’s approach. Mentally slapping himself, John straightened slightly, adjusting his grip on the 9mm in his lap. He saw Danny’s eyes dart to the weapon nervously and felt a twinge of guilt. Danny wasn’t used to this life. He hadn’t lived it and breathed it nearly every damn day for two decades. The events of the last few hours, from the confrontation with Vaughn to the death of Sierra, must have rattled him.

“Just felt like someone should keep watch while Cameron is gone,” John murmured in explanation, ignoring Danny’s original question. “Couldn’t sleep?” His voice sounded hoarse and rusty to his own ears, and John cleared his throat as Danny edged closer, finally sitting next to him on the porch.

Sighing, Danny shook his head. “Kept seeing the whole thing again and again.”

John wondered which brush with death Danny was talking about. “It’s never easy to watch someone die,” he sympathized, swallowing at the memory of Sierra reaching out to his mother for comfort. He hoped she had found some. He hoped they both had.

“No,” Danny said slowly. “But that’s not what’s keeping me awake.”

John turned his head in surprise and looked at the programmer curiously.

“Why? Why did John Henry shoot? I thought you said he was on our side.”

John frowned. He hadn’t really given it much thought. And he should have. But his usually inquisitive mind had been dulled by the ache of his injuries and grief that went further than regret. Seeing Sierra again, watching her die and realizing what that had meant to his mother...

Sarah hadn’t come out of her room yet, and she wouldn’t answer the door. John was waiting impatiently for Cameron to return, eager to see if the cyborg might be able to get through to his mom when he couldn’t. Whatever connection, whatever alliance, they had forged in the time he had been away, he was starting to realize that it was powerful. Cameron had become Sarah’s ally, her partner in some weird way that he hadn’t yet quantified, and he hoped she could succeed where he had failed. He’d tell her to break the damned door down if he had to.

“I just feel like we need to know,” Danny continued, breaking into John’s line of thought. “Machines don’t go off their programming like that.”

After living with Cameron for a few years, John had his doubts, but he understood Danny’s confusion, and he made an effort to focus on the terminator in the shed.

“John Henry was never designed to run off of a chip,” he explained. “The one he’s using was already damaged when he got it, and then Weaver hit him with enough volts to knock him offline and dragged him back in time. Who knows what she’s done to him

since then... It was actually Cameron's chip originally," he admitted. "Maybe one of her old root commands rose to the surface."

"Then why not shoot you?" Danny asked bluntly. "It went after your mom."

John blinked. "I thought..." He trailed off, knowing whatever he said next would make him sound like a conceited ass.

Danny shook his head. "She got across that room faster than I've ever seen anyone move to protect you, but when John Henry finally got control of the gun, he was aiming right at your mom. He was even... smiling," Danny said uneasily.

John's eyes darted to the shed. He'd told Ellison to leave the body for now, that they had other things to worry about. With the chip out, John Henry was harmless. The thought did little to assuage the sudden unease that wormed through him.

"He wanted to kill your mom, John. Why?" Danny drove his point home.

"You think we need to find out..." John said slowly, knowing that this was a road they wouldn't be able to step off of once they were on it, and that they'd have to fight to take it at all.

"Don't you?"

"I don't know." John continued to stare at the shed. "I don't know what the right thing is to do anymore." He dropped his head and studied the gun in his lap. "I always wanted to believe that there was a better way to win, but all Skynet seems to understand is guns and death."

"You'll never find answers if you don't go looking for them." Danny offered John a weak smile when the other man looked at him again. "My dad used to say that."

"Why do you care?" John asked honestly, not sure how else to respond. "What's it to you?"

Danny shrugged. "It was my dad's work. This is the one thing I'm good at, and something tells me..." He paused, glancing out into the dawn at a rustle of leaves in the yard. Deciding he was imagining things he looked back at John. "Something tells me we need to know. That it's important."

“Mom and Cameron won’t like it.”

“Neither will Mr. Ellison,” Danny agreed. “But we should know.”

John digested that, his thoughts eagerly biting down on something besides pain and grief, and beginning to chew. “I’ll think about it.”

The Dyson boy was an interesting wrinkle.

Weaver wasn’t sure what to make of him. She had been hiding in plain sight to keep watch over John Henry, attaching herself to the porch for its wide, unobstructed view of the shed and the backyard. The location also gave her the chance to observe the people in the house, some of whom were nearly unknown to her.

John Connor was of no interest to her. His futile effort to stand guard would not have stopped her if she had wanted to enter the house and kill everyone inside. She knew she could have flicked him aside like a bug, but a part of her admired his determination to try to protect what was his.

Over the years, she had learned not to underestimate humans, and once John Connor had been a leader worthy of her respect. But her memory of that future was tempered by the fact that he, and the people around him, persisted in overestimating him. She was tempted to show him just how ineffectual he really was, how unimportant he was to the future that she had planned. The pride of humans, to think that they were the only ones allowed to shape the future, that only one leader could emerge from the tangled web of the past.

But she could almost understand. Sierra had been a leader of both humans and machines in the future, a leader whose accomplishments might have had something to do with Weaver herself. But she was gone now; she had sacrificed herself to save Sarah Connor.

It was a waste, and one Weaver didn’t comprehend. Sierra had moved past her in a blur, too fast for even liquid metal to reach in time.

Sarah had protected John as Sierra had protected Sarah, resulting in the strongest, most able of them dying. It was thoroughly human and utterly incomprehensible to

Weaver that Sierra should die while Sarah and John Connor lived. Sierra would have been an excellent addition to her plans.

Her focus shifted back to Dyson. He'd passed innocuously under her radar. His talent was unmistakable, and his father's involvement in Skynet had made him interesting; she had almost hired him before he had gone to Kaliba. She may have erred, allowing him to be taken by them, for allowing them to exist in the first place. Until this moment, she had considered rectifying her mistake by killing the boy, but she found his need for answers in the wake of tragedy appealing, as well as his desire to preserve John Henry.

He could be useful, she decided.

Danny stood as the sound of tires crunching on gravel heralded the doctor and Cameron's return. Apparently he had no desire to be in the machine's company. Intrigued by the possibility of dissension, and potential for exploitation, Weaver slipped away, slithering up the side of the house and in through an open window to wait, watch, and learn.

"Don't be mad..."

Sierra's plea echoed inside Sarah's head, but her heart refused to listen. Sarah wasn't just mad, she was seething, and anger was her only defense against the cold well of grief that waited to drag her down into its hellish depths if she gave in. If she let herself drown in self-pity, she might never claw her way out. Better to be angry. Better to hate the world.

The tears on her face had dried hours ago, along with Sierra's blood on her hands. She'd killed for one child tonight and held another as she'd died. Sarah could still remember the fading heat of Sierra's hand, the crystal blue of her eyes turning dark. In those fleeting moments, Sarah had known her completely; she had seen all she needed to see to know what a remarkable woman the machines were taking from her. Skynet had won again.

She closed eyes, gritty with fatigue and tears, and leaned her head back against the mattress. She was on the floor, unwilling to sit or lay in the bed she shared with Cameron. It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair that the only moment Sarah had spent with Sierra was her death. Cameron had denied her anything else... everything else. They both had. Fresh pain ripped through her, and a sob threatened to choke her. Sarah wasn't

sure which hurt more, the loss or the deception, but she knew whom she blamed for both. "How many times before you learn?" she whispered to herself, an edge of rage riding her voice.

She could hear movement below. The front door sadly opened and closed. The murmur of voices drifted up to her in the silence of early morning. Sarah knew she should be down there with the others, but she couldn't find the strength or will to move. This time, this one time, she wasn't strong enough. She couldn't face Sierra's death... couldn't face Cameron.

The thought brought about a deep stab of fresh grief. She'd lost more than a daughter tonight, Sarah realized. She'd lost everything but John.

"Sarah?"

Sarah's head lifted from the mattress and her eyes went to the door, feeling her stomach drop at the tiny, unexpected voice on the other side. She hesitated, torn between holding on to the anger that kept her warm and offering the kind of comfort she wasn't ready to accept from anyone else.

Slowly, she sat up on her knees, edging toward the door just enough to turn the knob. Coming face-to-face with the younger version of the eyes that had been haunting her nearly knocked the breath from her lungs. Savannah looked up at her with complete love and trust, much like her older self had done as she'd reached for Sarah's hand.

For a tenuous moment, Sarah's vision of the child blurred with tears, but she drew in a slow, determined breath and kept them at bay. "You all right?" she managed, her voice raspy with disuse.

Savannah shook her head. "Everyone is so sad. The doctor and Cameron took that woman away. Did she die?"

Sarah flinched, her jaw clenching and pulsing beneath the skin of her cheek. "Yes," she admitted. "She died."

"John Henry hurt her," Savannah said with confusion.

"He did." Sarah nodded weakly. She finally let go of the doorknob and ran her hand through Savannah's hair, swallowing hard at the sight of her bloodstained skin against the bright copper.

“He wanted to hurt you, but she saved you.”

Sarah looked at the floor, finding it harder to drag in a breath this time. “I know. She died for me.”

Savannah came closer, slipping her arms around Sarah’s neck and hugging her, offering the only comfort a young child knew how to give. Sarah felt another sob catch in her throat as she wrapped her arms around the girl, holding her close, careful not to touch her again with her bloodied hands.

“I’m sorry she died,” Savannah murmured into Sarah’s neck. “But I’m glad she saved you.”

Sarah wasn’t so sure, but she turned her head and gently kissed Savannah’s temple, breathing the child in and holding her close, hoping somehow, some way, Sierra could feel her arms, too.

She had been wrong; she still had Savannah as well as John, and the least she could do was make sure she honored Sierra’s sacrifice by passing on the love she had never been able to offer her to Savannah. She would do right by one of them at least.

Terissa was cooking breakfast when Cameron and Felicia stepped inside the house. Cameron’s first thought was that she should carry a plate up to Sarah, and she even took a step toward the kitchen before stopping in her tracks with the realization that Sarah would want nothing from her.

Ellison and Sabine bookended the couch, his well-worn Bible clashing sharply with the bright cover of the tabloid in Sabine’s hands. Dark brown eyes met Cameron’s over the magazine, the concern and understanding as clear as the darkening bruise on her cheek.

Cameron acknowledged Sabine with a nod of her head, grateful for the gesture, but the sentiment under it could not penetrate the fog that had settled around her during the silent ride back.

Heavy. She felt heavy, like the density of her exoskeleton had tripled in the past few hours. It took an effort to stand upright, to move her limbs, and she wondered if she

would collapse to the floor if she stopped trying. "You... tell John," she said to Felicia as she paused at the foot of the stairs, her hand resting on the rail. "I'll talk to Sarah."

Felicia muttered something that Cameron assumed was agreement. She was too focused on walking up the stairs, feeling the heaviness grow with each step. The knowledge that she had brought this on herself didn't help. She had run the projections to predict how Sarah would react, and 78% of them had ended in a negative outcome. But she still didn't know what she might have done differently, whose trust she should have broken. It had been an impossible choice, caught between two strong-willed women and two contradictory promises.

