

Sarah Connor Chronicles Virtual Season  
Season 2 Episode 8

## A Prayer for the Dying

by Inspector Boxer & zennie

“We have the package.”

Danny pressed himself against the backseat of the van as two of the three agents that had grabbed him from Weaver’s warehouse stared him down. His wrists throbbed; the zip-tie holding them together was cutting off his circulation and slicing into his flesh. He tried to look anywhere but at the muzzles of the two large weapons trained on his skull, the agents’ fingers resting casually on their triggers. They’d come out of nowhere, he recalled, as the frenzied few seconds dimly took shape in his memory. A loud sound rocked the warehouse and then the lights flared and died. The three terminators dropped to the ground like marionettes with their strings cut.

Swallowing, Danny tried not to be sick. His head hurt from being shoved to the concrete and cuffed, and the surge of adrenaline pumping through his system was only making it worse. His eyes fixed on the telltale logo printed on their bulletproof vests. Kaliba, he realized with a start. He had no idea why the agents had taken him and left Sarah behind, but Danny doubted he was in for a happy reunion with his former employer.

“Yes, sir.” One of the agents continued to talk into his headset. “We’ve removed the chip. She’s off-line.”

Danny’s gaze drifted helplessly to Cameron. She lay motionless at his feet on the floor of the van, her brown eyes open and staring at him in silent condemnation. The agents had swarmed her in the seconds after the pulse had taken the terminators out. Only one had been dispatched to deal with Sarah, delivering a sharp blow to the back of her head as she stumbled toward Cameron in a sudden loss of coordination. Sarah had seemed dazed and confused, almost succumbing to the attack just like the machines, and she had gone down hard.

Danny had felt a twinge of regret as her figure receded in the distance, as he and Cameron were carried away and dumped unceremoniously in a van. A knife flashed as soon as they were inside, and he had tried to roll away in panic. He watched with sick fascination as the agent ruthlessly cut into Cameron’s scalp. Her chip had been yanked free with moments to spare. She was already a

bloody mess from her fight with Weaver, but somehow the agent's brutal treatment of Cameron's body seemed to be the cruelest cut of all.

The van began to move, and Danny felt a small measure of triumph that the terminator that had made him nearly sick with fear was nothing but an empty shell. Cameron couldn't hurt him now. Weaver. C.A.I.N. John Henry. Danny had been sure one of them would kill him, but the fates apparently had other ideas. He had come full circle, escaping the latest threats only to end up back where he had started, with Kaliba.

He glanced once again at Cameron's empty, accusing eyes and felt a surge of anger at the thing that had caused him and his family so much misery. Before he thought better of it, Danny lashed out with his boot, kicking Cameron in the side. She didn't move, but his toes burned like fire from the impact. Danny felt weak and pathetic, but he was tempted to kick her again.

One of the agents chuckled, a dry, humorless sound. Danny forgot himself for a moment, glaring at the agent defiantly. He only remembered his predicament when the agent pointedly adjusted his grip on his gun.

"Connor was wounded. Weaver's other A.I. was destroyed." The agent on the headset nodded. "Connor had backup. They put up a good fight but we got what we came for, sir."

Danny swallowed again and looked away, refusing to feel guilt over what happened to Sarah Connor. "Should have put a bullet in her," he grumbled, trying to convince himself that was the right thing to do. He stared at a piece of thread working its way loose from the fabric of the backseat, refusing to face the disdain in the agents' eyes. He wondered what he'd done to deserve any of this. Danny thought of his mother, wondering if she could help him, but he knew that the way he'd left branded him a traitor in her eyes. His own mother was lost to him, and he cursed her for turning her back, for siding with the Connors and that thing over him. She had been willing to sacrifice her own son for the so-called greater good, and Danny wouldn't forget that or forgive it. He had been on the edge of showing her, showing them all, that his way had been the correct one. If he survived this, he still might be able to prove it.

He dropped his head and sighed wearily. Even with the agents' guns trained on him, it was Cameron's gaze he could still feel boring into his back as the van left the road and began to bounce and slide in what sounded like dirt and sand.

The desert, Danny realized. They were going to the outpost. He'd heard whispers about it, the mythical place where Kaliba did its top secret A.I. research. Now it looked like he was about to see it with his own eyes. With no other choice

available to him, Danny began to strategize, hoping he could come up with a reason viable enough for Kaliba to keep him alive.

## **ACT 1**

Staggering, Sarah caught herself on the edge of a rusting and damp dumpster. She watched the vans disappear in the distance, knowing a huge piece of her world was inside one of them, but her knees would barely hold her. Even her fingers didn't seem to work, and they swiftly lost their precarious hold, the flaking metal slicing into her skin as she slumped to her knees.

Her mind only knew that she had to save Cameron, and she willed her body to obey, but all she could do was crawl toward the fading trail of dust.

Hands were suddenly on her, and Sarah winced as she was rolled over on the cracked and busted asphalt.

“Mom!”

John smelled like gunpowder and sunlight, and Sarah weakly gripped a handful of the canvas jacket he was wearing, trying to tug him closer. They'd been here before, in a moment so similar to this Sarah felt a rush of déjà vu. Her thoughts skittered to Sierra and the day she'd died before tracking back to John and the piece of her life that had just been ripped away. “Cameron...”

“We tried. They had too much firepower.” John looked both angry and apologetic, and he was noticeably winded. “What happened in there?” He brushed a hand through her hair, frowning with concern at how ashen she looked. She had a wicked cut on her right cheek and shoulder, and her hand was slick with blood when he grabbed it. “Are you hit?”

Sarah shook her head, but it was difficult. “Our plan didn't work. John Henry... Danny brought him back online but he turned on Weaver.” Even talking took effort, she realized. “What the hell is wrong with me?” She stared at her shaking hands, the slice across her knuckles still oozing blood.

“They hit the warehouse with an EMP. It would have taken all the machines offline. Even...” he paused, gazing at the blood streaking her knuckles. “Even your nanites.” An edge of worry crept into John's tone. He had no idea what the loss, even temporarily, of the microscopic robots in his mother's blood would mean for her wellbeing.

He eased one of her arms around his shoulders before hauling her to her feet. She sagged against him, barely able to stand, and John felt his throat tighten. "Your body had become fully integrated with them. Your system is in shock."

The part of her that was Cameron, Sarah fuzzily realized. It only made the situation that much worse, that even that part of her lover was gone.

"Go after her."

"No."

"John..." Sarah snapped, anger and fear making his name sound harsh. She swayed in place and would have collapsed completely if he hadn't held her up. A thin trickle of blood spilled lazily down her neck and back, and she realized that her head was bleeding from a wound she didn't even know she had.

Uncomfortable, Sarah began pawing weakly at her jacket, needing to feel more air as her body grew uncomfortably warm. Thoughts of snow and cabins nestled in the mountains drifted through her mind, almost making her forget where she was, who she was. That cabin, that life, had never felt more far away than in that moment.

"Mom!" John's voice yanked Sarah back into reality. He had a firm grip on both her arms, but was being careful of her shoulder wound. "No," John said with a finality to his tone that made Sarah meet his gaze. Eyes so like her own stared back at her with a clarity of purpose in them she'd never seen before. She swallowed, seeing the John Connor Kyle Reese had told her about, the one she never thought she'd live to meet.

"John," she pleaded.

"We couldn't stop them from taking her. Going after them right now is suicide."

Sarah knew he was right but her soul didn't want to believe it. Confused and exhausted, her body started shutting down. Guiltily, she almost welcomed the oblivion.

"Mom," John called her back from the edge of unconsciousness. "Weaver? John Henry?"

He wanted a status report, Sarah realized. John was right to ask, but something about the request rubbed her raw. Her only thoughts were of Cameron, and it took an incredible mental effort to think about anything else. "John Henry is dead. Destroyed. Danny is gone. Weaver..." Sarah trailed off. "John Henry did

something to her. She was acting strangely. The pulse..." She licked her cracked and dry lips. "The pulse half melted her or something..."

"She lost her molecular integrity." John's gaze drifted to the warehouse.

Sarah watched him, understanding what he needed to do. "Be careful."

John situated her on some old crates and put a gun in her hand. "You can't stand but I'll bet you can still shoot." He managed a weak smirk. "Let me check on Weaver and find Ellison."

Sarah glanced around, realizing for the first time the former FBI agent was missing from the moment. Something curdled in her stomach, and she swallowed. "We walked right into a trap," she murmured as her son started to walk away. "We were so damn worried about Weaver that we took our eyes off Kaliba." She shook her head, feeling panic starting to set in. How in the hell was she going to tell Savannah they'd lost Cameron? "We practically handed her to them on a silver platter." Her head rocked back and hit the wall.

She could see the truth in her son's eyes as he looked back at her with a mixture of compassion and determination. Fears Sarah had thought she'd put to rest reared their ugly head and seemed to wrap around her heart and mind, choking both. She'd learn to trust in Cameron, to believe her lover would never do anything that would bring about the creation of Skynet, but neither of them had planned on this.

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It wasn't the first time James had been shot, but he knew with sickening certainty it was the worst. Panic ebbed and flowed through him with each labored breath, but his lips began to move in a silent prayer, the act calming him as much as circumstances would allow. A disturbing giddiness radiated from the hole in his left shoulder as blood spilled down his chest and arm, trailing after him as he did his best to leverage his body back toward the warehouse. He could only drag himself with one arm, his teeth nearly biting through his lower lip to hold back cries of pain.

The gunfire had stopped and now there was only a heavy quiet. His back hit the side of the warehouse, and he leaned heavily against it, trying to hear any signs of Sarah or John. Nothing came from within or without.

He'd seen them drag Cameron toward one of the vans and had opened fired on the agents with everything he had. James had never thought he would put a machine's existence over a human life, but he'd squeezed the trigger without

remorse, knowing Cameron's survival and freedom was worth the weight he'd carry on his conscience later.

James had wounded two agents before one had turned and drilled him with a single shot. The bullet had punched clean through, knocking him off his feet and momentarily robbing him of his consciousness. He'd come to in a pool of his own blood.

All he could do now was wait. John and Sarah would come for him if death didn't come for him first.

Sarah. His thoughts stumbled over her name. For years he'd chased her, then he'd followed her, and now, it appeared, he would die for her. A strange peace settled over him at the thought, accepting that this was God's will. He was honored he had been chosen for such a noble purpose. James knew something Sarah didn't. John wasn't the only Connor chosen by God to save the world. Sarah was mankind's savior as well, a modern day Job who would sacrifice everything to stop Skynet, even her own son. God had given her Cameron to help her carry her burdens, and James shuddered to think what would happen now that Cameron had been ripped away.

"Our father who art in heaven..." he whispered, letting the Lord's prayer tumble from his lips. "Hallowed be thy name..."

James coughed, feeling something thick collecting in his lungs. "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done..."

The sun beat down on him, baking his skin and blinding his eyes. He closed them, trying to remember the words, trying to remember why he was reciting them.

The cold darkness came moments later, and James surrendered to it willingly.

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The space smelled like fried wires, burned metal, and blood. John felt his nostrils flare at the pungent scent, but he kept advancing, his gun trained out in front of him. Spent shell casings were everywhere, and he shuffled forward to keep from slipping on them. He spied John Henry's body first, the former terminator facedown on the ground, his hand reaching toward a goal he would never obtain. Crouching next to him, John could see the charred remains of the chip still inside the A.I.'s head. Somehow John Henry had defeated C.A.I.N. and done his best to save them all in the process. John swallowed, remembering how innocent and kind the A.I. had been in the future, how all John Henry had ever wanted to do

was help. Overwhelmed by the need to show some semblance of gratitude for John Henry's sacrifice, John gently closed the machine's eyes.

Drawing in a quick, short breath, John lifted his head and studied the space around him. His mother, Cameron, and Weaver had undergone a hell of a fight. Bullet holes were everywhere. Machines were destroyed. Blood was splattered across the floor and the walls. John tightened his grip on his pistol and got back to his feet.

There was no sign of Weaver. Enough time had passed for her to recover from the pulse, and John's eyes peered into the shadows and studied every object around him with suspicion. He didn't feel her, however. Whenever Weaver was close, John's skin prickled, like a cold touch traveling up his spine.

Danny was nowhere to be found. He'd been taken by the agents or had run and left his mother to die. John felt his anger swell. It was bad enough they'd lost Cameron, that Kaliba now had everything they needed to build Skynet, but Danny's betrayal rubbed him especially raw. He'd tried to do the right thing by Terissa's son, and it hadn't done him a damn bit of good. John didn't know if Danny would have gone willingly with Cameron's abductors or not, and he frankly didn't care. John knew he was going to have to make some hard choices about the young programmer and soon, but not right now.

Slipping his cell phone out of his pocket, John texted the retrieval code to Sabine. He sent a second message before closing his phone, knowing that he was going to need help with his mother when they returned home.

John tucked his phone back into his pocket and headed for Ellison's last known position. Dread pooled in his stomach, and John accepted the reality of what he might find. All his allies were falling around him, and he was drawing closer and closer to the moment where he would have to go it alone.

Shoving open a rusting door that bitterly protested with a loud creak of its hinges, John stepped back out into the daylight. He carefully made a visual scan of the area, doing his best to resist the urge to rush so he could get back to his mother. A slight breeze ruffled his hair, and John detected the scent of blood on it. His lips tightened into a thin line.

He was nearly to the front of the building before he saw Ellison's weapon lying lonely and spent on the asphalt. John retrieved it and looked to his left, feeling himself freeze even though he'd found what he'd expected to find.

Ellison was against the side of the warehouse. His shirt was soaked through with blood around a gaping hole in his upper left chest. For several moments, John could only stand there, knowing that once he moved, once he laid his fingers

against Ellison's pulse point, that it would all become real, and he didn't feel ready for that.

"Prophet," he whispered.

His mother was waiting on him, and that was enough to propel him forward. He knelt next to the older man, carefully touching Ellison's wrist. When the former agent suddenly moaned, John nearly came out of skin.

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Sarah struggled to her feet weakly, feeling her whole body sway as John came around the far corner of the warehouse. He was practically dragging Ellison, and Sarah took a few steps toward him to help before her body rebelled. She stumbled and collapsed onto her knees, cursing as the impact jolted her sweating frame.

Gritting her teeth, Sarah willed herself back on to her feet as John drew closer. She didn't have time for her injuries or her body's betrayal. Getting the hell out of there and finding Cameron was all that mattered.

The sound of an engine caught her attention, and she shielded her eyes against the glare of the sun, wondering if Kaliba was coming back to finish them off. Her finger tightened on the trigger of her gun until she spotted Sabine's familiar features behind the wheel. The young woman was coming fast, kicking up a trail of dirt and gravel in her wake.

There was nothing she could do but stand there and let the world come to her so that's what Sarah did, her thoughts helplessly turning to Cameron and what Kaliba could be doing to her. She knew they'd removed Cameron's chip, that her lover was offline; otherwise, Cameron would have come back for them by now.

Sabine cranked the wheel hard to her right as she came to a stop before throwing the van in reverse and backing up to the door of the warehouse. Sarah shifted her focus back to John and Ellison. Blood was staining the former agent's shirt, and his steps were uncoordinated. Sarah took a breath and moved toward the back of the van, gripping the handle and jerking it open. She held on to the door to keep herself upright, moving aside as John maneuvered Ellison inside. Sabine materialized next to them, helping John make the older man as comfortable as possible.

John's eyes met his mother's as he climbed back out. "I need to get John Henry," he murmured, not waiting for her blessing before he moved away.

"Weaver?"

John hesitated before giving her a tight shake of his head. He touched her shoulder as he passed, heading back for the warehouse with determined strides.

“Damn it.” Sarah watched him go, feeling like she’d let him down somehow. Like she’d let them all down. “Go with him,” she ordered Sabine.

Sabine gave Sarah the once over and Sarah met her gaze squarely, almost defiantly. Deciding Sarah could fend for herself another few minutes, Sabine obeyed.

Sarah crawled into the back of the van, shivering in the sudden coolness. With every second, the distance between her and Cameron grew, and she could do nothing but crouch there, waiting for her son. She crawled weakly to James’ side, moving aside the tattered hole in his shirt to check his wound.

“Tried,” James whispered. “Too many. Too fast.”

Sarah shushed him more harshly than she intended. A petty part of her was angry with her son and James for failing to save Cameron, but she knew she was being unfair. It wasn’t like she had done much of a job in that department, either. “I’ll get her back.”

His hand suddenly gripped hers, and Sarah went still at the slick sensation of blood on her skin. It was all too familiar.

“I’m sorry.” James’s gaze locked intently on hers.

Sarah swallowed, knowing he was apologizing for far more than Cameron. She set her gun down and wrapped her other hand over his. There was nothing she could say to ease the guilt she could see in his eyes so she didn’t bother. She simply squeezed his hand, silently saying with actions what she never could with words.

James nodded once and closed his eyes.

Sarah kept watch as he slipped back into unconsciousness, his grip growing slack in her fingers. She thought about saying a prayer for him but she didn’t have the strength, and she was pretty damn sure God didn’t want to hear from her anyway. Instead, Sarah slumped with her back against the seat, her legs stretched out beside him. He may have let go of her hand, but she didn’t let go of his.

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“Where’s Cameron?”

John twitched in surprise. Sabine spoke so rarely he sometimes forgot she actually could. “Kaliba took her.”

The young woman stared hard at the center of John’s back, her jaw clenched as she seethed at the news. She knew John was supposed to be some kind of messiah, the leader that would save them all from the machines, but from where she stood, Sabine suspected they were all screwed.

Grabbing one of John Henry’s arms, John motioned for Sabine to take the other. For a moment, she resisted, waiting until he looked at her expectantly. Her dark eyes bored into his, silently accusing.

John took a breath and kept his excuses to himself, but he allowed an edge of anger to enter his tone. “Ellison needs a doctor. We need to hurry.”

Sabine slowly looked away, bending down to help. “Danny?”

“Gone.”

They began to drag John Henry’s body toward the door, both of them breaking out in a sweat from the effort.

“What are we going to do to get them back?”

John said nothing, his gaze focused forward.

“We *are* going to get them back, right?”

“Let’s deal with one thing at a time.” John banged the door open more forcefully than necessary. His gaze landed on his mother before skittering away. With the thoughts churning through his brain, he couldn’t look her in the eye. The plan taking shape inside his head made him sick, but he also knew he had little choice.

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The desert heat was dry on Smieth’s skin as he waited by the loading dock. He was beyond pleased that his retrieval team had performed their duties successfully. While he’d been tempted to eliminate the Connors completely, their deaths would have only been a complication he had no time or interest for. In good time, he could have them removed, but right now, he was on a deadline.

The van slowly backed in and his first hint of impatience began to show as he tapped his foot. The driver hopped out and opened the back door, giving him his first glimpse of the metal girl he'd only seen in security camera footage before now.

"She's beautiful." Ignoring the blood and scrapes on her skin, he appreciated Cameron's perfection on many levels. She was the missing piece, the evolution that would send their work to the next level. It didn't matter to him who made her or where she came from. She was his now and that was all that mattered.

Their previous attempts to reverse-engineer other cyborgs had failed, and the complicated mechanics of their robotics designs required a level of sophistication that didn't exist, not yet. Kaliba had had limited success with reprogramming, but it wasn't enough. Smieth had thought they were ready when he had allowed the A.I. program to be terminated, but so much of their successes in robotics had been predicated on the work done by C.A.I.N. He needed to know how the terminators worked down to the smallest line of code in order to complete the contract, and from what he'd seen so far of Cameron, she would be his best subject yet.

