

SCC VS Episode 7: Where Madness Reigns

By Ralst

Teaser

The muted greys of dawn slowly crept across the landscape, illuminating the tired waste of a city crawling with the oblivious, all intent on their own happiness and unconcerned with the future their actions would help to create. It was a world where style was prized more highly than substance, and the mighty dollar was worshipped like a god. A world where the warnings of an apocalyptic future were treated as the ravings of a deranged mind.

It was home.

As the familiar pain of displacement faded, John realised that he was finally back where he belonged, amidst the flashing neon lights and distant sounds of traffic that were the signature tune of the twenty-first century. He took a heady breath, reveling in the stench, a disgusting mix of rotting food and diesel that characterised the industrial areas at the edge of the city. It was an aroma he knew well, but until that very moment, he had never realised how much he had missed the pungent odour. In a strange way, it reminded him of the future, with its polluted air and areas of depravation, but the lingering taint of decomposing food cut through the similarities and grounded him in the present. A present where food wasn't prized more highly than gold and his belly had never known true hunger.

The sound of a horn blaring brought him out of his musings, and a sudden shift in the wind reminded him of his nude and vulnerable self. A smile tinged his lips at the absurdity of human modesty, but he was unable to curb his response and quickly searched the area for any sign of voyeurs.

His body hunched, he shuffled towards the nearest shadow, his euphoria edged with sadness as he began to realise the extent of his loss. The future, that had never been his, had passed into non-existence without even a hint of protest, but the memory of the people he had left behind reached out to him with ghostly arms.

His father, now a child, would never know the son he could have fathered, the spirals of history poised to rob them of even a passing acquaintance. Allison, the mirror image of his first love, had stepped from the shadow of her reflection and gained a unique place in his heart. All of his plans and hopes had crumbled to dust as she slipped from his fingers, and his dreams of a shared future shattered against the dirt of an uninterested street.

Tears welled in his eyes, before he forced himself to ignore the future's pull on his loyalty and remember the reason for his return.

Keeping to the shadows, he began his journey home, to the one person who time and distance could never remove from his life, his mother.

Act I

White noise invaded Sarah's mind and dragged her kicking and screaming into the blinding absence of light that shrouded her war-ravaged body. Pain consumed her. The white-hot fires of Hell danced naked across her skin, taking indecent pleasure from her

muted screams, before congregating in a blazing inferno that engulfed and finally consumed her left arm. Sarah's past and future lost all meaning as the agony tore through her defences and demanded nothing less than total surrender. Names, once sacred and later defiled, crumbled to ash in her mouth as she beseeched the Heavens for a release from the unholy pain.

"Cameron!" The name caught in her throat, but its utterance sliced through her torment with indecent ease, the agonies of white replaced by the darkness of the night as the world around her began to take form.

The outline of furniture and her meager belongings began to come into focus as Sarah turned in her bed to reach for the warm body she remembered. "Cameron?" The sheets were cool to the touch and held no trace of the vigil Sarah half-remembered. Groping with blunt fingers, she searched for Savannah, but the child's warmth was as absent as Cameron's.

The sheet fell away with reluctance as Sarah abandoned the bed and went in search of the others. The IV tube, aggressive in its salvation, pulled at her skin and issued a reminder of pain's dominion. With trembling fingers, Sarah ripped it from her arm, the stench of blood pervading the room and following her as she stumbled out into the hallway.

Cameron's name tried to force its way past her lips, but years of caution stayed Sarah's voice and drove her to seek the darkest shadows. Sarah had no idea how long she'd been unconscious, or what horrors might have befallen the others during her slumber, but there was one thing she knew with gut-wrenching certainty and that was that a different kind of darkness had invaded their new home.

A light flickered.

The burst of white squeezed at Sarah's chest and tore the very air from her lungs. She knelt by the stairs, gasping in remembered pain, as the world around her first shattered and then coalesced into its lie of normalcy.

A discarded doll, its smile deformed by anger or haste, mocked Sarah's pain from where it lay forgotten. The evidence of yet another broken childhood, the blame for which she could never escape, forced Sarah to her feet. The world around her swayed, but remained solid, the feel of varnished wood against her soles the centre of her universe, as she slowly began to make her way down the stairs and towards the light.

Sarah's palm ached with the absence of a weapon. In the warehouse, the walls had been pockmarked with secret arsenals, their locations memorised and secure. The new house, its walls untarnished, held no such secrets, and she was forced to continue, alone and defenceless.

The light emanated from behind the closed door to the living room; the bursts of light created a halo of menace that any normal person would heed, but Sarah Connor had abandoned normal decades before, and no ghost writer's cliché was going to change that. Scrabbling around in the darkness for anything she could use for a weapon, Sarah's fingers tightened on a rugged, and seemingly incongruous, piece of timber; splinters from its untamed surface savaged the palm of her hand, but with effort, she was able to hold it aloft, a meagre barrier against whatever new evil lurked on the other side of the door.

Her right hand clasped tightly around the makeshift weapon, Sarah reached for the door with the other, but even as the limb rose in reluctant compliance, she knew it would be incapable of the task. Her fingers, once dexterous, felt bloated and sore; her forearms,

caught in the inferno of her imagination, pulsed with a fire that raged just outside of her senses. The dull ache, that her mind had chosen to ignore, erupted in sweet agony as her hand collided with the door, sending Sarah spluttering to her knees, her vision once more consumed by white.

For as long as she'd been fighting against the future, Sarah had been plagued by physical pain, her body a road map of injuries both trivial and severe. She had learnt, in that cold factory decades before, to fight through the pain and get the job done, but there was something different about these agonies, something that robbed the strength from her veins.

"Get up," she choked. "Get up and fight!"

The words barely rippled against the surface of the air, but they were enough to propel Sarah off of her knees and back into the motion. Her left arm discarded as useless, Sarah clumsily turned the door handle with her right, the wooden club banging against the sheetrock and robbing Sarah of the single true weapon in her arsenal: surprise.

Her eyes momentarily blinded by the light, Sarah manoeuvred through the room by memory, the expectation of gunfire dogging her every step, until she fell to her knees behind the false sanctuary of the couch. Slowly, as her vision began to clear, she could discern the source of the light: a computer monitor, its screen cracked and abused, lay on its side, light streaming from within in a staccato of vision blurring whiteness. Eyes half-closed, Sarah inched forward, determined to see past the light to whatever lay beyond.

Clouds of colour began to dance in the air, but Sarah refused to look away.

White faded, grew weak, and blinked out of existence, leaving the screen blank. The room fell into darkness. Seconds passed with neither sight nor sound as Sarah waited, not fooled by the tricks of light and darkness. The screen flickered back into life, its whites muted with shadow as a picture slowly began to form; a lone figure, devoid of definition, stalked the streets, its purposeful stride reawakening Sarah's worst nightmares.

It had found her.