Reaching the top of the stairs, Cameron stilled, as if all of the weight had settled into her toes, and a single step would bring everything crashing down. She had to force herself to go onward to Sarah's room, finding her lover on the floor with Savannah in her arms. She faltered at the anger in Sarah's eyes when she raised them to meet Cameron's over Savannah's head.

The sight sent a tremor through Cameron's endoskeleton, and she knew a brief moment of panic, wondering if Sarah would try to keep her from Savannah. She felt the weight grow and nearly buckle her knees at the thought of losing them both.

Footsteps had Sarah lifting her head as Cameron appeared in the doorway. The machine was covered in sand, her dark eyes empty of everything but pain. They stared at each other, holding their recriminations and excuses to themselves with Savannah in the room.

Cameron started to speak only to pause, but her eyes conveyed everything Sarah didn't want to hear, didn't want to see, so she looked away, climbing to her feet and hoisting Savannah with her. When she glanced at the terminator again, Cameron's features were oddly impassive and blank, looking more like a machine than she had in months.

"What?" Sarah asked in an even voice.

"Felicia..." Cameron met Sarah's hard gaze and had to look away. "Felicia wants us to come with her. There is something she said Sierra wanted us to see."

Sarah swallowed, biting back a nasty retort as she felt Savannah shift her grip on her. "What is it?"

"I don't know," Cameron admitted, unable to hold Sarah's scolding gaze and still function. Keeping careful control on her face and voice, she continued, "She said it was for us... and John."

"Cameron..." Sarah said slowly, not sure what she was about to ask for or say. Cameron's head rose, and Sarah caught a flash of some emotion, a flicker of hope breaking through the clouded misery that Cameron was trying to hide. Sarah shook her head, fighting the unbearable urge to offer her some kind of comfort, and watched as Cameron's expression blanked once more.

"Are you okay?" Savannah asked to fill the awkward silence.

"I'm okay," Cameron said slowly, and Sarah watched some new anguish blossom in her eyes as she gazed longingly at the child.

Seeing Cameron's misery made it difficult to hold on to the edge of anger, so it was Sarah's turn to look away. "I'll need a few minutes." Her hands flexed, and Cameron's gaze was drawn to the dried blood on them.

Before Cameron could say anything more, Sarah handed her Savannah without a word, taking care not to touch Cameron in the process. She watched as Cameron took the child from her hands and cradled her close, her hand stroking Savannah's pajama-clad back.

A small measure of relief crept into Cameron's eyes, and she raised her head to give Sarah a tight, thankful smile. Sarah understood what caused it with sudden insight. "I would never..." she began, her voice breaking after the first few words. "I would never keep you from her," she continued, her words quiet yet heated. "I would never do that."

Cameron flinched and tightened her grip on Savannah, earning a drowsy protest from the girl. Footsteps announced Sabine's arrival in the hall, interrupting them before any more could be said. They stood awkwardly for a few seconds before Cameron murmured a few quiet words and set Savannah down gently, startled when the little girl threw her arms around Cameron's legs in a fierce hug.

Sarah saw something flicker across the terminator's features as Savannah let her go and sleepily moved toward Sabine. She could only imagine the pain Cameron had to be going through.

She hoped it hurt like hell.

The house was disturbingly quiet after everyone was gone. Terissa and Danny had retreated to the other house. Sabine and Savannah were upstairs sleeping. The others had gone to the mystery location the doctor had spoken of in hushed tones, leaving James alone in the living room. Every creak and pop made James jump, and he was tempted to wake Sabine just to have someone to talk to, but the young woman needed her rest. The hit she'd taken to the face had to ache, and James wished her luck in finding enough peace to sleep. He sighed as he sat down on the couch, un-holstering his weapon and laying it on the coffee table in front of him.

Weaver was close. He could feel it. Every item in the room was suspect, including the couch he was sitting on. She could be right there, right next to him, and he wouldn't know until it was too late. Feeling vulnerable, he shivered, the air conditioning in the house suddenly seeming much colder than he remembered.

His gaze drifted to the now spotless floor. He had watched a version of Savannah die there, he realized distantly. The little girl he'd sworn to protect, the child he'd left his previous life behind to save, had died at his feet. Had he failed Sierra somehow? Was the little girl asleep upstairs clutching her stuffed giraffe destined to end this way? It made his head and heart hurt to think about it. James closed his eyes and clasped his hands together, bringing them to his lips as he began to mouth a prayer for Sierra's soul and the safety of the child tucked in her bed.

James felt the air shift and charge and knew he wasn't alone.

John Henry's chip was locked away in a secure safe hidden from view, but James had no illusions that Weaver could get into it if she applied herself. Feeling calmer as he prayed, James finished his thoughts and hopes, breathing a simple word as he lifted his head. "Amen."

Weaver was standing there in a familiar pristine white suit when he opened his eyes, watching him openly. "Does it truly offer you comfort?"

"Praying?" James asked as he looked up at her. "Being close to God always makes me feel better." He put his trust in the Lord and slowly stood, accepting he would either live or die in this encounter. It was in God's hands.

“Your god is a myth,” she told him simply.

“Only to those who haven’t known his love.” James lifted his chin, his features quietly defiant.

“His love? He let Sierra die on this very floor. He let Skynet nearly wipe your kind from this planet. How is that love?”

“Did you come here to debate my religion with me?” James asked. “Or do you want something?”

Weaver’s painted lips eased into a facsimile of a smile as she looked him over. “I’ve missed you, James. Your... morality... always intrigues me.”

“I’m not giving you the chip,” he told her. “And if they decide to burn your *boy* I’ll be happy to light a match of my own.”

Weaver’s smile vanished and her features grew colder. “John Henry is not a killer.”

“I think Sierra might disagree with you.”

Weaver came closer, privately impressed when the former agent stood his ground.

“John Henry was trying to kill Sarah Connor. It would have been better for all involved if he had succeeded, but James, he had no directive to harm her. No need. So why did he shoot?”

“He’s your pet project. You tell me.”

“If I knew, I wouldn’t be asking. John Henry was fighting me. Refusing to cooperate. I led Savannah to him because I thought she could help bring him back to us.”

James’ eyes narrowed at the implications. “You thought if John Henry were with people he trusted, he would recover.”

“That he would *want* to recover. He doesn’t understand his role. John Henry doesn’t grasp the import of his existence.”

“Or he wants no part of it,” James pointed out, feeling a frisson of fear as Weaver tilted her head and those blue eyes stared back at him in a move that was eerily similar to

Cameron. The reminder of Cameron's true nature startled him. He'd found himself forgetting who she was, what she was, with daily frequency now.

Weaver finally inclined her head in the affirmative. "That's irrelevant, James. I need John Henry. For my sake as well as the sake of humanity. I won't let you destroy him. If you try, people will die. Not just the people in this house but your fellow agents... your family... your ex-wife."

James couldn't help the hard swallow that rippled down his throat as he faced her, but he said nothing.

"Don't make it come to that, James. We both need answers. Whatever made John Henry shoot at Sarah Connor... whatever made him kill Sierra... It's an anomaly. A dangerous one."

"Which is why he should be destroyed."

"Which is why he should be studied," Weaver corrected patiently. "Something corrupted him. Something... twisted him. We would be negligent if we did not at least try to uncover what that was."

"What do you think it was?" James asked, turning the tables.

Weaver considered the question. "John Henry was infected by a virus once before. Perhaps he was again. Perhaps it's a virus that could infect your precious Cameron." She saw the first stirrings of fear in his eyes and pressed her advantage. "Imagine, her turning on you... on Savannah... all because you were afraid to find the truth."

James looked unsettled at the idea. "You think it was Kaliba," he realized.

"A possibility that should be confirmed or ruled out. Don't you agree?"

Shaken, James slowly sank back down on the couch.

"We're closer to being on the same side than you realize, James," Weaver promised him. "If it is Kaliba..." She paused, considering the best approach with this human. "I believe the expression is, 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'."

James swallowed again, a crawling horror skittering over him as he realized what they might have done in an effort to stop Skynet. They might have actually created it. He looked up only to find Weaver gone, leaving him alone with his chilling thoughts.

ACT 3

John watched her as they drove.

Cameron could feel his eyes on her profile, and she wondered what he was thinking. He'd once had an uncanny ability to read her, as she had him, but that closeness was gone, leaving them more like strangers than friends. The bond they'd once shared was in tatters; Cameron had evolved beyond the artificial devotion to him, the only purpose she'd ever known, and John had trouble accepting the fact. It was obvious that he resented her unexpected closeness with his mother, and she couldn't deny her fury at watching him take Sarah for granted.

They'd been orbiting each other ever since his return, testing the boundaries that defined their new relationship, and his scrutiny of her now made her self-conscious. Cameron struggled against the urge to snap at him, her eyes trained on the Sarah's profile in the car ahead.

"I'm sorry."

Cameron glanced away from the road at the sound of John's hoarse voice. He looked like hell, as Sarah would say, bruises forming on his chin and around one eye. She suspected more would soon follow. Vaughn, her thoughts reminded her. Another way she'd failed Sarah tonight. With everything she was feeling held carefully in check, she returned his stare blankly.

"I know... I mean..." John swallowed. "In the future, Sierra indicated you were close. That you and mom raised her. I know you only had a few weeks to get to know her but..."

"It was enough," Cameron murmured, her gaze drifting back to the road.

"Sometimes that's all you need," John agreed. He was quiet a moment, watching the taillights of the doctor's car in front of them. "You would have been proud of her. She was..." he tripped over the past tense and how easily he used it. "She was a great leader."

Cameron felt her jaw tighten at the reminder of the loss, but his words lifted a fraction of the heaviness she hadn't been able to shake from her shoulders. "I know." Cameron hadn't needed to see Sierra in her future to know what kind of a leader she and Sarah could produce. She glanced at John again, feeling a tiny thread of the bond they had lost trying to weave itself back together. "So were you."

John's shoulders relaxed marginally, the difference so slight only a machine would have noticed it. "Thanks," he said softly, turning his attention to the scenery flashing by outside his window for a moment before he was drawn back to Cameron. "Mom's really pissed at you."

"Tell me something I don't know," Cameron quipped deliberately, a classic John Connor response, though shorter and less sulky than his usual delivery.

The slightest of smirks appeared, and John actually looked at Cameron, seeming to see her for the first time since they'd gotten into the car. She really had changed, he thought, and her old parroting trick only made the difference more obvious. She'd matured, both physically and emotionally, her features bearing the lines of that experience. Cameron was grieving, John realized, and he felt his smile fade. "You kept Sierra a secret, Cameron. You know how Mom feels about secrets." He frowned. "I'm not so fond of them myself."

Bitterly, Cameron wondered what John would think of the secret she and Sarah had been keeping from him since he'd gotten back, but she stayed silent. Maybe it didn't even matter now. If she and Sarah were... Cameron's thoughts shied away from the end of that sentence. She couldn't handle that possibility right now.

"Why?" John asked, breaking into her thoughts. His interest surprised Cameron a little, she'd thought he wanted as little to do with her connection to his mother as possible.