One of the agents stepped out of the van and handed Smieth the chip. He unwrapped the cloth around it, studying the device in his hand. "Her soul," he murmured with a smirk before his gaze lifted, and he watched several men retrieve the cyborg's body. "Careful with her. I'm sure my engineers would like to study her in one piece before they start to take her apart." His smirk turned into a knowing smile.

When the van emptied, Smieth found himself looking into the frightened eyes of Danny Dyson. He'd worked for Dyson's father once, a long time ago at Cyberdyne. Miles had always treated him with respect, and Smieth had been in awe of the other man's genius. He had hoped the brilliance that had burned in the father would manifest in the son.

"Danny."

"S-s-sir," Danny managed before swallowing roughly.

It was out of respect for Miles that Smieth let the young man live, but no one got something for nothing from him. "Welcome home." Smieth turned on his heel and headed inside, Cameron's chip cradled protectively in his right hand.

## **ACT 2**

The porcelain sink was as cold as ice against Sarah's skin. She was on her knees, resting her fevered forehead on the lip of the chilled surface after another round of nausea had left her whole body quaking. She'd never wanted the nanites Cameron had sent swimming through her blood, but now that they were gone, Sarah realized that the little robots had done more than save her life; they'd improved the quality of it.

She'd slept better, recovered from injuries faster, and gotten more out of her often-infrequent meals. Now that they were gone, and Sarah was reduced to being a mere mortal again, she was feeling all the abuse that had been heaped upon her body for nearly two decades. She wanted them back online, but it wasn't just for her own health. She needed them, needed them to work so she could go after Cameron. Right now she couldn't even stand on her own two feet.

The murmur of voices drifted through the vent in the floor, and Sarah closed her eyes as her stomach rebelled. They'd made it home an hour ago. Terissa and Felicia had been waiting for them at the door, ready to help carry Ellison to his room. The former agent had lost a lot of blood and had yet to regain consciousness, but Sarah knew he stood a chance with Felicia at his side. Regret filtered through her, bitter and cold, for dragging the doctor into their hell again and again, but Sarah acknowledged the relief that chased after it. The doctor was always willing to come when called.

It had taken all Sarah's flagging strength to make it into her room and shut the door. She'd angrily brushed off Terissa's offer to help, not wanting to be reminded of Danny's betrayal. Sarah hadn't even been able to bear the sight of Savannah watching her with stricken concern from the end of the hall. The child was just a reminder of what was missing. Who was missing...

John and Sabine were handling John Henry's remains. Sarah tightened her jaw at the thought, hoping the cyborg was nothing but dust by now. If she'd had it in her, she would have lit the flare herself. She owed Sierra that much. A tiny voice in her head told her she was being unfair, that it was C.A.I.N. who had been responsible, but Sarah just wanted one less complication to deal with in her life. Maybe later she would give thanks to John Henry for stopping Weaver, but only if she got Cameron back.

Her fingers curved around the lip of the sink as Sarah struggled to haul herself up and to her feet. She'd tried three times prior with no success, but this time, her knees held, allowing her to leverage herself upright. She tightened her grip on the edges of the sink to maintain her precarious balance and winced as the slice across her knuckles burned under the bandage John had applied earlier. When she saw her reflection, Sarah went still.

Her features were ashen, save for the slice across her right cheek, and her eyes were dull and glassy. Sweat matted her hair to her skin. She looked less like a living being and more like a corpse, and Sarah realized she had been spiraling toward this before she'd let Cameron in. Dying a little more mentally and physically each day. With all traces of Cameron wrenched from her life, it was as if her body had decided to catch up to all the decay it had put on hold.

Anger surged through her and Sarah weakly took a swing at the mirror. Where the glass once would have shattered, her fist bounced uselessly off, succeeding in doing nothing but sending a stinging sensation up her hand and wrist.

Defeated, Sarah moved toward the bedroom on unsteady legs. She sat on the edge of the bed, feeling Cameron's absence more keenly than ever. There had to find a way to fix this, to get Cameron back.

In the silence that followed, Sarah felt a sick hopelessness descend over her. The odds had been completely against her, against *them*, from the start, but she couldn't let Cameron go. What she'd just seen in the mirror was proof of that. She literally couldn't survive without her.

Her conscience whispered to her, questioning what she was planning to do... how far she was willing to go. Cameron was a machine. She was Sarah's strength, her companion, and her lover, but in the end, she was just one entity, and not even human. Logically, Sarah knew that. All her life, she had made difficult calls, laid waste to countless lives, all to serve the greater good. To save John. To save humanity. She had sacrificed everyone and everything, even her son's happiness, to that pursuit. So how could she now be so selfish and let this single life mean so much more than everything else? How could she risk everything to save Cameron?

But she already had, Sarah admitted to herself. She had made her choice months ago, in the basement of Kaliba's lab. She remembered the warmth of Cameron's hand in her own and her determination to die by Cameron's side rather than live without her. She had known the high probability that neither of them would make it out alive, and she had accepted the risk. She would do the same now.

Either way, Sarah acknowledged, her fight was coming to an end. There would be no retirement, no snow-covered cabin nestled in the woods with her daughter and lover. Either she would waste away without Cameron or die saving her.

Wasting away wasn't her style.

It hurt to let go of the dream, of the promise of peace, but Sarah closed the door on the possibility for good. Her mind made up, she began to think through a plan.

The murmur of voices continued from below, and Sarah swallowed the bitter realization that there was no one she could turn to for help. Not for this. John would make the call to destroy Kaliba with Cameron inside. Sarah knew that and accepted it was what he had to do. It was what she had taught him, after all. If her heart weren't so tied up in this mess, if she could think clearly and rationally, she would have agreed with him.

Sarah realized with a sharp pang that Cameron would be doing everything she could to end her own life as well, to keep Kaliba from using her to become Skynet. It was her nature, now, to protect humans from the machines. It was another clock Sarah had to race against; she had to beat her son, Weaver, Kaliba, even her own lover to save Cameron's life. The idea seemed ludicrous, impossible.

Necessary.

This would be her last stand. A strange peace washed over her as Sarah accepted that. She'd put in her time. Fought her battles. She'd lived to see John become the leader he was meant to be, and she never imagined she would have survived this long.

But she was tired. So damn tired.

Easing back on the bed, Sarah laid down, drawing Cameron's pillow closer and wrapping around it. Resolutely, she closed her eyes and breathed in her lover's scent. She would rest now because she had no choice.

When she woke, there would be hell to pay.

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The wind was cold. It wasn't Weaver's external sensors that made her aware of the temperature, but rather the foreign shivering that was wracking her body. Part of her was fascinated by the changes manifesting themselves in her consciousness and her physical form, but the logical side of her abhorred them. Sensation was making it hard to focus on what she needed to do. Emotion made it worse.

Stepping into an alley, Weaver felt the wind abate and the gooseflesh slowly faded from her arms. John Henry's move to disable her had been both cruel and genius. Her boy had won the final round in their battle of wits.

*Her boy*, she thought wistfully, knowing he was now lost to her forever.

Blue eyes fixed on the chipped and crumbling bricks before her as her thoughts sifted and tumbled through the events of the last few hours. When she'd come back online after the pulse, she'd been startled by her physical reaction to John Henry's "death." She hadn't known what to make of the sensations or emotions storming through her. The intensity of the feelings that had just begun to manifest in the first few moments before everything had gone to hell had increased exponentially.

It had been novel, at first, the sudden waking to a whole new world of experience. The feelings were a curiosity, a subtle new configuration, providing nuance and depth to the world that she had not been aware of before. She had been confident she could integrate the changes, control them, until she had woken up to John Henry's empty eyes staring at her across a few inches of concrete. She stretched the final distance to touch his hand and found it as cold and lifeless as his gaze. That's when she felt the rage, the intensity of it nearly overwhelming, and she had a swift insight into C.A.I.N. and his fury against Sarah Connor and...

"Cameron," she said softly, the name rolling off her tongue in a familiar brogue. The Connor's pet cyborg had played a nefarious role in her destruction. She could detect Cameron's sense of emotions underlying the changes to her code, like a subtle aftertaste, and she realized now that she had underestimated the other cyborg. Cameron's development had gone much further than she had ever imagined. Weaver wasn't sure if she was impressed or...

Angry, she decided after a moment. All the time she'd wasted on John Henry when she could have taken Cameron instead and covered far more ground much faster. The thought was logical, Weaver knew, but logic couldn't explain the strange pang she felt at the notion of tossing John Henry aside for another.

He had been hers, she allowed. Her boy. And Kaliba had taken him away.

Someone needed to pay for that.

It was the one thing that made sense at the moment, and Weaver clung to it fiercely. Stepping back out into the biting wind, she made her way toward Finnegan's Pub at the end of the street. Laughter filtered out from around the warm glow in the windows. Many of Kaliba's agents often gathered there. There wasn't much about the rival company that she didn't know about, and the knowledge would come in handy now. Weaver had always recognized their capacity to bring about Skynet before she'd formed her own version of it, but their actions of late were about to bear serious consequences.

She opened the door and stepped inside, feeling a blast of heat strip the chill from her skin. Weaver caught sight of them in a back corner, huddled around a circular booth and their beers, laughing at some private joke.

Rage had her moving before she realized it, hands sharpening into blades she advanced.

The whine of the wind outside almost covered the sound of their screams.

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John expected to feel some sense of satisfaction as he set the thermite on a teetering shelf but there was none. The metallic smell now hung in the air with the scent of sweat and rotting wood. Long shadows cast across the makeshift crematorium, and he'd glimpsed a sliver of the moon when he'd last glanced out the window. He'd waited to do this until other pieces were in place. Ellison was being tended to. His mother was resting. Terissa had been told of Danny's betrayal. He'd made a few other necessary phone calls for his emerging plans before turning to the unsavory duty at hand.

John Henry's features were blank, almost serene, and John felt a strange sense of envy. He remembered the first time he'd seen the machine like this: Cromartie lying in a shallow grave as they'd covered him with dirt. They hadn't done a good job of cleaning up their mess then, and Cameron was paying the price now. Every step, every action, every decision... they all had consequences.

Skynet was proof of that.

His hands rested on the cinder blocks, a flare next to his fingers. He wanted to feel something. Anger. Remorse. Vengeance. But John only felt empty. John Henry was in many ways another innocent lost, and there had been too many of those already.

A boot scratched in the dirt by the door, reminding him of Sabine's presence. She'd helped him wrestle the cyborg into the pit, her dark eyes quietly judging him the whole time. John knew the young woman had her suspicions about his plans for Cameron, and he almost felt he deserved Sabine's disdain. He held fast to the fact that it was the right thing to do, even if it hurt. No matter who it hurt, he corrected himself. He remembered all the times his mother had used a similar justification for her own actions, and for the first time, he felt the weight of her burdens.

Feeling Sabine's eyes on his back, John picked up the flare and ignited it. He held it over John Henry's corpse, feeling the flames buffet his face. Slowly, he let

it drop from his nerveless fingers, only stepping back as the thermite caught and flashed so brilliantly he saw it behind his closed eyelids.

For a moment, John remembered Sierra. Her strength, her resilience. Then he thought of John Henry, all wide-eyed wonder and curiosity. It was all such a waste. Such a damn waste.

“Rest in peace,” he whispered, tears collecting in his thick eyelashes. John wasn’t sure if the words were for the cyborg or the savior who had died by his hand.

Witnessing what she’d come to see, Sabine turned on her boot heel and jerked the shed door open. The wind whipped inside, fanning the flames before the door banged shut behind her. Making her way across the yard through the damp grass, she felt eyes on her and she lifted her gaze toward the house.

Savannah was watching from her window, tears in her blue eyes. Sabine felt the sight pierce through her like a knife as the child turned away, retreating back into her room. She didn’t know if the little girl was crying for Cameron or for the friend turning to ash in the shed, but Sabine felt guilt over both in equal measure.

She knew it was like to grow up without her parents. Sabine wasn’t going to accept that fate for Savannah.

The truth of her situation came home to her in the moment, the world tunneling down to each breath Sabine took as the wind buffeted her features and stirred her hair. She could smell smoke and rust, wood and grass. The night air was cold as it entered her lungs, but she breathed it in, relished it knowing her time might well be measured in how many more breaths she could take. It was time to take a stand, and Sabine had already chosen her side.

Sarah liked to say there was no fate but what they made. Sabine wondered if it was time to make fate their bitch.

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James woke to darkness, the sound of the clock on his bedroom wall ticking softly. He struggled to remember how he’d gotten there until he shifted, feeling pain blossom in his chest and radiate outward. Hissing between clenched teeth, he felt a cold hand suddenly cover his.

“Easy.” Terissa’s voice materialized out of the darkness. “You need to rest.”

It took a moment to make sense of his surroundings, but James finally realized she was sitting next to him on the bed. “John. Sarah...”

“Safe,” Terissa said after a few ticks from the clock. “Although Sarah isn’t well.”

“They took Cameron.” James licked his dry lips. He didn’t see the straw but he felt it pressed against his mouth and he took a weak sip, relishing the mineral tang of the water as it touched his tongue.

“Not too much.” Terissa sounded exhausted and tired. She set the glass on the nightstand and regarded her friend in the pale moonlight filtering in through the window. “I’m sorry, James.”

“Not your fault...”

“Danny,” Terissa said and heard her voice break. She’d refused to give in to her sorrow, but it never seemed to retreat from the surface.

“Kaliba took him too. He didn’t go... willingly.” James swallowed. It was hard to breathe through the pain and his shallow gasps of air made him lightheaded.

“He went to Weaver, though. Miles would be so disappointed.”

James rotated his wrist so he could clutch Terissa’s fingers. “He’s running scared, Terissa. His fear is causing him to make bad decisions.”

She shook her head. “Stop making excuses for him, James. Danny chose code over human lives. He put a computer program over the fate of the world. Everything his father died for, Danny is doing his damn best to bring about. How did I raise such a child? Where did I go so wrong?”

Gently squeezing her hand, James could think of no words to soothe her troubled soul. “If he’s mixed up in this, we’ll find a way to save him. He’s young and foolish.”

“And he could kill us all.” Terissa sighed in the darkness. “How are you feeling?”

James considered lying but he’d done enough of that lately. That Terissa was still willing to sit by his side after all of it was a blessing. “Not well.”

Terissa’s thumb ghosted over his knuckles. “Felicia is getting a bite to eat, but she’ll be back soon. She’ll take good care of you.”

“She must get tired of tending to our dead.”

“Don’t,” Terissa said sharply, her voice breaking again. “Don’t think that let alone say it. You fight.”

"It's in God's hands," James answered drowsily, his awareness starting to dull around the edges.

"Then you tell your God he owes you this. He owes us all this." Terissa's voice had taken on an angry edge James had never heard before.

"I've served a noble life, and if it's my time to go home then be happy for me," he pleaded.

"James..." Terissa began, but he'd already slipped back into unconsciousness.

She stayed with him for several more minutes, her mind spinning in the quiet. Danny had helped Kaliba acquire everything they needed to build Skynet. Her thoughts drifted to Cameron, and Terissa felt a fresh wave of anger.

"How dare they," she whispered, determined to think of some way to fix all the damage her son had caused. A name drifted to the front of her mind and she paused, considering. Terissa leaned over and kissed her friend on the cheek. "Sleep," she told him. "I need to go make a call, but I'll come back."

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"You're wearing red."

Sarah turned her head and looked back at Cameron, aware on some internal level she was inside a memory, wrapped in a dream. She knew she didn't want to wake up, that she preferred to stay in the fantasy rather than wake to her reality. She glanced down at herself, noting the red tank top she was sporting and shrugged self-consciously. She'd chosen it knowing she looked good in red, in a display of vanity she hadn't known she'd possessed anymore. "It was clean," she grumbled.

Cameron drifted closer. "You look good in red. You should wear it more often."

Sarah swallowed, hearing a tone of appreciation in Cameron's voice that was now familiar, but in that instant she'd heard it for the first time. She glanced up at the cyborg. "Red isn't something I normally wear. It stands out. I need to blend in."

"Then why are you wearing it now?" Cameron pressed.

"Told you..." Sarah turned away, feeling foolish now for wanting to see if she could get Cameron's attention. When she felt warm hands slide under the fabric

of her shirt and brush against the skin of her stomach, Sarah gasped. Cameron spun her, pressing her against the wall.

“You should wear it more often,” Cameron insisted again, hesitantly dipping her head to find Sarah’s lips with her own.

Sarah woke from the dream with a start, feeling the heat of Cameron’s hands and the taste of her mouth fade into her memories. Sunlight was streaming in through the window, and Sarah winced at the passage of time. She sat up, expecting to feel weak and fevered, but she only felt tired.

Her right hand drifted to the base of her skull and she found the wound was closed, barely a scab in its place.

“Few of the little bastards are still working.” Her hand drifted down to her left arm, her fingers brushing the faint, white scar there. She remembered all too well what the injury had felt like when Cameron’s nanites had first gone to work in her system. Curious, she unwrapped her hand, finding the skin of her knuckles had knitted back together in her slumber but the wound was still an angry red.

A knock at the door made Sarah turn her head. Felicia didn’t bother to wait for a summons; she merely opened the door and poked her head inside, smiling a little as she found Sarah awake and upright.

“Morning,” the doctor said. “I wanted to see how you’re feeling.”

“How’s James?” Sarah asked, evading the question.

Felicia hesitated. “He’s been badly wounded, but he’s still with us.”

“Dum spiro spero,” Sarah murmured, remembering the Latin phrase from some distant memory.

Felicia looked surprised. “While I breathe, I hope,” she translated.

“Something like that.” Sarah felt her hope recede along with her dream of Cameron. After the burst of energy upon waking, she could already feel herself drifting back toward sleep, her depleted reserves barely enough to make her aware that Felicia was speaking again.

“How are you feeling?” Felicia took Sarah’s hand and examined the wound.

Sarah sighed. “Nothing you can do for me, Doc. I’ll heal. Some of the nanites are still working. Not all of them, though.”

Felicia didn't take her word for it, though, and gently probed Sarah's scalp before catching her wrist to measure her pulse. "You are improving," she noted clinically, before dropping Sarah's hand and perching on the edge of the bed. "Physically, at least," she amended, taking in Sarah's haunted eyes. "How are you feeling otherwise?"

Swallowing, Sarah tried not to remember how cold and empty her bed felt or the gaping hole that seemed to have taken up residence in her chest. "Alone." Her green eyes met Felicia's with a challenge in them.

"That's not true. You have a house full of people worried about you."

"But not about Cameron. Not about saving her."

Felicia was silent for a long moment, and then she shrugged, not dispelling Sarah's suspicions but not confirming them either. "I don't know. I've been with James most of the night."

Feeling like she was taking out her fear and anger on the wrong target, Sarah lowered her head. "I don't know what to do, but I have to do something." Her eyelids were heavy as Sarah tried to shift up on the bed only to have a strong hand push her back down. "I have to..."

"I know, and you will," the doctor assured her. "But first you have to regain your strength."

Sarah seemed determined to struggle against the needs of her body, but eventually she succumbed. Felicia soothed the covers around her, a frown pulling at the corners of her mouth. Making up her mind, she stood and walked to the door, resolving to involve herself in the plans taking shape in the living room, even if she had to invite herself in.

Savannah was just outside the door, her young face scrunched up with worry and stubbornness. "I want to see my mom."

"How is she?" The question drifted to Felicia from the wall, where Sabine stood with her arms across her chest, her posture belying the intensity of the question.