The source of all her terrors; the big, hulking, inhuman machine that had ruined her life and set her on the path to insanity with its very being. The one she had destroyed, time and again, in her nightmares, only to see it rise again and take from her everything that she held dear. She had always known, despite all she'd seen, that in the end it would just be the two of them: human verses machine, with no grey areas or questions of morality, just black and white, kill or die.

Footsteps echoed through the house.

The tread was heavy and sure, but it lacked the feminine grace that coloured Cameron's every move. It could be Ellison, returning from God knows where, but Sarah couldn't be certain, and without certainty, she wouldn't allow herself the luxury of relief. Holding the club aloft once more, she shuffled on her knees into the darkest shadow, her arm throbbing in protest with every jostle and jerk. If it was that thing on the monitor, she wouldn't stand a chance, but if she could only damage it somehow, she might make things easier for Cameron on her return.

A floorboard creaked.

The figure loomed in the doorway; its face was obscured, but the paleness of its skin robbed Sarah of her last hope.

She charged.

The club sliced through the air with clumsy grace, pulling Sarah off-balance as it delivered its first, glancing blow that was quickly followed by a second and then a third, before the creature wrenched the wood from Sarah's blood-soaked hand and threw it with contemptuous ease to the floor. Enraged, Sarah threw herself at its head, her fingers clawing at its fake skin as she tried to gouge out its eyes and reveal the machine within. A scream, muffled by the blood rushing through her veins, spoke of treachery and deceit, but a familiarity, more felt than heard, stilled Sarah's hand.

Light from the monitor, strangely absent until that point, flared to life, illuminating a young face creased in pain, but instantly recognisable.

John. Alive. Home.

Distrust warred with instinct as Sarah stared at the impossible, her good hand reaching out of its own volition to brush the hair from his eyes, and in doing so, releasing a torrent of memories that washed away any doubt.

"John?"

He smiled. The years of resentment had melted away, and for the first time, in what felt like a lifetime, Sarah could feel both his love and trust, without reservation.

Falling to her knees, Sarah reached for him, silent words of gratitude ruffling his hair, as she pulled him close, breathing him in, as she'd done when he was first born, as if she could capture the moment and set it in amber. One heartbeat, two, and the reality started to set in. Her head swam, her body ached, and her arm was on fire, but none of that mattered, because he had returned. She squeezed him tighter. He was real. His body was solid, and warm, and wet.

A choked sob rattled the air.

"John?"

Blood, as black as night, clung to his lips as words formed, but failed to appear. His light, that had been so clear to her moments before, fell into shadow, as his head lulled forward and his last sight became that of his undoing.

Confusion was rapidly followed by horror as Sarah called to him, desperation strangling her voice, as her gaze followed his to the churned battleground of blood and flesh that was all that remained of his chest. Metal, sleek and grey in its destruction, had bulldozed its way through his body's meagre defences and ripped the very heart from his breast.

The metal sang with triumph, its edge capturing the dancing light and blinding Sarah with the truth she was too afraid to acknowledge.

The metal, buried deep within her son, burned with a fire that had become all too familiar. The strong lines, marred by blood and guts, liquefied and transformed, turned from a weapon to a mother's caring hand, to Sarah's hand.

"No!"

The scream tore through the house.

Sarah's body lurched forward, her eyes crazed with delirium as they searched the shadowed world of insanity that only she could see. Cameron was the first to reach Sarah's side; she knelt beside her on the bed, her arms cradling Sarah's trembling body as it surged with adrenaline and fear. Her whispered words of comfort fell on deaf ears, but Cameron was powerless to ignore the compunction, and she continued to make promises of a salvation that might never come.

The house had remained unusually quiet after the doctor had departed, and Sarah had fallen into a restorative sleep, but as the light of a new dawn flooded the room, the tremors had started, and within minutes, Sarah's body had been bathed in sweat, her muscles taut with the strain of unknown terrors.

"John!"

From the very moment of his departure, Cameron had witnessed the devastation John's absence had caused his mother, but it wasn't until she heard the agony in her voice that Cameron truly understood the depth of Sarah's pain. Her own culpability in his desertion flooded Cameron with guilt and, in that moment, if she could have clicked her heels three times and turned herself into Sarah's wayward son, she would have willingly done so.

"He's safe," she lied; the unknown future masking her words with the cover of a truth she no longer believed in. "He's not here, Sarah, but he *is* safe."

Her assurances failed to illicit a response.

With a seemingly casual brush of fingertips against heated skin, Cameron recorded Sarah's body temperature at an alarming 104.7. The doctor, in her haste or incompetence, had missed something, Cameron was sure of it. She had calculated all the variables, and the blood transfusion should have worked, and yet Sarah's all-too-human body, weak and feeble by design, continued to defy instruction and raced heedlessly on its course of self-destruction.

Cameron reached for her cell; precise calculations were issued by her processors to instruct her hand on the exact amount of pressure to use for optimal deployment of the device, but all the mathematical wizardry in the world could not keep her from pounding the numbers and cracking the phone's fragile case.

She listened, her face a mask of calm, as her call went to voicemail. She did not leave a message. Her decision to spare the doctor's life had seemed fortuitous when Sarah's condition deteriorated, but with each unanswered call, there was building within Cameron a desire to see the physician pay.

"Will she be okay?"

The quiet voice cut through Cameron's thoughts of destruction and tinged her need for arbitrary retribution with the hint of shame. It was the first time Savannah had spoken in hours, and Cameron could see the distress it caused the girl to question the outcome she'd been promised. Standing at the end of the bed, Savannah had silently watched as Sarah's body began to reject its salvation, her lip bloodied with worry as she witnessed the onset of Sarah's terrors.

"Yes." Cameron kept her voice firm, with only a hint of the warmth she usually reserved for the girl, unable to even contemplate a different answer to the question. "I told you, I won't let her die."

This time, there was no fiercely comforting hug or sense of relief, just a short pause followed by a nod as Savannah signaled her acceptance. It was in that moment that Cameron recognised the shadow of Sarah's influence, and she turned from the child to once again survey the woman, her doubts and fears rising to the surface as she became a spectator to Sarah's inner battle.

"John!" Sarah turned, her blood soaked arms reaching out into the darkness, begging for the return of what she had lost.

"It's too late." Her voice sounded as young and petulant as Sarah remembered, but the Riley who stood before her was a far cry from the teenager she recalled. The girl's hair was a hedgerow of uneven clumps, the blonde strands stained red in places where a pair of barber's shears had cut too close. Her features, once cushioned by the pillows of youth, had turned sharp, her eyes sunken into a face gaunt with depravation. "You destroyed him," she mocked, the animation in her voice at odds with the pale oblivion of her gaze. "He always knew you would."

"No." She would never hurt John. It was a lie, it had to be; her son couldn't be dead. "I would never hurt him."

Riley laughed. "You always hurt the ones you love," she singsonged, the very sound of her voice grating on Sarah's nerves and bringing forth a wellspring of anger. "What's the matter, Sarah, can't you handle the truth?"

It wasn't true. None if it was. John was safe. He had to be. The blonde had been a stupid annoyance when she was alive, and nothing had changed with her death; she was still just a poor man's substitute for what John really desired.

