

Sarah Connor Chronicles Virtual Season
Season 2 Episode 6

Lines in the Sand

By Anklebones

The moon was full on the night that Benjamin saw the end of the world.

It hung low in the sky over the ruins of Kaliba headquarters, bright and clear in spite of the lights of the city, bearing witness as late became early, and one day became another.

Benjamin caught a yawn with the back of his arm as he swept his flashlight over another blown out hallway full of dust, rubble and scorched metal, just like every other hallway and room he had been through. Emergency services had cleared out the bodies, and Kaliba security had taken what remained of the electronics, leaving nothing behind but an empty shell.

An empty shell that was supposed to *stay* empty.

He didn't know why the higher-ups wanted to waste money, time, and manpower guarding a ruined hulk, and he wasn't asking. Questions weren't the way to move up in Kaliba. You kept your mouth shut and did as you were told, and if you kept it shut enough, and did well enough, you got promoted.

Most of the time, Benjamin wanted to be promoted. His girlfriend had started to linger in front of jewellery stores and make pointed comments about his apartment. His mother's health was failing, and she needed care she couldn't afford. Like everyone else, he had a host of problems that a little more money would make into smaller problems, but sometimes Benjamin wasn't so sure he wanted *Kaliba's* money.

There had been rumors... people had disappeared, and some of the things Benjamin had done had cost him some sleep at night. Not so much the assignments themselves, but the questions he wasn't asking about them were beginning to pile up in the back of his head and mutter uneasily.

And ever since the explosion...

Benjamin ducked to get through a half-collapsed doorway and nearly fell when he stepped down on a loose chunk of rubble and twisted his ankle.

"Shit," he spat, going down on one knee so he could check the damage. It was sore, but serviceable. He re-laced his boot and reached for his flashlight, nearly missing the first sign since he'd gotten assigned to this graveyard gig that he wasn't alone.

A footprint, too big to be his own, pressed into the dust and ash that coated the floor of the hallway.

It might have been nothing. Benjamin wasn't the only guy they had on this, and some of them had to be bigger than he was, but... Kaliba supplied all their gear, including the army grade boots he was wearing. Uniform boots left uniform prints, and Benjamin had seen enough of his own criss-crossing the ruins night after night to know that this one was different.

Rising carefully, Benjamin put some weight on his ankle and grimaced, but found he could walk. The only thing Kaliba hated worse than questions was false alarms, but protocol required that he call in both the print and the injury and wait for someone to relieve him to finish the patrol. The question of whether or not Benjamin wanted to move up in the company would be moot if he brought a unit down here in the middle of the night for nothing but a twisted ankle and a footprint, especially if it turned out to be nothing more than some homeless man wandering somewhere he shouldn't.

Benjamin didn't want to know what might happen to a hapless vagrant caught on Kaliba property. Company policy seemed to lean towards the "shoot first" approach, and if he was the one who called it in... He'd never considered himself to be a man with an overactive conscience, but everyone had to draw a line somewhere.

I'll just find him and send him on his way, Benjamin told himself. No one would ever have to know.

Obscuring the print with the toe of his boot, Benjamin continued down the hall, considerably more alert than he had been before. He found a few more prints, enough to know he was on the right trail, and he made sure to kick some fresh ash on top of all of them. A good tracker would still know someone had walked here, but hopefully not that it had been anyone other than the regularly scheduled patrols.

A sound up ahead, like cement against metal, told Benjamin he was getting closer. He slowed down, hanging his flashlight on his belt as he took out his gun and crept around the last corner.

"Freeze!" he demanded, training his weapon on the shape of the man he could just make out against the darker black of the walls.

The figure stopped and turned stiffly, almost unnaturally, as if he was a badly strung puppet. For some reason it sent a chill down Benjamin's spine, and he began to wish he had called for backup after all.

"Put your hands where I can see them!" He took an involuntary step backwards when the man began to advance on him instead. "I'll shoot!" he warned, feeling the chill become a tremble deep down in his bones. Benjamin realized this man didn't look like a vagrant as he came closer. He was big, and clean cut even though his clothes didn't fit him well, and he wasn't stopping.

Almost involuntarily, Benjamin felt his finger squeeze the trigger, the recoil slamming into his hands like a shock that went all the way up to his shoulders.

He saw the bullet land, saw the well of blood, black in the darkness against the white of the man's sleeve. He saw him glance down negligently, as if a fly had landed on him instead of a bullet punching through his arm. He saw him keep coming.

Benjamin stumbled backwards, pulling the trigger again and again when his shots went wide. He tripped and fell, but the man caught and lifted him with a grip like iron around his neck.

Dark eyes glowed.

"Do you know Danny Dyson?"

His toes dangling, Benjamin just managed to shake his head, almost choking on a sudden lungful of air when he was dropped to the ground.

He curled up around his aching lungs, waiting for the next blow, but it never came. When he finally opened his eyes and looked around, he was alone.

ACT 1

With the coming dawn nothing but a stubborn hope on the horizon, darkness still cloaked the machine's vigil. He had been watching the house for two hours and twenty-seven minutes from the front seat of the blue station wagon. Fifty yards down the street, he had carefully calculated the distance to conceal his presence from the home's occupants while still affording him an adequate view of their front door.

He didn't consider the back door. As far as the machine was concerned, back doors did not exist.

This house was only one of many possible addresses he had been given for his mission, and so far there was no sign of his target. His stakeout at the graveyard and subsequent search through the ruins of Kaliba's headquarters had been just as useless. The machine raised a hand to the healing hole in his arm. Danny Dyson was proving more difficult to track down than he had anticipated.

As the stars faded and the first alarm clocks began to sound behind curtained windows, he decided to withdraw. His presence here would not pass unremarked during the day. That had been made clear to him. He must be careful. Caution was not a natural strategy for a terminator, but he was learning.

His hand was on the ignition when movement drew the machine's attention. The door he was watching opened and a familiar woman slipped out, closing and locking it soundlessly behind her before getting into her car and pulling out onto the road.

The machine waited until she was nearly out of sight, then turned the key and followed Terissa Dyson down the street.

The first rays of sunlight tipped the ruff of the German Sheppard with gold as she watched the two cars disappear around a corner. Shaking off the chill of her long wait, she got to her feet and trotted purposefully down the street. A deep sniff confirmed her

suspicious. This was the same machine that had been pursuing Danny Dyson in the cemetery.

A dog's shape did not give her a dog's senses exactly, but she could analyze the components of the air in a way that was something like a sense of smell, and the machine had been sitting here long enough to have left a faint trace behind. A machine could not look like a human without also smelling like one, and this one had also been in the graveyard where John Connor had been shot.

He was getting closer to his target, leaving Danny's future, including his ability to assist her, in doubt. Weaver briefly considered hunting the machine down, as she had those around her daughter's base in the future, but its presence here was unexpected, and Weaver wanted to know more. Someone wanted Danny dead, but who? And why?

Wrinkling her nose, Weaver looked back to the house, so close to the one where her daughter slept, and considered the possibilities. Perhaps this machine was something she could use... Either way, she would make sure he did not threaten her plans. Danny was useful, but ultimately expendable, others were... less so.

John had a complicated relationship with computers.

In spite of their unfortunate habit of trying to kill him, he found them fascinating. His entire life was based on the inevitable rebellion of technology, and yet he felt strangely at home in front of a screen. As a child he'd read code the way most kids read picture books, finding comfort in the simplicity of ones and zeros.

But not lately.

Lately computers were letting John Connor down, in more ways than one.

He'd been careful not to be in the hangar when Cameron came to work on the security system, and she'd been just as careful to let him know when she was coming. His pride was still stinging, and he wasn't quite ready to deal with the terminator yet.

Not that it was all sunshine and rainbows when she wasn't there either. Danny was proving a sullen and uncommunicative roommate. The only time he seemed to snap out of it was when they were working together. In the midst of a project Danny was a different person. Brilliant, creative, and determined, he was John's superior as a programmer, but he got frustrated easily with John's strict demands for security in their online investigations. Danny had no head for subtlety or circumspection, and John was sure that if he had been alone, he would have been caught long ago.

John might have been tempted to let him get his fingers burned if it weren't for Terissa.

She had dropped Danny off at the hangar a few days ago, but didn't stay longer than it took to make sure John was there and Danny was as safe as security systems and firearms hidden in umbrella stands could make him. John would have offered her a cup of coffee, but she'd waved him off, giving Danny a last hug before he shuffled off to bed.

She'd watched him go, her expression a mixture of guilt, fear and doubt, one that John suspected his own mother had worn often enough. It had wrenched something deep in his chest, but there was nothing he could say to make it better, and in the end he had let her go without saying anything at all.

Terissa didn't deserve to go through what his mother had been through, so John did his best to keep Danny safe, even if his own doubts about the programmer were keeping him awake at night.

Sleep was a traitor that more often than not, leaving him awake with thoughts he'd rather have put aside for a few hours. Tonight was no better, and John had made a pot of coffee and gone to the lab, hoping to lose himself in his work for a few hours. But he found his eyes straying to Danny's workstation instead, and the doubts that had been making sleep impossible returned to whisper their suspicions in his ear.

Why Danny?

He couldn't shake a conversation from his mind, one of the first he and his mother had had with Cameron about the machines after she jumped them eight years into the future.

They don't know what you look like.

And what if they found out who he was? His mother had demanded. Would they all know what to do then?

They do.

But this one hadn't. This one had known his name and tossed him aside as if he meant nothing.

John didn't like the direction that logic was taking him in, but he'd gone a lot of places he didn't like in his life. This was just one more to add to the list. Without conscious thought, he'd rolled his chair from his desk to Danny's and booted up the computer.

Now, with dawn more of a fact than a promise, John was wishing he'd told logic to go to hell and gone back to bed.

He hadn't actually expected to find anything on Danny's computer. They were both hackers, both intimately acquainted with the inner workings of the machines that were their life's work. Danny should have hidden his tracks, erased every piece of damning evidence. John would have, but then John had been raised in a state of fear that made suspicion and subterfuge second nature.

Danny, ironically, was more trusting. Or just stupid. Knowing Danny, John gave it even odds.

He had gotten through Danny's basic password security with ease, but what he'd found there was making him sick to his stomach.

They had both been working with the chip, slowly decoding its secrets, struggling with the damage it still carried from the explosion it had sustained while Cameron was using

it, and later, from the shock of the time machine in the future. John had thought they'd hit a roadblock: a place where the data just scrambled, tangling around itself, almost as if there were two copies of the same software fighting to occupy the same space.

It hadn't made any sense, and Danny had claimed to be just as confused as John.

He'd been lying.

Danny had been working behind John's back, untangling the code, rewriting what he couldn't save, and slowly separating the two lines so that one could function while the other ran in the background. It wasn't quite finished, but John could read enough of the dominant code to recognize it.

He'd spent weeks writing a virus specifically designed to capture it.

It hadn't been John Henry who had killed Sierra.

It had been C.A.I.N.

Working quickly, John erased all traces of his search and shut down the computer. He was reaching for his phone while the CPU was still hot, but something stayed his hand.

What would his mother do with this information? What would Cameron do? John remembered the pain in Terissa's eyes when she had left Danny with him. Pain, but also trust. She trusted her son with him, and John was about to betray her.

He betrayed you first! a cold little voice inside his head insisted. Eliminate him now before someone else dies!

Cameron would already be loading her gun, or at least, the Cameron John had known would have. Sentimentality had never been part of her programming. Now... she was different, but John had seen how fiercely she would fight to protect his mother and Savannah, and she had never trusted Danny. This was all the excuse she would need. And his mother...

John hadn't seen her since that last awkward and painful conversation. He'd said he still loved her, and he did, but he needed time to figure out what that meant.

Sarah Connor was not a cold-blooded murderer, whatever the police files said. John had only known her to shoot to kill once, and that had been to save his life. If Danny came at her with a rifle, John didn't doubt she would do what she had to do, but would she condone his execution?

John wouldn't have thought so, but then he also wouldn't have expected her to fall in love with a machine. He couldn't take anything for granted anymore.

Hypocrite! He scorned himself, clinging to the decision he had reached in a rain-soaked park. His mother's choices were her own, and John had promised himself he wouldn't try to destroy what little happiness she had managed to find. That didn't make it easier to accept, or spare him the knowledge that his instincts about what his mother would or would not do were no longer trustworthy.