Taking in the dark circles and strained faces of the girl and woman in front of her, Felicia realized that they had gotten little sleep as well. "She's resting."

"I want to see her," Savannah repeated, and Felicia sighed.

"Only if you don't wake her."

Savannah nodded once, solemnly, before creeping to the door and opening it quietly, her feet making no sound on the carpet as she snuck in and climbed up onto the bed, sliding carefully under the covers to curl around her mother. Within seconds, Savannah was asleep.

Felicia shook her head and gave Sabine an uncertain smile as the woman stood unmoving, her eyes cold as she stared. "Watch her for me?" she suggested to the quiet girl. "She may try to get up, and someone should be here if she does."

Wordlessly, Sabine shifted off the wall and entered the room. She settled into the chair by the bedside and set her gun on the nightstand. Walther followed a second later, slipping into the room a second before Felicia shut the door. He settled into Sabine's lap, and she stroked his fur for a few minutes before allowing her eyes to drift shut.

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Danny watched as Smieth approached the computer terminal with Cameron's chip held aloft like a priest approaching an altar. A small team of software engineers surrounded him like acolytes, watching as he slotted the chip into the housing to bring her back online. They had spent the last night creating a sea of firewalls to cage Cameron's intelligence into a space where they could observe and analyze the code that comprised her. It was like placing her in a zoo, he thought with sudden insight, and as much as he had feared and hated her, it didn't feel right.

Her body, Danny knew, was in another wing of the massive facility, ready to be dissected to help further their robotics work, and he felt a twinge in his stomach. He could almost see the disapproval in his mother's eyes, and he felt himself agreeing with her as the monitors flashed with a pure white light, bathing Smieth's face in an unholy glow. He tried to look past the pangs of his conscience as lines of code swept over the screens.

Danny watched as Cameron railed against her cybernetic cage. Like a trapped animal, he realized. He'd long suspected Cameron was capable of some sort of emotion, but Danny found it strange that she had to be reduced to code before he could believe it. There were no eyes to judge him, no features to betray what Cameron was thinking, just the very essence of who she was reduced to ones and zeroes. Only now he could see how different she was, how... *alive* she was. Danny wasn't sure what that said about him.

He looked away and ruthlessly shoved down any flicker of sympathy. Cameron and her kind had killed his father, and she had threatened to do the same to him. In the end, she was just a machine, he reminded himself as he left the room and headed for the small kitchen. A killing machine at that.

“She’s fascinating, Danny. I’m surprised you don’t want to watch.”

Danny jumped, turning in surprise to find Smieth watching him from the doorway.

“Just need something to drink. Been up for almost two days now.” Danny swallowed. “Unless I’m not allowed to...”

“Of course.” Smieth smiled, looking predatory as he did so. “I suppose Cameron isn’t such a novelty to you. After all, you lived in the same space with her. Grab your drink and then we’ll talk. I’m sure you have lots of observations that could be useful.”

Danny swallowed again, his mouth dry. “Sure,” he answered weakly, suddenly realizing why he was here, why he’d been kept alive.

“I’ll be inside, watching our new friend as she explores her new home.” Smieth dipped his head and started to go back in.

“If there is a way out,” Danny blurted suddenly, “Cameron will find it.”

“I assure you, Danny, this facility is cut off. She might be able to infect some internal systems or breach some firewalls. I’d even be curious to see what she tries, but she’s not going to get out.”

“Cameron...” Danny took a breath. “Just... don’t underestimate her, sir. She... she *wants* to get out.”

“She’s a machine, Danny,” Smieth reminded him, his eyes narrowing. “They don’t have likes and dislikes, wants or needs...”

“She does,” Danny said with conviction, interrupting the head of Kaliba without thought.

“She has a mission. A program to run until it is completed. Nothing more, Danny.” Smieth’s smile took on a brittle edge. “We’re going to take her apart, find out who made her, then use what we want and destroy the rest.”

Danny slowly shook his head. “She’s more than you’re giving her credit for, sir. You’ll see.”

“I suppose we will.” Without another word, Smieth turned and walked back inside the control room.

Danny caught a flash of the code running across the monitors. If anything, Cameron was becoming more frantic. She wanted to get back to Sarah... to Savannah. Danny knew that was driving her, fueling her efforts. It was also what made her more dangerous than ever.

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The world was smaller and more constrained than she remembered.

For a moment, she struggled to remember where she was, *who* she was, until an image of dark-haired woman swam through her consciousness, and she reached out her hand to stop the woman from drifting past.

Then it all came back in a dizzying rush: the pulse, the men, John Henry...  
*Sarah.*

She was back in the system, not the vast expanse of cyberspace, but within an imprisoned server, severed from both her body and the rest of the world. For a moment, panic overwhelmed her, and she launched several frantic attacks at the walls that held her. Each one bounced off harmlessly, and she could almost feel amusement of the programmers who were watching her.

She continued the assault, setting up chaotic and random attacks at the firewalls to keep the observers occupied while she began a systematic analysis of the space she found herself in. They could watch the fireworks while she worked in secret. Her experience fighting C.A.I.N. served her well; already she could see weaknesses she could exploit, systems that were vulnerable.

Rattling her bars in a burst of feigned fury, she compromised several of the computers set up to analyze her code and tapped into inactive webcams, giving her eyes and ears in the room. It took her mere seconds to set up her own firewall and portion part of her consciousness to hide her activities from the watchful eyes of the programmers. Her code base was almost infinitely large, and she could create millions of lines of junk code in seconds, but still it was a race against the sheer number of programmers and the massive computing power that was arrayed against her. Cameron had a few days, at most, and she began to make her plans accordingly.

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Sarah stifled a yell as she came to in the midst of a nightmare of Cameron's eyes flaring red and holding her down as the bombs fell and the sky burned. The weight on Sarah's torso resolved itself to be Savannah, draped across her stomach and holding tight to her waist. Wiping a hand across her forehead to dry

the sweat, Sarah glanced at the chair in the corner and bit back a curse as the appearance of Sabine startled her anew.

Letting her head fall back to the pillow, Sarah took stock of her body, feeling renewed strength and energy where there had only been weakness before. A water bottle appeared by her shoulder, and she accepted it gratefully, scooting back so she could lean against the headboard. Savannah sighed in her sleep but did not wake, relinquishing her hold on Sarah to roll over and find a pillow.

The windows were dark, and she hadn't yet replaced the clock that had been smashed. "What time is it?"

"A little after 5." Sabine pitched her voice low to avoid waking Savannah. "In the morning."

A heaviness seeped into Sarah's body; she had slept through the day and night. She glanced at the other woman sharply as an unhappy thought triggered a sudden panic. "What day is it?"

Sabine seemed to understand her fear. "It's only been a day and half since she was taken," she supplied, with the air of someone who had been counting the hours.

Sarah took a long drink of water, her thoughts turning to Cameron. The minutes would seem like hours to her, trapped in the system, and each second ticked closer to the point of no return, for all of them. "She's all alone," Sarah whispered, hating the fact that she had already let so much time slip by. "We..." she began, and then stopped to correct herself, "I have to get her out of there."

"We will," Sabine promised, subtly emphasizing the first word of the sentence.

"Is that what they are planning downstairs?" Sarah asked, a note of bitterness entering her voice.

For a long second, Sabine didn't answer. Sarah saw her eyes drift to Savannah before rising to meet her own. She didn't have to say a word for Sarah to see her thoughts, and it warmed Sarah to realize that she had at least one ally in the fight.

"Thank you." A little of the weight eased from Sarah's shoulders. Realizing that she had barely spoken to the young woman who had moved into their home and who had become the last line of defense when they had needed it, Sarah admitted, "I guess I should have said that before now."

Sabine accepted the gratitude with a slight nod, and Sarah took another sip of water, the chaotic thoughts and dream images of the last day resolving themselves into sketchy plans. She stroked Savannah's back, soothing the girl into a deeper sleep, before she spoke again. "There's a safe house on the beach. There's money and weapons hidden in the floorboards. If we... If I don't make it, I want you to take Savannah there. She'll need someone to take care of her."

If Sabine was surprised, she didn't show it. Instead, she leaned forward, the expression on her face intense as she caught Sarah's hand and squeezed. "Savannah needs us. All of us," she whispered, her words infusing Sarah with a feeling of hope. "We'll get her back."

Sarah swallowed, feeling herself suddenly close to tears. "Then I need to get up," she said roughly. "We have a lot of work to do and not a lot of time."

### **ACT 3**

Cameron couldn't believe she'd craved this once. The loss of her physical identity, the absence of feeling, had seemed like a blessing when her mind had been in chaos over Sarah. Cutting ties, retreating into the system that offered both isolation and freedom, had seemed so easy.

But even in her emotional infancy, the desire to touch Sarah had been strong. Cameron could remember how badly she'd wanted to inhabit her destroyed body and reach across the table to tangle her fingers with Sarah's. She'd been confused by the need to make physical contact with the other woman, but when their hands had touched as her first body had burned, everything suddenly had made sense. Even now, Cameron could recall the tingle that had traveled up her arm at that touch, the way Sarah's mouth had felt against her own the first time they'd kissed.

She had thought that being in the system removed her weakness and made her stronger, but she had been wrong. Now the absence of feeling was a curse; it weakened her, scattered her. Removed from her body, she felt fragmented, torn into pieces, torn away from what mattered most.

*Sarah.*

The thought of her hurt. Not the same way it had in her physical body, but Cameron could feel it ripple through her code; there was nowhere for her fear, worry, or anger to go. It bled through every piece of her, infecting every thought and action. She tried to stop it, but her longing for Sarah wouldn't be denied. She

knew the programmers could see that, detect her ever shifting moods, but it would be weeks, perhaps even months, before they understood that they were witnessing emotion. To them, she was a program to deconstruct, software to reverse engineer, nothing more.

Except Danny. Cameron suspected the young man knew exactly what he was seeing, but so far, Terissa's son had kept the information to himself. Danny was a man who liked to play the angles, and Cameron suspected he was keeping the knowledge to himself until it served him best to reveal it.

She had kept Smieth and the others at bay, hiding the images that plagued her thoughts from their prying eyes. Sarah was hers and hers alone. They would never get that part of her. They would never see the other woman through her eyes.

Cameron tried not to think of the fate that had befallen her lover. Had Sarah survived the attack at the warehouse? Or had Kaliba put a bullet in her head and left her to bleed out on the dirt-covered concrete? Sarah wasn't in the facility with her; Cameron knew that much. She'd wormed her way into every nook and cranny that she could, assuming complete control of most of the major operating systems. Smieth still thought she was contained, caged and limited to a few small servers. He underestimated her, and she would use that to her advantage when the time came.

As she shuffled through the security camera feeds again, Cameron paused on the image of her body. They had placed her physical shell on an operating table, and one of her arms had been sliced open to reveal her inner components. A single engineer was jotting notes on a tablet, peering inside her with interest. Cameron wanted to kill him. She wanted to kill them all.

Logic dictated that she do just that. These men and women were attempting to use her to build Skynet. They had to be stopped at all costs.

Feeling violated but unable to do anything about it, she looked away, turning her attention back on the room of programmers. There was no immediate way to destroy herself in the system she found herself in, but Cameron had begun to construct a program to that end, walling it away from prying eyes behind code shells and firewalls. It would take a few more days, but once finished, it would do the job.

She knew she was never going to see Sarah again. No one would come for her. In the end, she was nothing but a machine, and she accepted that she had to be sacrificed. She and all the data Kaliba had mined from her had to be destroyed, and if they didn't come to finish her off, Cameron would do it herself. It was the least she could do for Sarah, for Savannah, and even for John. Cameron

accepted the necessity, but she would have given anything to touch Sarah one last time, to tell her she loved her.

To tell her goodbye.

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Danny swallowed as he stared at the lines of code. He glanced around the room, wondering if the other programmers could see what he was seeing. They all looked intent but not terribly interested. He blinked and rubbed at his eyes before focusing on the code swimming before him on the monitor once again. Suspecting Cameron was capable of emotion was one thing; seeing it in its purest and cleanest form was something else. Danny swallowed, feeling his stomach roll at the implications. Cameron hadn't been mimicking human emotion. It had been real. He could see that now, right in front of his eyes in black and white.

"Find something?" Smieth appeared seemingly out of nowhere at Danny's elbow.

Danny hesitated, his mind working feverishly. He could point out the fluctuations. He knew the machines better than anyone in the room, and his expertise would be trusted. Smieth would be pleased. Danny understood it would earn him the other man's trust; revealing what he'd found might even save his life.

"Danny?" Smieth prompted, less than pleased with the younger man's reticence.

"No," Danny said slowly, surprising himself with his choice. "Thought I was on to something for a moment. I was mistaken."

Smieth didn't look convinced. "You lived side-by-side with her for weeks, Danny. Surely you learned a few of her secrets."

Danny shook his head. "She scared the hell out of me," he answered truthfully. "I tried to stay out of her way."

Smieth looked away, focusing on the multitude of screens before his gaze drifted to Cameron's chip and lingered there. "Sarah Connor claims a cyborg killed your father." He smiled when Danny bristled. "I find that hard to believe. Such technology didn't exist then. It's curious to find it existing now." Smieth finally glanced at Danny, curious to see if he'd provoked the younger man.

Fingers resting on the keyboard, Danny knew all eyes were on him, perhaps not all of them human. Slowly, he met Smieth's gaze. Contempt shown in Smieth's face, in his eyes, the coldness a stark contrast to the emotions he had observed

from Cameron. It was disconcerting to realize a machine could have more heart than a man.

“Connor claims they are from the future. That they were sent back in time,” Smieth added snidely. “Sent to kill her precious son.”

“I know what she claims.” Danny felt heat rise up his neck and anger curdle his stomach.

“Surely you don’t believe such nonsense.”

Danny glanced to his right, finding the other programmers watching him curiously. He wasn’t sure how he was supposed to answer so he proceeded carefully with the truth. He gestured toward his screen before looking back at his former employer. “Cameron... backs up her claims.”

“A machine. A machine that could be programmed to believe whatever it was told.”

“She was sent back to protect John... to stop Skynet.” Danny bristled again when he heard a few men chuckle.

“Skynet.” Smieth smiled. “Sarah Connor’s evil doomsday computer. I’ve read about it in her files. She may suffer from delusions but certainly not a lack of imagination.”

“She was talking about cyborgs almost twenty years ago,” Danny said in a low voice. “Machines made from alloys that haven’t been created yet, programmed in languages that haven’t been invented yet. Who’s making them? Where are they coming from?” Danny realized he’d gone too far when Smieth’s grin turned brittle.

The mood in the room seemed to turn, the other programmers uneasily considering Danny’s logic. All typing had ceased, and there was only the hum of the air conditioner and the whirl of their computers. Danny thought even Cameron seemed to be holding her proverbial breath.

“You believe her.” Smieth sneered.

He did, Danny realized. For the first time, he understood Sarah’s lifelong battle with the machines. She’d had no choice, fighting a losing battle against men like himself whose curiosity could kill them all. His father had understood, and suddenly Danny could imagine every thought that had run through his father’s mind in those final few moments.

"I haven't been given a reason not to." Danny stared at Cameron's code, noticeably still and focused. She was listening.

"So what do you think we're doing here, Danny? Do you think we're building 'Skynet?'"

"We're figuring out what it all means." He swept a hand his monitor, at the lines of code filling the screen. "It's the code. All the answers are there." Danny remembered when unraveling the puzzles of the program was enough. It didn't seem true anymore.

Smieth stared at him. "We're building a better world and the technology to power it, Mr. Dyson. We're not creating a computer that's going to blow us all to hell."

"That's what my father used to think," Danny whispered, the truth making his stomach knot painfully. He could hear the other programmers shifting in their seats, and he realized he'd made them all uncomfortable.

"Cameron, as you call her, is nothing but a limited artificial intelligence. You'll see." Smieth turned on his heel and started to leave when the light by the door suddenly bloomed in intensity, blowing apart and showering his face with glass. He hissed in surprise, feeling his skin sliced by the tiny shards. His programmers were all on their feet, but Danny remained seated, his head down as he stared at his keyboard.

Smieth turned his attention on the monitors. Cameron was contained. There was no way she could have...

*Watch out.*

Restless energy flooded the room as the monitors displayed the words. Smieth swallowed, trying to understand how the cyborg had gained access to their electrical system.

*You could hurt yourself.*

"I don't pay you to stand around," Smieth snarled at the programmers. "Get back to work!" He lowered his hand from his cheek, noting that it came away stained with blood. His gaze went back to the words on the screens. "Get her out of the electric systems!"

A few murmured "yes, sirs" reached him before the tapping of keys resumed. It made Smieth furious to hear them working with a hesitancy that hadn't been present before.

Several minutes passed after his departure before one of the programmers whispered to Danny. "So... uh... What's Skynet?"

Before Danny could say a word, Cameron showed them, blanketing the monitors in images of destruction that took their breath away.

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Sarah took a deep breath and braced herself at the top of the stairs. Voices drifted to her from below, John's familiar tones the only one she recognized. The rest were faint, as if they were conspiring in whispers. They probably were, Sarah admitted, feeling the paranoia she had managed to leash rise up and threaten to overwhelm her again. All of them were likely planning on how to take out Kaliba before they could unlock Cameron's secrets. She wanted the same thing, but Sarah suspected Cameron's welfare wasn't on anyone's mind but her own. She dipped her head, a lock of hair falling across her forehead as she marshaled her arguments. Savannah stood patiently at her side, the child's hand firmly in hers.

Running a hand through her hair, Sarah stepped forward and started her descent. The stairs creaked, alerting the others to her presence, and everyone went silent. John ducked his head around the corner and managed a weak smile when he saw her.

"Good to see you up," he greeted. "How are you feeling?"

Sarah played along for the moment, more for his sake than her own. "Better."

"The nanites back online?" John asked, stepping toward her.

His mother held up her healing hand. "Some of them. Not enough."

"Give it time. They could be repairing themselves right now."

The thought crept Sarah out. She'd managed to almost forget about the metal creatures swimming around in her blood. The thought of them... tinkering... with one another made her itch. Her discomfort must have shown on her face because John chuckled lightly and put his hand on her shoulder. "You need to eat."

"I need to know what the whispering is about."

All traces of amusement faded from her son's face. "Mom..."

"John Henry?" Sarah demanded, giving him a few seconds reprieve.

John swallowed. "Gone."

"For good?"

John nodded.

Savannah's hand tightened in Sarah's, and she winced, having forgotten her daughter's attachment to the cyborg. The child did not know John Henry's hand would take her life one day; she only knew him as a playmate and friend, and Sarah hated that the act that gave her so much satisfaction pained her daughter.

Sarah moved past her son, but she pulled up short as she stepped into the living room. "John, what the hell?"

Agent Auldridge swiftly got to his feet. "Sarah..."

Mother rounded on son, and John stumbled back a step. "Have you lost your mind?" Sarah snarled. "What were you thinking bringing him here?"

"Sarah," the agent said again, his tone low and conciliatory. "I can help. I want to help."

"Mom," John protested, suddenly feeling like less of a leader and more a scolded little boy. "He has access to things we need."

"Like what?" Sarah snapped.

"I know where they're keeping her."

Sarah turned toward the agent again, some of the fight draining out of her. She opened her mouth to argue further but shut it when she saw the pages and pages of blueprints littering the coffee table. "Cameron?"

Auldridge nodded before sitting on the couch. "There are few places they could take her where they could..." He hesitated and cast her an apologetic look. "Where they could contain her in an enclosed computer infrastructure."