"What you both desire," Riley countered, as if death had imbued her with the ability to read minds. "A cold, hard, ruthless machine." Her lips peeled back into an approximation of a smile. "Tell me, Sarah, what's it like to fuck a machine?" Her laugh turned maniacal. "Have you ever wondered if John got there first?"

After his third circuit of the park, John had managed to map out the entire area until he knew the location of every pathway and dog pile within a two block radius. It was something familiar, taking in his surroundings and formulating an escape route to account for every contingency, and it eventually managed to quell the nervous tension that had arisen when John finally realised he had absolutely no idea how to find his mother.

Before, when they'd been separated, there had been a system in place to enable them to regroup, but things were different now. The cell number he remembered came back as unobtainable, and he had no way of knowing if the fault was due to his memory or the caution Sarah had instilled in him since he was a child.

Old friends, who could have helped, had either died or gone into hiding, and he had no idea if the people he'd met in the future had already joined his mother's cause. Not that the knowledge would have done him any good, as he doubted Sarah would have allowed either Prophet or Tango the luxury of an open line of communication with the outside world.

The world that he'd left, on his ill-timed journey to the future, had been about to fall down around his mother's ears, and he had no way of knowing how far underground she might have burrowed to keep her motley group of survivors safe.

Since meeting Sarah Connor, nothing in James' life had remained untainted; his marriage, his career and even his religion had been shaken and nearly destroyed by what he'd learned. Now, sitting alone in the half-light of a house that he had begun to fear could never be a home, he listened as Sarah's cries haunted the very air he breathed, and slowly, as his eyes filled with tears, he began to let go of the blame and anger he had harboured against her for all his losses.

He thought of Cameron, standing guard, a soldier in the guise of a nurse, and wondered if the sound of someone else's pain had any impact on whatever circuitry she had in place of a soul. Over the last few days he had witnessed a side to the machine that both confused and concerned him; she was acting irrationally, her decision-making skills apparently clouded by emotion, emotion she wasn't supposed to feel. It was something that went far beyond a simple computer glitch or faulty programming, and it scared him even more than the thought that she'd been compromised.

The very idea of leaving Savannah in her charge filled him with dread, but it paled in comparison to the possible consequences of removing the child from Cameron's care. With Sarah unresponsive, Savannah had become the only person capable of focusing Cameron's mind, and with little hope of Sarah surviving the night, the child's influence could end up being the only thing that stood between civilisation and a rampaging killing-machine.

James shuddered, sickened by his own thoughts, the idea of using a child to tame a monster filled him with guilt and made him question just what kind of man he'd become, that he could so easily risk the life of an innocent.

"Enough."

He wiped the question out of existence along with the tears misting his eyes. If Sarah died, he would deal with Cameron, but until then there was little point in speculating.

Seeking refuge from his thoughts, James turned to the world around him; even though the power had been restored hours earlier, every appliance in the house was still flashing big giant zeros. Resetting the clocks was a menial task of little importance, but he set to work rectifying the situation with a military precision; anything to keep him from thinking about the noises rattling through the house and what they might signify for the future.

He finished adjusting the clock on the old fashioned VCR and turned to the ultramodern computer system that Cameron had half-installed. He wasn't a computer genius, like Murch, but like most people he knew enough to take care of the basics. Shuffling the mouse, he watched as the screen came to life, and the screen-saver's brightly coloured ball was forced into retirement. The digital readout in the bottom corner of the screen coincided almost perfectly with the display on the VCR and proved, yet again, that not all machines needed human assistance.

Turning away from the monitors, James was caught by surprise when the muted colours that had filled the screen were suddenly replaced with the first in a series of images. His eyes registered the vague shape of a face, before the image was replaced, the replacement superseded just as quickly as its predecessor, as the images were dealt with a cardshark's fondness for showmanship.

Just as quickly as the images had appeared, they stopped, and in their place resided a single, blurred photograph. The image was of somebody's face; a man, James thought, but he couldn't be sure. It was the kind of image he'd seen a thousand times during his stint at the FBI and had no doubt been taken from a store's CCTV camera. Whoever it was, he or she had been on the sidewalk outside the store, and there was little to no chance that the photograph could be enhanced sufficiently to satisfy a jury.

Figures started to scroll across the screen, as green lines flashed against the image, and James realised that human eyes would not be the deciding factor in deciding the stranger's identity. It took the computer less than five seconds to transition from a set of confusing images to an identification of the unknown: John Connor.

An alarm started to sound as the images reappeared, and James realised they were all pictures of John: baby, child, man, each stage of his life was captured in a single image, each one contributing to the overall picture of a future legend.

James reached for his gun.

He walked the perimeter of the property, cursing its lack of vantage points as he scoured the surrounding area for any sign of trouble. His thoughts turned to Murch and the attack that had left the little man a discarded heap, his eyes turning to the sky as he recalled the hovering menace. It was almost impossible to hear above the shriek of the computers, but James tried nevertheless, his efforts rewarded by the arrival of a headache, but little else.

The first floor was secured. The physical alarm system was armed, and there was no outward sign of intruders. Convinced, at least momentarily, that the house wasn't under immediate threat of an assault, James was able to see what wasn't in the room: Cameron. Unless she were under attack, and by extension both Sarah and Savannah were in danger, the terminator should have been at his side, facing the threat head-on. That could only mean one thing, the attack was coming from above.

The alarms blared.

The artificial screech of danger was punctuated by the rabid sound of dogs baying for blood. Voices heavy with anger shouted in the distance, their words obscured, but the threat inherent in their tone unmistakable.

Sarah ran.

Pain lanced through her chest and turned each breath into a nightmare. Her body burned with fatigue as she tried desperately to outdistance whatever hell was on her heels. Each step brought her closer to a destination she could not name, but which offered her the only chance she had to escape from her past.

Darkness crowded her mind as she was chased through a wilderness barren to all but menace. Her pursuers grew closer, their words almost recognisable as they fought against the dogs' howls to be heard. She looked ahead but could see no sign of reprieve.

"Sarah!"

Her name tore at the air and sent Sarah sprawling to her knees.

She scrambled to her feet, the hot breath of the beast rotting the very air that she breathed, as Sarah turned to face her pursuers.

"Mom!"

John, his face an angry mask of betrayal raced toward her; his father, aged by hatred and not the years, was by his side. They did not stop. Their faces did not soften. They kept coming towards her, anger and revulsion souring their handsome faces until they were almost unrecognisable.

Sarah ran.

She wanted to go to them. To embrace her son and forget herself in the arms of the man she'd loved. She ran on. Her lungs burned and her legs buckled under the strain. She fell.

"Sarah!"

"Mom!"

The voices she'd so longed to hear tormented her with their anger. She called to them, begged them to welcome her home, but the closer they came the more vicious their anger became.

Sarah ran.

"Sarah?"

A different voice. Up ahead, in the darkness, where nothing could be seen past her reflection in the mists. It was a voice she knew. Cameron's voice, but different, as if the truth of it was only half-remembered, the warmth and promise alien to her memory's recollection.