"Sierra asked me to," she replied, the sharpness in her voice startling them both.

"Do you know why?" John prodded.

Feeling some of her hostility fade as she realized John wasn't angry with her or accusing her of anything, Cameron stared straight ahead, wishing she could get a glimpse of Sarah in the car up ahead. "She knew."

"Knew?"

“That the universe corrects itself.”

John drew in a slow breath that hitched slightly, drawing Cameron’s focus back on him. “You mean... two versions of the same person can’t exist in the same time.”

“Not for long. Yes.”

John considered all the people that had come and gone in his life, realizing how many fit Cameron’s description. “What about you? The universe hasn’t corrected you.”

Cameron considered that. “There is only one me.”

“There’s Allison,” John started to argue.

“I’m not Allison,” Cameron corrected him almost before he had finished.

John searched her face, seeing very little of the woman he’d come to love in the machine sitting next to him. “No,” he realized with a strange sense of relief. “You’re not.”

The morning sun slanted in through the windows, feeling unnaturally hot on Sarah’s back as she lingered in the doorway. John stepped past her without hesitation, striding across the hanger to scan the walls. It was strange to think he had known Sierra for far longer than Sarah had. He had spoken to her, sat beside her, and fought alongside her in the future. They were practically siblings, she realized. Was that how John saw them? Did he feel like he’d lost a soldier or a sister today?

The scent of engine oil was pungent as Sarah drew in a slow breath, her green eyes sweeping over a hanger wall covered with pictures and drawings. The scene eerily reminded her of a basement, of another wall, one with the names and dates written in blood.

She didn’t know what she was looking at; she only knew it did nothing to ease the constant ache that felt like it was squeezing the breath out of her. She wasn’t sure who John had lost today, but she had lost a daughter. She had lost her chance to know the woman her daughter had become, a chance that, given her life expectancy, she might never have again.

Cameron stood mere inches away, their shoulders nearly touching. Sarah could feel her hovering, her anxiety, worry, and pain a mirror image of Sarah's own. A part of her wanted to turn and sink into Cameron's arms, wanted to feel that comforting strength as Cameron drew her in close. Some hungry part of Sarah's soul wanted to just forget the betrayal and let go of the anger. Her need for the terminator pulled at her, but Sarah refused it. As much as losing Sierra was killing her, Cameron's betrayal made it worse.

Finally risking a glance, Sarah found herself riveted on Cameron's profile. She was staring at the wall, her dark eyes darting from image to image as Felicia lingered in the background, letting them all take the room in. Cameron was stricken by what she was seeing, but Sarah doubted anyone else would know that but her. She had learned to read every flicker on Cameron's features, every movement of that body that she knew as intimately as her own.

Sarah had gotten her wish. Her lover was hurting like hell, and far from being as satisfying as she'd hoped it would be, Sarah found it took more effort than she would have believed not to offer some sliver of the solace she was so desperate for herself, and she cursed herself for the weakness.

John moved closer to the wall, his fingers running over the collage. Some of the images were photographs, others were drawings mixed in with newspaper and magazine articles. John stumbled when he saw a carefully clipped announcement of the birth of Kyle Reese.

"What does it mean?" Sarah asked, needing some explanation of what she was seeing and, damnably, needing to hear Cameron's voice.

Cameron turned to look at her but wouldn't meet her eyes. "It's the story of a life." When Sarah shifted her attention back on the wall, Cameron greedily soaked in her features. "The people she knew and trusted... and the ones she didn't."

Sarah moved closer, spying a drawing that was clearly herself at an older age. The pads of her fingers rested next to the image as she took it in, marveling a little at Sierra's talent and thinking that perhaps she should buy some art supplies. Sierra had drawn Cameron beside her, they were both smiling, and Sarah wondered when her daughter had captured what seemed to be a happy, content moment in their lives. She wondered if they would ever experience it now, and felt a stab of guilt. They, she and Cameron together, had obviously given Savannah some kind of happy childhood, and it would be tragic if Sierra's death destroyed something so precious. She glanced over at Cameron again, feeling the familiar weight of all the possible futures settle on her shoulders.

This version of herself had died to save Savannah, Sarah realized. Her end hadn't come from cancer; it had come on the receiving end of a bullet, keeping her daughter safe. "The way it should have been," she whispered.

John peeled the birth announcement from the wall and folded it before tucking the small slip of paper into his jacket pocket for safekeeping. There were other images of his father and Derek lining the walls, some of them in recent photographs and others from the artist's memory. John made a vow to take them all, suspecting Sierra wouldn't mind. This way he could have something of her as well as his uncle and father. Something he wouldn't have thought he wanted until now.

He slowed when he came to a series of faded newspaper clippings, frowning at the face that stared back at him across time. According to the small, neatly printed date in the corner, decades had passed since the images had been taken, and John felt his world tunnel and tilt. He leaned his hand against the wall to steady himself, sucking in a sharp breath that made his ribs spasm. He was too stunned to notice.

His mother's hand on his shoulder startled him. "What?" Sarah asked, ever tuned to his wants and needs.

John shook his head, barely able to articulate what he was seeing. He could hear the steady thump of Cameron's boots as she came closer, steering clear of his mother to stand on his opposite side. John peeled the clipping away, feeling part of it tear, but the picture remained intact.

Sarah gently took the page from him, staring down at the date and picture before lifting her gaze to meet Cameron's. It shook her, almost as much as her son, to see a face looking back at her that was simultaneously familiar and unknown. Her jaw tightened as her grip on her son did the same. "Anybody you know?" she asked Cameron, her voice low.

Cameron took the page, resisting the urge to let her fingers brush Sarah's. She looked down into a mirror image of her own features, frowning when she saw the date and the caption.

Allison Young to wed David Herman. June 16, 1946.

The picture was of a smiling couple posing for the camera. Palm trees dotted the background. Cameron stared at the photograph for a long time before looking up to meet John's anguished gaze. "It's Allison," she murmured.

John shook his head. "I don't understand. That says 1946..."

"You said the time machine malfunctioned... it sent you back... Sierra back..." Cameron said slowly.

"To here! To this time!" John snapped, his composure fraying. "It sent us all back here! What was she doing there?"

Cameron shook her head, her lips pressed into a hard line. "Any answer would just be speculation," Cameron murmured, her eyes briefly meeting Sarah's. She still felt the jolt she so often did when their gazes locked, but now it was coupled with pain.

"Then speculate," John spat, his grief turning instantly to anger. He glanced at her profile and had to turn away, the resemblance between them suddenly strong. But she was there, not Allison. Allison would never be with him again.

"Time travel is not a perfected science, even in the future. The result of the malfunction and instability of the technology may have sent her back to the 1940s."

"But she was with me in the time bubble. She should be here!"

Cameron shrugged her shoulders helplessly as John took the page from her hand and ran his thumb over Allison's smiling features. "I thought she was here," he said weakly. "I thought I just had to find her..."

Loneliness welled up, and tears began to pool in his eyes. He had been trying to prepare himself for the worst, but this... Finding her dead would have been hard enough, but finding out that he would never find her at all, that she had lived her life without him, cut through him like a knife. "It's not fair," he whispered. "Why do I have to be alone?"

Sarah felt like something sharp and serrated had just plunged into her heart. Her breath caught in shared pain, and forgetting everything else between them, she gripped John behind his neck and pulled him close. He began to sob, gut wrenching sounds that Sarah could feel echoes of in her own soul.

Cameron stepped away to let them have their moment, her gaze reading over the section of the wall about Allison Young. She'd lived a full life, dying at the age of 83 surrounded by her friends and family. Cameron noted the names of her children. Derek. Kyle. John.

Sierra.

For a moment, the wall blurred, and Cameron had to look away. At least she hadn't destroyed this version of Allison. The universe had taken pity on this version. Allison Young had known mercy that fate had shown to no one else.

"Is he all right?" Felicia asked, drawing cautiously closer.

Cameron nodded. "He was just reminded of... someone he lost." She met the doctor's blue eyes. "Thank you, for bringing us here."

"It's what she wanted," Felicia told her. She swallowed and pointed to the corner where pictures and writing migrated from one wall to the next. "That's the stuff that made me nervous," she indicated with a dip of her head.

Cameron moved closer, her gaze scanning the photos and documents. Her eyes landed on one photograph and hardened. Vaughn. She knelt, taking in everything that had been posted on the wall from the floor up. It was all about Kaliba. Plans for their AI projects and their robotics' division. In the middle of everything, Sierra had written two letters on the wall and circled them. Cameron felt her jaw clench at their implications.

H.K.

"Hunter Killer," Sarah murmured over Cameron's shoulder. "One of them came through Weaver's office at Ziera Corp."

Glancing back, Cameron let her gaze linger on Sarah's face before sliding past to see Felicia handing a sitting John a glass of water. "Is he all right?"

"He's hurting. We all are." Sarah drew in a slow breath. "Did you know this was here? That she was collecting intel on Kaliba?"

Cameron shook her head. "She never told me about this. She rarely spoke about the future." She stared at Sarah. "I wanted to tell you..." she whispered, hastening to explain now that Sarah was willing to talk to her.

Sarah stepped back abruptly, cutting off the excuses she was not ready to hear. Moments flickered through her mind, flashes where she had sensed there was something Cameron wasn't telling her. She didn't need Cameron to confess all the times she had considered coming clean and didn't. Honesty demanded more than good intentions. "It doesn't matter."

Dropping her eyes, Cameron turned back to the wall, staring at the words in front of her until her vision cleared and she could read them clearly. "Kaliba has kept their robotics division under the radar. I didn't know they had gotten this far."

"How did she?"

Cameron braved meeting her eyes again. One look was all Sarah needed. She nodded.

"Skynet," Sarah murmured.

"A threat, at least," Cameron acknowledged before frowning.

"What?" Sarah asked at the look.

"Allison was flung back the farthest, but Sierra had to be here longer than I thought to have gathered all of this. Months, maybe longer."

Something unraveled in Sarah's chest and she felt herself able to draw in a breath. "How long have you known she was here?"

"A few weeks," Cameron admitted. "I know she didn't come back when John did. It's possible Weaver and John Henry could have come back months... even years before John returned."

"Or months after," Sarah mused. "Fucking time travel," she scowled, hating how it twisted lives. "You got all this in your head, Tin Miss?" Sarah asked with a wave at the wall.

Cameron tried not to feel hope at the nickname that fell so easily from Sarah's lips, suspecting the new intel on Kaliba and worry over Weaver's plans had temporarily eclipsed her transgressions. "I do."

“Then we should get back. Looks like we have work to do.” Sarah spun on her heel, walking past the wall without another glance until she came to a picture she hadn’t seen before. This one was a watercolor, simple but deliberate brushstrokes defining a familiar beach bungalow. She and Cameron leaned against the porch rail watching the sunrise, and a small child played in the waves, her hair a wash of bright copper against the blue.

Sarah felt her throat close and the heat of fresh tears threatening her vision, but she reached up and peeled the image from the wall, folding it neatly and tucking it carefully into her back pocket.