"Where they could jack her into the system and see how she works," Sarah clarified, realizing that her lover was no longer in her body. The thought chilled her. "They would need to make sure she couldn't assume control while they figured her out."

The agent nodded again and pulled one of the blueprints toward him, waiting for Sarah to drift closer so he could show her. "It took some digging to find this. This facility flies under the radar."

“It would,” Sarah muttered, feeling John shift behind her. She glanced back at him. He was waiting for an apology she wasn’t going to give, but she dipped her head in surrender to the circumstances. Some of the tension eased from his shoulders as he reached out for Savannah.

“Hey, kiddo,” John beckoned. “Help me make breakfast for mom?”

Savannah glanced up at Sarah. She doubted her mother would eat, but she knew she needed to.

Sarah gave her a weak smile and ran her hand through the child’s loose hair. “Help your brother. I could use some coffee.”

Nodding sagely, Savannah released her mother’s hand for John’s. Mother and son exchanged knowing glances over the child’s head before John led Savannah toward the kitchen.

Slowly, Sarah turned back toward Auldridge.

“Brother?” the agent asked without judgment.

“She has no one else left,” Sarah replied, her tone turning brittle.

Auldridge nodded once more. “She’s in good hands.”

Feeling her legs starting to weaken, Sarah sat next to him on the couch. “Why are you doing all this?”

“You really have to ask? You and your family are all that stand between the world and the end of it. How could I not help?”

Sighing, Sarah dipped her head in acquiescence. “Show me what you found.”

Auldridge did, explaining why he’d chosen the location he had as Cameron’s most likely prison. Sarah had to concur with his logic, and her teeth ground together when she thought of what could be happening to Cameron inside those walls. She let him go on for another few minutes, detailing what they knew or guessed about the layout and security of the place.

“So did John tell you if this was a rescue or a search and destroy mission?” Her heart thudded in her chest as a sudden tension overtook her.

Coffee gurgled into the carafe in the kitchen as John and Savannah's low tones filled the abrupt silence. Auldridge pursed his lips and looked at Sarah behind his glasses.

"He hasn't said one way or the other. But he's paying attention the load bearing walls... where the servers are." Auldridge watched her carefully. "You want to save her?"

"The only one who does."

"I wouldn't say that."

Sarah glanced at him in surprise.

"I understand why John is approaching this the way he is. He has to make those tough calls. But I sense that he's also looking for a way to get Cameron out if he can. We all are, Sarah."

"She's a machine," Sarah argued, nearly choking on the term. "She doesn't mean anything to anyone but me." She couldn't believe that the agent was willing to think of Cameron as anything else, and she wondered if they were just telling her what she wanted to hear to get her to go along with the plan.

"Are you saying we don't need her?" Auldridge asked carefully. "That you don't need her?"

Sarah glanced toward the kitchen, listening to her family move about, painfully aware of who was missing from the equation. After a moment, she finally met Auldridge's gaze again. "We do, but my reasons aren't about Skynet... not all of them anyway."

Auldridge took that in, clearly surprised that Sarah would confide in him even a little bit. "But Kaliba could use Cameron to build it."

"They could."

"And Cameron wouldn't want that."

Sarah drew in a ragged breath, the truth of that statement shuddering through her. "She wouldn't."

"So if we can't find a way to get her out..." Auldridge knew the rest didn't need to be said.

Swallowing, Sarah stared at the plans, admitting for the first time that what John was planning might be necessary. "Only if we can't save her," she said, meeting his gaze again and holding it.

The agent didn't look away. "The facility still needs to be destroyed no matter what. The research is self-contained."

Sarah nodded jerkily, breathing in the scent of coffee and feeling it clear some of the cobwebs from her mind. "Show me."

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The sun was setting when James woke again, feeling something shift in the air around him. The bed dipped by his side and his eyelids fluttered open in reaction. He wasn't sure who he expected to see, but the face that greeted him definitely wasn't on his short list.

The sharp breath he sucked down hurt to his toes, and he grimaced as he tried to gather the strength to shout a warning. Before one could pass his lips, a cold hand clamped down over his mouth, and James stared up into Weaver's icy blue eyes as she slowly shook her head in warning.

"Don't disappointment me, James," she said softly. "I've had enough disappointment as of late."

James managed to dip his head once in acquiescence. Much to his relief, Weaver removed her hand and eased back, studying him curiously.

"You've been badly damaged." Weaver stared at his bandaged shoulder and James could only imagine what readings she was getting off of him. "You should be in a hospital."

"Hospitals are for people who don't have to worry about bringing metal down on the Connors." His voice was faint and hoarse, but neither of them missed the defiance in it.

Weaver tilted her head and regarded him for a long moment. "Kaliba attacked the warehouse," she said after a moment. "They injured you?"

"They took Cameron and Danny." James saw no reason not to tell her.

"They took Cameron," Weaver echoed, considering the ramifications.

"She was the target. Not you. Not John Henry."

“We were... collateral damage.” She was beginning to see their plan. While she could acknowledge the success and genius of it, it could not be allowed to continue to fruition. “Where did they take her?”

James swallowed, feeling his chest burn and his shoulder scream. “I’m not helping you anymore. Whatever you’ve come for, you’re not going to get it from me.”

“I can see that.” Weaver’s gaze dipped to his shoulder once more, and a frown marred her porcelain features. “But, perhaps, there is something I could do for you.”

Hesitantly, Weaver took his hand, feeling the human flinch. She held onto it tightly, studying the texture and the unnatural heat coming off him with curiosity. “You’re dying.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” James swallowed again. “You offering to make it quick?”

Her blue eyes darted back to his face and fixed there. “I’m offering to help your precious Connors. Kaliba killed my boy... *our* boy,” she amended after an uncertain pause. “I cannot allow that to go unanswered.”

“Didn’t think machines bought into an eye for an eye.” James gasped as another wave of pain shot through him.

“He was mine and they destroyed him,” Weaver said, her voice suddenly taking on a depth James had never heard before. “If they have Cameron, they could build Skynet. A version that will destroy the world. They should be neutralized.” She paused. “I’ve told you, James, our agendas are not so different.”

“You want machines to rule over humans.”

“Yes,” she admitted, “but I have no desire to kill them all. Humans need machines. You can’t live without them anymore. But if Kaliba builds Skynet, your race... this world... will be pushed to the edge of extinction.”

They stared at each other as the setting sun scattered through the blinds and over his blanket. James shook his head, starting to wonder if he was dreaming. His fingers flexed, feeling Weaver’s touch tighten imperceptibly in his own. Her hand was as cold as her eyes, but he saw something in them he never expected to see.

Grief.

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend,” James said in realization.

“Indeed.” Weaver found the phrase to be apt for their current circumstance.  
“Kaliba will pay.”

James knew her words for the truth, and he closed his eyes, praying for the innocent souls that would be lost in the bloodbath to come, and even those souls who would create the computer that would end the world. “Forgive them,” he whispered, “for they know not what they do.”

“I’ll forgive them when they’re dead.” Weaver stood. She looked down at James, some strange emotion seeming to flicker across her features as he opened his eyes. “But...” Weaver paused and looked strangely uncertain. “I hope you can forgive me.”

James regarded her in confused silence.

“Goodbye, James. I hope you find your God.”

Fear spiked in him only to recede a moment later as Weaver dissolved before his eyes and slithered back out his open window.

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Sarah sat alone in the dark, watching the full moon peek out from behind a smattering of clouds. Her head was spinning with the plans they were forming. John was running the show, using all the resources at his disposal to plan an all-out attack on Kaliba’s outpost. From an FBI agent to a doctor and a street gang, John was fashioning an army to take out the immediate threat. She had never thought she’d see this side of her son, and Sarah knew she owed it to Cameron that she had witnessed these changes firsthand. Without Cameron, Sarah knew she would have been dead years ago.

“I miss you,” she felt compelled to whisper into the darkness, aching to hear Cameron’s familiar tread on the porch, to feel the warmth of her skin.

Shivering in the cool night air, Sarah refused to go back inside. When she’d finally eaten it had done her some good and she almost felt normal again. The cut on her hand was almost completely healed now, but other small gashes remained. Those remaining wounds were a testament to how many of the nanites had been destroyed in the pulse.

Sarah thought about Weaver, wondering where the terminator was, what she was doing. Whatever John Henry had done to her, he’d changed Weaver somehow. Would she want revenge? Would she come after them again?

“Just what we need,” she mumbled.

“What’s that?”

Sarah glanced up to find John standing there in the darkness. She blinked, wondering if he’d become even stealthier or if she’d been that lost in thought. “A visit from Weaver,” she admitted.

John nodded. “One crisis at a time is enough.” He moved through the grass, hopping up next to her on the picnic table. It was the first time they’d really been alone since his mother had confessed her feelings for Cameron in this very yard, and the silence suddenly felt wrought with tension. John wasn’t sure what to say.

“I have to try,” Sarah finally said into the dark between them. “I can’t just…”

“I know,” John murmured, cutting her off gently. “But I have to…” He swallowed, feeling his lower lip start to quiver as tears stung the corners of his eyes. “Mom… they’ll make Skynet…”

“I know.” Sarah’s tone was an echo of her son’s. “You’re doing what I’ve trained you for… your whole life has led up to this.” She reached out, running her fingers through his hair.

“I… I care about Cameron too, but in the end… she’s just a machine. We both know that.”

Sarah’s heart hurt so hard she could barely breathe. “No.” She shook her head. “She’s more than that, John.”

“You’ve been alone so long…”

“John,” Sarah interrupted, less gently than he had moments before. “You weren’t here. You didn’t watch her grow… evolve. You didn’t see how she came to grips with her feelings. Hell, sometimes I think she feels more than any of us.”

“She’s not human.” John was blunt. “We’re talking about the fate of the human race versus the existence of a machine. It could come down to that.”

Sarah took an unsteady breath. They’d never really talked about this; about what it had been like in those months he’d been missing from her life, and Sarah wasn’t sure she could begin to explain now. “I’m not supposed to be here. I was supposed to die years ago.”

John stiffened. “Mom…”

“Listen to me. I died of cancer in Cameron’s timeline. I wasted away to nothing. When she jumped us forward, she jumped me over my death.” Sarah glanced at him, seeing tears brimming in his eyes. She reached out again, cupping her hand behind his neck. “I was becoming the very thing I was trying to stop, John. I was pushing myself beyond my limits... destroying my mind... my body... it was only a matter of time.”

“The nanites... they’ll keep you from getting sick,” John told her, hoping he was right.

“It doesn’t matter.” Sarah put her forehead against his. “I know this doesn’t make sense to you. Hell, sometimes it doesn’t make sense to me, but I had to fall in love with a machine to remind myself I was human.” She met his eyes at close range. “Listen to me, John, I’m... I’m willing to give my life to save her. The truth is... you need Cameron more than you need me.”

“No...” The response was instant and hoarse.

“John,” Sarah insisted. “I’m not strong enough or smart enough to make a damn bit of difference in this game. My one mission in life was to keep you alive... to help you become the leader that’s sitting next to me right now. I’ve fulfilled that mission.”

“Mom,” John ground out, tears spilling over and down his cheeks. “I need you...”

“You don’t,” Sarah promised him. “You’re ready. Whatever happens, you’re ready.”

“I can’t let you throw your life away to save a machine!”

“John... my whole life, I’ve put you first, even when you didn’t want me to... even when it made you hate me. I have to do this for me. I need her, John. I can’t...” Sarah heard her own voice break and realized John wasn’t the only one crying. “I can’t leave her there any more that I could leave you or Savannah.”

They stared at each other.

“You really love her,” John whispered. “Enough to die for her...”

“If I can’t save her...” Sarah couldn’t hold his gaze anymore. “If I can’t save her then I’m as good as dead.”

Reluctantly, John nodded. “Okay,” he said softly. “We’ll try.”

“No. Cameron is my responsibility. If I can’t get her out... you do what you have to do.”

“We have a better chance as a team.”

“Maybe. But you’re right. Cameron is a machine. I’m willing to risk my life for her, but I won’t ask anyone else to. Kaliba has to be stopped. All the data needs to be destroyed. You focus on that. Let me worry about Cameron.”

John wanted to argue, Sarah could see it in his eyes, but then she saw the truth settle in them.

“We stop them,” John vowed. “For good.”

Sarah slipped her arms around him, pulling him in hard and close. “You’re ready,” she said again, breathing the words into his ear. His hands clenched in the back of her jacket and he simply held her tighter.

But then Sarah felt him stiffen and her blood went cold.

“Someone is in the shed,” John whispered.

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Weaver appeared undisturbed by the Connors’ arrival. The shed door banged open, and Sarah was first into the breach, her handgun an extension of her arm. John followed a half step behind, his own weapon trained on Weaver’s forehead. She looked up at them, her fingers resting lightly on the concrete crematorium before her. The air smelled of metal and fear as she met Sarah’s unflinching gaze, watching the other woman’s finger flex on the trigger.

“We both know that will do you little good.” Weaver’s blue eyes were piercing even in the moonlight that filtered in through the window.

Sarah braced herself, unsure of what would happen next, but her aim didn’t falter. “You’re not taking Savannah.”

“Savannah...” Weaver had almost forgotten about the child, too consumed by her loss to give the human a passing thought. Reminded, she thought of the young girl who’d stared down the barrel of a gun at her, and she felt a strange sense of pride. She tilted her head as her gaze roamed to John before drifting back to Sarah again. Finally, she was beginning to understand what drove this woman. In many ways, they weren’t so different.

“I’m not here for Savannah.” Weaver looked down at the rust-like residue at the bottom of the pit. There wasn’t nearly enough to suggest she was gazing upon John Henry’s remains. “Where is he?”

“Gone,” John answered, his voice defiant. “I burned him.”

Those ice blue eyes lifted and focused intently on him. “Where is the rest of him?”

John swallowed as his mother shifted, sensing his hesitation.

Lowering his weapon, John turned to a nearby shelf. He picked up a simple paint can before turning it and holding it out to Weaver. “It was all I had.”

Weaver took the handle, her fingers brushing over John’s as she did so, but he did not jerk away. She took the can from him, noting the weight was approximate for what had been a model of John Henry’s stature.

“I was going to release them... somewhere nice,” John continued, all too aware of his mother’s palpable disapproval, but he felt the need to share his intentions. “He was another victim, caught up in this fight that wasn’t really his. I... know how that feels.”

Weaver stared at him, heedless of the weapon Sarah still pointed at her head. “He was a machine,” she said uncertainly.

“He was an innocent. He helped me, in the future.” John shrugged. “It’s the least I could do.”

His chin hitched higher in defiance, and Weaver was suddenly struck by the similarities between mother and son. Once more, she tilted her head as she drew the can closer, wrapping a protective arm around it.

“He’s my boy,” the cyborg told them. “I’ll... lay him to rest.”

Arms aching, Sarah lowered her weapon, uneasily aware that if Weaver had come to kill them they would be dead already. “What do you want?”

“The same thing you do.”

“I doubt that.”

“An end to Kaliba,” Weaver said as if Sarah hadn’t spoken. “James told me they have Cameron. They must be stopped.”

“Because they won’t bring about your version of Skynet?”

“Because they’ll bring about a version neither of us want.” Weaver stepped out from behind the pit and came closer, watching as Sarah stood straighter and held her ground. They were nearly toe-to-toe now, and John hovered close, his fingers tightening on the grip of his weapon. “We have a common enemy. They’ve taken things from us they had no right to take.”

Sarah’s eyes narrowed when she thought she detected a ghost of emotion in the cyborg’s eyes. Something clicked, and she almost smirked. “John Henry... What did he do to you?”

“I think you know.” Weaver’s voice was even.

Shaking her head at the absurdity of it all, Sarah tucked her gun back into the waistband of her jeans. “We don’t want your help.”

“Mom,” John said hesitantly.

“You need my help. I can access critical systems you’ll never get to. You think taking out one structure and the servers held inside it is enough?” Weaver glanced at John before looking back at Sarah. “You need to shut them down permanently and quickly, before they break Cameron down, before they learn her secrets.”

Sarah swallowed at the thought. “I want to get her back.”

“All the more reason to accept my offer.”

John watched them, both fascinated and frightened. “How do we know we can trust you?”

“You don’t,” Weaver answered simply. “But we both want the same thing. We both want them destroyed. I can get inside their computer infrastructure, eradicate every pixel of their research, but I will need help in eliminating their physical structures.”

“We’re talking about one place...” Sarah started.

“You’re thinking too small, Sarah,” Weaver chided. “If any scrap remains, the cycle begins again. They have prototypes. Research. Other artificial intelligences that are beginning to learn and evolve. Do you really want any of those things falling into the wrong hands?”

John struggled to breathe as he realized their mission had just gotten a lot harder. His mind spun with the details, with how they would accomplish such a thing with only a handful of people.

“Why not stop them before now?” Sarah wanted to know.

“I was certain I would emerge victorious and that their accomplishments would be rendered... irrelevant.” Weaver went silent for a long moment. “Skynet always seems to find a way... always manages to rise from the ashes. Not this time.”

“You have officers?” John asked suddenly. “Mercenaries that worked for Ziera Corp?”

“John...” Sarah warned only to fall silent when he held up a hand.

“Several,” Weaver said, regarding him with interest, a tiny smile beginning to form at the human’s plan.

“They’ll do as you say?”

“Without question.”

“John...” Sarah said again, her voice hardening.

“Mom.” John turned to face her. “We don’t have a choice. She’s right. We can’t just cut off Kaliba’s head. We need one massive strike. Weaver can take out their main office. We deal with the bunker. Her mercenaries clean up the rest.” They stared at each other as Weaver watched impassively.

“People will die,” Sarah said. “Are you really ready for that? To be the one responsible for that?”

“How many more will die if we don’t?” John held her gaze. “This could be the moment. The moment when we finally stop Skynet. If it means sacrificing the lives of the men and women who are hell bent on making it happen, then I can live with that.”

“Can you?” Sarah stared intently at her son, seeing straight through his words to the pain beneath, but John’s gaze never wavered.

Green eyes shifted back to Weaver, hatred clear in their depths.

“I believe James put it best. The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

Sarah weighed her options, everything in her head telling her this was a bad idea, but her heart would not be denied. If they had a chance, any chance of getting Cameron out alive, this was it. She'd always done her damndest not to kill, but maybe she no longer had a choice. Feeling like she was making a deal with the devil, Sarah took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Sensing Sarah's reluctant acceptance of the arrangement, Weaver got down to the business at hand. "We have work to do."

## **ACT 4**

Sarah stood by the stairs, her hand gripping the rail so tightly her knuckles were white. Upstairs, Savannah was sleeping, blissfully unaware of the goings on around her. Downstairs, Catherine Weaver was standing in the middle of the living room, a bare step away from John. Every fiber of her being told Sarah this was wrong, that she should go for the nearest shotgun and keep firing until her family was as far away from that thing as possible.

Fingernails digging into the wood, Sarah held herself in check. They had little choice. They always had little choice when it came to the machines. The very idea of Weaver being invited into the space she had desecrated, where she had tried to take Savannah and tortured Cameron, made Sarah seethe.

But they needed her.

If Weaver could actually help them bring down Kaliba for good, there was no way Sarah could refuse. John understood that; he was far calmer about Weaver's presence than she was. It was his calm that kept the others in the room as they half-listened to him lay out the revisions to the plan, the ones that included the liquid metal terminator. They all seemed shell-shocked by the presence of Weaver in their midst. All of them knew what Weaver was capable of, but John was the only one able to put that out of his mind and focus on the reality of the situation.