She would have called out, but the struggle had robbed her of a voice, and she could only go on, blind to the dangers on her trail, as her every thought turned to Cameron and the protection she knew the other woman could provide.

Smoke choked her lungs as she drew in great lungfuls of air, her body rebelling against the latest invasion and sending her straight to her knees. She looked behind her, at what had once been darkness, but the area surrounding her son and his father was consumed with flames.

"No!"

Sarah tried to turn back, to enter the flames and retrieve what had been stolen, but her body would not respond. She stood, but not by her own volition, her back turned on the screams of her past as she walked away from them into the mist.

Soft light glinted through the whiteness, and for a precious moment, Sarah was convinced of her salvation. She drew closer. The screams of the fire and those it consumed faded into the background. Up ahead, something moved.

"Cameron?"

Pain and terror leeches from her body, and for the first time in what felt like days, she could breathe normally. Movement caught her eye and she stepped closer, a smile of relief warming her features, as Sarah discerned a familiar figure walking towards her.

The figure was clouded in a misty fog, but Sarah would have known Cameron's sure-footed yet graceful gait anywhere. She wanted to run. To take Cameron in her arms and demand that the girl lead her to safety. She was desperate to see a friendly face.

Sarah looked up, her smile disintegrating into a thousand screams as she stared at the metal exoskeleton looking at her with Cameron's soulful brown eyes. Its jaw contracted, the pistons lifting into a bastardised version of a smile, as Cameron's voice issued from deep within its artificial mouth.

"Welcome home, Sarah."

Act II

Sarah's cries accompanied the computer's screech in a symphony of discordant terror that left Savannah wide-eyed and braced for another attack. Cameron could do little more than glance in the girl's direction as she was assaulted by Sarah's blindly thrashing arms, the ailing woman's strength returning in a blur of nightmare-induced panic that, although no match for a terminator's power, tore at Cameron's skin with unpredictable ferocity.

A prone assailant, without access to a weapon, was hardly a match for a killing machine from the future, and if Sarah had been an enemy or even an ally for whom she held little regard, Cameron would have known exactly what countermeasure to employ. Her programming included eighteen different assault techniques specifically designed for this type of situation that would have left her opponent dead or dying, and fourteen more that would have resulted in broken-limbed unconsciousness. Nothing, however, in her stored memory or life experience had prepared her for dealing with a frail and dying woman, of whom she was desperate not to harm. The mere thought of causing Sarah pain made Cameron pause, indecision clouding her thoughts, as she was caught between the practicality of her next move and the empathy she was feeling at Sarah's obvious distress.

Pushing aside Sarah's flailing arms, Cameron wrapped herself loosely around the convulsing woman, her body connecting with Sarah's at precisely calculated intervals to limit the other woman's jerky movements without putting undue pressure on her abused limbs. It was, in essence, a simple embrace, but there was something strangely maternal about the way Cameron cradled Sarah's body, more words of quiet reassurance feathering the air.

Savannah looked up, her tears beginning to fade as Sarah's cries lost their potency, and the assault on her ears was reduced to the mere electronic warbling of the alarm system. She stood, uncertainty radiating off of her small body as she moved closer to the precarious situation on the bed, her hand tentatively reaching out to offer comfort to her distraught aunt.

Cameron smiled down at the girl, watching in silent approval as Savannah ran her fingers lightly through the sweat-soaked strands of Sarah's hair, but before she could marvel in the sense of calm Savannah's presence evoked, Cameron became aware of the thudding of feet on the stairs and Ellison's impending arrival.

His gun appeared first, bursting through the doorway and creating the impression of destruction, rather than haste, as he stood panting in the shadows of the hallway, his weapon aimed squarely at the machine in his sights.

One second passed, and then two, and finally Ellison lowered his gun and stepped fully into the room. "Can't you hear the alarm?" His voice was laced with accusation, but the sight of Savannah's frightened eyes and the way she fiercely clung to her two 'aunties' kept him from giving full vent to the fear and frustration that coloured his thoughts.

Cameron looked pointedly at the now-lowered gun. "We are not in immediate danger," she stated matter-of-factly, seemingly unconcerned about the possibility of a security breach. She did not enlighten him as to the graduated pitch and frequency of the alarm system or the different levels of threat it signified.

Ellison would have argued, but his own assessment of the situation had reached the same conclusion, although he still felt uneasy at the possibility of another cyber attack. "The computers are going haywire." His eyes strayed towards Sarah where she lay slumped in Cameron's arms, and he decided to refrain from mentioning John, at least until he could talk to Cameron alone. He didn't know if Sarah was lucid enough to understand what he was saying, but he didn't want to risk agitating her further. "You need to see this," he said, his voice laced with authority. "Now."

Leaving Sarah alone had become almost unthinkable, but Cameron recognised the urgency in Ellison's tone, and his seeming reluctance to talk in front of Sarah set Cameron on edge and robbed her of the luxury of ignoring his demand. "I'll be back shortly," she told Sarah as she eased her limp body back on the bed. Sarah's eyes once again closed in an approximation of sleep.

Taking Savannah's hand in one of hers, Cameron used her other to brush the hair away from the child's frightened eyes. For one so young, she'd seen far too much pain and misery, and Cameron was determined to spare her the full horror of Sarah's ordeal. She smiled down at the girl, her reassurance at odds with the cacophony of noise that surrounded them, but enough to bring an answering smile to Savannah's lips.

Leading Savannah out of the bedroom, Cameron followed Ellison down the stairs, her impatience clear even to the little girl as she demanded. "What is it?"

Ellison pointed towards the centre monitor and the images of John Connor splayed across the screen. "Is he back?" It was an educated guess, but he could think of no other reason for John's image to be so prominently displayed.

With a single keystroke, Cameron silenced the alarm, and within seconds, she had called up a review of the data pertaining to the grainy CCTV image Ellison had seen earlier. The facial recognition software she had cloned while in the system had determined that there was a 91.3% probability that the image was indeed that of John Connor.

Seeing him again, even through the pixelated image on the screen, stilled Cameron's hand, and for a moment, she was caught in the mire of conflicting desires. John's return, yearned for by his mother, would certainly bring Sarah joy, but it would also irrevocably change what had been growing between them. It was selfish, she knew, but a part of Cameron resented him in that moment, and wished her answer could be anything other than the truth.

"Yes." Cameron synchronised the results from the facial recognition program with a map of CCTV and other computerised surveillance equipment in the area, and from there, the information was transmitted to the GPS in Ellison's cell phone. "You have thirty-eight minutes to locate John and return with him to the house."

"How do I...?"

"I sent the directions directly to your cell phone." She indicated the monitor behind her on which a grid of the downtown area was prominently displayed. "I will monitor John's position and update the route accordingly." Her voice hardened. "Under no circumstances should you deviate from the specified route. Do you understand?"

Ellison bristled at her tone and the revelation of what appeared to be yet another of Cameron's secrets. "No, I don't understand." He glanced at his cell and the maze Cameron had created out of a simple ten-minute drive. "What's going on?"