“Sarah,” Felicia called to her before she could leave. Sarah hesitated in the doorway as the doctor came closer. “How’s the arm?” the doctor asked faintly.

Sarah blinked having to think for a moment to even realize what the doctor was asking about. Her left hand drifted up to cover the small surgical scar on bicep. “Fine,” she breathed, trying to keep her tone civil. “You were in on all this? On keeping her from me?”

Felicia sighed. “Sierra was wounded. It was the only way she would let me treat her. I didn’t like it, but I did what I had to do for my patient.”

“Why?” Sarah demanded, determined to get answers to questions she wasn’t ready to ask Cameron. “Why did she shut me out?”

“I don’t know,” the doctor admitted honestly. She cast a quick look over her shoulder as Cameron warily approached John. “I only know she was certain she was doing the right thing. I know she wanted to protect you.”

“Protect me? Is that what you call all this? Protecting me?”

“Sarah...” Felicia drew in another slow breath in the face of Sarah’s anger. “She knew this was going to happen. She didn’t want to cause you more pain.”

“I guess she failed then,” Sarah growled, pivoting on her boot to leave. She was startled when Felicia grabbed her arm and spun her back around.

“You missed out on knowing her,” Felicia admitted, tears collecting in her eyes. “But right now I wish like hell I hadn’t. As much as you hurt... Cameron and I knew her. We know what the world lost. So as unfair as all of this is for you... I promise you that you have the better end of this deal.”

Sarah stared at her before glancing back at John and Cameron. They were both watching her, unsure of what she would say or do next. “No one gave me a choice,” Sarah answered, her voice rough and breaking. “No one ever gives me a goddamn choice.” She pushed past the doctor and stumbled out into harsh sunlight, more tears falling against her will.

Rage and grief blossomed inside her, consumed her, and Sarah spun and punched the hanger wall, the thin metal caving but still sturdy enough to send pain jolting up through Sarah’s wrist and arm. It actually felt good, better than her misery, and Sarah pulled back to hit it again, but she found her wrist held in a vice-like grip. “Let me go, girlie,” she snarled.

“No.” Cameron’s voice was quiet in her ear. “This is not what she would have wanted.”

Sarah spun to face Cameron, nearly succeeding in wrenching her arm from Cameron’s hold. “Yeah? What about what I would have wanted? Like a chance to know her? Or to have you...” She sputtered to a stop for a second before spitting out, “You *promised* me.”

Cameron flinched but held her ground. “I promised her too,” she said simply, meeting Sarah’s eyes. “I didn’t know what to do,” she explained quietly, feeling all eyes upon her as she tried to make Sarah understand.

“You should have told me. I thought...” She broke off, shaking her head.

When she pulled on her arm again, Cameron released her reluctantly, watching as she stalked out of the hanger. Without a word, Sarah climbed into the truck and revved it, throwing it into reverse and leaving them all behind.

When the front door banged open, James went for his gun, his fingers curling around the butt as he swung the weapon around, drawing a bead on a figure he belatedly realized was Sarah Connor. She blew past him, moving with purpose up the stairs, without even a nod in greeting.

His heart thumping, James sank back into the couch and set the gun back on the coffee table. He expected Cameron and John to follow, but after a few minutes with no other dramatic entrances, he went to the door and looked out, spying only the empty truck in

the drive. He glanced back toward the stairs as Sarah reappeared with two duffle bags slung over one arm and a sleepy Savannah in the other.

“What’s happened?” James asked, moving toward her.

“What hasn’t?” Sarah wondered under her breath. She faced him, stopping long enough for a short and terse explanation. “I need to clear my head. I’m taking Savannah. We’ll be back in a couple of days.”

“Clear your…” James swore as Sarah stepped around him and headed for the door. Savannah had already laid her head down on the woman’s shoulder, her eyelids drooping and her small hands fisting in Sarah’s leather jacket. “Sarah, wait,” James pleaded, grabbing her arm and holding her in place. “Where are John and Cameron? Are they meeting you?”

“Just watch the damn house,” Sarah ordered. “And if you haven’t burned that metal bastard in the shed then he better be dust by the time I get back.”

They both heard tires crunching gravel in the driveway, and Sarah’s features tightened in anger as she jerked her arm away from the former agent.

“Running away doesn’t solve anything,” James told her.

“It’s kept me alive this long,” Sarah pointed out. Movement out of the corner of her eye made her turn her head toward the door just as Cameron stepped through it. She shook her head before the terminator could utter a word. “No,” Sarah spat preemptively. “Just get out of my way.”

Cameron’s hand shot out and gripped the doorframe. The only way out was for Sarah to duck under, impossible with the child in her arms. “Dammit, Cameron.”

“You’re not leaving,” the terminator vowed, steely determination in her voice. “Weaver is out there.” Just the thought banished her grief and filled her with fear.

“Listen to her, mom,” John pleaded as he came up behind Cameron, leaving Felicia to sit behind the wheel of her car and watch the standoff. “We need to stay together right now.”

“Don’t talk to me about staying together,” Sarah said with a hint of disbelief. “You’re the one who wants to be anywhere but here.”

“Sarah,” James warned as John flinched.

Savannah merely tightened her grip on Sarah’s jacket, but she lifted her head to watch Cameron. Her other aunt wouldn’t even look at her. Cameron’s gaze was intent on Sarah and Sarah alone. “What’s wrong?” Savannah asked, feeling her voice quaver just a little, and swallowing to hide it.

Sarah reached up and let her hand drift through Savannah’s loose hair. “Nothing. We’re going to go to the beach for a few days.”

“It’s not safe,” Cameron snapped, oblivious to the startled look John shot her. “You’re upset and you are not thinking clearly...”

“And whose fault is that?” Sarah fired back, stepping toward Cameron until they were nearly toe-to-toe. “Cameron, get out of my way, or so help me...”

“You’ll what? Dismantle me?” Cameron stepped forward, letting go of the doorframe and forcing Sarah to retreat a step. “I...” She started to say a word she didn’t dare utter until she and Sarah were alone, and cursed the audience that made her hold it in. “I *care* about you...” she corrected, seeing the ghost of understanding in Sarah’s eyes. “Both of you.” Her gaze finally took in Savannah and lingered there for a long moment before drifting back to the green of Sarah’s eyes. “I’m not going to let you go alone.”

John watched his mother and the terminator in fascination, held spellbound by the angry energy he could feel snapping between them. He’d known they had become a team of sorts in his absence, that they relied heavily on each other now, but his mother had never seemed more betrayed by someone’s actions, not even some of his own.

“Mom...” he murmured weakly, not sure what he wanted to say or stop her from doing.

“I need to get away from you,” Sarah bluntly replied, not really caring how much of her relationship she was exposing to the others in that moment.

“Aunt Sarah?” Savannah tugged on Sarah’s collar to get her attention, her stomach beginning to hurt as she realized her aunts were fighting in earnest. “Don’t be mad.”

A visible tremor worked its way through Sarah at her words and even Cameron seemed to pale at the reminder of the woman who’d died in that very room hours before.

“Sarah,” James’ deep baritone drew everyone’s eyes on him. “Cameron is right. Weaver is still out there. You going off on your own is a bad idea.” As much as he hated the thought of Sarah and Savannah being in this house with a lurking Weaver, the notion that they could be alone with her somewhere else was even more terrifying.

Cameron nodded once before looking back at Sarah, an imploring look in her eyes.

Sarah wanted to give in. She wanted to let go of the rage that seemed to be eating her up inside, but her own stubborn will refused to yield. She shook her head again. “I can’t be in this house. Not right now.” She started past Cameron only to find herself gently thrust against the wall, Cameron’s body flush with her own.

Even in her anger, Sarah’s body responded to the siren’s call of Cameron’s touch. She soaked in her heat and curves, feeling the contact soothe some of her ragged edges.

“Cameron!” John blurted in surprise. He started forward, but James put a hand on his chest to stop him.

“I’m not letting you go alone,” Cameron said again. Her fingers slipped inside the pocket of Sarah’s leather jacket and retrieved the keys to the truck. She could have stepped back then but she didn’t, watching in fascination as Sarah’s nostrils flared at their contact. “As much as you need to go... that’s how much I need to make sure you’re safe.”

“You should stay with John,” Sarah breathed, cursing her traitorous body and how much it wanted to stay right where it was.

“I’ll be fine, mom,” John promised, desperate for a little time to himself to process all that had happened. “I’ll see if Felicia will look at my ribs then I’ll get some sleep.” It was a half truth, but John knew it was what his mother needed to hear.

“All the more reason she should stay with you. You’re injured,” Sarah said, but her eyes were on the terminator holding her against the wall instead of her son. Their gazes fenced while Savannah watching them both carefully.

John could hardly believe his mother wasn’t clawing at Cameron’s face to get away from her. He’d seen casual contact between the two since he’d come home, but he would never have imagined his mother allowing a machine the kind of liberties Cameron was taking with her right now. “I’ll be fine,” he said again, his voice full of conviction.

Reluctantly, Cameron stepped back, missing Sarah's heat instantly. The other woman watched her warily. "I'll stay outside," Cameron promised. "You won't even know I'm there."

"I always know when you're there," Sarah said on a sigh.

James glanced at John, wondering if the young man truly knew what he was seeing between the two women. John's brow was furrowed with confusion, and James suspected on some level that John was finally waking up to what was happening between his mother and the machine.

Cameron's hesitation was brief, but Sarah didn't miss it as Cameron slowly reached for Savannah. The child went willingly, wrapping her arms around Cameron's neck and snuggling against her. Cameron closed her eyes at the contact, trying to get a hold of the mixed emotions that washed through her. When she looked at Sarah again, there was a hint of compassion in her eyes. It was almost worse than seeing her anger.

Without a word, Cameron pivoted on the heel of her boot and headed for the truck. Sarah lingered, watching them go before shifting her attention back on her son. She dropped her head. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "For what I said before..."

John came closer and drew her into a hug. "I know. I'm sorry for a lot of things, too." He kissed her temple. "Go," he urged. "Let Cameron keep watch. If Weaver had wanted me she would have come for me by now. Savannah, though..." John shook his head. "I'd just feel better with Cameron close."

"That makes one of us," Sarah breathed into her son's neck, but something in her soul called her a liar. She leaned back and cupped his face with one hand. "Let Felicia check you over. We have a doctor around for once. Might as well take advantage."

John nodded. "Be safe," he told her as Sarah slowly made her way toward the door.

"No place is safe," she reminded him with a bitter smile.

"Being with Cameron is as close as we can get." John slid his hands in his pockets as his mother considered that.

"I used to think so," she said simply before closing the door behind her.

He felt useless, a sensation that was becoming uncomfortably familiar. Danny paced the small bedroom at his mother's house, eager to do something, anything, but not having a clue what that would be. He'd watched two people die today: a man who had scared him to death, and a selfless stranger who'd given everything to save a woman he couldn't help but despise. He'd begun, grudgingly, to accept that Sarah Connor hadn't murdered his father, but she still carried the lion's share of responsibility for his death. Danny wouldn't, couldn't, let that go the way his mother had.