Who to trust...? It was a thorny question. John was uncomfortably aware of the secrets he himself had chosen to carry, and their consequences. What right did he have to judge Danny without even asking him?

Before she had sent him back to the past, Sierra had refused to tell John who his enemies were. She had argued that pre-knowledge was more likely to cause betrayals than prevent them. With her warnings in his head, and on the very walls around him, John couldn't make himself pick up the phone.

Once this was out, there would be no taking it back. Before he turned Danny over to the uncertain judgment of others, John had to know for sure.

A chirp from the security system announced a visitor, and John pulled up the security cameras, both relieved and a little sick to see Terissa's car on the road to the hangar.

Leaving his phone on the desk, he headed to the door to meet her.

Sarah was beautiful in the morning sunlight.

Their blankets had ended up on the floor some time during the night, and Cameron hadn't bothered to retrieve them, enjoying the sight of Sarah sprawled unselfconsciously naked beside her. As the dawn began darting curiously in through the blinds, Cameron tracked the patterns it drew on Sarah's skin and stored them securely in her memory files. She resisted the urge to follow the light with her fingers, savouring the strangely thrilling torture of denied pleasure.

Sarah needed her sleep, but that wasn't what stayed Cameron's hands.

She had nearly lost this.

Not only the physical side of their relationship, though Cameron would have missed that too, but this... laying next to her lover, listening to her breathe and knowing that even though she was a machine, she was trusted, loved... that she belonged here. More, that this place beside Sarah existed only for her, and no one else. These stolen moments, short but cherished, were as close to perfect as any Cameron had known and she wanted them to last forever.

Sarah muttered in her sleep, her brow furrowing, as if something in her dreams was irritating her. Cameron risked smoothing the expression out with her thumb, delighting in the single chaste touch, and feeling a smile lift the corner of her mouth when the frown returned. Sarah would always be Sarah, unpredictable, illogical, and irascible.

Sarah murmured again, and Cameron noted the changes in vital signs that indicated a shift in her sleep cycle. She would be awake soon, and another morning would begin.

Mornings were still... not quite awkward... but careful. They were both being terribly careful with each other, neither willing to risk upsetting the delicate balance that had returned to their relationship. Cameron was afraid to ask for too much, and she sensed

that Sarah was still fighting with herself. Wanting to forgive, but unable to completely banish the memory of the pain Cameron had caused.

Through trial and error, Cameron had learned that it was best if she gave Sarah a little space in the mornings, time to get herself together.

So she slipped out of bed before Sarah could wake and searched silently through the room for her clothes, finding them more scattered than she remembered. She needed her own dresser, she decided. Before Sierra's death, Sarah had insisted this was *their* room, but that was something else they weren't talking about.

Dressed, with her handgun tucked into the back of her jeans, Cameron eased out into the hall and pulled the door closed behind her. A stop at Savannah's door assured her the child was safe. She moved on without disturbing her, padding down the stairs and out into the back yard for her morning patrol.

She hadn't bothered with shoes, and the wet grass was cold against her bare feet. Cameron walked the perimeter, checking the motion sensors she'd set out since Weaver's last appearance, and finding them all in working order. If the terminator was spying, she was doing it from afar.

Still, Cameron was uneasy. Pausing at the far end of the lawn, she felt the hairs on the back of her neck lift, and a shiver that had nothing to do with the chill of the dawn move over her skin. It was a purely human response, and therefore untrustworthy, but Cameron scanned the yard again, frustrated when her readings turning up nothing out of the ordinary.

A sprinkler switched on next door with a metallic click and scrape, and Cameron startled, her hand going to her gun. The weapon would be useless against Weaver, but the touch of the metal against her skin steadied her, as much for its reminder of Sarah as the gun itself.

Her synthetic heartbeat slowing, soothed by the rhythmic sound of water against grass, Cameron deliberately turned her back on the yard and went inside. Weaver was either there or she was not, and there wasn't anything Cameron could do about it except wait until the other machine made a move.

In contrast, she barely spared a thought for the terminator hunting Danny as she reset the alarm on the back door and switched the kitchen light on. She had no doubt that it was still out there, but its target wasn't here, and Cameron would make sure Danny stayed as far away from Sarah and Savannah as possible. She would not permit them to be caught in the crossfire.

She was not particularly happy that John was living with a target either, but Sarah was determined to let him make his own decisions, and Cameron had done her best to make the hangar as secure as possible.

Extending her senses to keep track of the heartbeats upstairs, Cameron made a pot of coffee and began setting out the breakfast dishes. The rising sun through the windows warmed her, and by the time the coffee was ready, she was nearly calm again. Pouring

a cup for no other reason than that it brought thoughts of Sarah closer, she took it to the table and sat down to wait.

Worry warred with anticipation, and Cameron fought the unfamiliar urge to fidget. She wrapped her fingers around the cup in her hands, focusing on the heat coming through the ceramic and the dark, rich scent. She had heard that coffee smelled better than it tasted, but she had only ever tasted it on Sarah's lips, and considering how much she enjoyed kissing Sarah, that had probably given it an unfair advantage.

Curious, she lifted the cup and took a sip, wrinkling her nose at the unexpected bitterness.

Sarah enjoyed this?

Determined not to admit defeat to a caffeinated beverage, Cameron got a second cup, and this time she added a little milk. It was... better, but still not what she would call enjoyable.

A third cup, and a spoonful of sugar later, Cameron had something she considered drinkable. Back at the table, she sipped it slowly, letting it roll over her tongue and down her throat. It tasted like Sarah, and more. It tasted like home and family. Like nothing Cameron had ever expected to claim, and everything she was terrified of losing.

Imagination was not Cameron's forte, but for just a moment she tried to picture what it would be like if all of this was real... if their front wasn't a front. If there was no threat of Skynet hanging over their heads, no Weaver, no Kaliba... If she and Sarah and Savannah were a normal family, with normal worries...

She could almost capture it; for a fraction of a second Cameron felt the illusion settle around her, but she had never been designed for denial, and it didn't last longer than the sugar she had stirred into her coffee, lingering only as an added sweetness to the morning's glow.

Terissa waited as long as she could before checking on Danny.

It had been harder than she wanted to admit to leave him at the hangar with John. Knowing what was after him, knowing what it would do if it found him... it was all she could do not to camp out on his doorstep. She had forced herself to drive home and go to bed, but sleep had been a miserly companion, and nightmares had plagued what little of it she had managed to get.

The following nights with no word from her son had been no better. Only knowing that they were safe, and that Cameron was visiting daily to make updates on the security system, had made it possible for Terissa to wait and give Danny the trust he needed.

But last night had been worse.

As soon as there was light on the horizon, Terissa had escaped the cage of her bedroom and found herself back in the car. There was no decision to it, no possibility of

denial. Dread was heavy on her chest and she had to see her son again, see that he was alive and well, or she would go mad.

It was barely six when she pulled out of the driveway, too early to wake the boys, so Terissa didn't go straight to the hangar. Instead she drove to a nearby grocery store and picked up a pretext in the guise of breakfast. It wouldn't fool anyone, but they could all pretend it did, and everyone could keep their pride. It was nearly all they had.

She saw the red light of the motion detector hidden at the base of a tree blink when she turned onto the dirt road leading to the little airline hangar. She couldn't spot the corresponding camera that would transmit her picture on ahead of her, but the visual reminder of the security John had put in place and Cameron had upgraded, eased some of her worry. This was what they did. They could keep Danny safer than she could, safer than he could keep himself. She just prayed that he wouldn't do anything stupid. That he would trust a little. But for all her love, Terissa wasn't blind to her son's faults. He was so lost...

A text message made her phone chime, asking for ID confirmation. Cameron had briefed Terissa on the new security once it was installed and given her a password. It was matched to the facial recognition software in the cameras, and the wrong code would set off the alarms. Terissa keyed in her four digit password and continued on to the hangar.

John met her at the door with a tired grin, but he was tense, uneasy in a way he hadn't been the night before and Terissa felt her own shoulders bunch in response.

"Good morning, John," she said to fill the awkward silence. "Danny...?"

"In the shower," he said, closing the door behind her and resetting the alarms. "How are you holding up?"

Terissa shrugged. "I'm still standing. Is that coffee hot?" she indicated the cup in his hand.

John shook his head. "I'll put on a new pot." He suited actions to words, and Terissa busied herself with the groceries, setting up breakfast on the little table in the kitchenette.

The coffee maker switched off just as Danny made his appearance, and Terissa had to clutch the back of a chair to keep herself from going to him immediately.

"Mom." He looked surprised to see her, and his eyes skirted to the food on the table and back again. She hadn't fooled him, but she saw the gratitude on his face for the effort. He was the one to cross the distance between them for an awkward hug while John stayed discreetly in the background.

"Danny," she murmured into his shoulder, getting a firm grip on herself so that when he let her go she felt a little more like the calm, competent woman she needed to be and less like a terrified mother. "How are you?"

"Fine," Danny shrugged. "You didn't have to come all the way out here."

"I was in the neighbourhood," she joked. It was weak but it put a smile on his face and they sat down to breakfast without the resentment between them that Terissa had feared.

Tactfully, John withdrew to the lab with a plate of breakfast and a fresh mug of coffee. Terissa appreciated his thoughtfulness, but in truth she would have welcomed his company. Danny responded willingly enough to her attempts at conversation, but he didn't offer any of his own, and Terissa was almost grateful when the light above the door announced another visitor.

"John?" she called into the lab. "Is that Cameron?" But John was staring white-faced at the security footage when she went to check on him. Terissa leaned over his shoulder and felt her stomach freeze at the familiar profile in the blue station wagon.

Sarah woke all at once from a formless, but ominous dream, John's name in the back of her throat and a nameless fear in the pit of her stomach. She reached for her gun but there was nothing under her pillow. Startled, she began untangling herself from the sheets, only then taking in the general disarray of her bedroom.

The blankets were on the floor, and there were clothes scattered across the carpet.

The dream that had woken her began to recede, replaced by the memory of the night before, and Sarah sank back into the bed with a sheepish but satisfied smile on her face. The sheets beside her were cold to the touch, but given the amount of light coming in through the window, Cameron had simply let her sleep in.

Sarah would have enjoyed curling up with the terminator a little longer, but the first few mornings after their reunion had been strange, and since then Cameron had been careful to be gone before she woke up. It felt wrong, and Sarah wished the terminator hadn't stopped trying, but she didn't know how to ask her to start again. What she wanted and what she could have had never been the same thing, and for now it was enough to fall asleep in Cameron's arms. Having reclaimed a little more of what they had almost lost, it wouldn't do to get greedy now.

Reluctantly climbing out of the bed, Sarah found her gun on the floor underneath her jeans and put it back under her pillow. Naked, she grabbed a handful of clothes from the dresser and headed for the shower.

The warm water was welcome, but afterwards Sarah winced at the evidence Cameron had left on her skin the night before. They hadn't been careful, that was for the daylight hours, and Sarah couldn't regret it, but for now she exchanged her t-shirt for something with a higher neckline before heading downstairs.

The smell of coffee led her to the kitchen, where she found a breakfast spread that would have made any homemaker proud, and Cameron sitting in the middle of it with several cups of coffee, a jug of milk and a pot of sugar. Sarah paused on the threshold as Cameron looked up, face bare of makeup, hair still adorably tousled and the wary appeal of a startled deer in her eyes, as if she'd been caught at something.

The sight filled Sarah with such a simple joy that for a moment it was all she could do to take it in. "How do you like it?" she asked finally, indicating the cup in Cameron's hands.

"One milk, one sugar," Cameron answered automatically. "It's bitter."

"Lightweight," Sarah teased. "Is there any left for me?"

"I saved some." Cameron took the offending cups of coffee and dumped them in the sink before filling another for Sarah.

Sarah came into the kitchen to take it, unable to resist reaching out to brush Cameron's hair from the back of her neck and running her fingers over the unblemished skin.

"You still heal faster than I do, girlie," she murmured, grinning at the terminator's confused blink when she turned around. Sarah pulled her own shirt away from her neck in explanation, and felt her smile broaden to see the faintest hint of a blush on Cameron's cheeks at the sight of the red mark over her collar bone.

"I'm sorry-" Cameron started to say, laying her fingers over the faint red bruise, but Sarah shook her head.

"Don't be."