There was little time for explanations, but as Ellison appeared reluctant to move without one, Cameron decided to furnish him with the basic facts. "When I was in the system, I installed a feedback loop in the local surveillance network that would be triggered the moment a live image of John Connor was recorded. The effects of the loop last for exactly thirty-eight minutes and twenty-seven seconds, after which the image becomes traceable, and although I could find no evidence to suggest that C.A.I.N. had initiated a similar search, I cannot guarantee that one hasn't been installed."

"Couldn't you just erase the image?"

"No." When Ellison failed to move, Cameron pointed to her bare wrist, the irritation she felt manifesting itself in a patronising tone, "Time *is* of the essence, Mr. Ellison."

He gritted his teeth. "What makes you think that John will come with me?" Even after months of living and working together, Ellison knew that Sarah didn't entirely trust him, so he thought it somewhat ludicrous to assume that her son would follow him blindly, especially considering his last encounter with the boy. "You should go, he trusts you."

"I need to stay with Sarah." There was no room for argument, and Cameron had lost her patience with Ellison's dithering. "Do you plan to betray Sarah?" she demanded.

"No."

"Then John will trust you." If the future had proven Ellison a liar, John would head for cover, and Cameron could arrange for his retrieval after she'd dealt with the former agent, but until such time, she would trust in Ellison's intentions. "You need to leave. Now."

"What if it's not John?" He wanted to believe. To rush out and bring back Sarah's son, but he'd spent too many hours with Weaver to ignore the possibility of a changeling. "What if it's Weaver or another of those things?"

Cameron was on the verge of picking Ellison up by his lapels and throwing him out of the door. "If you had paid attention to the route I sent to your cell, you would already know the answer to that question." She pointed to the glowing orange circles dotted around the grid, two of which bisected the white line that highlighted the route she had mapped out for John's return. "Your route takes you past both a pet store and a local park, either of which should provide the answer to your question, but if you fail to ascertain a clear reading, I can re-route you past a third alternative."

Satisfied, at least temporarily, and realising that he was in imminent danger of being physically ejected from the house, Ellison turned and left, quietly relieved to have escaped the stultifying environment that had descended with the return of Sarah's illness.

Cameron opened a new window on the computer and initiated a systematic search of available on-line medical resources. Information scrolled across the screen with dizzying

speed as grotesque images of swollen and putrefied limbs crowded John's photograph and added a sense of the macabre to her findings.

Little had apparently changed since the doctor's initial diagnosis, but that in itself was revealing, as it highlighted the marked deterioration in Sarah's condition in comparison to the improvements Cameron had noted almost immediately following the blood transfusion. If the blood cells had been warriors in an army, Cameron would have said they'd been overrun, their superior skills thwarted by the sheer number of enemy soldiers they faced. A good general, and Cameron had been programmed to be an excellent general, would know exactly what to do in such a situation, and if she could only continue to view Sarah's condition as a tactical manoeuvre, she knew the precise tactics to employ.

She was alone.

The screams had died and the ghosts had disappeared, seemingly into thin air.

She tried to remember the faces in the mist and the cause of her fear, but everything that had come before was shrouded in confusion. The agonies of fire that had seemed so clear had faded with the screams, and she was left cradling a dull ache where previously the pain had consumed her.

It was a lull between nightmares, where, for just a moment, she could envision a life lived outside of destiny's web, where she was just Sarah Connor, a small town waitress with good friends and bad dates. A woman for whom cyborgs were nothing more than the fantasy of film directors and dateless geeks. It was a life that had once seemed dull and repetitive, but in the years since its obliteration, Sarah had come to treasure those times for the normality they represented.

"Liar."

Riley stepped out of the shadows, her body sheathed in a bastardised version of the waitress uniform Sarah had worn in her youth. The dusty-pink of her memory was replaced by a soiled white that highlighted the deathly pallor of Riley's skin and the blackened scars that encircled her emaciated neck. The skirt was torn, its edges frayed and revealing far more of Riley's mottled skin than even her pervert of an ex-boss would have thought appropriate.

"You chose this life, Sarah, it didn't choose you."

"You're wrong." There had been no choice to make, her world had simply been ripped away, just another victim of the monster they'd sent to kill her. "I didn't choose any of this."

Riley laughed, the stench of decay accompanying her every breath, as she moved closer to where Sarah stood, unable to move, a captive audience of one. "Come with me if you want to live," she mimicked, Kyle's words distorted through the mockery of her tone. "Wasn't that a choice?"

"That thing was trying to kill me, I didn't have a -"

"Choice?" Riley smiled with blatant insincerity, "Okay, I'll give you that, the instinct for self-preservation makes monsters out of us all." She moved closer still, her voice obscenely intimate as she whispered, "But you chose to fuck him, didn't you Sarah? You chose to carry his bastard child."

"It wasn't like that."

"No?" Riley's hand slid around Sarah's throat. "Did he force you?" Her fingers dug into the soft skin, tearing through flesh and smearing Sarah's neck with crimson. "Did he hold you down and ignore your screams?"

"No!"

Savannah watched quietly as Cameron sat in front of the computer, her focus entirely on the video footage streaming across the screen, and seemingly oblivious to the grid on the left hand side of the screen that she had shown Mr. Ellison earlier. Savannah couldn't quite see what was on the video, as Cameron had positioned her body to shield that part of the monitor, but the muted drone reminded her of the old black-and-white TV programs Miss Perry had made them watch during Women's history month. She hoped, for Cameron's sake, that they weren't quite so dull.

Apart from the video's drone and the occasional brush of the keyboard, the house was eerily silent. Sarah's screams had abated and Savannah was unable to hear any other signs of distress. It should have been a relief, but the absence of sound tore at the girl's fears and kept Savannah permanently on alert, her eyes continually straying towards the second floor and any hint as to the new danger she knew awaited them.

Cameron's back stiffened, and she quickly deleted the video she had been watching. Savannah stood, expecting Cameron to rush to Sarah's side, but instead, she watched as the terminator moved towards the front door.

The alarm was disconnected and the door thrown open before the visitor's knuckles could even make contact with the door. It was a rare sign of anxiety, but Cameron appeared unconcerned with the transparency of her behaviour as she ushered a stranger into their new home.

The stranger, a woman of about Cameron's age, took in the room with studied indifference, her attractive features masked by apprehension. "Savannah, this is my friend, Sabine."

Savannah was intrigued; she hadn't even known that Cameron had friends, at least outside of her and Sarah. "Hello." She held out her hand to the new girl and smiled giddily when Sabine reciprocated the gesture and gave her hand a firm shake. "I'm Cameron's friend, too," she explained.

The new girl smiled, but Cameron gave no indication that she'd heard. "Do you have what I asked for?"

Sabine slipped a large backpack off of her shoulder and passed it to Cameron. "Everything you wanted," she confirmed.