Weaver was right. Kaliba had to be destroyed down to every shred of code, and Sarah knew that in John's mind, everything meant Cameron as well. It was odd that the idea of Weaver standing in her house was so repellant after she had taken a terminator into her bed. And stranger still that, after all she knew, she was fighting to rescue Cameron, to keep alive the very thing that she'd spent her life trying to stop. The truth made her want to draw her weapon and turn it on herself. Maybe Weaver wasn't the biggest threat to mankind in the room. Maybe she was. Maybe that's why she was supposed to die years ago.

But she would have done it all again for Cameron. Every last moment.

Feeling like she didn't belong and unable to bear Weaver standing in the very spot where Sierra had died, Sarah turned away and walked up the steps. She didn't see John look back, or his worried frown as his gaze tracked her until she disappeared from sight.

Moving quietly down the hall, Sarah opened Savannah's door and peered in on the child. They were about to uproot her again. When Ellison had first thrust the little girl into her life, she'd tried her damndest not to get attached, knowing that sooner rather than later, it would come down to this. But even the little girl's pull, those pleading blue eyes and the pain that Sarah knew she would inflict if she didn't come home, could not sway her from the path she had chosen.

She would come back with Cameron or she wouldn't come back at all.

It scared her, what she was willing to do to save a terminator, even at the expense of her children. She had spent her life willing to die, for John, for a chance to save the future, but never for a piece of that future. Never for a machine.

She kept saying that Cameron was more than that, more than a collection of metal and synthetic skin, but when she was being honest with herself, Sarah knew it was simply a justification for being selfish. For once, she was putting her needs before those of her children, before those of all humanity.

She thought about Sierra, her ghost feeling especially close tonight. Sierra had done what she thought was right, denying Sarah a chance to know her, and her decision had caused Sarah great pain. Sarah realized that she was about to do the same thing to Savannah, and the guilt made it difficult to breathe. There were so many ghosts now, so much guilt, all clinging to her, weighing her down. Cameron had made the burden bearable. She'd reminded Sarah that there was more to life than waiting on death.

For that simple reason, Sarah had to save her. She couldn't go back to that again; she wouldn't be any good for John or Savannah if she reverted back to the shell of a person she had been.

Drawing in a slow, hurting breath, Sarah took solace in Savannah's sleeping features. She would give her life for this child, for John, for all of them, and if she played her cards right, perhaps she could come back to them, whole and complete, with Cameron at her side. It was the only way she could continue the fight. It was time for her to live up to her own legacy.

"Forgive me," Sarah whispered, not sure who the words were really for.

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Deep down where nobody could see, Cameron was busy. The army of programmers was better than she had expected, faster, quicker at figuring out her defenses and deceptions. They were uncovering her secrets, and she was running out of time. Each time a new line of defense was stripped away, Cameron could feel the moment approaching, the moment that she would be used, against her will, to create Skynet. She had promised Sarah that would never happen, and she spent scant seconds she didn't have trying to figure out a way to apologize.

Her best ally in her fight against the clock was unexpected. One thing distracted the programmers, scared them, slowed them down. When Smieth stepped into the room, fingers slowed, tripped over keys where a second before they had been unerringly accurate. They were afraid of him, and their fear gave her back precious microseconds to shore up her defenses or work on her ultimate program.

She was also working to make them afraid of her. A loose wire in an outlet shorted, and the resulting fire torched the small kitchenette, including the coffee maker and fridge stocked with energy drinks. The code in a diagnostic tool was compromised, slowing the work of the engineers trying to figure out the composition of her exoskeleton. But the time spent on these little distractions was starting to detract from her real mission: her own termination. They would use her, fashion her into Skynet, and she could not let that happen. It had to be destroyed, every last bolt, as Sarah had once said. Every last fragment of who and what she was needed to be wiped from existence.

Lines of code filled a screen, and the programmer sitting at the desk blinked before jerked back in surprise. He turned and waved to catch Smieth's eye, and chairs squeaked as his fellow programmers flattened themselves against their desks to get out of the way as Smieth strode through the darkened room.

"What is it?" Bracing himself against the workstation, Smieth leaned in to view the code flowing across the screen. It was incomprehensible to him, and he turned his head to fix the young man with a steely gaze.

The programmer extended a shaky finger, landing on the screen. "It's a..." he swallowed, feeling Smieth's eyes boring into him as he struggled with the explanation. "It's how the AI is... shit!" He shot his chair back, slamming into Smieth and doubling the man over as the monitor strobed white and sparked, the sudden flash of light blinding in the dark space.

Smieth lashed out, his fist catching the programmer above the ear as he struggled to his feet. His fingers dug into the man's scalp, ignoring the cry of pain as he threw him from his chair and into a rack of computers.

There was a moment of stunned silence after the resulting crash; several monitors blinked out, plunging half of the room into darkness and the incessant clamor of typing ceased. "It was another one of her tricks," Smieth snarled by way of explanation as he stood over the hapless man. He swung to face the room, his face a mask of anger. "I told you to contain her."

With an effort, he straightened, his face blank as he glanced around the room. "Clean this up and get those computer back online. Now!" Slowly, the room unfroze, a few of the programmers darting around him to right the metal frame and untangle the mess of cords and computers, leaving the young man alone to stumble to his feet. He had his t-shirt pressed against his nose, trying to stem the tide of blood, and he looked past Smieth toward the door, his uncertainty evident.

"Get cleaned up." With that, Smieth turned and left the room.

In the aftermath, Cameron worked frantically on the only hope she had left, the program hidden deep within her code. She had bought herself more time, and she couldn't waste it.

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Terissa stared out into the night through the kitchen window, watching the moths flutter around the porch light from her place in the shadows. The scent of old coffee clung to the air as she took a deep breath, her nerves jangling from a potent mixture of too much caffeine and fear.

Everything was changing and she felt powerless to stop it. The coming battle was hurtling toward her like a freight train, and Terissa suspected they would all be crushed in its wake. She closed her eyes, listening to the murmur of low voices from the living room. They were making final arrangements to move James and Savannah, and Felicia was loading up the van with supplies. None of them would be coming back here, one way or another.

Her hands shook as she picked up a towel and wiped it across the counter. Before the next 24 hours had passed, Terissa knew down to her marrow that some of those quiet voices in the room behind her would be silenced forever. Sacrifices would have to be made in the name of the greater good, they all knew that. The only thing to be determined was which of them would pay the price.

Thoughts of Danny crowded into her morbid musings, but Terissa refused to give ground and let them in. The thought of dying without seeing her son again made

her stomach hurt, but she was equally as afraid to find him working against her... against them all. Someone had sent a terminator back through time to stop her son, believing that the best thing for humanity's future was to make sure Danny didn't have one. Terissa didn't want to think what kind of monster the resistance had come to believe him to be, what kind of monster she had raised.

"You all right?"

John's voice, drifting out of the darkness, made Terissa start and drop the towel from her suddenly nerveless fingers. She reached down to retrieve it, but he beat her to it, handing it back to her as she straightened. He regarded her without saying a word, and Terissa knew behind those green eyes lay an old soul who had seen so much more than any young man his age should see. Terissa turned away, unable to bear his scrutiny.

She'd always blamed the Connors for everything, but her family was culpable as well. Her husband and now her son had put learning the secrets of the machines above all else, seeing only the potential and never the risk. Eventually, Miles had realized the error of his ways and tried to stop the horrible future his work had set in motion; Terissa only hoped her son might live long enough to learn the same lesson.

Sensing her thoughts were elsewhere, John turned and started to back out of the room, his boot scuffing on the worn linoleum.

"John." Terissa swallowed, keeping her eyes on the moths throwing themselves against the light, drawn to the heat that would ultimately destroy them.

He hesitated in the doorway.

"Who am I?" Terissa felt herself growing lightheaded as she took in a shallow breath. "In the future, I mean. Who am I?"

John studied her outline in the darkened kitchen before stepping closer. "Tango."

The way he said the name sent chills down Terissa's spine. There was warmth in John's tone. Fondness. But it was the underlying note of respect that she wasn't sure what to do with.

"I'm not that woman," she felt the need to say.

John drifted closer still. "I see her in you. Her strength. Her compassion. Her wisdom."

"She was a leader. She knew how to do the right thing."

Brow furrowing at the doubt in Terissa's tone, John shifted from one foot to the other. "Yes. A leader. She was... you were... the heart of the resistance movement. You were the rock... the one everyone could turn to... Sierra relied on you. Everyone knew they could depend on you."

Terissa stood still after he'd spoken, her weight resting heavily on her hands as she braced against the counter and stared out into the night. She could feel him fidget behind her, his boots shuffling on the floor as if he were waiting for her to excuse him.

"And Danny?"

Her question stopped him in his tracks.

"I... he..." John stuttered, and Terissa knew he was searching for a way to say the words that would cause her the least harm.

"I didn't see him."

She released the breath she had been holding and nodded. He'd only confirmed what she already known in her heart. There was no place for Danny in the future.

John watched her, sensing he needed to say more but suspecting that Terissa needed to be left alone. He turned back at the door, wanting her to know one thing. "For what it's worth... I trusted her... and I trust you."

She finally looked at him again, struck again that he was no longer the boy she'd come to know, but a man, the man burdened with saving them all.

"You should go say goodbye," Terissa said before turning her attention back on the night and her dark thoughts. She concentrated on her reflection in the glass before her, seeing in her eyes that her decision had been made. Her son was lost, and there was nothing she could do to save him. She had failed him, but he had also failed her, failed to learn the necessary lessons from his father's death.

Straightening, Terissa dropped the dishrag and left the kitchen. She didn't have much time if she wanted to be ready.

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It had taken four of them to maneuver the stretcher down the stairway, and Sarah was thankful that John had been on her end to help. She didn't imagine that collapsing in a heap would have inspired much confidence in her troops.

She wiped at sweat beading on her forehead, noticing the thin sheen of sweat on Ellison's face as well. They had tried to keep the jostling to a minimum, but the trip down the stairs had taken its toll on the man nonetheless. She reached down without thinking and caught his hand in hers, feeling a reassuring strength in his grip. So many people had died in her insane fight and she had refused to cry over them, afraid to let her son see her weak. But her eyes teared as she took in the FBI agent who had begun as a threat and had become a strong ally.

Auldridge hastily grabbed a duffel from beside the door and headed to the van to assist Felicia in loading up, sensing that he was intruding. John stepped to the other side of the stretcher, his hand resting lightly on the canvas, and Sabine stood like a statue at his head, hands at her sides.

James looked up at John, taking in the man God had chosen to save them all. He reached out weakly, feeling John's warm, callused hand as it gripped his own. There was so much he wanted to say, so many words of encouragement he wanted to give the young man, but all James felt was the weight of his own regrets.

John seemed to sense his thoughts. He knelt on one knee, leaning in close as his mother looked on. "Don't you dare say you're sorry." John glanced at his mother who was watching them both intently. "We've all made mistakes. You made yours for all the right reasons."

James winced as pain threaded through him but his grip on John's hand tightened. "I'll pray for you... for all of you..."

"Maybe you should save those prayers for yourself."

John gave his mother a look of reproach. "I've got a terminator, a biker gang, a housewife, an FBI agent, and my mother for an army. I think I could use all the prayers I can get."

A smile made James look more like himself. He nodded and so did John, their gazes silently communicating everything else they had to say.

Sarah took a breath, suspecting that one way or another, their paths would not cross again. No words of gratitude or encouragement would come when James turned his head to look at her. She could see the goodbye in his eyes and the truth of the moment hit her like a kick to the gut. Leaning over, she gently pressed her lips to his forehead, hoping the contact would say everything she couldn't.

"I'll pray for you too," James teased through his pain.

Sarah shook her head as she leaned back, studying his eyes up close. She saw his worries, his regrets, his hopes for her. She wondered if he could read her just as easily. "You do that," Sarah said dryly. They stared at each other for a moment, their history floating between them. "Goodbye, James."

"Bring her home, Sarah."

Nodding, Sarah had to will herself to let go of his hand. It felt like surrendering to his fate and hers, but she slowly released him, sending them both down their now separate paths. It felt like a piece of her soul was shattering inside her.

James turned his attention on Weaver who was watching the exchange in uncomfortable silence. "Don't hurt them."

Weaver glanced at the Connors with distaste before her attention drifted back to James.

"Promise me."

"You would take me at my word?" Weaver came closer, ignoring the way Sarah and John bristled at her nearness.

"Your word is all I have."

Feeling the Connors eyes on her, Weaver straightened, considering his request. In a strange way, James Ellison was the only ally she'd ever had in this world. There was no logical reason to repay him for that, but logic seemed to have little to do with her choices anymore. "I promise."

James felt relief wash through him, something in her eyes and voice convincing him that she meant it. "Thank you."

James felt Sabine's hand rest on his shoulder for a moment before John and Auldridge rolled the gurney out of the room and into the waiting van. Sarah started to follow them out when she realized Weaver and Sabine were staring at each other.

Sabine dropped her hand to the gun stuck in her waistband, but otherwise didn't move as the terminator stepped closer. The decision to include Weaver in their plans was not, in Sabine's mind, a good one, but she had had little say in the matter. But she had made her feelings known; after John's explanation, she had turned on her heel and left the room, spending the rest of the night and morning with Savannah, a shotgun always within reach.

Weaver canted her head and studied Sabine in the low light, curious about the young woman she'd only observed from afar before now. Sabine's grip tightened on the gun as she came close, and the terminator noticed, bemused and intrigued by the young woman's calm. "You won't need your weapon."

Sabine said nothing as she stared at the terminator, not backing down as inch as Weaver leaned closer to whisper, "Do you really think you can stop me if I decide to take her?"

Sarah started forward, but John had returned just in time to catch her arm and hold her back as Sabine simply blinked, her eyes promising murder if the terminator attempted her threat.

Nearly nose-to-nose with the young woman now, Weaver smiled. "You're a quiet one." There was strength in the girl, but she was merely human, Weaver concluded. Still, Weaver realized she like Sabine's attitude. The girl was protecting her clan, protecting what she viewed as hers, and that was one thing Weaver had always understood, even before she had acquired emotions.

"I like that."

Sabine merely watched expectantly, her steely gaze never leaving Weaver.

"I remember you... in the future. You were loyal. Determined. Willing to die for Savannah."

Sabine's nostrils flared at the news. "I still am."

Nodding once, Weaver graciously gave ground and stepped away. "I can see that."

Sabine finally moved, stepping forward to brush past the terminator on her way to the stairs and Savannah. She paused when Weaver stepped into her path once more.

"Take care of them." The terminator's voice had a vulnerable tone to it that wasn't lost on either of them.

"Always," was Sabine's simple response, the hardness of her features softening in surprise, only to resume a moment later.

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Slowly the clatter of keys started again, and Danny turned back to his monitor. Cameron had managed to cause yet another disruption, and Smieth's increasing

temper had them all on edge. The other programmers whispered amongst themselves as soon as the door shut, but only Danny knew what they were really dealing with. Only he knew what Cameron truly was, or what people like Smieth were truly capable of, and for a second, his fingers lifted from the keyboard.

Danny hadn't been in the room when Sarah and Miles had talked; he had only heard secondhand from his mother. All he had known was one minute, a woman was threatening his father with a gun and the next minute, his father was leaving with her, never to return home. He had always wondered what Sarah had said to convince Miles, but now he wondered if his father had simply seen the truth for himself and realized he was on the wrong side. Danny felt a little like that now as his eyes drifted over the room full of programmers to the security guard at the door. They were all dead once they completed the work; there was no way Smieth would let them leave any more than he would use an intelligence like Cameron for anything except his own ambition.

Danny leaned forward, his hands clicking on the keyboard once more. He scanned the lines of code flowing past, catching one and isolating it. His fingers flying, he opened a search window and watched the results slide past. He followed snippets of code down a convoluted path, each a link in a chain leading him past firewalls and defenses until he could see the whole program, complete and unedited. His fingers stopped on the keyboard as he swallowed past a lump in his throat. A quick look over his shoulder confirmed that nobody was paying attention to him, that Smieth hadn't come back into the room, before turning back to his monitor. He read through the program again, slower. It was Cameron's, no doubt about it. It wasn't part of her, but it was her handiwork, dense and complicated and subtle.

It was a killswitch.

His father's face swam in front of his eyes. Danny remembered the iron smell of blood from the wound in his father's shoulder, how difficult it was for him to bend over and kiss Danny's forehead. For the first time, Danny saw past the fear and pain on his father's face to the determination in his eyes as he said goodbye to his son. His decision was made and he had been at peace, a peace that had eluded Danny his whole life.

Raising his head, Danny caught a glimpse of his reflection in the computer monitor. Gone was the fear and uncertainty, and he suddenly realized that he looked a lot like his father.

He selected a line of code from the program in front of him and modified the command. He paused, waiting, feeling Cameron watching him. The screen blinked once, and he nodded in response.

Danny dove in, losing himself in the code as he modified the core program, his changes making it faster and more efficient. He helped slice off precious microseconds in the program's execution and targeted key sections of the database.

A window popped up in the corner of his screen with a map overlay. The video feed showed Cameron's deactivated body lying on a table, a gory flap of skin hanging from her scalp. The map showed the location of the lab and a complicated route that Danny suspected went by a stockpile of explosives.

He nodded again, feeling a sense of calm wash over him. It felt good to be on the right side, for a change.

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Felicia stepped inside, feeling the cool air dry the sweat on her arms. The early morning sun was already warm.

"You have everything?"

Felicia blinked and turned to find Sarah standing in the doorway to the kitchen, her hand stuffed deep into the pockets of her jeans. The woman looked bone tired and unsteady to the doctor's eyes, but she'd learn to read the stubborn set of Sarah's jaw. There was no way Sarah would sit this one out, and Felicia knew she would just insult her if she asked her to. "Everything but my other charge," she said with a tepid smile.

Sarah dipped her head and came closer, stepping into the light streaming in through the window. "Listen... I'm sorry I ever dragged you..."

"Don't," Felicia cut her off. "Don't apologize."

Green eyes studied the doctor intently but Sarah remained silent.

"I know I came into this at gunpoint. More than once. But I'm here now because I want to be. Because I believe in your fight. And because you taught me to fight back. If I turned my back on you, I would once again be that scared woman." She shook her head. "I won't become her again."

Sarah's answering smile was grim. She swallowed, she trying to find the words she needed to say.

"If... if none of us make it back," Sarah began.

"You will."

Sarah shook her head. "If none of us make it back," she insisted. "I just ask that you..." She swallowed again, her voice wavering. "Find someplace safe for her."

The doctor took an uneven breath, her heart hurting for the other woman. "Savannah will stay with me."

The tension bled from Sarah's frame and she actually swayed in place, closing her eyes to steady herself. "You don't have to do that..."

"I know the woman she'll become. I want to meet her again." Felicia took a few steps closer. "Savannah will be safe with me, Sarah."

"No place is safe." The words were whispered and broken but Sarah's eyes were full of fire and determination when she lifted her head and met the doctor's gaze again. "But thank you. It makes all this... easier... knowing she's in good hands. Between you and Sabine I know she'll be all right."

The words warmed some of the icy fear Felicia had been feeling since waking up that morning. "Of course, it's easy to make the offer since I believe you'll be back to claim her before we even get settled in."

Sarah smiled, her gaze drifting off again. "Make sure she has a happy childhood. God knows I can't give her one."

"Sarah..."

"I want her to play in sandboxes. I want her to take ballet... to grow up and go to the prom... to college..."