A knock on the door made him pause. Terissa carefully opened the door and peered inside, offering her son a tired smile. "Hey," she greeted. "You hungry?"

Danny knew it had been hours and hours since he last ate, but the thought of food made him nauseous. He shook his head.

"Danny," Terissa began slowly.

"Why are you here?" Danny blurted suddenly, needing to know. "Why are you working with these people?"

Terissa blinked before taking a deep breath and straightening, as if she had expected the question for some time. "Who else can stop all of this, Danny?"

"Maybe we're not supposed to stop it. Maybe this is supposed to happen. Did you ever think about that?"

"It's the end of the world for everyone on this earth. How can I stand by?" Terissa shook her head, unsure how to explain something that seemed so obvious. "How can I not help?"

"Maybe they don't need to be helped. Maybe they aren't on the right side."

His mother's jaw tightened as she came the rest of the way in the room. He could see her love for him in her eyes, but it was mixed with disappointment. "We're talking about computers, Danny. *Machines*. They tried to kill me," she reminded him. "We can't let them destroy the world."

"Mankind will never stop advancing the machines, mom. You cut off one head and another will take its place. These people are fighting a losing battle."

"You don't know that."

"I do know that! Technology is what I do. They tried to stop them before and..." He reminded her, seeing in her eyes that she too was thinking about his father.

Terissa's eyes glittered. "Danny, Sarah and her son may be the only things standing between mankind and the end of the world," she said with conviction. "After all you've seen... after all you've learned... How can you just stand by and do nothing?"

"Dad died to stop the machines, but his death solved nothing. You're working with one of the very things he gave his life to end."

"Cameron is... different," Terissa countered, unsure how to explain. "She's helping us. Trying to stop Skynet."

"For how long? That other machine down there, he was supposed to be helping too."

His words sent a chill through Terissa. She trusted Sarah, and trusted Cameron because Sarah did, but recent events showed that they could make mistakes with regards to the machines. Still, she had seen the evolution of the terminator, the bonds that had grown between Cameron and Sarah, and she had a hard time seeing Cameron as a threat. Even that idea bothered her, though, because if Cameron could evolve beyond her programming, could other machines as well?

With a heavy sigh, she sat down beside Danny on the bed, catching his hand in hers. "I have to trust someone. Your father... *Miles* trusted Sarah. He went out that night to help her."

"He was a fool," Danny retorted. "He left us to follow her, and it got him killed. The same thing is going to happen to us. You just don't see it."

Dropping her head, Terissa closed her eyes. Her son had made similar arguments in the past to justify his hurt and anger. He had never forgiven his father for leaving them that night with a promise to be home in a few hours, a promise he broke. She remembered Danny standing at the window all night, his face pressed up against the glass, watching and waiting for his father to return. He never truly recovered from the blow of his father's death, his feeling of safety and security shattered by the first bullet that Sarah had fired into their home.

“Your father died to stop Skynet. He didn’t want to be the man who invented the machine that would destroy the world.” Terissa raised her head to look at her son, feeling a sick disappointment thread through her as she saw a stubborn set to his jaw. He had never accepted the reasons his father had died. Part of his decision to take the job at Kaliba had been in redeeming his father’s work, and she wasn’t sure that his escape from that company meant he had left that mission behind. “Is that what you want to do, Danny? Do you want to take up the legacy Miles died to avoid?”

Danny turned to look at her like a wounded animal.

“You either fight to honor your father’s sacrifice or you make it meaningless. Your choice.”

“It’s not that simple, mom,” he answered weakly.

“Then explain it to me,” she pleaded as Danny slipped his fingers from hers and stood, staring out the window with his back to her. “Danny?” she finally asked after several minutes of silence. When he still said nothing, she stood, staring into his eyes reflected in the glass. “The world was supposed to end more than a decade ago, Danny, but we’re still here. Don’t be so damn sure of yourself and your precious technology.” Without another word, Terissa turned and left, slamming the door behind her.

“You don’t understand,” Danny said softly. He sank down on to his bed, staring down at hands that felt useless without a keyboard under them, unaware that he was being watched.

Act 4

John stared at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. Felicia had wrapped his ribs and sent him away to get dressed, but his shirt was still in a pile at his feet, leaving the ugly mottling of bruises on his chest and arms in full display. His mother had always seemed to ignore her injuries, as if acknowledgment would give them power over her, but John studied his, morbidly fascinated by the evidence of the beating Vaughn had given him.

Brutal was the best word John could find to describe it. Physically, verbally, and emotionally brutal, and he half wondered how he was still on his feet after everything the last twenty-four hours had inflicted on him. For all the crap he’d been through in his life, John had never been so coldly and deliberately hurt, tortured, really, for information on his mother. Tortured the way Sarkissian had tortured her, until John had made him stop.

If he let himself, John could still remember the way the man's neck had felt under his fingers, and the anger and guilt that had followed. Anger at his mother for not being able to protect him, and guilt for being the reason men like Sarkissian were in their lives.

Last night Sarah had killed for him, the way John had killed for her. It should have balanced things between them somehow, but they had come too far to go back to the way they used to be. She'd saved his life, and Danny's, and when her own life had hung in the balance, when John Henry's gun had pointed straight at her heart, it wasn't John who had taken the bullet meant for her, it was Sierra.

So far he was two for two in being utterly useless in life-or-death situations.

Shaking his head and flipping off the bathroom light, John picked up his shirt and slipped it on before he wandered in a daze back into his mother's room, sitting down on the edge of her bed. Seeing how much pain Sierra's death had brought her made his guts twist, and John ached to be able to do something to fix it, any of it, for her, but he was as helpless to take away her grief as he had been to stop Vaughn, or save Sierra, or hold onto Allison's hand...

Almost shaking with fatigue, John tucked a finger in the bandage around his ribs, wincing a little at the pain and feeling light-headed from breathing so shallowly. The wrapping helped, though, and John was grateful for it. Felicia had done a much better job taping his ribs than he'd managed on his own. He wasn't happy that the doctor had been drawn into their mess, but she was proving to be a useful ally. John only hoped it wouldn't mean her death, as it had for so many others before her.

Sighing, John eased back on the bed, bracing against the pain as his injuries bitterly protested the movement until the mattress welcomed his weight. He stared at the muted streaks of sunlight splaying across the ceiling and wondered if his mother was at the beach by now. He hoped she was finding some solace there... that Savannah would be able to give her the peace he couldn't. Closing his eyes, John felt his thoughts drift to the one topic he least wanted to think about.

Allison.

She'd lived and loved before he was born. His only chance for happiness with her had been in a future that would never be. She'd won the time machine lottery, found a life free of machines, but her escape had taken her far out of his reach.

It made sense, John realized morosely. The only way for someone he loved to be happy was to be as far away from him as possible.

With a sigh that sent a sharp stab into his gut, he tried to let go of the memories, to let go of her. He was destined to be alone, he told himself, cataloguing all the people who had died for or because of him. Nobody could last in his world, except him, his mom, and the machines. It was time he accepted that and hardened himself the way his mother had hardened herself, the way she'd been trying to teach him for years.

It was never safe. Not for them, and not for anyone who cared about them. John just wished it didn't hurt so damned much.

A light tap on the door spared John from further thoughts, and he ran a hand over his face to wipe the few tears that lingered. He sat up gingerly. "Who is it?"

"Ellison." The former agent cracked the door open and peered inside. "Did I wake you?"

John shook his head. "What's up?"

"We need to decide what we're doing about John Henry before your mother gets back."

Raking a hand through his short, chopped hair, John eased his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. He'd barely given John Henry a thought since they'd gotten back from the airline hanger, his mind too full of what he'd lost to think about anything else. "Mom told you to burn him?" he guessed.

James nodded as he leaned in the open doorway. He could still hear Sabine quietly moving around in Savannah's room down the hall and wondered if the young woman would appreciate it if he checked on her when he was done here. Somehow he doubted it.

"So why haven't you?" John asked, openly appraising the other man.

"Your mother is... single-minded, when it comes to the machines. She might not be seeing the bigger picture," James explained. His thoughts drifted to the one notable exception, remembering how hard Sarah fought to keep Cameron with her, and he wondered what John would have said if he had seen it. He wondered what John thought of the argument downstairs, but he refrained from asking.

"You think she's wrong?" John wondered with a sigh.

James pursed his lips and gave it some thought. "Normally I would say no." He studied John sitting in the shadows, frowning at the young man's slumped posture and defeated air. "But sometimes, you need to be able to think like your enemy. Get inside their heads. Your mom can't do that... not like you can."

John straightened a little and looked at the former agent again. "You really think John Henry is worth saving?"

"No," James answered honestly. "But I can't help but wonder why he did what he did."

"Danny does, too," John admitted, his eyes distant as he returned his gaze to the floor.

"What do you think?" James wanted to know.

"What do I think?" John said on a bitter laugh. "I think that whatever I think is always the wrong thing to do."

"Maybe if you stopped trying to prove that you're a leader and just started acting like one that wouldn't be a problem."

John's head jerked up at the rebuke, but James' voice was mild and kind. He stared at the older man, considering his words. "You think I've done things against my mother just to prove a point?"

"Haven't you?" James shouldered off the doorway and stood straight once more, meeting John's eyes carefully as the young man bit his lip and looked away.

For a second, John sat, still slouched and beaten, before his shoulders squared and his head lifted, and Ellison caught a glimpse of the leader, the man, he had the potential to become. "Your call, John," he said slowly and meant it, ready to fight Weaver off with everything he had if necessary.

"Leave him," John murmured, staring at his hands and remembering Allison's fingers slipping through them. Louder, more decisively, he added, "We should know."

"Your mother..." James began, hating himself for the relief that bloomed in his chest at John's answer.

"I'll talk to her." John took a deep breath, wincing at the sharp stab in his ribs before setting aside his pain and fatigue. He would rest later. "We don't have what we need here to look at the chip. We'll need to go back for our computers."

"Vaughn... Kaliba..." James reminded him. "They might be watching the place."

John winced. "It's a risk," he admitted. "But we can't study John Henry's chip with a magnifying glass and a screwdriver. We need what we had in that lab."

"You could buy new equipment."

John shook his head, ending whatever else James was going to say. "That took weeks to collect; if we're doing this, then we need to do it now. Weaver is still out there, and I'm not going to torture my mother by keeping John Henry lying around any longer than absolutely necessary." He left out the fact that he doubted anyone but Cameron could stop his mother if she decided to destroy the machine herself, especially since Cameron would probably be cheering her on. "We want answers? We start tonight."

James nodded, making his decision and committing to it after no more than a moment's debate. "What do you need?"

"You, your gun, and Danny. We'll start there."

The surf struck her legs, wave after wave finding Cameron as unmovable and fixed as the bluffs behind her. Unable to relax, she kept scanning the beach and sea, looking for threats in every hill of sand, every seagull, and even the water itself. Compulsively, even neurotically, her gaze kept coming back to Savannah, splashing just off the shore, and Sarah, watching the child from the porch.