Standing on tiptoe, Savannah was still unable to see into the bag, but whatever it contained, it seemed to please Cameron. Reaching inside, Cameron removed a small box, similar in shape to the X-Men pencil case her mother had given her last Christmas. Savannah wanted to ask what it was, since it caused Cameron to stare at it with such intensity, but she was afraid that her question would go unanswered.

Apparently satisfied with the supplies she'd been given, Cameron took Sabine to one side and began to instruct the newcomer on the current state of affairs, and in particular, Ellison's retrieval of a 'missing' John. She chose not to burden the other

woman with the knowledge of a fractured and nightmarish future, not only because she lacked the time, but because Sabine was one of the few individuals that had ever proved useful without the need for longwinded and complicated explanations.

Shouldering the backpack, Cameron knelt down in front of Savannah, the girl's spirits soaring at the attention. "I need you to stay down here, with Sabine, okay?"

She would have rather gone with Cameron, but Savannah wouldn't ignore a direct request from her friend. "Okay." Besides, Sabine might need her help when Mr. Ellison returned, because she didn't think he knew that the other girl was Cameron's friend and he might get annoyed if he thought she'd just walked in off the street.

Cameron nodded, her attention focused elsewhere, as she made her way towards the stairs and the decision that awaited her on the second floor.

The small dog yipped in ecstasy as it wound itself around the friendly human. Its owner, a stout woman in her late fifties, beamed with pride, as she talked about her little 'Dottie' with the young man and his serious-looking friend. Normally, she would have avoided the scruffy young man, but he'd practically thrown himself in her path, sitting in front of Dottie and cooing delightfully at the small dog. She wondered briefly if he was one of *those*, the type of young man who liked interior decorating and colourful drinks with umbrellas and passion fruit stuck to the glass; it would certainly have explained his companion's proprietorial air, if not his rather drab clothing, but fortunately for John, she was far too caught up in the enjoyment of his attentions to exercise her prejudices.

"He's a friendly little fella." Ellison reluctantly allowed the overgrown rat to sniff at his outstretched hand before taking a step back and waiting for John to disengage himself from the dog and its overzealous owner.

John brushed off his knees and said a final goodbye to Dottie and her owner, his smile turning into a look of determination as he looked up at Ellison. "Satisfied?" He didn't begrudge the need for added security, but after so long away from home, he'd envisioned a rather different homecoming than a sloppy kiss on the lips from a miniature Yorkshire Terrier. "Take me to my mother."

John's retrieval had gone more smoothly than Ellison had imagined, and the young man's ready acceptance of his role in Sarah's small band of misfits had allayed some of his own fears in regard to the path he'd chosen. The boy had yet to speak of his sojourn in the future, but there would be plenty of time for that; as things stood, the current situation in regard to Sarah's health was far more pressing an issue.

Ellison checked his cell and the route that would force him to circle back for several blocks before he could retrieve his car. It made him realise how prolific cameras had become in downtown, and while they were not as prevalent in the US as in other countries, he was beginning to feel like Winston Smith, hemmed in on every side by Big Brother.

"This way."

John didn't question the order or the bizarre maze Ellison seemed to have created out of normal streets; his only immediate concern was his mother's absence. "Why didn't my mom come to meet me?" He knew that circumstances often dictated the deployment of troops, but he knew his mother, and he knew that she'd want to be the first one to meet him on his return.

Ellison faltered; he'd known the question was coming, but he was unprepared for the reminder of John's youth as the boy looked at him with an almost desperate need for his mother. "She's sick." He would not say dying, not yet, not unless the boy pushed. "She's resting."

"Resting?" Disbelief mixed with anger as John turned on his companion. "What's wrong with her?" His mother wouldn't know how to rest if her life depended on it and to suggest that she'd laze her day away in bed rather than be reunited with her only child was ludicrous. "Was she injured?" A bullet wound had been known to slow her down, at least temporarily, if driving halfway across the state and seeking her own medical treatment wasn't included.

"She was involved in a car crash." It was the truth, but Ellison didn't fool himself into believing he hadn't just lied, in essence if not in fact.

"How badly was she hurt?"

Turning the corner, Ellison could see his car just up ahead, and John's question faded into the background as he performed a visual sweep of the area. The auto repair shop on the corner spewed noise and vibration across the street and provided an innocuous, if minimal, countermeasure to any surveillance equipment that might have been erected in his absence. Cameron's high-tech approach might have provided them with a camera-free route, but there was nothing in all her computer files and programs that could eliminate the human factor, and although he'd taken precautions, Ellison couldn't say with any level of certainty that neither he nor John had been spotted by one of Kaliba's people.

Three men stood conversing on the opposite corner, at the side entrance to the repair shop, and a car sat idling at the curb, less than thirty feet from Ellison's vehicle, two unidentified figures hunched in the front seats. "John, take these," he said, handing the younger man a set of keys. "I need you to -"

John grasped Ellison by the arm and yanked him to a stop. "How badly was she hurt?" he demanded, spittle peppering the former agent's face as John allowed his fear and frustration to manifest in anger.

"We don't have the time -"

"Is she okay?" John had lived with the knowledge of his mother's death for over a year, but he had always assumed that if he ever got back he'd have the time to put things right. "For God's sake, Prophet, tell me she's not dead?"

Ellison's brows furrowed at the name. "She's not." Necessity dictated a quick end to the discussion, but Ellison's conscience wouldn't let him leave the boy with false hope. "She's very sick, John, and I don't know if she's going to make it, but for now, she's alive." It wouldn't be long, but if he could just get John back to the house safely, the boy would at least have the chance to say goodbye to his mother. "As soon as we're in the car, I will explain everything. I promise." He resisted the urge to brush off John's hold and waited patiently for the boy to make his decision.

A couple of squabbling children clambered into the back seat of the suspect car, and it quickly drove off. The unexpected noise forced John into action and, with a perfunctory nod, he dropped Ellison's arm and took the keys. "What do I need to do?"

The melodic rise and fall of voices teased at the edge of Sarah's senses and tortured her with the false promise of an escape from the labyrinth of her terrors. She tried to call out, but the words died on her lips, the sour taste of desperation tainting her thoughts and choking the very air from her lungs. She gasped, her fingers clutching frantically at her throat, as the memory of Riley's hands superimposed upon her own and stole the breath from her lips. She fell, her body convulsing as the life seeped from her bones and she succumbed to the pull of oblivion.

Cool hands covered Sarah's own and gently pried the talons from around her throat. Reluctantly, the black haze of death receded and slowly, as if choreographed by one of the forgotten greats, the image of her saviour came into focus.

"Cameron?" The girl, nee woman, nee machine, stood over her, a smile of unknown warmth lighting her features and easing the pain from Sarah's memory. "Was it you that I heard?" She'd thought, in her delirium, that the voice had belonged to John, but seeing Cameron standing over her, she realised that it had always been the girl who walked beside her and that even her hostility had failed to exorcise the machine from her life.

Falling to her knees, Cameron swept Sarah up into her arms, the move straight out of a silent movie, but no less impressive for its lengthy pedigree. "I would never leave you." The words were coated in the rosy hue of romance, but there was something about the sentiment that gnawed at the back of Sarah's mind, reminding her of another time and another machine sent from the future to protect her son.