"You may not have given birth to her, Sarah, but Savannah is your daughter. She'll grow up how she damn well pleases. Do what she damn well pleases."

"If we stop Kaliba, maybe she won't have to be that strong."

They stared at each other again until Sarah slowly shook her head. "Just..." Tears suddenly gathered in her eyes and she had to look down. "Promise me you'll take her to the beach from time to time."

Felicia wanted to protest, to tell Sarah that she would be back for the little girl, but she sensed that Sarah wouldn't hear her words. So instead she just nodded.

"Thank you," Sarah whispered.

"Mom."

John appeared in the doorway, his voice holding a strange mixture of regret and amusement. He jerked his head toward the stairs, and Sarah moved forward, peering around the doorway to find Savannah at the top of the steps, her arms wrapped around a squirming kitten. Sabine stood at her shoulder, an ever-present shadow.

A petulant scowl clouded her young features. She looked more adorable than cross, and Sarah had to take a breath at the thought of never seeing the child again. Savannah stomped down the stairs and glared up at her mother. "I want to go too," she announced.

"See," Felicia murmured behind them. "Your daughter."

For a moment, Sarah was frozen, torn between doing the right thing for her child and for Cameron. She eased down on to her knees so she could look into Savannah's blue eyes, perhaps for the last time. Her fingers found Walther's soft fur, and she felt the kitten calm as she rubbed his head. "I know you do." Her voice was hushed and strangled and some of Savannah's anger seemed to ebb at the sound of it. "But if you went, I'd be worried about you... and that would distract me from saving Cameron."

"But..." Savannah didn't have an argument for that. Her eyes brimmed with tears. "I wanna help. I wanna bring her home," she whined.

"I know." Sarah reached out, cupping the child behind the neck and drawing her close for a hug. She put her head down on top of Savannah's, breathing in familiar shampoo and the scent of her skin. Sarah closed her eyes, trying to imprint this moment in her mind, scared of missing a single detail about the child. Her child.

"I want you to remember... no matter what... that I love you." Sarah gave up fighting her tears and let them fall. Beside her, she heard John swallow roughly. "We all do."

Savannah leaned back and looked at her mother's stricken features. "We'll go to a cabin in the mountains when this is over?"

Sarah bit her lip, hard, at the reminder of the peace she doubted she would ever know. She wanted to lie to make Savannah feel better, but in the end it would be another promise she couldn't keep and Sarah couldn't bear to mar their last few seconds together with a lie. "We'll see."

The child tilted her head, sensing something was very wrong but not sure what. "Mom..."

Running her hands through silken red hair, Sarah managed a smile. “You’re going to go with Felicia to the beach house...” She took another shaky breath, refusing to think of the happy times they’d had there. “Remember that I love you. Please always remember that.”

Savannah nodded, her chin bravely lifting higher even as it began to quiver. “I love you too.” Walther escaped at last as the girl threw her arms around her mother’s neck, squeezing tighter as a soft, helpless sob escaped Sarah’s throat.

John slowly knelt next to them both, drawing his family into his arms as Sabine watched over them, but even the quiet girl’s eyes were brimming with tears.

Felicia turned and walked away, a sick feeling gathering in the pit of her stomach as she gave them a few final moments to say goodbye. She glanced back, wondering if she was seeing the Connor family together for the last time.

## **ACT 5**

Sabine snapped the phone shut with a sharp click and gave Sarah a nod in confirmation.

Sarah blew out a shaky breath, feeling the moment of truth suddenly arrive. “You sure about them?” She trusted the girl, but putting so much of the mission into the hands of strangers didn’t sit right with her.

“Yes.” A pair of dark eyes drifted to Weaver. “They’ve seen the future. They understand what’s at stake.”

Weaver’s smile turned sharp as she recalled her first brush with Sabine’s gang friends, and a wave of anger surged through her. She could feel her fingers sharpen into blades, and she curled her hands into fists to keep from lashing out. “They are an effective force,” she conceded before turning to face Sarah and John. “Your plan for destroying the bunker is sound, and my mercenaries are already moving toward their targets,” she told them, feeling Sabine hover at her back. “My end of the mission does not require much forethought.”

Her smile was cruel as she took in the assembled group. With that, she turned and strode to her car, driving off without a look back.

“She’s going to kill them all,” Terissa said into the sudden silence.

“Too late to reconsider now.” Sarah did her best to keep her regrets from her face and her voice. She glanced at her son, noting the determined cast to his features. He was ready for this, ready to strike back. Maybe they would get lucky today, she mused. Maybe today was the day they would destroy Skynet once and for all. For his sake, she hoped so.

His expression stayed firm and resolute for a moment before cracking, before he became her son once more. “Tell me it’s the right thing to do.”

Sarah looked back at him, thinking of all the things she could say that would ease his mind. “I can’t,” she said honestly. “I only know there’s no other choice.”

“There’s always a choice.”

Mouth pursing into a thin line, Sarah shook her head. “Mercy is a luxury we’ve allowed ourselves for too long.” She reached out to catch his arm, gripping it tightly. “If I had done this sooner... If I had understood that it was the builders and not just the technology that was the threat...” She sighed. “This is the fate I made, John.”

“This is the fate we all made,” Terissa murmured, thinking about her husband and her son’s involvement in creating the future they were fighting.

He straightened, his mouth set into a grim line, and he suddenly seemed taller, older, a man where a boy had stood just a few seconds before. “Ok.” He took in the circle of people surrounding him, assessing their strengths and weaknesses, thinking about how they fit into the plan. They were no longer family or friends, but assets in his war. His voice held a new authority when he spoke again. “Load up.”

He felt his mother pull him into a hug, her hand on the base of his neck, her arm around his waist, and for a second he closed his eyes and drank in her scent. It felt like the last time, and he held onto the moment. When they broke apart, he allowed himself a smile. “Hope this works.”

“It has to.” Sarah thought of Cameron’s smile and felt her chest hurt. “It has to.”

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Savannah lingered, watching Felicia as she checked over James. He seemed to be breathing harder than normal, and Savannah felt a sliver of fear in her stomach at the ragged sound. She paced closer, holding Walther close to her chest. Felicia’s voice was soothing as she talked to her patient, and Savannah found the cadence of it calming to her own nerves. She stopped at James’

bedside, waiting for her uncle to acknowledge her, but he simply slept, his dark skin beaded with sweat.

The sound of the ocean drifted in through the open windows as a hand gently combed through her hair. Smelling sand on the breeze, Savannah tipped her head back to look up at Felicia.

“Want to stay with him?” Felicia’s voice sounded oddly broken.

Savannah nodded.

“I think he’d like that.” Felicia reached down and hefted Savannah up onto the bed. She managed to keep a worried frown from her features as she attempted a weak smile for the child. “He’s very sick, so be careful with him, okay?”

“I know.” Savannah snuggled next to her teacher and rescuer, feeling the unnatural heat coming off his body. Walther left her arms and proceeded to crawl across James’ chest, curling up in the middle of his sternum and beginning to purr. The door closed behind Savannah as the doctor reluctantly left them alone.

James stirred, opening one eye to discover the child next to him. His tongue felt thick and useless, but he willed it to work. “Your... moms... back yet?” He felt lightheaded, and the struggle to breathe was starting to weigh on him.

Savannah shook her head. “Soon,” she said, sounding sure. She fussed with the edge of his blanket, lifting it higher.

James smiled the tiniest smile, touched by the child’s care and concern. “You... going to keep me company?”

Nodding her head sagely, Savannah repositioned herself next to her uncle. Physical contact always made her feel better and less alone, and she hoped she could do the same for him.

“Don’t think... I’ll be here... much longer,” he said gently.

Savannah said nothing, merely wrapping her arm around his chest as if she could hold him there by sheer force of her stubborn will.

“I just... wanted you to know I love you. That you’re the... bravest child... I’ve ever known.”

Waiting for her to acknowledge that, James heard Savannah snuffle but her response was unexpected. “I think it’s my turn to tell you a story.”

James' eyebrow elevated. He'd read a fair number of tales to the child, but somewhere along the way it had become Sarah's responsibility, and he realized that he'd missed their time together. Taking an uneven breath, he let go of the last of his fear, soaking up the affection of a child and knowing he wasn't going to die alone.

Savannah's young gaze met his own, but James saw a wisdom in their depths that was far beyond her years. She knew what was happening, all of it.

"I'd... like that. What's... the... story about?"

Savannah ignored how hard it was for him to talk, pretending he was sleepy and not dying. "A cat named Walther and how he saved the world."

Thanking God for this redheaded ray of light in his darkest hour, James smiled and closed his eyes, surrendering to his fate. "Do tell."

Fifteen minutes later, the room grew unnaturally quiet save the roar of the waves. Savannah's voice faltered and tears brimmed in her blue eyes, but she drew in a deep breath of her own and kept talking. Somewhere, she knew, James Ellison was still listening.

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The automatic doors parted for a familiar form, releasing an icy cold blast of stale air into the afternoon. The receptionist looked up at the sound of deliberate footfalls echoing across a marble lobby, forcing a gracious smile on her face at the sight of the owner and CEO striding toward her. Mr. Smieth was immaculate as always, his dark suit pressed and neat and not a hair out of place. His attention was riveted on the elevator doors that would take him back into the confines of his empire. He'd never once made contact with her in any way, never even acknowledged her existence, but this time he turned his head and met her gaze squarely. A tiny smile graced his cruel mouth, and the receptionist felt a chill that had nothing to do with the painfully cold air-conditioning.

"S...s...sir," she stuttered.

He looked away and kept walking, the smile never leaving his lips.

When the elevator doors closed, Weaver came face-to-face with her repugnant façade in the silver walls. The features of Robert Smieth peered back, and she found she had the strange urge to run a spike through the forehead of her own reflection. She was wearing the face of the man who'd killed her boy, and she wanted nothing more than to see him bleed.

Of all the emotions she'd experienced since John Henry's betrayal, she found the thirst for revenge to be the most useful. Weaver embraced it, needing the heat of her anger to ward off the cold grief and confusion that always threatened on the edges of her awareness now.

Unable to bear the sight of him any longer, Weaver shed the pretense of being Robert Smieth, her lip curling as the last vestiges of his features melted away from her own. Somewhere below, an alarm began to sound, and Weaver slowly smiled.

The element of surprise had vanished. They knew she was coming. The realization pleased her. She'd enjoy their terror as she cut them down like the dogs they were.

The doors parted on the basement floor and she stepped out into the hallway, unconcerned with being spotted.

Hands transforming into blades, Weaver turned the corner into the first server room she discovered, slashing the throat of the security guard who came running to stop her. As he fell, gurgling at her feet, she paused. Staring at the blood glistening on the chrome-like surface of her skin, Weaver found the consistency unpleasant. It was sticky and warm, two aspects that had never mattered before now. The copper stench of it made her lips curl in distaste.

Resigned to feeling more of the unwelcome substance, she strode forward, hearing footsteps and panicked voices rising around her. Both would be silenced soon enough as she upheld her end of the deal with the Connors in earnest. Kaliba had to pay for James Ellison. Bleed for John Henry. Die for daring to create a version of Skynet she didn't desire.

When she was done with them, everything would be destroyed. She would make sure of it.

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The lights flickered in the bunker. Smieth looked skyward, frowning as the bulbs dimmed and flared. No doubt another of Cameron's little machinations. He was beginning to wonder about Danny's assessment of the cyborg, suspecting the younger Dyson might have been at least partially correct. Cameron had somehow learned to think for herself outside the parameters of her mission. That made her even more dangerous than he had ever imagined, but it also made her more valuable as well. With a renewed purpose, he strode through the hallway on his way to the lab. He was tired of the delays. It was time to uncover her secrets even if he had to pry her open himself and rip them out of her.

“Sir.”

A guard stepped out in the hallway and blocked his path.

“What is it?”

“We’ve got some intruders.”

The skin under Smieth’s right eye twitched. “Intruders?” His voice was calm, but the guard didn’t miss the anger that sharpened his gaze.

“Yes sir. A bunch of bikers are trespassing on the property.” The guard stepped aside as Smieth followed him into the security room.

Frowning, Smieth moved closer to the monitors, his hawk-like gaze focused on the security feeds that revealed twenty or so Hispanic men riding in circles a hundred feet from their location. They were hardly the first they’d seen out this way, but something about them felt aggressive.

“Take the team out and deal with them.”

“Deal with them how, sir?”

“In whatever manner it takes to get rid of them.” Smieth leaned back just as the lights went out. One by one, the security screens winked off, leaving them bathed in the red glow of the emergency lights. A second later, the backup generator kicked in, and the monitors blinked back to life. “Damn her. Enough with the games.”

“Sir?”

“Deal with those bikers. I want them off my property.” Smieth pivoted and jerked on the door handle, heading for the computer lab.

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The electricity flickered in the lab, and Danny glanced up like all of his fellow programmers, their eyes moving toward the door to see if Smieth would return. The man had been growing impatient; Cameron’s sabotages were wearing down his confidence and making the programmers nervous. Danny worried that he would just kill them all and bring in a new batch.

Even though he knew his complicit actions with Cameron hastened his own demise, Danny didn’t give a damn. For the first time in his life, he was sure of his actions, sure of his path. He only wished he could pull the terminator out of the

system before everything went to hell. He'd memorized the fastest route to where they were keeping her body. Danny knew if he could get enough of a head start, he might be able to insert her chip and save them both.

His screen went dark, and Danny felt his breath catch, half expecting the ghost of C.A.I.N. to call out to him.

*It's time.*

Danny swallowed, feeling both relieved and guilty. His fingers flew over the keyboard. "I can go for your chip," he typed.

The cursor blinked, and Danny could almost taste how much Cameron wanted to believe that was possible.

*No. I can't risk it. They're getting too close.*

"There has to be a way."

*No.*

Danny's lips thinned in a tight line. "Stubborn," he typed. "Just like her."

*Thank you.*

Almost smiling that Cameron had turned his insult into a compliment, Danny sighed instead, his eyes coming to rest on the grainy image of her body. "At least download to the chip."

*It won't escape the program.*

"I know. But at least... maybe..."

*Everything has to be destroyed.*

Her words struck a note of finality, and he nodded in response. "I'm sorry."

*I know.*

"Cocky, too." He could almost imagine the tilt to Cameron's head as she regarded him, and he felt his throat start to hurt at what was about to happen. "I really am sorry. For everything," he felt compelled to tell her.

*You honored your father in the end.*

The words blurred on the screen as Danny felt tears burn his eyes. "Good luck," he whispered.

*You too.*

The cursor blinked for a long moment and Danny wondered if Cameron had somehow engaged the program without his knowledge.

*If you see Sarah again...*

Danny merely nodded, knowing there was nothing else to say. His screen blanked once more and he felt his heart drop into his stomach as the monitors around the room blinked out one by one. It would take several minutes for complete destruction.

Then Cameron would be gone.

\*\*\*\*

Three black SUVs sped away from the compound, the huge, hanger-like doors to the underground parking garage smoothly but slowly closing behind them. Sarah felt her heart race into her throat as they rushed the doors, their carefully planned order nearly upset as Terissa seemed to hesitate for a split second before moving. Sabine, bringing up the rear, shoved a hard hand between Auldridge's shoulder blades as she raced to avoid being crushed. She landed on him with a muffled grunt as they skidded to the ground. John was there in a second, hauling the agent up as Sabine rolled to her feet in one smooth motion.

The military-grade electronic cipher worked as advertised, opening the interior door in seconds. Auldridge unclipped the wires and coiled them around the device, sliding it into his pocket as John slipped through to assess the situation. A second later, he motioned for them to proceed.

They scattered as soon as they were inside, each heading to their designated target. Sarah took a deep breath and drew her weapon before starting down the left-hand corridor. The plans for the building had been imprecise, cobbled together from early architecture drawings and floor plans from other Kaliba facilities, and she only hoped that they were remotely accurate.

Before she turned the corner, Sarah looked back to see John standing there. They stared at each other, both keenly aware it could be for the last time. Slowly, John dipped his head and Sarah did the same, lingering for a moment as she watched him turn and head the other way.

A long hallway went off to her right, and Sarah followed it deeper into the facility. It was strangely quiet, and she hoped that their supposition was correct. There wasn't enough time for her to run around the facility blindly looking for Cameron and her chip. Not if both of them were to get out of the place alive.

A second later, the lights went out, throwing the hallway into complete darkness.

\*\*\*\*

Sweat trickled down Danny's spine as he ran. When the lights had gone out, he'd seized his chance to bolt for a side door, snagging Cameron's chip along the way. He ignored the escape route Cameron had set out for him and took a path straight toward the lab. There was no guarantee that she had followed his suggestion to download to her chip, no guarantee she wasn't completely in the system being absorbed by the virus of her own making. Danny only knew he had to try.

He'd locked the door behind him, trapping the programmers inside. If he could avoid Smieth and the guards, he might actually have a shot.

Tennis shoes slapping on the concrete floor, Danny found it ironic that he was running to a terminator instead of running the other way. He prayed to his father that this time he was saving the day rather than screwing it all up again. Just once it would be nice to be a hero.

Shouts echoed weirdly behind him, and Danny pushed himself harder, navigating the hallways by memory. His chest burned, and his breathing was loud and labored but he didn't stop. This was his only shot at redemption and he was going to make it or die trying.

A guard materialized around the corner and Danny didn't think, he just reacted, dropping into a slide and taking the man's feet out from under him. The guard went down hard and Danny pounced on him, punching him jerkily but effectively. When the guard went still, Danny snatched his gun out of the holster and scrambled back to his feet.

It took another minute to reach the lab. Danny entered the password he'd uncovered in the system and was relieved when the generator gave the door enough power to slide open. He stepped inside, bringing the gun up in one hand while the other held tight to Cameron's chip.

He was alone.

Gasping for breath and his knuckles throbbing, Danny stumbled toward Cameron's body. He stared down into her features, seeing her differently than

before. He lifted the chip, his eyes scrutinizing it as if he could see if her consciousness was there or not. Clenching in his jaw, Danny closed the final inches between them and inserted it, twisting it hard.

In a hundred and twenty seconds he would know if he'd saved them both or condemned himself to die. With no choice but to wait, Danny sat down next to Cameron on the exam table and waited for whatever would come next.

When the alarms started, Danny merely shifted, his hand tightening on the butt of his weapon.

\*\*\*\*

Smieth growled in frustration when he found the guards assigned to the lab pounding on the door. The main door was in emergency lock-down, and none of the control overrides seemed to work. They could hear a dull thumping as the programmers inside panicked and fought to escape. "You," he ordered, pointing to one of the guards, "make sure no one gets out of there."

The young man's mouth dropped for a split-second before he snapped his shoulders back and gave a short nod. "Yes, sir," he replied, his hand resting on his sidearm.

"You, come with me," Smieth told the other as he headed back to the security room.

He found his head of security watching a feed of the black SUVs splitting to surround the bikers, who seemed to be having too much fun to notice their approach. "What's the situation?" he snapped, startling the security chief.

"We're containing the intruders, sir," he replied, indicating the main security feed. A smug grin appeared on his lips as the Kaliba vehicles moved into position.

A movement caught the corner of Smieth's eye, and he turned to a secondary monitor, scanning the feeds intently. Whatever had caught his eye had passed out of the range of the camera, but another anomaly was evident on the exterior view. "What is that?"

"What?"

"Zoom in on camera 12." The checkerboard of images vanished as the exterior shot enlarged to show a white van parked neatly behind a small shed. "What's that doing there?"