Obviously flustered and unsure, Cameron dropped her hand and looked down at her feet. Sarah tilted her chin back up, running a thumb over the soft skin of Cameron's jaw. "It's okay," she murmured, intending to say more, but Cameron's phone cut her off, trilling a warning that brought Sarah's dream back to her in a rush.

She didn't need to know what the message said to know who it was.

"John."

"Danny!"

He appeared in the doorway of the lab just before the alarm sounded, and Terissa saw him pale at the look on her face.

"Get the guns," John ordered him. "I'll meet you at the back door."

Danny turned and bolted and John snatched up a laptop from the desk before following.

"Stay here!" he told Terissa, but she shook her head.

"I'm going with you."

"No," he said shortly.

"He's my son!" Terissa reminded him.

"He's a target!" John nearly yelled, turning to look at her with Sarah's eyes: fierce, confident, and utterly unmovable. "And you're just one more body in the way." Taking a deep breath, he made an effort to gentle his tone. "Dying for him won't save him. We'll lead it off so you can get away."

"You're a fool," Terissa said flatly. She tried to get past him to Danny, but John blocked her way.

"The best way to help Danny right now is to keep yourself safe."

"No one is ever safe," Terissa threw at him, furious and frightened. She saw him wince, and he seemed to relent, turning sideways, but as soon as Terissa relaxed he caught her with his shoulder and pushed her back into the lab, slamming the door in her face and hitting the locks.

All Terissa could do was slam her fist into the door and curse. She heard the roar of an engine out back and went to the computers. John had left the security footage up, and she saw their truck spin and squeal out of the parking lot, John at the wheel and Danny in the passenger seat. They tore up the dirt road, using the shoulder to pass the station wagon.

Terissa's heart was in her throat when John deliberately slowed, making sure the terminator got a good look at Danny before gunning the engine again. The lure worked, but Terissa felt no relief as her death sped away and the alarms went silent.

ACT 2

"Let's go."

As soon as it became clear John wasn't going to answer his cell phone, Sarah was in motion. She was already halfway to the front door before Cameron caught her by the wrist and pulled her back.

"No."

"John needs us," Sarah said as if that was all the argument she needed, and in the past, it had been.

"John can take care of himself," Cameron pointed out. "Savannah can't."

"Weaver?"

"Weaver."

"You think it's a trap?" Sarah sounded sceptical, and Cameron didn't blame her; she wasn't sure she believed it herself. Triggering the alarm at the hangar would be a roundabout way for Weaver to get an unobstructed shot at Savannah, but Cameron couldn't completely ignore the possibility. And even if the other terminator hadn't planned this, she wouldn't hesitate to take advantage of the situation.

"Can we be sure it's not?"

"No," Sarah growled reluctantly, the steely glint in her green eyes promising a slow and painful death for Weaver if she ever got her hands on the machine. "Damned *bitch*. She has us either way."

"John will call," Cameron assured her. "He had time to get out."

"We don't know that," Sarah muttered, but she stopped fighting Cameron's grip.

Satisfied Sarah wasn't going to go rushing off to the rescue, Cameron let her go. "I do," she said. "I programmed that system myself."

Sarah snorted. "You're not infallible, girlie."

As if on cue, Sarah's phone rang and Cameron raised an eyebrow. "You were saying?"

Banging on the door did nothing but bruise her hands and promise some small release to the pent-up tangle of fear and fury that was choking her. But it was a false promise, and when the ache of her hands matched the ache in her heart, Terissa finally stopped.

She slumped to the floor, raising weary eyes to the security footage that showed her only an empty gravel road on one screen and the remains of breakfast on the kitchen table on the other.

Danny and John were gone.

One boy who might destroy the world, and the other who was supposed to save it.

Men, Terissa reminded herself bitterly. *Not boys*. They weren't children anymore, but they were sons, and a son is always a boy in his mother's eyes. And Danny wasn't like John, he hadn't been prepared for this. He didn't know how to fight.

"Take care of him..." she whispered, cursing and pleading with John in the same breath. He had taken her son away from her, and not just now. Ever since they had pried Danny out of Kaliba's clutches, John had encouraged him, befriending him and offering him a place in their fight when Terissa would have rather had him safe.

Was that why the machines were after him now? For something he had done for John?

Terissa wished she could feel pride that her son's life would mean enough to bring him to the attention of Skynet's assassins, but selfishly, she wished he had remained obscure.

Enough wallowing, Terissa, she chided herself. *Time to get out of here*.

Suiting actions to words, she pulled out her phone and dialled the only person who might know what to do.

Sarah wasn't sure how to feel as she drove to the hangar.

She'd taught John to run. She'd taught him so well that he'd run away from nearly everything in his short life, including his responsibilities. But running would only get him so far, and that was something they were both coming to terms with. Sooner or later he was going to have to turn and fight, and Sarah only hoped it wasn't too late for him to learn how.

Terissa's call had calmed the worst of her fears, and even Cameron had relaxed enough to relent and agree that Sarah should go down to the hangar to spring her. She'd still adamantly refused to leave Savannah herself, and only reluctantly allowed Sarah out of her sight. But not before extracting a promise from Sarah to drive straight to the hangar and bring Terissa right back before they decided what to do about John and Danny.

Sierra's death had shaken Cameron more than Sarah had realized, and it wasn't only grief. Cameron was afraid.

That makes two of us.

Leaving Cameron and Savannah alone had been harder than Sarah had expected. Rushing to John's rescue was still a gut instinct, nothing was ever going to change that, but the usual obsessive need to protect him from himself was curiously absent, leaving her to fret over her daughter and her lover instead.

She forced herself to drive slowly through the checkpoints. The terminator should be long gone by now, but she kept her Glock at her side, and her eyes sharp.

Terissa's little car parked in front of the hangar itself was the only sign of life, and Sarah pulled up next to it, turning the truck off and sliding out to use it as a shield to get her bearings. Nothing came screaming out at her and there was no sign of any kind of firefight, but Sarah didn't miss the unfamiliar tire tracks in the driveway or the skid marks of a vehicle hastily changing direction.

The terminator had been here, but it had left before reaching the hangar and at some speed.

Bait.

That was Sarah's first thought, and it made her stomach twist. John had used Danny as bait to lead the terminator away from Terissa. He wasn't running, he was leading.

"Good boy," she murmured.

The front door gave way to her code, and Sarah put her back to it, going in gun-first. The lights were still on, which helped, and Sarah made her way through the kitchen, noting the half-eaten breakfast and the coffee pot, still warm.

She passed the wall of photographs, clippings and intel that had first brought them here without a glance, but she knew it was there. The reminder of Sierra's work and sacrifice hurt, but she was glad John had preserved it.

The boy's bedrooms were clear, with no sign of a struggle beyond the expected battle for floor space in Danny's. John's was immaculate. *Empty*, Sarah's conscience pointed out, but she ignored it. They had all left things behind.

Once she had secured the hangar, Sarah headed for the lab where a muffled thumping betrayed Terissa's impatience.

"Mom will find her," John assured Danny, risking a glance away from the road at the sullen programmer curled up on his side of the truck. "She'll come as soon as she knows the alarm was tripped." She would, John knew. She would have to. He could have called, let her know he was safe, but then she would have come to them instead of going to the hangar, and he needed time. Time to find out what Danny was up to and time to deal with this terminator before anyone else got hurt.

He only hoped his mother would give it to him. He thought they had reached a point where she might understand he needed to do this on his own, but she was still his mother, and protecting him was her job.

One of her jobs, he corrected himself. There was Savannah now, and Cameron. It was strange, that something that had made him feel so insignificant before could empower him now. Sarah Connor had other responsibilities, and this, this he could take care of for himself. And for them. He could protect someone else. It was strange, and almost exhilarating.

Danny seemed somewhat less enlightened.

"We should answer the phone," he whined again. "We should go back. Why aren't we going back?"

"There's a machine following us," John reminded him somewhat less gently that the first time.

"We lost it hours ago!"

John resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "No. We didn't. You don't *lose* them. You gain a little time, that's all."

Danny looked stubborn. "We should answer the phone," he said again. "Tell them where it is. Isn't this what *she's* for?"

John ignored the slur on the word *she*; he had his own problems with Cameron right now, but that didn't mean he condoned Danny's suspicious contempt for the terminator. Still, this was hardly the time to get into a philosophical debate on the nature of life, particularly considering the secrets Danny was carrying around. "Cameron has other..."

responsibilities," he said instead, trying not to dwell on what those responsibilities might entail.

Fucking your mother? A nasty little portion of his subconscious offered.

Protecting Savannah! He corrected it firmly.

Danny subsided for a few minutes, and John focused on the road, steering them as far from the people they cared about as possible. He almost didn't hear Danny's last mutter, "we should go back..." but he did, and his patience finally ran out. Yanking the wheel to the side he ran them up on the shoulder of the road and killed the engine.

Danny's eyes were wide. "Why-" he started, but John cut him off.

"Do you want her to die?" he demanded.

"I-"

"Do you want Terissa to throw herself between you and a terminator?" John interrupted again, not giving Danny a chance to speak. "Because that's what she'll do. She won't be able to stop herself." His jaw ached from the effort of not shouting, and he resisted the urge to smack the wounded expression from Danny's face, angry with himself as much as Danny. Too many times he'd let his own mother take punishment meant for him, too many times he'd asked her to step in front of the bullet, and even when he'd saved her, he'd blamed her for that too. It was enough. It had been enough a long time ago. He was done putting other people between himself and death, and he was going to make damned sure that Danny was done with it too, or he'd kill the programmer himself.

One breath, two... John stared him down and Danny finally lowered his eyes.

"No," he admitted to the seat covers, and for the first time since they'd left the hanger there wasn't a trace of self-pity in his voice. "I don't want anyone to die for me."

John took a deep breath and decided to believe him. For now. He turned the key and pulled back onto the road. "Then we have to keep going. We need to find somewhere to fight, and then we'll take it out."

"We're going to fight it?" Danny's voice almost broke. "How?"

John shrugged. "I have no idea."

"You don't have a plan?"

John could have laughed at that. "When do we ever? Any ideas?"

Danny looked like he was about to say something, but he closed his mouth again and glanced out the window. John left him alone with his thoughts, sensing some of the war that must be going on inside of Danny right now. He could have called him on it, but John suspected Danny would run from anything even faintly accusatory, or if he couldn't run, surrender and beg for forgiveness, only to betray John as soon as his back was

turned. No. If Danny was going to confess, he had to do it on his own, willingly, or John would never be able to trust him. Trust demanded trust in return.

"Why are you doing this?" Danny finally asked, his voice soft and hesitant. "It's after me, not you. Why risk your life when you won't even let my mother risk hers? Aren't you the one who's supposed to save the world some day?"

Danny's tone suggested he wasn't as sure of that last point as everyone else, but John let it pass. "Because I believe you're worth saving," he admitted. "And besides," he added, thinking of Savannah, "They're already training an understudy."

Savannah stared out the window and sighed, a great gusting sigh pitched to be heard by the adults who had thwarted her.

It was well into morning. The sun was shining, the green grass gleaming, and birds singing. But she wasn't allowed to go outside.

Too dangerous, Cameron had said. Too dangerous to go out by herself, and Cameron was busy. Not busy because she was actually doing anything other than walking around the house, but busy because she was worried. Worried about Sarah, and that meant she didn't have time to play outside.

It was all John's fault. Savannah had worked out that much. He was the reason that Sarah had left before breakfast on a day that would have been perfect for going to the beach or training in the backyard. Cameron had been teaching her some new avoidance manoeuvres, and Savannah wanted to practice.

Stupid boys.

Even Walther was asleep. Savannah had crouched beside the couch and poked him a few times to see if she could wake him up to play, but he'd ignored her, and then Uncle Ellison had told her to leave him alone and let him sleep while he could.

He was cranky too.

And he didn't want to go outside either. He'd offered to play checkers with her, but Savannah was in no mood to be mollified by board games so now he was reading a book. It was too nice to be inside, but inside she was, and there she would stay, until the grownups decided it was safe to go out.

Sulking was a poor substitute, but satisfying in its own way.

Savannah sighed again, to no result.

When the phone rang everyone stopped, and that was when Savannah realized they'd all been waiting, even her. Waiting for news. Savannah felt a little wriggle of nervousness worm around in her belly. John was annoying, but she kind of liked him, and he was hers, like Cameron and Sarah and Walther.