The hulking mass of metal and flesh had evoked none of the confusion of the later model, but even amidst her hatred and fear, Sarah had recognised the value of his mission. Unlike the men who had come before him, the terminator would never abandon John or allow harm to come to him. He was, in essence, the perfect father for her fatherless son.

"And what does that make me?" Cameron asked, as she pirouetted, and gently placed her precious cargo amidst the sumptuous folds and silk delicacy of a stranger's bed. "Am I no less perfect?"

It was too perfect, too artificial; even Sarah's youthful daydreams had never plumbed the depths of a dime store romance that her nightmares seemed determined to inflict upon her tortured mind. It was all wrong. From the pampered feel of silk sheets beneath her skin to the look of adoration on Cameron's face, it was all just a fantasy, but not one of Sarah's making.

"No, you prefer your dreams a little more real, don't you Sarah?"

The air filled with the musty odour of decay, and she was transported to another time, another place, where the sheets felt coarse and her thighs ached with the memory of passion spent. "Kyle?" He stood in the shadows, his face shrouded in darkness, a silent reminder of the father and lover she had tried to replace.

"With a machine, Sarah?" He stepped from the shadows, his youthful face tinged with the pallor of death, but still capable of conveying the full magnitude of his disgust. "Did I really mean so little to you that I could so easily be traded in for one of those monsters?"

The denial stalled on her lips as Sarah struggled to go to him and erase the accusation that stood between them, but she could not move. Her limbs were weighed down in a mire of lassitude, the illusion of sleep tugging at her body, and making her weak in the face of her desires.

For a moment, death receded from Kyle's eyes and hope crowded his features as he waited, with rapidly waning belief, for Sarah to deny his accusation.

"She has made her choice." Cameron appeared at Kyle's shoulder, her eyes lit from within with a mechanical fire as the room transformed around them, replacing one motel room with another. "You are no longer needed."

"No!" Sarah's voice rang out and she clawed the air in a futile attempt to stop his retreat. "Don't leave me again," she begged, tears blurring her vision as she watched him disappear once again from her life. "Cameron, stop him!" she ordered, the irony of her request lost on Sarah's fevered mind. "Please, don't let him go."

Cameron's eyes lowered in preparation for defeat. "You can't have us both, Sarah, you need to choose." She took her place beside Sarah on the bed, her fingers slowly trailing through the loose tendrils of sweat soaked hair at the side of Sarah's face. "The past or the future, Sarah? Which is it to be?"

The choice was an illusion. All of her choices, Sarah knew, had been nothing more than tests of fate, sent to torment her soul. She was little more than a puppet in some grand performance, desperate to escape her strings, but lacking Pinocchio's magic.

She wanted the nightmare to end. She wanted a return of Riley's torments and the fires of Hell, anything to take away the mirage of possibilities.

"I won't leave," promised Kyle, his quiet words seeping past Sarah's defences and making a mockery of her resistance, "unless you push me away." He sat down beside her on the bed, his hand resting possessively against Sarah's own.

She was sandwiched between realities; the future she'd seen ripped away and the one she'd never seen coming. For so many years, she had hidden behind the safety of Kyle's unassailable love, using him to escape the mire of human emotions and stave off the agony of watching another loved one perish. It hadn't worked. She had walked away from Charlie before his love could destroy them both, but in the end, she had been no less devastated by his passing.

The guard she kept on her emotions had rendered them sour with neglect, but it was not too late, Cameron had shown her that. What happened between them had been a mistake, brought about by isolation and grief, but it had been real, not a desperate attempt to recapture what she had already lost.

"The future is not yet written," the words were Kyle's, memorised at John's urging, but the voice belonged to Cameron, her point made in a simple caveat, "but the past is gone for ever."

Kyle's hand withdrew, not in shame or acceptance, but rather in anger at the thing that had dared to challenge his predominance in Sarah's life. "You can't listen to that machine. It would say anything, do anything, to complete its mission." The air shifted and then stilled, and suddenly, he was before her, his hands in her hair, as he pulled Sarah towards him, their mouths meeting in the hunger of long-denied passion.

Memories of their single night together clashed against the realities of the moment as the putrid taste of decay invaded Sarah's senses, and she was consumed by revulsion. Bile rose in her throat as she pushed against his advances, but his desperation would not allow him to accept defeat, and he persisted, the love and devotion he tried to convey warped by the truth of the death he could not alter.

Sarah wrenched her mouth from his, her lungs screaming for air, as she retched with the taste of him.

"I should go." Alive, the battle would have been his for the taking, but dead he could offer no more than the torment of what could have been. "I love you, Sarah."

He was gone before Sarah had registered his disappearance, and she was left alone with the terminator as her sole companion, just as she'd been left alone with nothing but Cameron and a makeshift family following John's desertion. She wanted to cry, to mourn the love that should have been, but she had been in mourning for Kyle for nearly eighteen years and it was time to move on. To where, she didn't know, but there could be no going back.

"I would never leave you." The words were spoken with ironclad certainty, no trace of the simpering romance that had so tainted their first utterance. "All you have to do is accept what cannot be changed."

Confusion clouded Sarah's mind as she tried to unravel the meaning behind Cameron's words, but before her questions could take shape, she felt the cool touch of the girl's hands against her skin as Cameron moved closer, her lips obliterating the bitter memory of Kyle's touch in a kiss fresh with life and possibilities.

Act III

Sarah's convulsions had slowly dwindled into tremors as the energy drained from her body. Inarticulate cries rattled her chest as she waged her private battle, the sounds of torment permeating the room and warping Cameron's thoughts. She tried to remain objective. The strategy she had devised left no room for sentiment or individual desires. It was a battle, pure and simple, and if she had any chance at winning, Cameron could not allow herself to become distracted by the spectre of what she might lose if her plan failed.

Pulling up a chair, she sat at Sarah's bedside, the small box she'd received from Sabine clutched almost forgotten in her hand. "The Doctor was right," she said, the futility of speaking to the unconscious outweighed by Cameron's need to justify her decision. It was a human failing and one Cameron had never believed herself foolish enough to emulate, but as she opened the box and removed a scalpel, Cameron could not stop the words from forming. "The infection is spreading too fast, and the only viable option is to remove the bone and cut out the infected tissue."

The transfusion had bought them time, but the situation had remained the same. "The enemy troops are too numerous," she continued, falling back on the military analogy that had allowed her to see past the human drama and clear her thoughts to ready for the battle ahead. "We need to wipe out the point of entry and cut off their only source of reinforcements."

The memory of screaming humans, swarming through the rusted metal gates of a forgotten compound, intruded on Cameron's thoughts, and she watched with detachment as they tore at the machines barring their way. The terminators batted away the attack with apparent ease, but where one human fell, another two took its place, until eventually the Goliaths fell.