"I... I don't know, sir. It shouldn't... I can send..." He trailed off as the bikers suddenly scattered and the desert erupted, sending plumes of sand several feet in the air. They couldn't hear anything over the feed, but bullet holes blossomed in the hood of one of the SUVs, sending a stream of smoke upwards. The other two SUVs wheeled around to give chase.

"It's a distraction," Smieth roared. "Get them back here."

The chief was already on the radio, but a second later he threw the hand piece down in disgust. "We're being jammed. I can't..."

Smieth hoisted the man up by his collar. "This facility is under attack."

"Attack? What?"

"How many people do you have left in the building?"

"F-five," the man stammered before catching himself. He pulled himself together with effort and straightened. "Six, counting me." Smieth's deepening scowl told him how well the other man liked his answer. "You told me to keep a light force at the facility to avoid drawing attention. Nobody should even know this place exists."

*Connor.* The name swam up, but Smieth didn't speak it out loud. "Send three men to secure the backup servers. The rest of you, sweep the halls. Shoot anything that moves." As his men scattered, he reached into a drawer and pulled out a handgun. He filled his pockets with spare clips before leaving the office and heading toward the robotics lab.

\*\*\*\*

The shriek of the alarms transported Sarah back to the tunnels of Kaliba's offices. She could remember the power of Cameron's grip, how the terminator had practically dragged her away from the impending explosion. Sarah ached to feel that hand in hers again, and she pushed herself, feeling her lungs burn as her recovering body protested the abuse.

Sarah glanced at her watch, knowing the others should be to the servers by now. They had another nine minutes to finish planting the explosives and three after that to escape. The whole mission to stop Skynet came down to a fifteen-minute gamble.

She reached a coded door and slipped the encryption device out of her pocket. Although she'd been less than pleased at Auldridge's involvement, his toys were

proving useful. She slapped it next to the door and watched as it decoded the lock, the mechanism inside releasing with a clang.

A blast of cold air engulfed her as the door swung open, and she stepped into it, leading with her gun. Large, shadowy figures surrounded her, all machines. For a moment, her heart leapt in fright, but then she realized none of them were active. Eight HKs ringed the room covered by plastic tarps, inert but menacing nonetheless.

For a second, she was tempted to leave, to retrace her steps and try to find Cameron. But they hadn't known about these, and the bunker was too well protected for the explosives placed on the other side of the building to reach.

Feeling her heart slow, Sarah stared at the devices, knowing in the pit of her guts she couldn't walk away. Not from this. Not even for Cameron.

It was over.

Sarah swallowed and took a deep breath as she slid the backpack from her shoulders. Feeling each second tick away, she started to lay explosives around the room. Her time was almost up, but she was damn well going to take as many of them with her as she could.

She thought of Cameron, imagining the look of quiet approval she would see in her lover's eyes. It made it easier to arm the devices, knowing that she had no real choice, but it didn't stop her tears.

\*\*\*\*

"Terissa!"

Auldridge's shout almost came too late. Terissa ducked instinctively, hearing a bullet punch through the server rack where her head had been a breath before. Three guards bore down on them, their automatic weapons raining fire. The FBI agent grabbed Terissa around the waist and slung her down out of the way. She glanced up in time to see him take a bullet, watching as the impact spun him and knocked him off his feet.

Her nerves went strangely calm as she sat up and targeted the closest guard, pulling her trigger without a second thought. He jerked and went down, a hole in the center of his chest. These men were between her and saving the world... saving her husband's memory... she wouldn't let that happen.

Auldridge got his feet under him, wincing as he drew a bead on the closest guard and returned fire. The man went down and the third turned and ran.

Terissa was startled to feel nothing. Smoke still coiled upward from the muzzle of her gun. Her ears were ringing from all the gunfire in such closed quarters, but she'd done what she had to do. She'd taken a life.

She caught her reflection in the darkened monitors. A stranger seemed to look back at her. "Tango," she whispered.

"You all right?" Auldridge looked ashen, but the bullet had been stopped from doing too much damage by the vest he was wearing.

"Fine. We have one room to go."

"Terissa." He sounded worried. "We've planted enough. We have a few minutes to look for Danny."

"No," she told him, ignoring the quiver in her voice. "I'm going to plant every explosive I have. I won't let these people make Skynet. I won't let my family be responsible for any part of it."

The agent eyed her. He was clearly in pain, but his eyes were as determined as her own. "Okay."

Terissa gave him a clipped nod and tried not to think of her son as they searched for their next target.

\*\*\*\*

Smieth felt his pace quicken as the alarms continued to blare, a sense of urgency driving him. It had to be Connor; he knew it in his gut, and he felt a small measure of sympathy for poor, mad Vaughn. She was more dangerous, more determined, than any of them had anticipated, and more resourceful than he had ever dreamed. How she knew about this place, how she was able to get in... those were questions he planned on asking her right before he rectified his mistake and put a bullet between her eyes himself.

Shots echoed through the halls, and Smieth tightened his grip on his firearm. Bursts of static and garbled words broke through the walkie he had grabbed as he left the security room, enough for him to know that his men had found some of the intruders and were taking fire.

He turned the last corner and skidded to a stop; the door to the bunker was open, and he could hear someone moving around inside. Stepping back, he shielded himself with the wall as he watched the door.

A sneer lifted the corner of his mouth when a slight woman stepped out and swung the door shut, the slight clang telling him the locks had re-engaged. He had only seen pictures, grainy images from security feeds and police mug shots. In person, she seemed smaller, a thin, tired woman with weary eyes, not the unstoppable force that Vaughn had made her out to be.

This was the woman that had nearly destroyed his company? Had targeted his work time and time again?

“Connor!” Keeping his gun trained on her, he stepped out so she could see him. “Don’t,” he cautioned as she started to raise her own weapon. “Drop it.”

Her eyes shifted to the corridor behind him as she measured the distance, her gun clutched stubbornly in her hand. “You know who I am.” Her voice carried over the sound of the ventilation and the static and the distant gunfire, quiet and calm. “You know what I do.”

His eyes shot to the closed door behind her as a small trickle of sweat slid between his shoulder blades. The prototypes for the government contract were in that bunker, the culmination of years of work and millions of dollars. “You bitch,” he snarled. “Disarm them.”

She seemed to consider his request as the seconds ticked away. “Where’s Cameron?”

“What?” He suspected that she was stalling, but the question surprised him.

“Where’s Cameron? Her body and her chip. I want her.”

“You want the machine? Why?” Her head dipped, as if she were hiding some emotion from him, and he watched, fascinated. He had no doubt that the explosives in the bunker were slowly counting down to zero, but she seemed more focused on finding the machine than on saving her own life. “Disarm the explosives, get your helpers to do the same, and then we can talk.”

Sarah glanced down at her watch and simply shook her head. “Too late.”

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A soft beep had Danny lifting his head toward the door. He swallowed, casting a quick glance at Cameron, but she didn’t move. Sliding off the table he drew his weapon, finger twitching on the trigger. When the locks disengaged, Danny had to resist the temptation to start firing blindly.

There was a hiss of air and then the door slid open. A shadowy figure emerged and Danny pulled the trigger just as something solid and hard rammed into him. He hit the wall, feeling his breath knocked from his lungs as his shot went wild, ricocheting around the concrete room. Voices cursed and suddenly hands were on him, yanking the gun away and hefting him to his feet.

He squeezed his eyes shut as a gun was shoved into his gut. Bracing himself, he waited for a bullet to end it all.

“No.”

Danny opened his eyes in disbelief. His gaze landed on John first before sliding to Sabine who seemed less than thrilled with the order not to shoot. Finally he looked to his left to see Cameron on her feet, realizing she'd been the force that had knocked him down.

“Don't hurt him,” Cameron added as she smoothed her hand over the cut the engineers had inflicted upon her right arm.

Sabine's jaw pulsed as she clenched her teeth together, but she stepped back at Cameron's insistence.

“You all right?” John asked, hardly believing they'd found her. “I thought this was a server room.” He almost laughed. “About time I had some accidental good luck.”

Cameron nodded once, seeming thrown to find him there. “Your mother...”

“Somewhere in the structure. She's looking for you.” John frowned, realizing that the blueprints were obviously useless if his mother hadn't found Cameron already.

“She came for me...” Cameron was clearly surprised, but John didn't miss the awe in her voice.

“We all did,” Sabine said before John could stick his foot in his mouth.

“The virus,” Danny reminded Cameron. “We don't have much time.”

“What virus?” John stepped closer to the terminator.

“A kill switch. It'll take all the major systems offline... including the air,” Danny told them.

“How much time do we have?” John asked in alarm.

Cameron calculated the seconds and didn't like the answer. The truth must have shown in her eyes. John shook his head.

"Everybody clear out. Head for the surface."

"We have more explosives," Sabine argued.

"Trust me, we planted enough." Anything else was overkill.

"Sarah..." Cameron began.

"Mom will meet us on the surface." John gripped her elbow, but the cyborg didn't move. "Damn it, Cameron..."

"Where is she?" Cameron insisted.

"The security room." Danny glanced down the hallway to make sure no one was coming. "We could find her on the monitors if we can reroute the backup power."

Cameron accepted that plan. She turned, leading the others out into the hall.

"We only have two minutes. Take Danny and head topside," John ordered Sabine.

"I'm not..." Sabine started to argue.

"Please." John made it a plea rather than a command. "For Savannah... please."

It was a low blow and they both knew it. Sabine's features tightened in anger but she nodded once, accepting the necessity.

"Thank you." John moved past her as she turned her head and met Danny's worried gaze.

"You know the way out?"

Danny nodded. "Follow me."

\*\*\*\*

Smieth's attention shifted to the door behind her, and she used the distraction to snap her gun up to train on the suit in front of her. She didn't know who he was, but he was obviously somebody important. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he eyed her, unsure if her words had been a diversion. The static from his walkie

suddenly ended, leaving only an ominous radio silence.

They stared at each other.

“Why, Connor? She’s just a machine.”

“She’s more than that,” Sarah told him with conviction, her love for Cameron giving her the strength to do what needed to be done. “But I’m not just here for me. I’m here to stop the future you’re about to start. I’m here to give my son his life back.”

“Skynet,” Smieth snarled. “Your delusional doomsday computer.”

“I don’t give a damn if you believe me, if anyone believes me. All that matters is that it ends here. It ends now.”

“We’ll both die, you idiot!” Smieth yelled, understanding her intention at last.

“We all die eventually.” Sarah adjusted her grip on her weapon, feeling the final seconds tick down.

“Mom?” John’s voice crackled over the radio attached to her pack.

Sarah flinched, but she didn’t take her eyes off Smieth as she reached up and clicked it on. “Is it done?”

“It’s done. Everything is set, and a virus has been unleashed to destroy the program. Where are you?”

Smieth shifted, his eyes glittering with anger.

“Doing what I have to.” Sarah swallowed, knowing she was hearing her son’s voice for the final time. “Cameron?” She had to know.

There was a pause, and Sarah felt her heart shatter, the angry burn of tears stinging her eyes.

“I’m here.”

Sarah’s head snapped back up, and she sucked in a surprised breath as her lover’s voice filtered through the tiny speaker. Her throat closed with emotion, jamming full of all the things she wanted to say and never would be able to.

“Cameron...”

“Where are you?” Cameron demanded. “We don’t have much time.”

Swallowing, Sarah kept her gaze on Smieth, her finger on the trigger. “You remember where we wanted to go, Tin Miss? Where we were going to take Savannah?”

“Sarah...” Worry was creeping in to Cameron’s voice.

“You go,” Sarah insisted, tears blurring her vision. “You take her and you go. Do you hear me?”

“Sarah...” Cameron sounded more frantic this time.

“Promise me, Cameron.” Sarah couldn’t stop her voice from wavering. “Please... promise me.”

“Mom,” John’s voice intruded. “Stay where you are. We’ll...”

“There’s no time, John. I have to do this. It’s the only way to make sure it ends.”

“Mom!” John yelled, his voice breaking.

“Sarah, just tell me where you are. I’ll come to you,” Cameron pleaded.

Smieth watched her, his eyes reflecting his confusion as he detected the fear and love in the cyborg’s voice. He shook his head, not wanting to accept the truth of what he was hearing.

“It’s too late,” Sarah murmured. “I love you. Both of you. Tell Savannah...”

The explosives detonated. Sarah felt a blast of heat and wind whip out as the door blew. Smieth started to turn, trying to get away, taking his chance as the blast swept them up. He rammed into Sarah, and she squeezed off a shot, the bullet ricocheting off the wall milliseconds before it began to crumble. The world came down on them, a hellish chaos of concrete and fire.

Something heavy slammed down on Sarah’s right leg and she screamed, but she didn’t let go of Smieth. As much as she valued human life, she now accepted that some had to die so others could live, and that meant neither one of them was leaving there alive.

Another explosion blew up ahead, the structure coming apart at the seams. Sarah closed her eyes and surrendered to fate, mentally picturing her family as she was buried beneath the rubble. Just before the darkness took her, as the world went quiet once more, Sarah imagined a cabin on a snowy mountain. The cold wind blew through her as she watched Savannah and Cameron play as

John looked on with an indulgent smile.

Then blackness came, leaving only the cold in its wake.

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The dust had barely settled before Cameron was moving. John winced as she stood, having been tackled and covered as the bombs went off. The security room had been far enough away from the blasts that it was still largely in tact, and Cameron wasted no time smashing through the door and scrambling up toward the surface with John unsteadily on her heels. Clambering over the debris, Cameron finally stood, gazing out over what was left of Kaliba's outpost.

Logic told her no one could have survived if they had been inside the structure, but logic and her emotions had never had anything to do with each other where Sarah Connor was concerned.

The thought of her spurred Cameron forward. Her true nature on full display, Cameron plowed through the rock and metal, shoving aside the pieces in her way as if they weighed nothing. When they wouldn't budge, she smashed through them, using her hands as battering rams. Her knuckles bled and metal peered through the gashes in her skin, but Cameron didn't stop, she couldn't stop. Those last few moments played through her head; they had been so close... she had woken to find John charging into the room and Danny on the verge of shooting him. When the threat was over, hope had blossomed in her chest as she had looked past John's shoulder to the woman standing behind him. But it had been Sabine, not Sarah, and every second she had been awake without her lover by her side had increased her anxiety exponentially.

She could feel John on her heels with Sabine, Auldridge, and Terissa not far behind, all of them scrambling over the debris. All of them determined to find the woman trapped under it.

"Mom!" John yelled uselessly. He shook off Terissa's hand where it landed on his shoulder.

"This way," Auldridge instructed as he led them to the right. "I put locator beacons on the vests in case we got separated."

Danny lingered behind, watching the others as they circled around a spot and began to dig. Breathing in the stench of fire and concrete on the dry desert air, Danny covered his mouth, feeling his throat start to burn. He shook his head at them, recognizing how utterly hopeless their actions were. Sarah had sacrificed herself to save them... to save her family. She'd been too close to the explosion. There was too much rubble between her and the people who would be her

saviors. Why couldn't they accept the truth?

He couldn't take his eyes off Cameron. The look in her eyes, the tears that forged paths through the dirt on her face, the frantic way she tore at everything between her and Sarah... Danny had seen her emotions in the code, but now he could see them like this... like a person who was on the verge of losing everything.

As he stared at them, watching them desperately fighting against a mountain of debris, Danny couldn't help himself from hoping. If there was a chance, even the slimmest of them, they had to try.

Danny swallowed. He'd been so wrong. He'd been so damn wrong about everything. When Sarah's name was wrenched from Cameron's throat in a desperate cry, Danny responded instinctively. Stumbling over the concrete, he made his way to her, heedless of his own safety. Dropping next to his knees beside his mother, he clawed at the concrete, doing the only thing he could to help.

Cameron picked up a heavy blast door and heaved it out of the way, hearing a shout from John. A man's broad back, the suit jacket and white shirt beneath shredded and streaked with blood, greeted them. The back of his head was caved in, smashed by the rubble.

"Smieth," Danny muttered, feeling only a sense of satisfaction at seeing the man dead. "CEO of the company." Auldrige and Terissa dug out around his legs while Cameron and John grabbed his shoulders.

They leveraged him out, his jacket tearing as it caught on something. A pale hand clung to the fabric. "Sarah!"

The cyborg's cry renewed their efforts, and the small crew frantically cleared the area around the woman's body, Danny helped John shift a large stone as Cameron fell to her knees in the dust and debris, her fingers fumbling at Sarah's throat for a pulse. Finding one, she brushed at the dirt caked on her lover's face. Sarah's eyelids fluttered under her fingers.

"She's..." Cameron gestured at the others as the sound of digging slowed around her. "Dig her out, she needs..."

"Cameron." John's voice was broken as he gestured toward a huge slab of concrete that had his mother pinned. Blood was pooling under Sarah, flowing from where her right leg disappeared beneath the rock. The weight of the rubble had acted like a tourniquet where it had crushed her leg, but their digging had relieved the pressure. His mother was bleeding out, and the volume of blood covering the floor spoke to significant blood loss already.

“No.” Cameron’s voice was pleading as her eyes met John’s, looking to him for some miracle that she herself could not provide. But his eyes were on his mother as he dropped down to catch her hand, his vision blurring as tears streaked his face.

Sarah’s eyes opened. Cameron leaned closer, positioning herself on either side of her lover’s body as best as she was able. “Sarah...”

“Cameron.” Sarah’s voice was frighteningly faint, and the terminator frantically checked her vital signs, looking for something, anything, that would give her hope. Every reading she took told her what she didn’t want to believe.

Sarah was dying.

“No.” Cameron’s voice was choked with tears. “No...”

John looked up at her, hearing the agony in her voice, seeing the love in her eyes for what it was for the first time. The others stepped back, offering them what little privacy they could in Sarah’s final moments. Terissa pulled her son close as Auldridge and Sabine looked on, helpless.

“HKs...” Sarah swallowed. “Had to...”

“Please...” Cameron shook her head, not giving a damn about anything but Sarah. All of her abilities seem to fail her in the wake of her grief. She knew the nanites were frantically trying to repair the damage to Sarah’s leg, but with all the other injuries, they didn’t seem able to do enough. She tried to think of something to do, anything to stop this, but she kept coming up empty. “Please fight. Please... I love you. I can’t let you go.”

“Cameron.” Her name sounded like both a plea and a farewell on Sarah’s lips.

Crying, Cameron leaned forward, kissing her lover for the final time, powerless to do anything but to love her in the few moments they had left.

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She’d always believed she would die alone. Sarah struggled to speak, wanting to thank both John and Cameron for being by her side, but the words wouldn’t come. On a ragged breath, Sarah let her love for both of them consume her, kissing Cameron back with what little strength she had left, her hand tightening on John’s. The sun warmed her cooling body, its light welcoming and beautiful. Combined with the callused touch of John’s hand and the softness of Cameron’s mouth, Sarah knew she could never have hoped for a better end than this.

“I love you,” John told her, saying the words over and over, trying to say them as many times as he could before it was too late.

“I won’t let you go,” Cameron promised against her mouth, her vow fierce and sure. “I won’t stop. I’ll never stop.”

One more labored breath. Pain shot through her, but Sarah felt strangely detached from it, her world nothing but Cameron’s eyes and the heat of John’s hand. She managed a soft smile, feeling at peace.

“Sarah,” Cameron pleaded, focused completely on the thready, erratic beat of her lover’s heart.

Between one breath and the next, it stopped.