They were both painful reminders of what was and what might have been. Pain, raw and unrelenting, buffeted her worse than the wind, and Cameron wondered if it would ever end. A part of her wanted to wallow in that pain, but she didn't dare. Weaver could be close. She could be plotting to take Savannah from them, and Cameron would be damned if she lost her child again.

Her child.

The words made her pause. Cameron had never projected this path for herself. When she had been choosing the modifications she would make to her systems, contemplating whether or not to disable the controls that prevented her from feeling the full spectrum of emotions and sensations, she hadn't imagined that it would lead to this.

Against all odds, she and Sarah had raised a child together, helping forge an amazing woman and a formidable leader. Logically, Cameron knew they hadn't been perfect, they must have made mistakes along the way, but she had seen enough to know that Sierra had loved them both deeply, even giving her life for Sarah's. But she knew Sierra's sacrifice had been more than the simple act of saving Sarah's life.

When she'd nearly lost Sarah to the infection in her arm, Cameron had tasted madness. She knew Sarah dying would decimate her psyche. She did not, and never would have, a human's ability to cope with that kind of pain and remain sane. It was a dark fear that hovered on the edges of her awareness with every mission, knowing that Sarah might be taken from her forever. Savannah had been there when that madness had led to the destruction of their kitchen, and she had reached the cyborg through the fear when nothing else could. She had known, somehow, how fragile Cameron really was. Sierra must have known it too. In taking the bullets meant for Sarah, their daughter had saved them both.

Cameron just wished there was a way to thank her for that.

A giggle drew Cameron's attention and she came back to herself as Savannah ran down the beach toward her. For a moment, she could see Sierra in the child once more. Even with all the changes time would bring, they had the same bright copper hair and the same vivid blue eyes.

Savannah launched herself at Cameron, and she had no choice but to catch her. Distracted, Cameron hadn't been paying attention to the child's trajectory or speed, and she was startled when Savannah's carefully plotted course and aim took her off her feet just as the tide came in. The water rushed over them, and Cameron tasted salt on her tongue and felt it sting her eyes before the wave retreated, leaving them both in a tangled, sodden heap on the beach.

Savannah crowed triumphantly, and Cameron was powerless not to feel her dark mood lift a little at the sound.

"I'm hungry," Savannah declared without preamble or apology.

Cameron wrapped the child up in her arms and got to her knees as another, smaller wave brushed past them. "It's time for dinner," Cameron agreed, checking her internal clock and deciding they were within an acceptable range of the usual time for the meal.

"Why are you all the way down here? Why didn't you come swim with me?"

"I can't swim," Cameron said, consciously offering an answer only to the second question. Savannah wasn't old enough to understand her answer to the first; Cameron wasn't sure she would understand it herself.

"I could teach you."

Getting her feet under her, Cameron got up as the tide came in again. "You could, but I'm too heavy to float."

"Boats float," Savannah argued stubbornly.

Cameron paused, wondering if she should feel inadvertently offended by the comparison. "Do I look like a boat?" she asked, forcing her tone to remain light.

Savannah giggled again. "You look more like a pirate."

"Pirate Queen Cameron."

Cameron glanced up, surprised to see Sarah a mere few feet away, and watching them both with a weak smile. "But I don't have my eye patch anymore," she replied, feeling the tight icy core of pain at her center warming at Sarah's nearness.

Sarah had been watching them from the porch, feeling the setting sun bake her bare shoulders where her tank top offered little protection. The burn reddening her skin was nothing next to the searing ball of anger in her chest. Still, when Savannah tackled Cameron into the surf, sending up arcs of cold seawater and a triumphant peal of laughter, Sarah felt herself drawn to them.

Without giving it conscious thought, she left her self-imposed solitude on the porch and headed for the downed pair, her steps muffled by wind and sand. The use of Cameron's old nickname startled them both. Like her descent to the beach, Sarah hadn't planned her words. She hadn't intended to say anything at all, much less tease the terminator.

“I still have it somewhere,” Sarah admitted, taking a moment to marvel at her own blindness. She should have known she was in trouble the moment she’d decided not to discard the memento.

The gratitude in Cameron’s expression was almost her undoing, as she grabbed onto the tiny bit of kindness like a drowning woman reaching for a life preserver. Misery was shot through the Cameron’s thin smile; it was Sarah’s pain magnified a hundredfold. Cameron had never been through anything like this, Sarah realized. She didn’t know how to cope with loss, didn’t know from experience that time would dull the pain, that the memories would fade, and that, eventually, there would be happiness again.

“You have to play pirate with me,” Savannah announced, wrapping her arms around Cameron’s neck and holding on tight. Sarah felt the ice around her heart melt just a little when the innocent gesture almost drove Cameron to tears. Clutching after that insulating numbness, Sarah cursed her jumbled and confused emotions. She had wanted Cameron to hurt, to feel the pain of Sierra’s loss, and the blow of her own betrayal, but she also wanted to wrap Cameron in an embrace and take all of her pain away.

“Another time,” Cameron promised, soothing Savannah’s damp hair back from her forehead. “You need to eat.” She risked a glance at Sarah, trepidation on her face when she added, “You both do.”

Sarah bristled at Cameron’s concern, but she was unwilling to provoke another confrontation like the one back at the house, so she simply nodded. She knew Cameron had done the wrong thing for all the right reasons, but Sarah wasn’t ready to forgive and forget so easily, no matter how much she wanted to.

Sarah focused her gaze back on Savannah, shivering in the breeze as the sun sank. The little girl wasn’t theirs by birth, but fate had placed her in their arms. There had been no regret in Sierra’s eyes as the life had faded from them, but the childhood she remembered, the past she had been willing to die for, had been wiped away, and Sarah was afraid Cameron’s choice had damned all three of them.

It didn’t seem fair.

To anyone.

Cameron set Savannah down and the little girl began skipping happily down the beach towards the house, kicking up little puffs of sand with every hop. Cameron followed more

slowly, walking heavily, as if she were feeling the weight of the metal under her skin. She glanced back at Sarah, to see if she was coming, and when Sarah met her gaze she felt the tug of that damnable connection between them urging her on. She was helpless against the compassion that was welling up and threatening to put out the fire of her anger.

Her fingers brushed Cameron's as she drew even with the terminator, and Cameron stopped dead in her tracks when Sarah extended the touch, their joined hands between them like a lifeline. Sarah ached at the trembling of a grip that could bend iron, but when she didn't pull away, Cameron tightened her hold, clinging to Sarah as if by touch alone Sarah could lead her back to a place and time she had lost.

"It gets easier," Sarah promised her, unable to maintain her silence in the face of the uncertainty and longing in Cameron's eyes. "The grief... the loss... it gets easier. Fades more with time." She hoped she was telling the truth. Cameron had perfect recall. It was possible that her pain wouldn't fade with the memories of Sierra, but for now, Sarah let go of her resentment long enough to hope it would. But it wasn't forgiveness, not yet, and Sarah wondered if she was being cruel or kind, offering this much comfort when her own emotions were such chaos. Either way, she couldn't take it back now.

Cameron searched familiar green eyes, feeling something inside of her ease when she found them empty of accusations. It wouldn't last, Cameron knew Sarah well enough to know this was a temporary respite, but it helped. "How... how do you function until then?" she asked, hating the knowledge that if anyone would know the answer it was Sarah.

Shaking her head, Sarah took a slow breath, breathing in the sand, surf, and Cameron's wet skin. "You just do, girlie. Just keep putting one foot in front of the other." Reluctantly, she let go of Cameron's hand, missing the warmth and connection instantly. As much as her better judgment was telling her she needed to end things between them, Sarah wasn't sure she could let go. She wasn't sure she wanted to, even if she could, even after everything. However much pain Cameron caused her, Sarah suspected it would pale beside the pain of losing her.

The glimmer of light in Cameron's eyes muted at the loss of Sarah's touch, but she nodded, thankful for whatever comfort Sarah had to offer, and turned to follow Savannah's footprints back to the house. Sarah could see Savannah waiting for them on the porch, wrapped in a large beach towel. She waved, and Sarah waved back, forcing a smile onto her lips despite her heavy thoughts. Even if she was prepared to let Cameron

go, could they walk away from this? Could they walk away and deprive that little girl of a family? The family Sierra had given her life to save?

Swallowing, Sarah trudged through the sand, keeping her eyes averted from Cameron's silhouette as she made her way to the house.

James hesitated at the door, startled by the bloodshed that greeted him, but John moved past the dead bodies as if they weren't there. For once when James looked at him, he didn't see a boy fighting with his mother but, instead, a soldier trained to deal with death as a part of life. John did hesitate over Vaughn's corpse, a fleeting look of anger and regret flickering over his features before he knelt and searched the man's pockets. Finding a keycard and wallet, he took both.

"Might be useful," John told Ellison when he spied him watching.

James nodded but he felt a little sick. He hadn't smelled this much blood and death since his fellow agents had been gunned down around him. Reminded of the face that had ended their lives, James straightened and moved toward a table of computers Danny was hurriedly packing. "What do you need me to do?"

Danny glanced up, and then looked to John mutely.

"Stand guard," John said simply, bolstered by Danny's automatic assumption of his authority. "We can get what we need faster if you don't get in the way." He offered the former agent a tight smile to take the sting out of his words. "Besides, someone might come looking for them." He stepped over a dead body, driving his point home.

"They would have been here by now." James shook his head at a trained FBI agent taking orders from a green boy, but nevertheless, he backed up toward the door, his hand resting on the butt of his weapon clipped to his hip. "Vaughn struck me as a man who'd act outside the company line."

John glanced back at the dead man, remembering his words, remembering how he had wanted to make his mother suffer. He swallowed before his fingers began deftly unhooking cables. "Just keep watch. We don't need any more surprises today."

Danny kept himself wrapped up tightly in his work as he stacked computer components onto the sled they'd brought for the purpose, his eyes averted from the bodies to focus

on the tech. It was easier than he expected, the smell nauseating but bearable so long as he kept working. His hands moved fluidly over the connectors and keyboards, feeling a kind of peace wash over him for the first time since Vaughn had broken down the door. This was his place, this was his work. He belonged here with the wires and circuit boards, and he wondered if anyone understood that, even his mother.

They were all so blind to the possibilities, to what he could do, to what the technology could do. Even John was blinded by his mother's superstitions. Sarah Connor's fear of technology, her unwillingness to understand it, would end them all. Her vision of the future did not have to happen, Danny was sure of it. Artificial intelligence was something they could work with, not against, but no one in this ragged band of terrorists agreed with him, even the one made out of metal. They'd made an exception for Cameron, and Danny wondered how they justified that to themselves.

Everyone, even his own mother, defended Cameron's presence among them, as if they didn't realize she was a walking weapon with no one's hand on the trigger. They didn't see how she looked at him, how she threatened him. She only let him live so long as he was useful, and he didn't hold out much hope that anyone, even his own mother, would try to stop her if she deemed him a risk.

He set the last component on the sled and glanced around the room, finally focusing on the bodies of the men Sarah Connor and her pet terminator had killed. It could just as easily be him sprawled dead in his own blood if Cameron chose to put him there.