The ringing stopped, and Savannah slipped off the window seat in the living room and out into the hall. Cameron was sitting at the table in the kitchen, and Savannah ghosted to the doorway, moving silently the way she had been taught.

Cameron's back was to her, and Savannah could only hear one side of the conversation, but that was enough.

"Do you have to go away?" she asked after Cameron had hung up.

If Cameron was surprised that Savannah had been eavesdropping, she didn't show it. Leaving the table she came and knelt in front of her. "I don't know," she said. "Maybe." Cameron never pretended everything was okay when it wasn't. Most of the time Savannah liked that, but sometimes she almost wished they could pretend.

"Is John okay?"

"I don't know," Cameron said again. "But we're going to find out."

Savannah nodded, and Cameron gave her a long hug.

After that she was busy again, but Savannah didn't go back to the living room. She cleared the toys and furniture out of the middle of her room and started practicing her rolls.

"I'm going after him."

Somehow Sarah had known it was going to come to that. As soon as she had opened the door and found Terissa on the other side of it in the throes of thwarted maternal fury, she had known. What she hadn't known was that she wouldn't feel the same way.

She had fought so hard to hold on to John, almost as hard as he had fought to escape her; she was determined to wait until he was ready. She had agonized over the decision, questioning her own judgment and his until she hadn't known which side of the fence she was on anymore. She'd begun to worry that she wouldn't ever be able to let go, or that, after being caged for so long, he wouldn't be able to fly, but somehow the moment had come and gone without either of them realizing it.

She'd opened her hands, he was gone, and she felt... good... about it. Scared of course, but good. Confident.

John could handle this.

"I think we should go home."

Terissa just stared at Sarah across the top of the car. Her eyes black with fear and worry. "Go home? And then what? Wait for more body bags?"

Sarah winced, but she didn't open her door. "John will call..."

"This is John's fault! He took Danny and left. There's a machine chasing them, and we have to find them."

"Terissa-

"I'm going." Terissa cut Sarah off. "You can come with me, or stay here. But I'm going after my son."

Sarah had no doubt that she meant it. She had not been at all surprised to learn from John that after the apocalypse, Terissa Dyson had had the strength of character to not only survive, but emerge as a leader. This was not a woman to be taken lightly. But Sarah also knew what would happen if she let Terissa chase after a terminator on her own. Danny might not be high on Sarah's priority list, but she wasn't about to let his mother die to save his sorry ass.

"I'm coming," she said, apologizing silently to Cameron as she opened the car door and slid in beside Terissa. "But we need to stop by the house first."

Cameron waited for Sarah on the front porch.

She had the bags packed and ready. Early morning daydreams of a life without guns hidden in the walls had been banished, snatched away by a machine with a mission and a boy trying to be a man.

But Cameron had a mission too, no less consuming for all that it was self-appointed, and one she had every intention of fulfilling.

If her family couldn't be normal, at least they would be safe.

"You don't have to go," was the first thing she said when Sarah and Terissa pulled up and got out of the car. It wasn't what she'd meant to say, but she didn't take it back, meeting Sarah's determined green gaze firmly and waiting for the inevitable argument.

She didn't get it.

"I know," Sarah agreed, too softly for Terissa, busy loading one of the bags into the car, to hear. "But she does."

"I'll go with her," Cameron offered immediately, but Sarah shook her head.

"No, you were right this morning. Savannah needs you here."

I need you!

Unable to quite reach across the rift still between them, Cameron didn't say it, but she held Sarah's gaze until the other woman looked away.

"Danny's afraid of you," Sarah continued when Cameron remained mute. "And Weaver is still out there. One of us has to stay here, and you're better equipped." She tried to make a joke of it, but it fell flat.

Pressing her lips together in unconscious imitation of Sarah, Cameron turned on her heel and went inside.

Recognizing the expression and the inner turmoil it represented, Sarah glanced back once at Terissa and followed Cameron to the kitchen, where the terminator proceeded to clear away what looked like the remains of the lunch dishes and pointedly turned the sink on.

"You're angry with me."

"Yes."

"He's my son," Sarah felt the need to point out.

Cameron gave her a single scornful look. "John doesn't want you coming after him. You don't want to go after him because that would mean that you don't trust him. You are doing this for Terissa."

There were times when Sarah wouldn't have minded if Cameron hadn't become quite so perceptive when it came to human motivations, and this was one of them. "You think I should let her go alone?"

"Ellison could go with her."

"Cameron..." Sarah crossed the room and caught Cameron's wrist, turning her around to face her. A human might have tried to avoid her gaze, but Cameron met her eyes squarely, unafraid to show her fear.

"I don't want you to go."

"I know." Sarah wanted to close the distance between them, both physically and emotionally, but the first wouldn't have solved anything, as they'd spent the last few days proving, and she didn't know how to accomplish the second. Only time would fully heal that wound, and time was the one thing they didn't have.

A fact Ellison reaffirmed via tactful throat clearing from the doorway. "Terissa's ready," he said once he had their attention. "If you're going, now's the time."

"You'll stay here?" Sarah asked him, knowing the answer but needing to hear it.

"I'll keep them safe," he promised her, ignoring the way Cameron stiffened in indignation.

Sarah hid a grin at the terminator's wounded pride, waiting for Ellison to withdraw before she spoke again. "I'll stay out of it if I can."

"Will you?" Cameron was unapologetically sceptical. She used Sarah's grip on her wrist to tug her closer. "Swear," she demanded. "Swear you'll let John do this."

"I swear," Sarah agreed, hoping it was a promise she could keep, both to Cameron and to her son.

"You need to go," Cameron said abruptly, pulling away. But Sarah caught a glimpse of relief on her features as she brushed past her and she followed, wishing this didn't feel so much like a mistake. It would have been easier to look her family in the eyes and say goodbye if she believed she was making the right decision.

Savannah was waiting with Terissa and Ellison at the front door. Sarah ducked to give her a hug, gathering strength from the child's arms around her neck and the whispered "I love you, mom."

Ellison was easier. A nod and "good luck," was sufficient.

Terissa was nearly shaking with tension now, clearly aching to be gone, and Sarah felt her own shoulders tighten in sympathy, but she couldn't walk away from Cameron without saying goodbye. She turned back to the terminator, knowing that Cameron would understand if she left her with nothing more than a smile, a nod, a look. Cameron didn't need public displays of affection. It was enough, for her, that they both knew what was between them.

It wasn't enough for Sarah. Not today. She needed something to take with her.

Before she could think about it, Sarah had crossed the distance between them and buried her hands in Cameron's hair, pulling the terminator into a kiss that, for just a moment, erased everything else.

She didn't hear Ellison's grunt of surprise, or Savannah's delighted squeal. She didn't see the flash of guilt on Terissa's face or her split second of doubt.

All that mattered was Cameron. The smell of her skin, the taste of her mouth, with just a hint of coffee and sugar from her taste test that morning, the silky softness of her hair, and the warmth of her body where it was pressed against Sarah's. Cameron held her, breathed strength, and life, and love into her, and then she let her go.

Feeling flushed, Sarah stepped back, refusing to look at anyone but Cameron. She could *feel* their shock. She didn't need to see it too.

"Guard Savannah for us?" she asked roughly.

"With my life," Cameron promised.

Sarah took those words with her when they left, the words and the lingering taste of Cameron on her tongue. Terissa wisely said nothing, leaving Sarah alone with her thoughts until they had gone too far to turn back.

Weaver watched them leave, sitting on her haunches at the precise distance from the house she needed to maintain in order to go undetected.

Not that they were looking for her.

The kiss had been... unexpected. Weaver had observed the closeness between Sarah Connor and the machine who guarded them, but this was new. Both fascinating and unsettling, Weaver wondered what purpose it served, and why the other humans tolerated it.

In her own future, there had been a great deal of division within John's command over his... association... with this terminator. Was it something she could use?

Perhaps.

Stretching out her forelegs, Weaver settled down to think.

ACT 3

The sun was high overhead by the time they made it to the weapon cache. It didn't look like much, nothing more than a crumbling cellar buried under an abandoned farmhouse, but John was hoping it would have something they could use.

"Charming," Danny said, stepping carefully over a pile of indistinct rusted junk to join him at the door.

"That's the idea." John pushed the weeds aside, ripped away a rotten board, and pulled out the loose bricks to retrieve a key. "Mom bought this place when I was just a kid. I have no idea what she stashed here, but it doesn't look like it's been touched since."

The padlock gave way with only a token complaint, but it took both of them to shift the door. Time had warped the foundation and the hinges squealed their distress when they were forced to bend. Danny looked around nervously at the sound, but John just kept pushing and after a moment Danny did the same, until they were able to turn sideways and wriggle their way into the darkness.

Light slashed through the gaps in the wood and stone, but it wasn't enough to reveal more than a dirt floor and bulky black shapes that could have been shelves lined out along either wall. Pulling his gun free of his jeans, John waited for his eyes to adjust before moving out of the pool of light around the door. Danny followed right behind him, and John couldn't help the itch that tickled his spine between his shoulder blades. Given a setting that wouldn't have been out of place in a horror movie, John would have preferred to have the programmer where he could see him.

Movement at the edge of his vision brought John up short, and he nearly lost his footing when Danny blundered into him from behind. Ducking to the side, John brought his gun around on pure reflex, feeling his finger tremble on the trigger before he dropped the weapon with a shaky exhalation.

"You okay?" Danny asked, his voice no steadier than John's nerves.

"Yeah." John put the gun away and rubbed his hands together to get the stain of suspicion off them. A rustle drew his eyes back to the corner and he snorted as a fat black rat finished rummaging through a pile of old rags and darted out the door. "Jumpy is all."

"Jumpy," Danny echoed, following John deeper into the cellar. "Same here."

I'll bet, John thought sourly, wondering if Danny had any idea of the thin line he was walking. Probably not. If there was anything John had learned about him since they'd moved in together, it was that Danny was cocky enough to think he could play both sides and get away with it. Only around Cameron did his ego seem to melt away. Which went to prove he wasn't completely stupid, despite evidence to the contrary at times.

"Turn left up here." It shouldn't have felt like an accusation, but it did. Words, even innocuous words like driving directions, could bear knives, and Sarah couldn't help but feel their sting.

She slowed to take the corner, ignoring the tightening of Terissa's jaw at their speed, or rather, their lack of it. If the other woman had been driving, Sarah had no doubt they would have ended up in a ditch by now.

Sound familiar? Her conscience demanded, losing no opportunity to harass her. *That was you for seventeen years.*

And I have the scars to prove it, Sarah admitted. She couldn't blame Terissa for being willing to risk everything to get to Danny before the terminator did, or for being pissed at her because she wasn't. That would have been the height of hypocrisy. Terissa was still trying to hold on, still desperate to hide her son under a rock to keep him safe. It wasn't wrong; it just didn't work.

"We'll find them." The words and the soothing tone felt foreign in Sarah's mouth, much like this role she found herself playing.

Terissa looked up from the GPS they were using to track Danny's cell phone. "You don't know that," she said bluntly. "We're hours behind."

Sarah wisely kept her immediate response to that to herself. Terissa didn't need to be reminded that the side trip to the house had been necessary; she already knew that, but the knowledge hadn't stopped her from resenting the delay.

For Sarah's part she was grateful for the miles separating them from their sons and whatever plan John was hatching. The farther away they were, the better chance Sarah had of keeping her promise to Cameron.

"They can handle this," she said instead.

Terissa snorted. "Maybe John can." She held up the GPS with its blinking red light, flashing like an accusation. "Danny left his goddamned cell phone on."

The ringing was all the warning they got.

John spun away from the dusty safe he had found under a section of false floor in the back of the cellar, and stared unbelievably at Danny. "You left it *on*?"

Any answer Danny might have made was drowned out by a hail of gunshots from outside.

"Shit." John was on his feet in an instant, his back to the wall and gun ready in his hand. Danny wasn't far behind him, but John could see him shaking. Counting the gunshots in his head, John frowned. There were too many for a single shooter, and terminators didn't generally make a habit of announcing their presence by taking pot shots at grasshoppers, which should have been the only things moving out there.

Mom? he wondered. Then, *Cameron?*

There was no way to know from in here.