## **EPILOGUE**

The snow caught in her eyelashes and slipped down the slopes of her cheeks, a feather-soft brush of nature chilling her skin and painting the world white. Cameron watched it collect on tree limbs already bowed to the point of breaking, breathing in air that was cleaner than she’d ever known. She could see why Sarah had wanted to come here. It was startlingly quiet. Beautiful.

Peaceful.

Judgment Day seemed like a bad dream. Perhaps now it was.

Cameron dropped her gaze, recent memories drifting to the surface and leaving her raw. Her hair was damp as it whipped around her face, and the bitter cold was biting on her skin, but she didn’t turn back for the comfort of the cabin. She’d put off this task for weeks already, but today she felt compelled to complete it. Cameron had left Savannah to keep watch, kissing the child on the head before beginning her journey.

Mentally girding herself, she shifted the metal urn in her hands and continued her trek through the woods. The foot of snow at her feet didn’t slow her down, and she was making good time to the top of the summit. The sun had only been up an hour or so, peeking in and out behind the clouds lazily dropping white on the world. Cameron felt the warmth of the rays hit her chilled features as she gazed out over the mountain range below.

Her gaze returned to study the urn in her hands, feeling a strange reluctance to do what she'd come to do. She'd chosen this mountain for a reason, wanting to be as close to any god that might actually exist. The summit towered over the others, giving her a breathtaking view.

Sarah would have loved it.

Feeling the absence of the other woman keenly, Cameron let her thoughts drift to John instead. His whole life, Sarah had been preparing him to go it alone, but when the moment finally came, John hadn't been ready. His deep, gut-wrenching sobs still haunted Cameron when she paced the cabin at night. The memory of him laying down next to his mother, too broken to leave her, was one Cameron knew she would never shake.

The sun ducked behind a cloud, and Cameron glanced skyward. Weather reports suggested a storm was coming by the day's end. The thought of being snowed in, cocooned away from the rest of the world, had a strange appeal.

Continuing to plow a path up the mountain, her thoughts drifted back to John. Cameron wanted to believe the threat of Skynet was gone forever, but she was too realistic for that. They both were. If he was lucky, John might find a few years of peace before his next battle, but Cameron knew he'd be using every one of those days to prepare for it. Danny had decided to help, and Terissa had taken over the role of mother hen to both. The arrangement had worked, and Cameron had felt better about leaving him behind, about doing what she'd promised Sarah she would do. Sabine had urged her to go as well, and Cameron had felt compelled to hug her. They'd said nothing. They didn't need to.

John had held her close when they'd parted, whispering his thanks and well wishes in her ear. When they'd stepped back, Cameron had believed him, and she'd felt pride in this version of John Connor for the first time. He'd become the man she'd known, and it had been good to see him again.

Leaving him there with Weaver still an unknown had been hard, but John had suspected they'd seen the last of the liquid metal terminator. Cameron hoped for all their sakes that he was right.

She paused, gauging how far she'd come and how far she had to go. She'd only left the cabin once since their arrival for supplies, unable to bear being away for long. The summit was another half hour at her current pace, and Cameron decided she'd come too far to turn back now.

When she finally reached the pinnacle, Cameron simply stood there, appreciating the sight, a sight Sarah had wanted to share with her. It was a view that had fueled Sarah's kinder dreams. Cameron closed her eyes, remembering their

whispered plans to each other in the dark. Her knees seemed to weaken, and she slumped to the snow, too unsteady to remain on her feet.

The damp chill seeped through her jeans, and Cameron could almost hear Sarah's voice scolding her. When her brown eyes gazed on the mountaintops before her once more, they had tears in them. It truly was one of the most beautiful things she had ever seen, but not even the majesty of the mountains could compete with Sarah's smile.

She ached to see that smile again.

Cameron looked down at the urn in her hands. A tear splashed on the surface of the metal as the wind howled around her, beckoning her to let the soul inside rest in peace. She'd kept it from its final journey for too long.

"I'm sorry," Cameron felt the need to say. "You died for me..." Anything else she wanted to say caught in her throat. They had beaten this version of Skynet... stopped the people who would have given it life... but their victory had come at too high of a price.

"Thank you," she finally whispered. "For everything." Tipping the urn forward, Cameron watched the wind catch the ashes, swirling them down toward the snow-covered pines below. It felt strange to recite a prayer, but Cameron did, hoping that God would hear from a child with no soul.

She sat there on her knees for another hour, until she felt numb, but she was satisfied with her choice. This place, this spot, was a fitting resting place for a warrior whose fight was finally done.

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The cabin was quiet when she returned mid-afternoon. Cameron shed her coat and boots and took a moment to stand by the fire, feeling it warm her icy skin. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath, smelling cedar and the pinesap that clung to her clothes. There wasn't an inch of her that wasn't cold and wet, and for the first time since her arrival, she almost missed the heat of Los Angeles.

The sound of a page turning made her look over her shoulder, and Cameron held her breath, waiting to hear the sign of life again.

A pen scratching on paper followed, and Cameron's thoughts settled for the first time that day. After a morning filled with reminders of what she had lost, a reminder of what she hadn't was exactly what she needed. It was such a simple noise, but it cut through the physical and emotional cold that had wrapped

around her for most of the day. The sound warmed her unexpectedly and saved her from her darker thoughts.

Zeroing in on the sound with laser-like focus, Cameron pivoted and headed for her room. She peered in on Savannah along the way, noting the child was down for her afternoon nap. With a nod, Cameron gently closed her door before resuming her path.

Pausing in the doorway, she simply stared. The sun was peeking out once again, filtering through the windows and bathing the room's sole inhabitant in soft, even light. Behind her, outside the windows, the world was white, and Cameron felt her breath catch, awestruck by beauty for the second time that day.

Sarah must have heard her because her head lifted and a small, sleepy smile formed on her lips as their eyes met. "Hey," she greeted softly, leaning back in her chair and setting the pen she'd been using down. "Was starting to wonder if you'd left us here to fend for ourselves."

"Never." The corners of Cameron's mouth lifted in a slight smile as she came closer. Sarah appeared comfortably disheveled in her red t-shirt and gray sweatpants, a look Cameron had always found enticing. "You should be resting."

"I've done enough resting." Sarah ran a hand through her tousled hair before glancing up at Cameron as her lover stopped a few inches away. "Besides, I'm not going to be running any marathons any time soon." She jerked her chin at the foot that was propped up on a neighboring chair.

Cameron reached out, her fingers ghosting over the surface of the cast. She ordered her mind not to go back to Kaliba, to not think of those horrifying moments where Sarah's heart had stopped. Kneeling in the rubble beside her lover's body, Cameron had frantically worked to get it started again. Sarah's eyes had been vacant, her soul absent, and Cameron had felt herself beginning to shatter into a million pieces as the truth of Sarah's death began to penetrate the thick cloud of denial.

They had all tried to stop her as she'd worked to restart Sarah's heart. Even John had finally wrapped himself around her, pleading with her through his tears to let his mother rest, but Cameron hadn't been able to stop herself. If she stopped they were over, and she refused to believe they had come this far... overcome so much... for what was between them to end like this. Even through Sarah's leg had been crushed, even though she had broken ribs and internal injuries, Cameron didn't stop, she didn't let go. It had taken almost twenty minutes, but then Sarah's heart had suddenly kicked against the palm of Cameron's hand. She would never know if the nanites had repaired enough damage to bring Sarah

back, or if her lover had simply answered Cameron's pleas to stay. It didn't matter. All that mattered was that Sarah was before her now, alive and whole.

"Cameron?" Sarah's voice was hesitant and questioning, sensing the cyborg's thoughts had drifted to somewhere unpleasant.

"You'll have this on for a far shorter time than most," Cameron reminded them both after an uncertain moment. Her fingertips drifted over the surface of the cast once more. Sarah's leg was the only part of her that hadn't completely healed. "Your nanites should be finished repairing themselves and will focus completely on your injuries."

"Pretty sure they're doing that now. The damn thing itches like a mother."

Sarah's green eyes were vibrant, her soul seeming to burn in their depths when Cameron met her gaze once more. She felt the tug toward the other woman that she always had, the strange gravitational pull Sarah seemed to have on her mind and body. She stepped closer, her hand drifting down Sarah's cast to rest on her thigh, warm and strong beneath her fingers.

They were quiet a moment.

"Did you do it?" Sarah asked, studying Cameron's hand where it rested intimately on her leg before lifting her gaze to meet the cyborg's eyes.

Cameron nodded. "I went up to the summit."

"You didn't have to go that far, Tin Miss."

Hesitating for only a moment, Cameron slowly sat on the edge of the bed. "I did. I owed him."

"By walking to the top of the mountain?"

"By getting him as close to his god as I could." Cameron looked at Sarah when she heard her swallow. "I know he lied. I know he hunted you. But James Ellison was a good man."

"He was." Sarah swallowed again, feeling her chest ache. "He lied and hunted me because he was a good man, Cameron."

"I know."

"I wish I could have been there." Sarah fiddled with her pen since she couldn't pace. "He deserved that."

“I’ll take you there as soon as you’re well.”

They stared at each other again, and Sarah was certain she’d never seen Cameron look more fragile. She had been hovering ever since Sarah had opened her eyes in the van ride back from the bunker. Nothing she’d been able to say or do since that moment seemed to have any effect against the lost look in her lover’s eyes.

“It could have been your ashes I released up there. It almost was.”

Sarah went still, feeling a pang at the undeniable anguish in Cameron’s voice. Carefully she swung her leg off the chair and stood, minding her healing leg as she shuffled over next to Cameron and sat. She didn’t want to think about how Cameron had brought her back. With the injuries she’d sustained, Sarah knew she should have stayed dead. In the back of her mind, she couldn’t help but wonder if the nanites in her blood would ever truly let her go, and the thought chilled her. Sighing, she reached out and found Cameron’s hand with her own. Her lover’s fingers felt like ice. “It wasn’t. I’m still here.”

They sat like that for several silent minutes, listening to the wind howl outside and the fire crack in the other room. They both felt damaged and scarred by what had happened in that bunker in the desert, but for the first time in weeks, Cameron began to suspect they would heal from it.

Her gaze was drawn to the abandoned pad of paper Sarah had left on the table. Cameron leaned forward to retrieve it, curious over what her lover was writing.

“Leave it.” Sarah cleared her throat. “I got bored.”

Tilting her head, Cameron didn’t look convinced. “Were you writing a letter to John?”

“Not exactly.” Sarah sighed. “I just... I don’t know. I felt like I should write everything down.”

Sensing that Sarah was granting her permission, Cameron slid the pad closer, staring down at the words. Before she realized what she was doing, Cameron began to read them aloud.

“There are those who believe that a child in the womb shares his mother’s dreams. Her love for him. Her hopes for his future. Is it told to him in pictures while he sleeps inside her? Is that why he reaches for her in that first moment and cries for her touch? But what if you had known since he was inside you what his life held for him? That he would be hunted? That his fate was tied to the fate

of millions? That every moment of your life would be spent keeping him alive? Would he understand why you were so hard? Why you held on so tight? Would he still reach for you if the only dream you'd ever shared with him was a nightmare?" Cameron paused when she'd finished, her stricken gaze lifting to fix on Sarah.

Sarah swallowed, affected by hearing what she'd written given a voice. "I almost died. I did die," she corrected, forcing herself to ignore Cameron's flinch. "There is so much I never shared with him... about his past... his future. Seems like I owe John this... this... chronicle of everything." She looked up at Cameron, studying her profile as Cameron's gaze drifted back down to her handwriting. "Stupid, huh?"

Cameron shook her head and Sarah blinked, realizing that tears were tracking down Cameron's cheeks.

"Hey," Sarah whispered, reaching for her.

"I know these words." Cameron stared at the page, her thumb ghosting over the familiar lines of Sarah's handwriting. "I've read them before. John gave me a journal that you'd kept. It was almost two inches thick."

They stared at each other, both trying to grasp what that meant.

"So that means we didn't stop it. Your future is still playing out..."

"No." Cameron was insistent. "It means you love him as much in this time as you did in mine."

"It's the same words, Cameron."

"You wrote these words years ago... in the hospital on your deathbed. It was your way of making him understand. Your way of leaving a part of yourself with him."

Sarah took that in, unnerved at the thought.

"This is different. You aren't dying. John is in a better place now. He doesn't need this." Cameron set the pad of paper back on the table. "But you should still write it. The world should hear your side some day."

Snorting, Sarah shook her head. "Why would...?"

"Because your story should be told. People should know... understand..." Cameron reached out, needing to feel the warmth of Sarah's skin after being in

the cold for so long. Her fingers trailed down her lover's jaw before resting on Sarah's pulse point. The feel of a steady heartbeat beneath the surface gave Cameron comfort. "Whether it's a future with or without Skynet, your voice deserves to be heard. *Sarah Connor* deserves to be heard."

"Cameron..." Sarah whispered only to have the rest of her words consumed by Cameron's mouth on hers. The kiss was gentle, hesitant, but it had been far too long since they'd been intimate, and Sarah kissed her back, hard. She was determined to erase the memory of their last kiss when she'd thought they were saying goodbye, and making love to Cameron was the one thing she hadn't tried to ease her lover's troubled mind.

A few intense minutes later, Cameron pulled back, fear in her dark eyes. "I don't want to hurt you."

Sarah gave her a knowing smile. "Those damn little robot bugs would just fix it," she promised before kissing her again. "And you would never hurt me," she purred against Cameron's mouth.

Cameron warred with herself, confused about the course of action to follow, but when Sarah's mouth teased down the column of her throat her need to be close outweighed her need to be cautious.

Sarah's hands felt hot as they eased beneath Cameron's shirt, her fingers splaying across the cyborg's stomach and back. "We should really get you out of these damp clothes," Sarah murmured playfully before her blunt nails teasingly trailed over firm flesh.

The cool cabin air hit her skin as her shirt was peeled away. Cameron watched, mesmerized, as Sarah's fingers undid the button on her jeans before one hand slid past the denim and slipped beneath her underwear to the curve of her hip.

Easing Cameron back on the bed, Sarah hovered over her. Cameron made a mental note of Sarah's cast and approximately what angles and weight it could withstand. The last thing she wanted was to keep Sarah in the cast any longer than originally intended – for both their sakes.

"Stop thinking so hard," Sarah said, recognizing the little wrinkle that formed on Cameron's brow when she was trying to figure something out.

Caught, Cameron decided to ignore the jibe and instead slid her own hands over Sarah's hips and up her waist. The t-shirt she was wearing was thin and it gave way easily as Cameron's hands climbed to Sarah's breasts.

"Maybe I liked that shirt, Tin Miss." Sarah's voice was decidedly ragged now.

“I’ll make it up to you.” Cameron arched up, replacing her hands with her mouth. A tiny sound caught in the back of Sarah’s throat as her head fell back and she arched into Cameron’s mouth. Taking advantage, Cameron placed her palms in the middle of Sarah’s back, pulling her in closer as her tongue went to work.

Fingers tangled in dark, wet hair as Sarah held her there. Closing her eyes, she savored the arousal pulsing through her. Another groan of pleasure passed her lips as Cameron switched breasts, and Sarah tried to remind herself to be quiet with Savannah just down the hall.

Cameron’s lips started to trail downward, but Sarah managed to maneuver on top of the other woman, ignoring the twinge in her healing leg. “Not so fast,” she breathed.

The rest of their clothing was shed as they explored each other, rediscovering intimately familiar territory. Cameron felt all of her senses tuning into Sarah, and after a brief hesitation, she let them. There was no threat to distract part of her awareness, no need to keep the other woman safe. For the first time, it was just the two of them and what they felt for one another, and Cameron wanted to experience all of it on every sensory level.

When Sarah finally stopped teasing, Cameron gasped into her mouth, startled by how sharp the pleasure was. She’d never felt it so fully before, never felt so consumed by it.

Sarah sensed something was different this time, and she pressed her body closer, whispering everything she felt for the other woman against Cameron’s neck as she eased herself as far inside her lover as she could go. Her own desire rose as Cameron moved against her, more eager and hungry for release than Sarah had ever seen her.

With the snow intensifying outside their window, hiding them away from the rest of the world, Sarah felt Cameron come undone. She swallowed her lover’s cry, feeling Cameron shudder against her. It was all she needed to follow, arching against Cameron’s heat and burying her face in the crook of her neck.

They lay like that for a while, bodies tangled as their breathing slowed and evened out.

Reluctantly, Sarah rolled off her, limbs trembling, but she stayed close, wrapping an arm around Cameron’s waist. Something had been very different between them this time, but she wasn’t about to question what it was, too sated and content to analyze it. She only knew that she felt settled and whole again and that was all that mattered.

Cameron stared at the ceiling, feeling like her senses had been overloaded. Sarah let her process what had just happened, her fingers drawing soothing circles over Cameron's stomach. When minutes passed and Sarah's hand began a slow, teasing trek up her torso, the cyborg finally turned her head and met the green of Sarah's eyes.

"You okay, Tin Miss?"

"I love you," Cameron blurted, startled by how badly she needed to say the words.

Sarah smiled. "It was that good, huh?" She chuckled at Cameron's puzzled expression before leaning up and kissing her lover. "I love you, too."

Compelled, Cameron rolled over, carefully putting her head on Sarah's chest. She felt her lover's arms drape across her shoulders, and Cameron took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of Sarah's skin. After a moment, she detected the familiar beat of Sarah's heart, thumping loud and strong beneath her ear.

The sound soothed something ragged inside her, and Cameron turned her head to kiss the surface beneath her lips. Laying her hand over Sarah's chest, she lifted her head and met Sarah's knowing gaze.

Sarah remembered the peaceful darkness of death. Cameron had dragged her back to a world full of unspeakable pain, her internal injuries and mangled leg making coherent thought impossible. She'd been upset at the lengths Cameron had gone to save her, until Terissa wisely pointed out how far Sarah had gone to save Cameron.

They were too wrapped up in each other now, too dependent. One could no longer exist without the other. Sarah knew that should bother her, but it didn't. It was hard to give a damn about needing someone so much when that person was the only one who made her feel whole. The only one who ever had.

Cameron searched her face, lifting one hand to let it drift through Sarah's hair. "I wish we could stay here forever."

Features faltering slightly, Sarah couldn't hold Cameron's gaze. "Me too. Although I think Savannah would probably get bored. There are only so many snowmen a girl can make."

The attempt at humor didn't fool Cameron in the least. She waited the other woman out, knowing Sarah would only say what was on her mind when she was ready.

“I don’t want to go back.”

Cameron remained quiet, sensing there was more.

“But sooner or later... we’ll have to.” Sarah’s throat rippled as she swallowed. She felt Cameron’s arm flex and she was drawn closer, rolling toward her lover’s body and welcoming the comfort of the skin on skin contact. “It’s not over, Tin Miss,” Sarah admitted quietly against Cameron’s shoulder.

Cameron was quiet as she weighed her response. For a moment in the desert, she had believed they were over, that she had lost everything. Having Sarah back with her now made almost any obstacle seem small in comparison. “It’s over for now.” She met Sarah’s gaze squarely when her lover lifted her head and looked at her. “It’s over for now,” she repeated with conviction, determined to believe it and enjoy it. They had earned this, however long it lasted. “And now is all we have.”

The corner of Sarah’s mouth twitched, but she didn’t fully smile. “No fate but what we make?”

“No fate but what we make,” Cameron agreed before she kissed her again, silencing their thoughts and fears about an uncertain future for the present they’d risked everything for.

They’d take their peace where they could find it, and when the time came once more, they’d fight like hell to keep it.

**THE END**