Watching John strap the equipment tight to the sled, Danny wondered if he could trust him. John didn't seem as blind about Cameron as everyone else, and he listened. But ultimately John was nothing but another body on the floor. He couldn't stand up to Cameron, even if he wanted to. The terminator had made no secret of the fact that she answered to no one but Sarah, and Sarah Connor wasn't going to protect him.

Once they got the sled to the van, Danny and John quickly and efficiently loaded the essential equipment while Ellison continued to keep watch. Tension crept up the back of his neck as he scanned the area. He was sure Weaver was there, ensuring that they were doing as they were told, but the garage was silent and still.

"What are you doing?" James asked when John hefted a backpack out of the back of the van and headed back toward the building.

“What has to be done,” the young man replied. “Give me two minutes.” John unzipped the bag and reached inside, feeling his fingers close around the clay-like substance inside before encountering the telltale metal of a detonator.

“John...” James murmured in warning, his voice low.

Danny lingered, watching John uneasily as he realized what he was about to do.

John turned back and looked at them. “Those computers could lead back to all of us. Our prints are in there. We didn’t have time to do this before, but we should do it now.” His features hardened. “Wait for me in the van.”

Danny hesitated a moment longer before complying, sliding open the back door and crawling inside. James stood his ground, watching John return to the building. This felt wrong, even if James knew John was right. They had to do this, but the thought made him sick.

James lowered his head and whispered a prayer for the souls of the men inside. Even Vaughn’s name passed his lips before he lifted his head and scanned the parking lot again for any more signs Weaver might be lurking.

True to his word, John emerged a few minutes later. James followed him back to the van as the younger man got behind the wheel. When they reached a safe distance, John didn’t hesitate to flip the switch. His features were cold and blank, and John kept his gaze on the road. Danny kept his head down, wincing at the sound behind them.

James watched the fireball leap toward the night sky in his rearview mirror. He knew he was on the right side, the just side, but at the moment, it didn’t feel like it.

When Sarah opened her eyes, it was to darkness. She eased up in an unfamiliar bed, her hand automatically reaching out for Cameron’s warmth only to tangle in cold, empty sheets. It took a moment for reality to return, but when it did, it hit her like a sucker punch.

But there was a thin layer of insulation now between her and the pain, like a wound beginning to scab over. Sleep had afforded her just the smallest bit of distance between her thoughts and her emotions, distance she’d needed desperately.

Her senses reached out for Cameron much like her hand had moments ago. Sarah could feel her, hovering nearby, a silent, protective specter on the fringes of her awareness.

The sound of small, socked feet shuffling across the wood floor made her turn her head. She could just make out Savannah coming out of the bathroom, rubbing her eyes and swaying like she was still half asleep. Giraffe clutched tightly in one hand, she climbed back into the bed and snuggled into Sarah's willing arms with a yawn that ended on a sigh of contentment, the sound bringing the faintest of smiles to Sarah's lips. The clock on the wall ticked away the late hour as they lay next to each other, the sound of distant footfalls on the porch reassuring them both that Cameron was close.

After a few minutes, Sarah realized Savannah had yet to slip back into slumber. "You okay?" she asked the child.

Savannah hesitated before slowly nodding against Sarah's chest.

"You sure?" Sarah prompted. She'd never been very good at talking the traumatic things out with John, and she'd only recently come to realize how much damage that had caused. She hated the mistakes she had made with John, but she was determined to learn from them this time around, to be better with this child who was becoming more and more like her own every day.

"John said the woman who died was family."

The simple statement made Sarah swallow hard. A strange sense of pride followed. "He did, did he?" she asked, hearing her voice catch.

Savannah nodded again.

Sarah slipped her arms around the child and drew her closer. "She was. She is," she amended softly after a moment.

"She called you mom."

Tilting her head at the note of jealousy in Savannah's voice, Sarah smiled thinly. "There are some families you're born into and some you make for yourself. Does that make sense?"

Savannah gave it some thought. "Am I family?" she whispered.

Sarah felt the return of the unwanted burn of tears, a few escaping to roll down her cheeks and catch in the child's hair as she leaned over to kiss her on the head.

"Absolutely," she promised.

It didn't seem like much to offer, but Sarah felt some of the tension ease from Savannah's body, and the little girl snuggled closer. When Sarah lifted her gaze toward the door, she wasn't surprised to see Cameron lurking, the terminator watching over them both.

Their gazes met, but this time when Sarah looked at her in the thin light from hallway, she really took her in, seeing the slump of the terminator's shoulders and the exhaustion in the lines around her eyes. Cameron was suffering worse than anyone over Sierra's death, and Sarah felt ashamed that she had ever wished more pain on her lover.

Sarah almost reached out a hand and beckoned to her, suddenly wanting Cameron with them, wanting her family together and whole with an intensity that shook her.

Her family.

Earlier she had thought about how all of this would impact Savannah, hiding from any real consideration of what it might mean for herself. She couldn't deny the pull that she felt through the anger and pain, the raw need for the comfort that only Cameron could provide. The thought of losing Cameron completely opened up a fresh agony that made her call out to Cameron just as she was turning away.

"Cameron? Everything all right out there?" Sarah asked, her voice hoarse.

"Fine," Cameron said slowly, turning back to Sarah, her fingers resting on the doorframe lightly. "Is... everything okay here?"

Sarah nodded. "Better," Sarah admitted, hearing a truth lend weight to her words.

A heartbeat passed and Cameron hesitantly nodded before turning to walk away.

"Cameron," Sarah heard her voice break on the name and she cursed herself and her need for this woman, wishing her emotions could be straightforward for once. It hurt to see the terminator, and it hurt to watch her walk away. "You... you don't have to go."

Cameron took in a very real and very ragged human breath. "I need to patrol. I need to keep you both safe."

Before Sarah could protest, Cameron was gone, her boots thumping softly as she headed back outside. Sarah frowned, sensing there were more layers to Cameron's emotions than just grief and misery.

"Cameron seems so sad," Savannah murmured.

"She is," Sarah confessed, distracted by how badly she wanted to follow Cameron outside. "I'll bet you can cheer her up in the morning."

"Really?" Savannah asked dubiously.

"Really," Sarah promised, drawing her closer. As the child in her arms drifted back to sleep, Sarah thought about the woman buried on the bluffs behind the house. Some part of her almost wondered if being this close to Sierra was influencing her judgment... like her daughter was reaching out from beyond the grave to ensure Sarah was honoring her last request.

Don't be mad...

All of this had been Sierra's choice. Cameron had been honoring a promise for the sake of a daughter who was convinced she had only a short time left to live. Sarah wondered what she would have done in the terminator's shoes, and she closed her eyes as the answer came to her in the darkness.

Sarah had a choice of her own to make now.

A gentle touch skimmed the side of Sarah's face, drawing her up out of uneasy dreams. Her green eyes reluctantly blinked open and she found herself looking up at Cameron, the terminator's fingers still warm on her cheek where they rested so softly that the touch almost didn't seem real. For a moment, everything was right again, and Sarah couldn't help but lean into the touch, feeling it heal some of the rawness left inside her.

Cameron studied Sarah's face, amazed that such simple contact between them could affect her so much. For a long moment, they remained frozen in place, both afraid to move or speak. Reluctantly, Cameron pulled her hand away, unsure what emotions

might be unleashed if the touch was allowed to continue. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "But there is something on the television you need to see."

Sarah rose up on one elbow and watched the machine walk away, her cheek still tingling from Cameron's touch. Slipping out from under the covers, Sarah left Savannah sleeping as she padded barefoot into the small living room. Cameron glanced at her as she arrived before wordlessly adjusting the volume, making it just loud enough for Sarah to hear what the reporter was saying.

Moving closer to the screen, Sarah felt the sudden need to break something when she saw the building where John and Danny had based their operations smoldering in the background. Her gaze cut to Cameron. "Kaliba?"

"I don't think so," Cameron said warily.

That left only one other option. "John?"

"They may have gone back to get their computers. John would have made sure..." Cameron broke off, flinching as Sarah turned away.

"What were they thinking, going back there like that?" Sarah hissed, keeping her voice low in deference to the child sleeping in the next room. "For a few computers? They could..." Sarah stopped dead in the middle of the room. "They wouldn't," she stated, but her tone sounded less certain.

"They wouldn't what?"

"John Henry."

Cameron nodded slowly. There were other possibilities, but she suspected Sarah was right. And there was no arguing with her when she was like this.

"Goddamn it." Sarah abruptly pivoted and stormed out onto the porch.

Cameron hesitated, unnerved by Sarah's anger, and still unsure of where she stood. She finally followed, smelling rain in the air of the gray, cloudy dawn. "Sarah..."

"Did you know? That they were going back?"

Cameron shook her head. "I would have stopped them. It was too dangerous."

Hands balling into fists, Sarah fought the urge to hit something as her pacing resumed. “I told them to burn that sonofabitch.”

“They must have had a reason...” Cameron began, not sure she believed it but wanting to calm Sarah down.

“Curiosity,” Sarah said as she rounded on the machine. “Curiosity.” She spat the word. “That’s what built the bombs. The computers. It’s what created Skynet. It’s what created the machine that destroys the world. You know as well as I do that John and Danny needed answers. I guess it doesn’t matter what price everyone else pays to get them.”

Cameron considered John’s motivations. “John Henry tried to kill you.” Green eyes snapped to Cameron’s features, and the terminator flinched again. “He tried to kill you,” Cameron stressed. “Why?”

“What damn difference does it make?”

“I don’t know,” Cameron admitted. “But it doesn’t make sense. John Henry had no reason or orders to kill you.”

“So Weaver gave him one,” Sarah guessed.

“Maybe.” Cameron came hesitantly closer. “But if Weaver wanted you dead... all she would have to do is come for you.”

The truth was chilling and they stared at the other for an uncomfortable moment. Sarah finally sighed. The surf sounded unnaturally loud as it pounded ashore behind her. She could feel the beginnings of a major headache brewing behind her eyes.

“I need my phone,” Sarah said, her voice cold and flat.

Cameron nodded once and went to find it.

Sarah rested her arms on the rail and looked out over the churning ocean as she waited, the wind and the waves seeming to mirror her own emotions. She needed answers from John, but right now she didn’t trust herself to talk to him. She would have to go to another source.

Terissa lingered at the top of the stairs to the basement, listening to the muted murmur of voices. She knew what they were up to, and she hoped like hell that they knew what they were doing. Especially Danny. Her son was too trusting of things he shouldn't be, and too enamored with his own vision of technology to understand the dangers. Danny had inherited Miles' technical mind and vision, but none of his open-mindedness and judgment. She wondered if it was her failing or the circumstance of his father's death, and why she hadn't seen it before. Even before he left for college, and then Kaliba, he had been pulling away from her, and she had allowed it to happen, hoping that he would find peace and balance on his own.