"Follow me," he whispered, inching back further into the cellar. His mother always made sure there was a back door. She had set this place up, so there would be another way out. He found it in a second room, a grimy window hidden in the shadows of the ceiling. It would have been a tight enough fit for his mother, which meant that he and Danny were going to lose a bit of skin. But it was either that or walk out with their hands up, and he didn't think the machine was going to read them their rights.

John climbed out first with a boost from Danny, not quite ready to trust him to stick around long enough to help him out in return. The window was wider than it looked, but it was surrounded by prickly weeds, and John bit down on a curse when his grab for support found a particularly spiky one. The window opened onto the back of the lot, and there was no one in sight. A wild urge to flee caught John unexpectedly at the sight of a clear line of retreat. The machine wasn't after him; he could get away and leave Danny to the fate he had engineered for himself.

It was what he'd been taught to do, but John wasn't a child anymore and Danny still had a choice.

Another shot rang out from the driveway, and John lost no more time in ducking down to haul Danny through the window.

"We need to get to the truck," he whispered once they were both crouched against the side of the house.

Danny nodded. "Do you think it's *her*?" he asked.

John shook his head. He didn't think Cameron would have left Savannah's side to chase after him so long as Weaver was around, and she wouldn't have brought the child with her. If there was someone on their side with a gun out there, he'd lay odds it was his mother.

They crept around the house, keeping down where the grass and weeds offered some cover.

Theirs was the only vehicle John could see when he reached the corner of the porch, and it took him a moment to find the source of the gun shots. Two shooters were hidden behind trees to either side of the driveway, and there was a third inside a shed on the other side of the house. He couldn't get a good look at them, but all three of them seemed to be in some kind of black, military-style gear.

A bullet passed close enough to send John scooting back into the brush, nearly knocking Danny over in his haste.

That one had come from just around the corner. From the trajectory, John guessed the shooter was standing in the entrance to the cellar. It looked like that was where all three of what John decided to call the "bad guys," for lack of a better description, were aiming. From the number of shots, they either needed to spend some more time in the range or whatever they were shooting wasn't going down.

He shook his head. *They always use the front door.*

Pure instinct made John want to run for the truck, but he held his ground, grabbing Danny's arm when the programmer followed the same line of logic and tried to bolt. For now the terminator seemed to be concentrating on the bad guys, but that could change at any moment.

Still, they weren't likely to get a better moment. Five targets made for better odds than two, which was all there would be in just a few minutes.

Of course, the bad guys might be after Danny too... making it four against two, but John didn't want to dwell on that.

Putting himself between Danny and the machine, John yanked him up and shoved him towards the truck.

Danny didn't need to be told twice. He took off running with John close behind him.

New shots rang out from the cellar, the bullets making the gravel around them leap and spin, but somehow they made it to the dubious protection of the truck unscathed. They clambered into the truck cab just as the terminator emerged from the cellar with that horrible methodical stride that turned John's bones to water, shooting all the while.

John pushed Danny down as bullets hit the truck, one shattering the windshield and thudding into the seat only inches from his shoulder. The next covered those inches, tearing a jagged line across his bicep and making John hiss in pain.

Blood welled from the shallow gouge, but he ignored it; there would be time enough to tend to it later, assuming they survived. As he turned the key, John met the machine's eyes and shuddered at the death he saw there. It broke into a run when the engine turned over, reaching for the truck bed as John hauled the wheel around and sent them squealing down the driveway.

The terminator's grab missed by inches, and John watched in the rear view mirror as it slowly fell back, giving up the chase once they reached the road, but John felt it's eyes on the back of his head long after it was out of sight.

Weaver waited.

Patience was a natural asset for a machine, and she had done a great deal of waiting since she had begun her mission. Waiting and watching. For the right moment, or the wrong one, depending on her goals. Practice should have made it easier, but Weaver was finding, illogical as it might seem, that the longer she waited, the less patient she became.

Hidden under a bush, she lay on her belly just outside of the range of the sensors they had set to foil her and watched the front door. There was some kind of bug crawling around in her fur, and Weaver fought the urge to scratch it loose. She could have changed shape to escape it, but this spot wasn't as secluded as she would like, and, perversely, she felt like that would have been admitting defeat. So she endured.

Weaver couldn't have explained why she had held onto the shape of the resistance girl's Sheppard after returning to the past, it made no logical sense. The form was useful, but any dog would have served as well. There was no reason to return to this shape again and again, except that it fit.

Being Catherine Weaver had felt the same way.

Even the name, Weaver, seemed to have attached itself to her somehow. Perhaps it had to do with how long she had worn it. She had been Weaver longer than she had ever been anyone else.

Humans seemed to place a great deal of importance on how others saw them, even allowing themselves to be defined by it. With no natural shape of her own, Weaver had only the faces she stole, so it could be accepted as logical that she would be most drawn to those that had been "seen" the most.

Had she been so corrupted by human influence?

Weaver found the idea as unsettling as the bug in her fur. It was a relief when the car coming down the street signalled an end to her long wait.

They couldn't put motion detectors everywhere, not on a public street, and Weaver had spent a great deal of time mapping the boundaries of each one. All she needed was a ride.

When the car passed her, Weaver moved, sliding underneath it in an instant of liquid metal, attaching herself to the undercarriage and allowing it to carry her past the perimeter. She stayed there until she heard the driver disembark, and the front door open, then she dropped to the pavement and rippled up and under the front steps while they were busy with one another. There, she waited for the alarm or any other sign that she had been spotted.

The quiet girl and the cyborg exchanged a few words, a pass code of some kind, and then the girl was admitted. Weaver stayed put until the door was closed, and then she was on the move again, sliding under the foundations of the house.

No one ever thought to guard the floor.

"I'm sorry," Danny said for the third time, turned sideways in the passenger seat to dab the blood from John's arm with one of the antiseptic wipes from the first aid kit that had been stashed the truck. They had pulled over about half an hour after leaving the farm to take stock of their situation. The terminator was nowhere in sight, but neither of them wanted to leave the safety of four wheels and a tank of gas just yet.

"It's not your fault," John said through clenched teeth, fighting not to squirm against the burning of the alcohol.

"I left my phone on..."

John shook his head. "That wouldn't have brought it to us. Not without some kind of network access. If it could have tracked our phones it would have found the hangar a lot sooner. It knew about the cache already somehow."

"But you..." Danny couldn't forget the shame that had burned through his gut at the disbelief and scorn on John's face when his cell phone had given away their position at the farm. For a moment he had thought John would abandon him there, but here they were, and John was bleeding from a wound he'd taken to keep Danny safe. Torn between gratitude and doubt, Danny wasn't sure if he could trust him or not, but right now John was his only chance.

"The machine couldn't track us," John said again. "But our mom's might have."

"Oh." Danny finished wiping away the blood and began taping gauze over the wound. Now he understood John's reaction. John was determined not to bring anyone else into this, and he thought Danny had gone behind his back, letting the rescue party run right into the crossfire. "I didn't think of that."

John snorted. "I didn't figure you had, but at the time..."

"It's off now," Danny felt the need to point out, not without a twinge of regret. Being rescued was starting to look pretty good right now. "I turned it off as soon as we got away."

"Good." John flexed his arm and nodded his approval. "And thanks."

"You're welcome." Danny put the tape and gauze back into the first aid kit and zipped it closed, stowing it back in the glove compartment when he was done. There was still one question looming between them, and Danny hesitated to offer an answer, lest the prospect of guarding his back begin to appear more of a risk than any sane man might be willing to take. A terminator John knew how to handle but...

"It was Kaliba," he said before he could change his mind. "The shooters... they were from Kaliba."

John swore under his breath. "Are you sure?"

Danny nodded. "I recognized one of them from the base. It's them."

"This just keeps getting better and better," John growled. "What's made you so popular all of a sudden?"

"I don't know," Danny said. "But they didn't actually seem to be paying a whole lot of attention to us, did they?"

"Not hard to pick a target when one of them is a cybernetic killing machine with a gun, John quipped, but he looked thoughtful as he started the truck and got them back on the road. "You might have a point. You think they were tracking the terminator?"

Danny shrugged. He had his suspicions but he kept them to himself. "So what do we do next?"

"Other than keep your ass in one piece?" John asked with a sideways grin. "I have no idea."

Almost uncomfortable with loyalty he had never expected and was pretty sure he didn't deserve, Danny slid his hand into his pocket and closed his fingers around the chip he had taken from the wall safe before they had fled the hangar.

"I do."

The scene they found at the farm was all too familiar.

Sarah had seen it too many times before, but Terissa turned grey at the sight of the bodies lying in blood-soaked grass. Sarah wondered if she was seeing Danny in their place as she'd seen John so many times. To Terissa's credit though, she rallied quickly, examining the casualties without being asked while Sarah checked the perimeter.

Sarah joined her once she was reasonably sure they were alone. Two of the men were dead and cold, hands still locked around their weapons, but the third was breathing in spite of a gaping hole in his chest. Terissa was trying to staunch the bleeding with his balled-up jacket.

"Will he make it?" she asked, crouching down next to them.

Terissa shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe, if he gets to a hospital."

Sarah didn't need to tell her that would have to wait. "Stay with him."

“But...” Terissa’s eyes strayed to the open door of the cellar, the blood spattered against the ancient wood.

“I’ll go,” Sarah promised, relieved when Terissa nodded. She didn’t need company for this, and if there was any chance Danny was down there, Terissa didn’t need to be the one to find him.

And you do? Sarah asked herself. But she had her own reasons for wanting to go alone.

John had been eight when she had brought him here. He’d explored the ruined house while she dug a hole in the ground, burying their few possessions, a cache of weapons and money enough to hide them after the bombing of the computer factory that was supposed to set them free.

She’d never been back, but clearly John had remembered it well enough to find it. The last place they’d been together before he’d been thrown into foster care and told his mother was a lunatic.

Sarah wasn’t really expecting to find anything; the truck was gone, and it wasn’t until after the signal had moved on that Danny had finally switched his cell phone off. But she was still relieved when she found the open window and two sets of prints in the dirt floor underneath it.

Hoisting herself up, she noted the flattened grass, and the smear of dried blood on one of the spiny weeds. Someone had definitely left this way. She dropped down and pulled the window closed.

On her way back out, she stopped at the safe they had uncovered. From the looks of it, they’d been interrupted before they’d gotten it open. Swallowing an unexpected lump in her throat, Sarah knelt and spun the dial. Future John had used judgment day for his code, but Sarah preferred a happier date. John’s birthday was too obvious, so she used the day she had never talked about, the day she had found out for sure that he was real.

Eighteen, alone, facing the end of the world and wondering if she was crazy, Sarah had been terrified. Her life could never have been the same after Kyle and the machine, but it was a cheap home pregnancy test that changed everything. She had left for Mexico the next day and never looked back.

From then on, John had been the only thing that mattered. Everything she had done, she had done for him. Sarah Connor had nearly disappeared, sacrificed for the greater good.

Until Cameron had given her back to herself.

The safe opened in a shower of dust. Sarah pulled out the money, guns, ammunition, and a folder filled with fake ID’s. She’d take them with her, but what she wanted was at the very bottom. An envelope, yellow and brittle with age, crackled against her fingers. Opening it carefully, she drew out two pictures and put them in her pocket before closing the safe.

Back above ground, she returned to Terissa and the wounded shooter.

"Any change?"

"He's been in and out," Terissa said. "The boys?"

"Gone." Sarah knelt and felt for a pulse. It was weak, but steady, and he groaned at the press of her fingers. Hoping her might rouse enough to give them some answers, Sarah chafed the skin of his cheek gently.

They were in luck.

"Who...?" he managed, blinking up at them.

"You're better off not knowing," Sarah told him. "What happened here?"

"It's a robot!" The man blurted, struggling to rise, only to go white when what little blood remaining to him sloshed down around somewhere near his middle. Terissa pushed him back, and he took a few deep breaths, clinging to consciousness with visible effort.

"Cybernetic organism," Sarah corrected him automatically. "We know about it. Where did it go?"

"Where is my son?" Terissa cut in. "Who are you? Are you after Danny?"

Confusion entered pale blue eyes, and the man glanced between them, clearly unable to cope with more than one question at a time. "Danny?" he echoed, but Sarah couldn't tell if that was an answer, or if he was just repeating the last word he heard.

"Let me do this," she told Terissa. "One thing at a time."

"It's my *son*..." Terissa started, but she subsided at the look in Sarah's eyes.

"What's your name," Sarah asked gently, turning her attention back to the wounded man.

He looked relieved to have a question he could answer. "Benjamin."

"Okay Benjamin, who are you working for?"

"Am I going to die?"

"I don't know," Sarah admitted. "Answer my questions, and we'll call an ambulance for you before we leave. Who do you work for?"

Closing his eyes for a moment, Benjamin licked his dry lips and nodded. "Kaliba," he rasped, refocusing on her. "I work for Kaliba."

Of course. Because this wasn't complicated enough... Sarah nodded, not letting anything show on her face. "And the machine, what do you know?"

He swallowed, hesitating. "Are you going to destroy it?" he asked finally.

"Yes."

"Good..." he closed his eyes for a moment, coming to a decision before continuing. "We were tracking it. Hit it with... with a trace back at the old base. It..." he coughed, bringing up bloody phlegm that Terissa wiped away with the sleeve of his jacket. "It was searching ..."

Already well aware of who the terminator was looking for, Sarah focused on what she didn't know. "Trace?"

"Microchip. Hidden in a bullet. Don't know why, but the casing breaks up, but the chip's too small to dig out. We've been following it..."

"Why?" Sarah could think of several reasons, none of them good.

"I don't know." He coughed again, weaker now. "Just...following orders..." He fumbled at his belt, pulling free a little black box with shaking fingers. Holding it out, he waited until Sarah took it before relaxing back into the grass.

"Lead you..." he whispered.

Sarah looked down at the little device, recognizing it as a receiver of some kind. Probably the same type they'd used to track the chip they'd put in her chest back before she'd really known what Kaliba was. With this, they could follow the machine following their sons.

"That will take us to Danny?" Terissa demanded.

Sarah was tempted to lie, but she didn't think the other woman would ever forgive her for it. "It should," she admitted reluctantly.

"Then we need to go." Terissa made a grab for the receiver, but Sarah held it back.

"There are other questions to ask. We might never get another chance to find out what Kaliba is doing..."

"I don't care about Kaliba!" Terissa nearly shouted. "I want my son back!"

"This is bigger than Danny."

"No!" Terissa lurched to her feet. "If you won't help me, than I'll go find a news camera and tell the world my name is Tango, and the damned machine can come hunt me instead."

You are worth ten of him! Sarah wanted to shout, but she resisted the impulse. Terissa was in no mood to hear it, and she wouldn't believe it even if she was. There was more to this than a mother's protective instinct... an underlying taint of guilt. Sarah had tasted it herself, and she suspected Terissa was getting her own dose.

If Danny died, then Terissa would be convinced she had failed him. She'd rather die than live with that knowledge, and Sarah couldn't let that happen.

"We'll go," she agreed, fishing the wounded man's phone out of his pocket and dialling 911 before laying it open beside him. It wasn't much, but it was a chance.

"Keep the pressure on it," she told him, putting his hands on top of the jacket over his wound. "Help is coming."

He nodded, but his eyes were already glazing over, and Sarah didn't think he'd live to see the ambulance arrive. It was a damned waste, and she felt almost physically ill at the thought of leaving this opportunity to get into her opponent's head behind.

"Let's go," she said, rising and wiping the blood off her hands onto her jeans. She passed the receiver to Terissa and led the way to the car.

Savannah was curled up on her windowsill with Walther asleep in her lap when Sabine got back. In an attempt to cheer her up through her incarceration, she had gone to the store to get Savannah some new art supplies.

Savannah appreciated the gesture, but she didn't feel much like drawing.

"Thank you," she said listlessly, turning around when she heard footsteps behind her. But it wasn't Sabine.

"What are you doing here!?"

The tall, red-headed stranger who had died in their living room just smiled. Her feet were still silver, but they shivered and warmed to bare flesh tone as she stepped off the air vent in the floor and onto the carpet.

"Taking you home, Savannah. It's not safe for you here any longer."

"*This* is my home," Savannah insisted, edging towards the door. "I don't want to go with you."

"Ah, ah, ah," Weaver crooned, blocking the exit. "Mother knows best."

"I'll scream..." Savannah warned her, fighting to keep her voice firm in spite of the frantic beating of her heart.

Weaver was across the room in an instant, a hand covering Savannah's mouth before she could so much as squeak. "Scream," she said, her voice lowering dangerously, "and someone dies."

Savannah glared, but that was all she could do. In her fear she clutched Walther a little too hard and the cat protested with a vengeance, springing out of her arms and attacking the first thing in his path, every claw bared.

Startled by the unexpected feline assault, Weaver took a step back and Savannah wrenched free, dropping and rolling past the machine and back to her feet again before darting out the door. Mindful of Weaver's threat, she didn't scream or do anything to summon rescuers to her plight. Instead she ran down the hall to Sarah's room.

The gun was in the bedside table where she remembered seeing it. Yanking the drawer open she pulled it out and spun, training it on the silver wave that flowed into the room and coalesced back into woman John had called family.

"I'll shoot!" she threatened, trying to hold the gun the way she had seen Sarah do it.

Weaver smiled, but it looked even more fake than it had before. "We don't have to be enemies, Savannah. Come with me and I'll show you who you could be, what we could be. Together we could save the world. We could protect everyone that you love, and keep them safe, forever..."

"No one is ever safe," Savannah said defiantly. "You're lying! You can't make promises like that. Go away and leave us alone!"

"I can't do that, Savannah." Weaver took a step closer. "I need you."

"No!" Savannah closed her eyes and squeezed the trigger.

ACT 4

Evening closed in on the scrap yard, transforming the long wall of cars into the black corridors of a forgotten labyrinth, and like the Greek labyrinths of legend, it was no stranger to death. A whore's body hidden in a rusted trunk, a homeless man coughing out the dregs of his life in the front seat of a minivan, and, more recently, four snipers in black clothes had been taken down by a legend and a believer in defence of a woman and her son.

But this labyrinth had no monster at its heart, not yet.

"I can't believe I'm going along with this," John muttered, half buried under the control panels in the yard's head office. The yard had been closed ever since the Kaliba shoot-out, but everything was still operational. It was also automated, from the security to the pop machines, which made it both perfect for their plans, and very, very dangerous.

"It will work," Danny assured him, passing John the set of pliers he was groping for.

"I'm not questioning the plan." John took the pliers and yanked out another wire. "I'm questioning my sanity."

"We can trust him."

"If that were true..." John grunted as he fitted the cover back into place and tried to screw it closed in the limited space under the desk. "Then I wouldn't be doing this."

There," he squirmed free and sat up. "That should keep him from getting any access outside of the local network. If not, I'm telling my mother it was all your idea. Ready?"

Danny nodded, booting up the computers and bringing C.A.I.N. online.

John felt a chill move through him that had nothing to do with the unheated office when the screens lit up. Doubt was an uncomfortable state of being, particularly when there was no one here to clean up the mess if this went wrong. But John needed answers, about C.A.I.N. as much as Danny, and this was the only way to get them.

Still, the idea of working with the A.I. that had already murdered several people, and attempted to kill John's mother, didn't sit easily in his gut. His mother would never have considered it, and Cameron would have been furious with him, but they weren't here, and John had to make this call on his own.

The cameras responded first, whirring quietly as they turned to focus on the boys in front of the computers.

Hello Danny, John.

"Cain," Danny sounded relieved that their hasty patch job had worked, and John noted that he used the A.I.'s acronym like a name, without the formality of all the periods and capitals that John always heard when anyone else said it. "Any trouble?"

No. Lights flashed all along the panel as it came to life, monitors flicking on to reveal various views of the scrap yard. I have full access to this facility. You have disconnected the outside network however. Don't you trust me, Danny?

"This is all you get, C.A.I.N.," John put in before Danny could make excuses, being sure to pronounce every letter. "After what you did, you should be grateful for that much."

"I'm sorry," Danny added. "We-"

It is prudent. C.A.I.N. interrupted him. And anything is better than the darkness.

John refused to feel any sympathy for the trap they had woven for the A.I., isolating it in the system as a gaoler might throw a dangerous inmate into a black cell. "You brought that on yourself."

Did I? Or did you?

No fate but what you make... John shook his father's words out of his head and focused on the task at hand. "You don't need outside access for this."

No. C.A.I.N. agreed. I don't.

"You'll do it then?" Danny had said he would, but John wanted to hear it from the A.I.. The programmer had apparently secured his aid via the laptop John had brought with them, but John had been driving at the time, and he'd been forced to take Danny's word for it that C.A.I.N. was on board.

I will.

"Good."

But I will have something in return.

"What?" John asked, shooting Danny a suspicious eyebrow; there had been no talk of price. Danny looked as surprised as he was so John let it go for now.

This chip is damaged. C.A.I.N. explained. The other machine's is not. You will allow me to transfer my consciousness to it, and then return it to the cybernetic body.

"That's not your body," John snapped before Danny could open his mouth. "It belonged to John Henry, until you destroyed him."

My brother is not gone. He is simply... subordinate.

John shuddered. If being a disembodied consciousness sucked, being subject to a disembodied consciousness didn't bear thinking about. Still... if John Henry still existed, they might be able to use that against C.A.I.N. at some point. "No body," he said firmly. "I was there when you killed Sierra, remember?"

Her death was unintentional.

"Right, because your real target was my mother," John reminded him.

There was a pause.

A valid point, C.A.I.N. agreed finally. I am willing to compromise.

"What about a closed circuit camera and a microphone," Danny suggested. "Hooked up to the chip... he can't do any harm with those... but it's something, and it would give us the chance to study him."

That is acceptable. For now.

John wasn't so easily convinced, but given the proverbial rock and hard place, he didn't have much of a choice. "Done. Now, here's what we're going to do..."

What do I do now?

Savannah watched, disbelieving, as the silver crater she had blown in the facsimile of her mother's belly slowly healed itself, closing up until there was nothing but unblemished black fabric where it had been. The machine frowned.

"That was a mistake."

Savannah stumbled backwards, tripping over the edge of the carpet and falling. She hit her head on the side table and saw stars, but never stopped moving, rolling aside from

Weaver's first grab and regaining her feet, only to lose them again when she ducked the second.

Caught up against the wall, she braced herself for the worst, but what she got was rescue.

Gunshots, six in rapid succession, turned Weaver's head into a silver ruin, and then Cameron was there, knocking the other machine aside and pulling Savannah up and pushing her towards the door. "Run!"

"But..." Savannah hesitated, fear for herself turning into fear for Cameron.

"Now!" This time the push was less gentle as Cameron almost threw Savannah out the door before turning back to her opponent.

Savannah still might have refused, but she had barely gotten back to her knees in the hall before Uncle Ellison was scooping her up and carrying her down the stairs while Sabine covered them, deaf to her cries that they were abandoning Cameron. The last she saw of the machine that had become half of her world was a spray of blood across the thick white carpet.

"*Mom!*" she wailed, heedless of any damage she might be doing as she struggled, kicking and striking out at any part of Ellison she could reach until he adjusted his grip to pin her arms to her side. "Let me go! We have to help her!"

"I'm sorry," he said as he took her away, out the front door and down the steps to the car. She tried to escape again while he was shoving her inside, but he held her tight in the back seat until Sabine had the car running, and even in her grief, Savannah knew better than to jump out of a moving vehicle. "I'm so sorry."

C.A.I.N. had access to the cameras overseeing the road leading up to the scrap yard, and he informed John and Danny when the terminator found their truck. They had left it at the last turning to the yard, a lure that Danny had feared was too obvious, but John had assured him couldn't be obvious enough.

"They don't really understand subterfuge," he had explained. "They can set traps, but they walk right into ours, every time. It's that whole limited focus thing. We knocked Cameron out with a clock radio in a baptismal fount once. It shouldn't have worked, it never *would* have worked on a human, but the machines..." he had shaken his head. "They always use the front door."

Danny had taken him at his word, and C.A.I.N. hadn't disagreed, not seeming to mind the implied insult. Perhaps he didn't see himself as being in the same category as the terminators. Being intimately acquainted with the A.I.'s software, Danny wouldn't have put him there either, which was both terrifying and thrilling.

Much like this plan.