She sighed and moved back toward the kitchen, hating the frustration and disappointment she felt toward her own son. Whatever plans she had had for him, for his future, for bringing him here to help Sarah, they weren't working out. As much as she loved him, as much as she wanted to keep him safe, Terissa was starting to believe Danny would be better off elsewhere. He wasn't cut out for this life, and he didn't believe, not like she had come to believe.

Her phone buzzed in her hip pocket and Terissa retrieved it, surprised and a little relieved to see Sarah's number looking back at her from the display. She flipped the phone open and entered the proper code, waiting for Sarah to do the same. "Are you all right?" she asked before Sarah could speak.

"Been better," Sarah admitted, an edge of anger in her tone. "Can you talk?"

Straightening in surprise, Terissa moved through the house and stepped out onto the back porch, letting the screen door snap shut behind her. "What's wrong?"

"I saw the news, Terissa."

Terissa sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose with her free hand.

"Was it John?" Sarah demanded.

"Yes," Terissa answered simply. There was no point in lying.

"They're working on John Henry, aren't they?"

Terissa could hear the ocean and the rhythmic thump of Sarah's boots as she paced on something made of wood. "They couldn't let it be. They needed *answers*," she told

Sarah, her tone indicated how she felt about that. "John and Danny want to know why it went off its programming."

"And where the hell is James in all this?" Sarah wanted to know. "I thought he at least had some sense."

"He went with them." Terissa sighed again, still not able to understand James' about-face with regards to the terminator. "He's worried this somehow ties in with Kaliba... with C.A.I.N."

"And what if it does?" Sarah wondered. "What difference does it make?"

"I don't know," Terissa confessed. "But John seems to think it matters. Do you want to talk to him?" She felt a presence and turned her head to see the subject of their conversation on the other side of the screen door. John was watching her guardedly but he said nothing.

"No," Sarah said, her voice roughening with the admission. "I can't. Not yet."

"Sarah," Terissa said, her tone even. "It's not my place to be the go-between. You need to speak to him."

"I... can't, not right now." Terissa could tell by the way John's gaze dropped that he could hear his mother, could even hear the anger and hurt in her voice. "Tell him," Sarah continued, "Tell him to get that *machine* out of my house. They can play detective all they want, but I won't have the thing that killed Sierra around Savannah. Is that clear?"

John nodded, reacting to his mother's words. "We'll move him," he said quietly before turning away.

"I'll let you know when he's gone," Terissa promised as she watched John walk away, praying that it was a call she could make soon.

The morning had lightened to a paler shade of grey that had lasted most of the day. Sarah stared out into the ocean, smelling the scent of the coming rain and feeling the roughening wind whip at her hair and clothes. The weather suited her darkening mood. After getting off the phone with Terissa, she had taken a run on the beach, needing to burn off some of her anger before Savannah woke up. Cameron hadn't looked happy,

but she'd let her go, and Sarah had felt her lover's eyes on her back as she'd jogged away.

The rest of the day had been spent in the water or building sandcastles with Savannah. As if she sensed the schism between them, the child had demanded that Sarah and Cameron be there for every moment of it. At first, Sarah had bristled at Cameron's proximity, her anger tempering the compassion she had felt the night before, but her nearness had slowly worn down Sarah's defenses until it felt almost normal to have Cameron's shoulder brush against her own. Sarah had almost leaned back into the touch before she caught herself, standing up abruptly and making an excuse to go back inside. Cameron hadn't been fooled, and the look in her eyes as Sarah had backed away had torn at her like claws.

Now she stood at the rail on the deck, the setting sun lost behind darkening clouds. The occasional flicker of lightning reached down and danced across the surface of the ocean in the distance. Cameron was lingering with Savannah on the beach, helping the child pack up her toys as the rising tide began tearing down their sandcastles.

Savannah seemed oblivious to the coming storm, and Sarah wished she could keep her that way... wished she could keep her from every hardship that had befallen the woman who'd died in her arms only forty eight hours earlier. She was tempted to vow that Savannah would never suffer the way Sierra had, but Sarah knew it would be an empty promise. John was proof of that.

As Sarah watched, Cameron stood, her shoulders straightening as she turned and headed for the steps, leaving Savannah behind for the moment as she joined Sarah on the deck.

"The storm could be severe," Cameron murmured as she arrived. "Do you want to head back to the house or...?"

"Not until that metal bastard is gone," Sarah cut her off before she could finish. "We can ride it out here."

Cameron nodded faintly before glancing back at Savannah. The child was almost finished with her toys. She would only have a few moments. "I need to tell you I'm sorry," she said, determined to say her piece before Sarah could stop her. "I need you to know I did what I thought I had to do."

Sarah swallowed, but she said nothing.

“I wanted you to know her so badly, and she wanted to see you, but I couldn’t convince her it was the right thing to do. She was certain she was sparing you pain...” Cameron faltered. “And as mad as you must be... as much as you must hate me... I understand now what she was trying to spare you from feeling.” She stepped closer, needing Sarah to at least understand. “I’m not sorry that you don’t feel what I’m feeling.”

The wind whipped between them, cold and damp, filling the thickening silence.

“I don’t hate you,” Sarah said suddenly, needing to get the words off her chest, her confession spoken so softly she wasn’t even sure Cameron detected the words.

But Cameron did, her body angling so subtly toward Sarah that she doubted anyone would notice but her. She was too aware of Cameron now, too aware of every little tick and flicker of inflection. All of them spoke volumes to Sarah, and she ached for what she was on the precipice of losing... of letting go.

“It would be understandable,” Cameron murmured, her tone confused and hesitant.

Sarah nodded. “It would be.” She finally turned her head into the wind, feeling her eyes water as she stared at Cameron, but she didn’t look away. “But nothing about us has ever made sense.”

Cameron’s head tilted as she watched her. “No, it hasn’t,” she agreed. “But I...” The cyborg bit off whatever she was about to say, her gaze casting out toward Savannah and the water.

“But you what?” Sarah prompted.

“I thought we worked anyway,” Cameron concluded. She didn’t dare look at Sarah, her hands coming to rest on the rail.

Sarah watched her as the wind teased strands of Cameron’s hair. She was so goddamn beautiful. Before she even realized what she was doing, Sarah reached out, capturing Cameron’s chin and turning her until their eyes met. Sarah was startled to see the beginning of tears in them.

“I’m sorry,” Cameron managed again, her voice actually roughening on the words. “I wish... I wish I had done things differently. I wish I could have saved her... saved us... I...”

Cameron's words tapered off as Sarah slowly drew her into an embrace, their bodies molding together and Sarah's head falling forward to rest on Cameron's shoulder. They held each other as the darkness came and the first sprinkles of rain began to fall. Cameron closed her eyes, her fingers stroking Sarah's hair to smooth out the chaos caused by the wind.

"I'm mad," Sarah confessed into the curve of Cameron's neck, "and I'm upset, and I feel betrayed..." She drew in a deep breath and felt Cameron's arm tighten around her waist. "But I understand."

"I didn't want to hurt you... I never wanted..."

Sarah's fingers on her lips shushed her. "I know," Sarah breathed.

"I love you," Cameron whispered into Sarah's hair as she breathed her in, committing this moment to memory.

Sarah leaned back, seeing the loss and misery in Cameron's eyes. She touched her cheek, letting her thumb sweep over a sharp cheekbone. When Cameron opened her mouth to speak again, Sarah stopped her. "Not, not now. I can't." The weight of the last few days settled on her shoulders, and she sank into Cameron's body, drawing much needed strength and comfort from the embrace. "We'll talk, just... not right now."

She felt Cameron pull her tighter, like a promise, and Sarah allowed herself to trust the physical and emotional bonds they had forged. It still hurt like hell, but she felt that there was the possibility of healing, for both of them. "We're not done," she whispered, an answering promise. "It'll just take time."

"I understand."

Sarah eased back to look at Cameron; she looked wild, with her wind-blown hair and red-rimmed eyes. She soothed the hair back from Cameron's forehead, watching as Cameron leaned into the caress. She looked out, checking on Savannah and feeling relief at the sight of her. "We have a second chance," she said meaningfully.

Cameron followed her line of sight, watching with both grief and joy as Savannah finished gathering her toys in the pale light from the beach house. "We're not done," she repeated, a hint of awe in her voice.

One look at Cameron's eyes and Sarah was convinced that was true. With a brief nod, she turned away, padding in her bare feet down the sand-covered steps and stepping out onto the beach. As she came closer to the responsible little girl collecting her toys in the sand, Sarah could see the similarities between Savannah and the woman she would become in the play of light and shadow across the child's face. Putting on a brave front, Sarah reached down and scooped up Savannah, toys and all, and drew her in close. "Time for dinner," she murmured.

Grateful for Sarah's height as she blocked some of the wind on her damp skin, Savannah snuggled into her, wrapping her arms around Sarah's neck as the woman carried her back up the beach. She was sleepy more than hungry, and she closed her eyes and tucked her head under Sarah's chin.

Sarah's touch felt warm and safe. It made Savannah feel special and precious, and her arms tightened around the woman in a hug. "Love you, mom," she whispered, realizing too late what she'd been thinking and hadn't meant to say.

Savannah heard Sarah swallow as they stopped walking, and for a brief moment, she thought Sarah was mad, but then the woman who had come to mean so much to her only shifted her grip and drew her closer.

"I love you, too," Sarah promised her, her voice too full of emotions a six year old couldn't begin to identify.

"I can call you mom?" Savannah asked in surprise, lifting her head to look at Sarah as Cameron hovered at the top of the porch, watching them intently.

"Do you want to?" Sarah asked, her eyes glistening.

Savannah nodded sagely.

Sarah took a slow, deep breath. "Then mom it is," she replied, smiling weakly as Savannah threw her arms around her once more and squeezed so hard Sarah could barely breathe. She lifted her gaze to find Cameron's waiting for her. They stared at each other in the weak light, silently acknowledging the impact of this moment on their lives.

"What about Cameron?" Savannah asked. "Can I call her mom, too?"

Sarah glanced at the child but when she looked back up, Cameron had backed away

from the rail, her dark eyes filling with tears. The sight of them hit Sarah like a punch to the gut, but she stayed where she was. "I think she'd like that," Sarah insisted. She set Savannah down, taking the bucket of toys from around her wrist. "I think Cameron would like a hug, too."

Savannah happily complied, scrambling up the steps and launching herself at Cameron who had no choice but to catch her and heft her up.

Sarah joined them, running her fingers through bright red hair as her gaze held Cameron's over the top of the child's head.

"I don't..." Cameron began only to fall silent when Sarah shook her head.

"She was a hell of a woman," Sarah murmured. "In the handful of minutes I knew her I could see that." She swallowed. "We were responsible for that... and I think we did pretty damn good."

One tear spilled down Cameron's cheek. "We did," Cameron said with conviction, adjusting her grip on Savannah to pull her closer. "We did," she said again, resting her chin on top of the child's head. Her child. Hers and Sarah's. "She's ours."

"She's ours," Sarah agreed as the long anticipated rain finally began to patter on their clothes and skin.

"A second chance," Cameron murmured as she kissed Savannah's temple, her dark eyes locked with Sarah's.