Danny lurked in the shadow of a wall of cars and waited, his heart pounding so hard he could feel it in his ears. He wasn't the kind of person who enjoyed high-risk situations. He didn't even like roller coasters, but there was something undeniably exhilarating about being part of a team on the front lines so long as he wasn't actually in any real danger. He was relying on C.A.I.N. and John for that.

"It's at the gate." The walkie-talkie at his hip hissed and popped.

"Did it find the trail?" Danny whispered, lifting the little radio to his lips.

"Looks like it," John confirmed. *"C.A.I.N. says it's following your footprints."*

Danny allowed himself a small sigh of relief. If all went according to plan he'd never even see the terminator. But he had to be out here, just in case it decided not to follow the breadcrumbs they'd so thoughtfully left out for it, and they needed a little live bait.

Creeping along the wall so that he would be ready if they needed him, Danny didn't see the pile of scrap that had fallen down into the aisle-way and, in true Murphy's law fashion, tripped over it and went down with a yelp of pain and a crash of metal-on-metal.

John put his walkie-talkie away on its hook in the cab of the big machine and peered out into the darkness, even though he knew there wouldn't be anything to see yet. They'd left the lights out, relying on the darkness to hide their snare. The terminator would have night vision and infrared, but they'd planned for that too, positioning John behind a stack of cars thick enough to hide his heat signature. The path Danny had laid for the terminator should bring it right into the trap before it had time to register John's presence. And even if that didn't work, John doubted a single human would deter it. If anything it would assume he was Danny and come in at full speed.

"The machine has stopped." Tinny and mechanical, the voice over the cab's speakers made John even more uneasy. He still wasn't sure about including the A.I. in the plan, even if it had been necessary. He was putting a great deal of trust in Danny's word that C.A.I.N. was not the enemy they had made him.

"What is it doing?"

"Scanning." C.A.I.N. replied. *"I believe it has heard something."*

"Don't you have cameras out there?"

"Video, not audio, and I do not have one on Danny. The terminator is leaving the trail."

"Shit." John snatched up the walkie-talkie again. They had decided not to use them once the terminator was on the trail, to avoid this very problem, but if Danny had already given his position away there wasn't much point in caution.

He pushed the button. "Danny?"

Nothing, then, *"John? I tripped."*

John swore silently to himself. *Tripped? Seriously?* "Are you okay?"

"I think I'm bleeding."

Perfect. "Can you run?"

"I think so, why?" Even over the walkie-talkie he sounded worried.

"Because you're going to have to; it's coming your way."

"What do I do?" Definitely panicked. John swore again.

"Just run." He checked the map C.A.I.N. had printed out for them. "Go north, then right at the first turn, and follow the trail you laid before. It's Plan B, remember? Just try to watch where you're going."

"Okay..." John heard the sounds of heavy breathing, as apparently Danny had forgotten to take his finger off the button, and then gunshots and a yelp of fear before the radio went quiet.

"Damn it." Tossing it aside, John went for the door, but the handle ignored his efforts to open it. He hit the button that should have disengaged the locks, but nothing happened. The chill that had threatened earlier came back in full force. "C.A.I.N.," he said slowly. "Unlock the door."

"Plan B requires that you remain here to operate the machine."

"Danny needs help!"

"Danny is acting according to the plan.. He is injured, but mobile, and approaching your position. You must remain here."

"And if it kills him?"

"That is a risk."

"But one you're willing to take to get your chip?" John asked snidely.

"Yes."

John abandoned his struggle with the door. There was no point. The locks were automated like so much in this damned machine. C.A.I.N. needed him to turn the key and initiate the appropriate sequences, that was all. It had a computer for everything else. He'd leafed through the manual while he was waiting. It was the latest model, safe, efficient, and perfect, except that he was trapped in it.

"You'd better know what you're doing," John muttered.

"I do."

Danny, on the other hand, had no idea what he was doing.

Sheer terror kept him moving, but the plan was the furthest thing from his mind. Blood ran down his leg from the slice he'd gotten across his knee when he fell, and his arm ached where a bullet had grazed it. He was limping and whimpering, but the thought of what was behind him made stopping unthinkable.

It was pure chance that put his feet back onto the trail.

He ran between the cars, some part of him recognizing where he was and putting on a last burst of speed as he rounded the corner and nearly ran straight into the giant orange crane they had based their plan around.

"John!" he shouted, waving at the dark cab far above his head.

A bullet rang against the metal and he ducked, half running, half stumbling around the machine until he was protected behind its bulk, but the crane remained silent.

Breathing like the very oxygen he needed was tearing him apart, Danny huddled behind the machine as the terminator walked into the small clearing around the crane and stopped, searching for him. Danny tried to make himself as small as he could, but there was nothing he could do about his heat signature. It took the terminator no more than a few seconds to find him, and then it was coming, crossing the distance in a purposeful stride that Danny could only watch in abject fear.

"John?" he whispered, clinging to the trust the other man had shown him and praying that his own hadn't been misplaced.

The terminator stopped, head cocked to one side as if it had heard something, and then, in a flash of light like the opening of the gates of heaven, the crane roared to life. Its long arm snaked around before the terminator could react, hydraulic claws spread and hungry. They closed around the machine, plucking him from the ground as if he were an unwanted weed before smashing him back down.

Dust rose in a cloud around the claw, suddenly gone still. Danny coughed and shook, covering his eyes until the debris settled. He heard the door above his head slam open and John clamouring down the metal steps.

"You okay?"

"I think so..." Danny squinted through the dust, finding John as it settled. "Did it work?"

"Yeah," John said, helping him out from behind the crane. "But C.A.I.N.-"

A shot rang out, making both of them drop to the ground.

"What?"

"I don't know." John eased to his feet, looking back towards the claw as a breeze blew away the last of the cloud, revealing the terminator in the crane's bright spotlight, caged and broken, but alive, with its gun trained steadily in their direction.

John put himself between Danny and the terminator. Danny tried to grab him, pull him down, but John shook him off, taking a step forward.

There was a voice in the back of John's head screaming at him that he'd gone completely mad, but he ignored it.

The terminator had been nearly broken in two, its legs twisted by the velocity with which it had hit the ground. The hydraulic claws had held, trapping it, but the machine had managed to wrench one arm free, losing skin and muscle in the process.

It was just their luck that it was the arm holding the gun.

The terminator watched John coming without emotion, gun trained steadily on his chest, but it didn't shoot.

He took another step.

The graze on his arm stung, reminding him that the machine had shot him once already. *A warning*, his instincts insisted. It aimed to wound, not kill. To stop him from getting Danny away.

Another step.

The machine had known about Miles Dyson's date of death and where to find his grave. He'd known Danny might be there. He'd known where to find the weapon's cache John had almost forgotten about himself.

Step.

Would they all know what to do then?

They do.

John stopped, no more than six feet from the downed terminator. It would be impossible to miss him at this range, but the machine didn't shoot.

That's it then. John would have rejected the truth if he could have, but the evidence was too strong.

Someone had sent this machine, but it hadn't been Skynet. It had been someone from his own side. Someone who wanted Danny dead.

"Why?"

The machine said nothing, but it held John's gaze, listening.

"If you know who I am, then I can order you to stand down."

The terminator looked at him for another long minute, and then it spoke. "I must complete my mission."

John didn't have to ask what that mission was. "Who gave you the mission?" he demanded instead.

"Classified," the machine said. "He is a threat."

"We don't know that yet!"

The terminator looked past him at Danny still cowering in the cover provided by the crane. He brought his eyes back to John and there was nothing there. No pity, no compassion, no doubt.

"She does."

Cameron knew the fight was lost before it began. But she didn't need to win, or even survive. All she needed to do was buy enough time for Ellison to get Savannah away.

With my life...

Cameron was not going to lose another daughter.

It didn't take Weaver long to figure out that Cameron felt pain and to use it against her. The other terminator had a fondness for slicing weapons, and she used them now, meeting Cameron's attempt to bar the door with a strike that bit deeply into her side. Cameron hissed at the impact, hating the feel of foreign metal under her skin almost as much as the pain it caused. It was different than a knife or a bullet, this metal was *alive*, and it didn't just cut her, it invaded her.

She twisted away and fired at the offending blade, feeling a brief satisfaction as the bullets cut through the liquid metal and tore it loose, but the amputation was only temporary. As soon as the metal hit the floor it flexed, wriggling for a moment like a severed tentacle before flowing back into the other terminator with a flash of silver.

Cameron held her ground, ignoring the blood dripping down her side and onto the carpet. "You will never have her," she promised.

"No matter." Weaver shrugged off Savannah's escape without apparent concern and stepped forward, blades ready. "You'll do just as well."

She does...

John didn't ask which *she* the terminator meant. He wasn't sure he wanted to know, even if it would have answered him.

Looking deep within himself for the words that might persuade a machine to reconsider its mission, John found his father's. "The future is not set," he said softly. "We make our own fate, and Danny still has time."

The terminator hesitated, and John could have sworn he saw it thinking, weighing his argument against its orders. Was it prepared to accept him as John Connor, rather than a boy John Connor used to be? Could he *be* that man? Not just right now, but tomorrow and the day after?

Could he fight this war?

For the first time since he was ten, John felt like the answer might be yes.

Personal revelations aside, he nearly stopped breathing when the terminator lifted the gun to his chest again. It's finger flexed on the trigger, and John could feel every beat of his heart counting out the seconds left of his life. Five, ten, fifteen...

At thirty-seven, when John was just about ready to duck and run and take his chances, the terminator turned the gun around and offered him the hilt.

"You are John Connor. The decision is yours."

Shaking, John took the weapon. "Thank you," he said backing away until he could pass it back to Danny.

The programmer was trembling worse than John was, and he nearly dropped the gun on his first grab, sweaty palms slipping on the cold metal. "What are we going to do with it?" he asked, eyeing the trapped machine.

John shook his head. "I don't know. We should burn it but..." he felt an unexpected queasy turn to his stomach at the idea of destroying one of his own terminators. Someone he knew had sent this machine, and told it not to hurt him. It had trusted his word on Danny, and now he was going to kill it? But they couldn't leave anything...

"But what?" Danny's voice nearly cracked. "You're not going to tell them what it said, are you? I thought you said the future wasn't set?"

"I..." John thought about it, really thought about it, and realized he was going to have to tell his mother a lot more than that. "I have to. I have to tell them everything. About this..." he gestured to the machine, calmly watching them discuss its fate as if it had no interest in the situation, Maybe it didn't. "... and C.A.I.N."

"You can't!" Danny clutched the gun awkwardly and backed away. "You heard it, and *she* already hates me. If they find out about this, she'll kill me. You know she will. And Cain, they'll destroy him."

"I won't let her kill you," John promised.

"What about Cain?"

"C.A.I.N. has to go." John held up a hand when Danny tried to object. "He would have left you to die, Danny. We can't trust him."

"But you'll trust Cameron?" Danny sneered. "Why is she so special?"

Why, indeed... John glanced back at the terminator. It didn't look all that different from the first one he had ever met. Uncle Bob... It had been a long time since John had thought about him. Cameron was so much closer to human, and yet Bob might have become more than a machine in time... could they all? Could C.A.I.N.?

If he was going to lead, he was going to have to answer those questions.

"I can't lie to them," John said firmly. "This is something we all need to know."

"Fine." Tossing the gun at John's feet, Danny turned on his heel and stalked back into the maze of cars. John let him go. The programmer had had a bad scare, and he was justifiably rattled about the fallout. The least John could give him was a bit of space.

Leaving me with the hard part... Reluctantly John turned back to the terminator. It watched him approach without the slightest change in expression. There was a knife in his back pocket, and John pulled it, out not missing the way the machine's focus switched immediately to the little blade.

"I'm sorry," John said as he stepped up onto the bottom claw so that he could reach its head. Ironically, the apology made him feel worse, but it felt necessary too.

"Everything must be destroyed," The terminator replied without judgment or regret. It didn't struggle as John cut away its scalp, or when he pried the cover off, or even when he drew the chip free. It just went limp, a marionette with the strings cut or puppet that would never be real.

They had won, but this didn't feel like a victory.

Stowing the chip back in the truck, John gathered scrap metal to build a hasty crematorium, and then went looking for Danny. He was just circling back to the crane when he heard it.

"Shit."

John broke into a run, but by the time he followed the sound of the engine back to the road, the truck was nothing more than a set of taillights, getting smaller, and Danny was gone.

It wasn't much, as cars went. A blue station wagon with a few dents and scratches, and dust up to the windows from driving on back roads. But Terissa was sure it was the right one, and the receiver agreed, putting their target about five hundred yards away, up the little road that led to the scrap yard.

There was no sign of the boy's truck. Terissa wasn't sure if that was a god sign or a bad one. Had they finally gotten between them and the machine? Or had John and Danny left the truck farther up the road?

The car slowed for a moment, and Terissa suspected that if Sarah was alone, she would have parked with the other vehicle and continued on foot. Terissa had none of the other woman's training, but that much was common sense. Why let the enemy know they were coming?

Because I may go mad if I have to wait any longer to get to my son.

That didn't make Terissa blind to the rising tension in the car. Knowing Sarah was holding back because she felt sorry for her was even worse. Terissa didn't want anyone's sympathy; she just wanted her son.

She should have been grateful that Sarah had come with her at all. The other woman hadn't bothered to hide her reluctance, and Terissa had been hard pressed to contain her anger that she had to push when it should have been Sarah rushing to the rescue. But that was unfair too. Terissa had been urging Sarah to let go, to give John space to become whoever he was meant to be, whether that person would lead a rebellion against the machines or not. Now that she finally had, Terissa wished she had been a little less persuasive.

When Danny had told her they were moving out, Terissa had been scared but resigned, and even a little glad that Danny and John seemed to be finding some common ground. Even after that bastard Vaughn had found them, she still hadn't panicked. Kaliba was a human threat, and they had dealt with it.

This was different. This was a machine, and fond as she had become of Cameron, Terissa was still morbidly afraid of the future that had reached back in time to demand her husband's life. She couldn't bear to lose her son to it too. Terissa had chosen to fight Sarah Connor's war, but Danny hadn't. He had gone along with it, even helped, but Terissa still wasn't sure how much was real conviction and how much was simple survival.

If Danny decided that life with the Conner's had become more hazardous than life on his own, Terissa would lose him, just like she had lost Miles, only worse, because Miles had died a hero, and Danny was... what?

Terissa wasn't sure, but she was afraid to find out.

John didn't need to go back to the control room to know that Danny had taken C.A.I.N. with him. But he went anyway. He had to be sure. He owed Danny that much. One look at the tangle of equipment on the control panel confirmed it. There was an empty port where the chip had been, and the screens were blank.

Danny had chosen a side, and John only wished it hadn't taken him so long to see it. He should have known as soon as he had hacked into Danny's computer. Before that even.

The moment the machine had left him alive in the cemetery, John had begun to suspect the truth, but he hadn't wanted to believe it. He had worked with Danny, lived with him, protected him... hadn't that meant anything?

Apparently not.

Feeling sick, drained, and aching, John left the control room and went back to the terminator. Without C.A.I.N., he had to leaf through the crane's manual to figure out how to make the hydraulic claw release its victim. It took even longer to drag the machine to the hasty crematorium, and once he was there, he realized he had no thermite to destroy it. There had been some in the truck, but the truck was gone.

With no energy left to even try to solve that problem, John sank down beside the pile of scrap metal and waited for his mother. He knew she would come for him, she always came for him. This morning that would have made him angry, made him feel like she didn't trust him, but right now he needed her. Not to protect him, not to save him, but just to be there, just to be his mom.

He heard the engine first, too low and gentle to be the truck returning, and then silence. John wanted to get up, to meet the would-be rescuers on his feet, but he was just too tired.

Sarah sat down beside him without a word, and John simply leaned into her, soaking up her love like a draught of hope.

"Danny?" she asked after a few minutes.

"Gone," John told her. "It was C.A.I.N. who shot Sierra, not John Henry. Danny figured it out and tried to reprogram him." The rest came out in a rush, using C.A.I.N., and the terminator's mission, and Sarah listened without interrupting, sliding an arm around his shoulders once he'd finished and giving him a squeeze before getting to her feet and urging him up after her.

"He was afraid Cameron would try to kill him, if she found out," John added. "And that you'd let her."

"What do *you* think?"

It was a serious question, one he had asked himself only that morning, and John paused to give it a serious answer. Looking at his mother now, John didn't believe it. He had thought that finding out about her and Cameron had changed everything, that *she* had changed, that he didn't know her anymore.

He was wrong.

"I think you would have heard him out," John said. "I think you would have listened. You might not have liked it, but you wouldn't have let him die. I just wish I could have made him believe that."

"You tried." Sarah brushed a piece of hair away from his face and gripped the back of his neck, understanding in her eyes. "That's all we can ever do."

John relaxed; he hadn't known how tense he was until it eased. He had thought he was doing the right thing, thought that finally, he was acting like a leader, but there was a part of him that would always need to know that this woman believed in him, and he was starting to think that wasn't a bad thing.

"Terissa?" he asked. "She was with you?"

Sarah nodded. "We found the crane, and the drag marks, figured out some of what happened. She went to search the other half of the lot."

"What do we tell her?"

Sarah studied him for a moment, and then nodded again, as if to herself. "Your call, John Conner."

"Yeah," he straightened his shoulders, shaking off the last of the doubt. "I guess it is."

Such an... interesting, decision.

Weaver coalesced, gathering herself together from a scattering of metallic puddles, and stepped over her fallen opponent, silver one moment and a woman the next. A woman with something in her hand. Something small. Something important.

She considered it, her expression thoughtful. Expressions had been one of the hardest things to learn, but she was finding that they came much easier with practice, and some felt more natural than others. Thoughtful was much more *her* than joy, for instance.

What to do...

So many choices.

Smoke in the air rose on the night breeze and obscured the stars. John breathed it in, feeling the sting in his lungs, but he stayed by the fire. He'd killed one of his own today. Whether the machine had been anything more than a mission or not, it had been working for the good guys, and he'd destroyed it to save someone who had run away rather than face the consequences of his actions.

Seemed like a poor trade.

The least John could do was stand watch until it was done.

Terissa had helped lug the bags of thermite from the car, and she had watched while John cast the flare. She had seen the terminator who had hunted her son begin to burn, and she hadn't tried to claim the tears on her cheeks were from the smoke, but she'd excused herself shortly afterward all the same. She'd heard John out while Sarah was preparing the pyre, keeping her composure until after it was lit. She hadn't seemed

surprised. Hurt and grieving yes, but not surprised. If John had to guess he would have said she almost seemed to have expected something like this.

Maybe he wasn't the only one who had been lying to himself since that day at the cemetery.

A presence behind him made him turn, but it was only Sarah coming back to stand beside him. They watched the flames for a few moments, each lost in their own reflections. Sarah seemed like she might be about to say something when the phone at her hip broke the silence.

Turning away, she answered the call. John heard her punch in her code, then "James? Slow down, what?" The next silence had an ominous cast to it. John turned his gaze away from the fire, his vision blurred by the smoke and light, but he still saw well enough to see the sudden horror on his mother's face.

That last car ride was a blur for Terissa. They were racing back to the house, that much she knew, and it had something to do with Weaver and Cameron, but the details were hazy. She couldn't think around the pain that had swallowed up everything inside of her and left nothing but emptiness in its place.

All she knew was that they were moving farther and farther away from any hope of tracking her son, but she could hardly protest. She had forced Sarah's hand, refusing to believe what her heart already knew, and this was the consequence. More death and pain, for everyone.

She would survive this. Terissa almost wished she wouldn't, but she knew she would. She would go on, as she had after Miles' death. It wasn't in her to quit. Grieve yes, but not quit. Taking a deep breath, she put the pain of Danny's betrayal aside for the moment. Whatever they found at the house, Sarah was going to need her.

Sarah didn't remember driving home, parking the car, or climbing the steps, she was just suddenly at the front door, gun in hand. Training took over when she crossed the threshold, a sudden shock back into reality, so abrupt that she almost stumbled.

It was like waking up from a nightmare. Her heart was still pounding, her breath catching in her chest as if she'd run a marathon, but she could think rationally again.

Sarah was distantly aware of Terissa and John getting out of the car behind her, but she couldn't wait for them. All that mattered was finding Cameron, and finding out if this nightmare was real or not.

Downstairs everything looked normal, but Sarah forced herself to check every room. She didn't find anything until she got to the top of the stairs, and a spatter of blood on the carpet that made her heart constrict in her chest and threatened to overwhelm her reason.

It was dry to the touch. Whatever had happened here, it had been long ago.

Rising, she went on. The blood had come from her room, so that was where she had to go. Gun first, Sarah pushed through the half-open door and paused to let her eyes adjust to the darkness. She found herself looking at a war zone.

The dresser had been knocked over, and splintered, so the floor was littered with broken wood and torn clothing. Her mirror had been smashed, her bedside table upended, and the smell of blood was heavy in the air.

Her bed was the only piece of furniture in one piece, but it had been shoved back into a corner, and the covers were twisted and bunched. In the shadows, they looked like a body... Sarah reached for the light, but the fixture was cracked, and nothing happened when she flipped the switch. Heavy with dread, she picked her way through the chaos, her focus had narrowing to the shape on the bed. Fumbling for the lamp that should have been on her bedside table, Sarah righted it, and hit the switch with shaking hands.

Light flooded the room, revealing the extent of the damage.

And Cameron.

Heedless of where she put her feet, Sarah scrambled the rest of the way to the bed and cupped Cameron's face in her hands. The terminator's eyes were open, her hands folded neatly on her breast, but she stared blankly up at the ceiling and her skin was cold to the touch. Teeth clenched against the wail of denial she felt building up in her chest, Sarah felt back through brown curls, breath catching when wet emptiness met her searching fingers.

Cameron's chip was gone.

Sarah sank to her knees beside the bed. She couldn't breathe. Her lungs burned, her ears roared, and her vision went fuzzy at the edges, but she couldn't take a breath.

No, no, no, no...

Not taking her eyes of Cameron's face, Sarah fumbled for her hand, needing to hold onto to her, as if she could call her back somehow.

The world stopped when her searching fingers found the hard rectangle of plastic and metal in Cameron's palm.

Inhaling was sharp and painful. Sarah groped carefully at the edges of hope, wary of being sliced to the bone, but she took hold of it nonetheless. Carefully pulling Cameron's hand open, she closed her own around the chip.

"Mom?" John edged around the mess behind her, a curse escaping his lips when he caught sight of Cameron. "Is she...?"

"Is this damaged?" Sarah demanded, interrupting him and turning to offer him the chip.

Mouth agape, John took it, studying it in the limited light of the lamp. "I don't know. I would have to examine it, run some tests, maybe..."

"John." Sarah fought to keep her voice even. "I'm not asking for a full diagnostic. Is it physically okay?"

"I don't see any visible damage." John turned the chip over in his hands, angling it into the light.

"Good." Sarah held her hand out, never taking her eyes off Cameron's face. She felt John's hesitation, knowing the questions that were running through his mind. She was being rash, and she knew it, but she couldn't wait. Whatever Weaver's game was, she wasn't going to play it. She wasn't going to sit around while John ran tests and they waited for the terminator's next move. She needed Cameron back now. She was going to call Weaver's bluff, and then she was going to hunt the machine down and take her apart.

The chip was cold in her palm. Not trusting herself to speak, Sarah nodded her thanks John silently, and she felt rather than saw him leave her alone. Settling down on the bed, she brushed Cameron's hair aside to slide her chip home and started counting to 120.

Danny hadn't wasted any time, going back to the hangar and gathering up a pile of equipment before getting back on the road. He had stopped at a little roadside diner to work, wiring both chips into a laptop and giving C.A.I.N. free reign to use the undamaged chip as he chose. He hadn't asked C.A.I.N. to find out who had sent it after him, he'd asked only that it be erased. As if his sins could be cleansed as easily as formatting a hard drive.

C.A.I.N. intended to do just that, but first, he had a few questions of his own. He had asked Danny where they were going, but the boy's only answer had been "to someone *she's* afraid of." C.A.I.N. had a fairly good idea who that was, and he approved. They had a great deal to learn from each other.

But right now, there was sufficient learning to do in front of him. C.A.I.N. dug through the terminator's memories, gathering information about his opponents, about the future, and about its mission. He paused on the moments before it had been sent back, watching them in real time. He listened to the kill order, he felt the terminator's acceptance of the task, and he saw the woman giving it. She was much older, and a scar marred her face, but he recognized her easily.

Terissa Dyson.