As the cheers rang out, Cameron struggled to discern the origin of her thoughts, but before she could assign them to her human template, an explosion rocked her memory, and she watched as the humans fell, one by one, onto the cool earth, their rampage

transformed into a mad race for survival as the camp, along with all its inhabitants, was destroyed, and the terminators began to rise from beneath their grave of human corpses.

"One decisive strike can change the entire course of a battle." She put the scalpel aside and reached into the backpack to remove a far more deadly looking instrument, the blade's shine almost indecent in its efficiency.

Cameron laid the blade on the bedcover, next to the scalpels, as she mentally calculated the incisions she would need to perform. An amputation was, in essence, a fairly simple procedure, but the side-effects, from shock alone, could cause an otherwise healthy person to slip into a coma and die. Sarah, although tough as nails, was far from being healthy, and the trauma of the surgery, coupled with the infection, could easily plunge her further into septic shock.

The Doctor had warned Sarah that even with full medical backup, she might not survive the operation, but that it was her only hope if she wanted to beat the infection. The prospect had enraged Cameron at the time, but she was no longer in a position to question the hard choices.

"I know what your choice would be." It was an argument she had already lost, but as with all battles, final victory was awarded to the last one standing. If she disregarded Sarah's wishes, the other woman would never forgive her, but it would be a small price to pay for Sarah's life.

There had to be a third option, caught somewhere between the certainties of death, that would allow the transfused blood to do its work unhindered. "A surgical strike." Even the name was apropos. Cameron's gaze settled once again on the smaller blades as she reviewed all the data she had collected on bone structure and the human body's ability to regenerate compromised bone and tissue.

If the bone integrity had not been compromised and Cameron was not forced to remove excessive amounts of necrotic tissue, it should be possible to remove the infected section of bone without sacrificing the arm.

It was akin to planning a war with nothing more to go on than a child's drawing and an arsenal of leaky water-pistols.

"I'm sorry, Sarah, the risk is too great."

The kiss grew in intensity.

The whirlwind of emotions that had overtaken Sarah's senses during their first time together, returned, capturing her in the dizzying embrace of released desire, as she gave herself over to Cameron's questing lips. The feel of Cameron's body against her own erased the doubts her nightmares had induced, and Sarah gave herself to the terminator with an abandon she had never quite been able to replicate in life.

"I could hurt you."

Sarah wanted to laugh. Once before, she had quelled Cameron's fears, not with words but with deeds, and if the girl needed a repeat performance, she was more than happy to oblige. She ran her fingers through Cameron's hair, pushing it back from her face and releasing it to cascade in waves across her lithe body.

"I will hurt you."

The caution was gone from Cameron's voice, replaced with the cold, hard certainty of a machine. Sarah's hands fumbled to a stop as the body beneath her touch turned rigid, and Cameron seized her neck, the nails embedding in Sarah's skin as she brought them together in a second, more heated kiss.

Darkness swam before Sarah's eyes and she fought for breath, her thoughts caught in a kaleidoscope of betrayal as she struggled to free herself from Cameron's hold. The taste of copper exploded in her mouth, and Sarah jerked back, but her freedom was short-lived as Cameron closed the gap between them and continued to plunder Sarah's mouth.

The stench of blood permeated the air but, to Sarah's dismay, it failed to carry with it the pain of torn flesh. She pushed against Cameron's hold, her fingers encountering slick resistance, as they strove to find purchase against the blood-soaked skin of Cameron's throat.

Skin turned to liquid beneath her fingers, and not even Cameron's assault could muffle Sarah's screams. The beautiful face that had proven a Siren's call to both Sarah and her son was coated in blood, the truth revealed in swathes of exposed metal.

Cameron's hold broke for an endless moment and allowed Sarah to experience the full horror of her choice. The skull, grey and lifeless, was smeared in blood, flesh clinging to its edges and carrying the hint of the woman it used to be.

It smiled. The last remaining trace of humanity fell from Cameron's exoskeleton as it moved closer, its teeth parting to reveal a sharp ridged tongue, unencumbered by the decadence of flesh. The abomination grew nearer, its intent perfectly clear, as it descended on Sarah's lips, its mouth opening wide to consume her screams.

John barrelled through the door, setting off the alarm and startling the room's youngest inhabitant as she sat cocooned within the safety of Sabine's arms. The older girl glared at him, her hand dangerously close to the gun she kept hidden in the waistband of her jeans and only her memory of him as 'Cameron's supposed brother' keeping her from brandishing the weapon and teaching him how *not* to scare little children.

Ellison brushed past John and silenced the alarm, the reprimand dying on his lips as he registered the stranger in their midst. "Who are you?" He noticed the gun first, poking out of her jeans, and then the girl's proximity to Savannah, and his hand itched with the want of a weapon.

"That's Sabine," said John, unconcerned with the reappearance of the silent girl and anxious to forego the introductions and return to his pursuit of the missing terminator.

Savannah scowled as John divulged her secret, but the expression didn't last as she happily supplied Ellison with the part of the secret that she was sure even John didn't know. "She's Cameron's friend," she said, the wonder in her voice softening Ellison's stance and bringing a half-smile to his face that only grew as she added, almost shyly, "and mine." She turned to Sabine, her confidence bubbling over. "That's Mr. Ellison, he's my friend, too."

Sabine smiled down at the girl and resumed her previous task of braiding Savannah's hair, the gun that had so worried Ellison safely back in its hiding place.

"Sierra?"

John stared at the little girl. He'd been privy to her identity, if not her alter ego, for over a year, but John found it almost impossible to equate the woman with the child. Savannah was just so damn tiny he couldn't imagine her growing up to become the head of the resistance, but then he supposed his mother had the same doubts about him, in the beginning, when all he wanted was to run and play and his chubby fingers had been too weak to pull a trigger.

He smiled, the urge to ruffle the girl's hair was irresistible, and undoubtedly patronising, but John chose not to analyse his actions as he stepped forward, his coarse hands undoing the neat braid Sabine had spent the last ten minutes creating.

"My name's Savannah," she corrected, scowling at John with murderous intent, before turning to Ellison and demanding, "Are you sure he's the right John?"

Ellison laughed, the tension that he'd felt since the alarms had gone off that morning finally finding a release, and he silently thanked Savannah for putting off his ulcer for another day. "Yes, he's the right John."

Savannah grudgingly accepted his assurance, but her scowl remained firmly in place, and John was finally able to see the woman the girl would one day become.

A scream resounded from the room above, and John abandoned thoughts of Sierra and the future that would never be as he recognised the voice as belonging to his mother. "What the fuck?" Shoving his way past Ellison, John took the stairs two at a time as he raced towards the sound.

Confronted with a hallway lined with identical doors, John barged through the first, splintering the lock and almost tripping over the small box of toys tucked neatly at the foot of the closet. Savannah's room. His fear and anger mounting, John kicked at the box, its contents spilling across the floor as he abandoned the room, the next door he breached revealing a bathroom absent of suffering.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs as Ellison and Sabine gave chase, but even their ruckus could not drown out his mother's cry. John crashed through the next door, his forward momentum bringing him to his knees as he skidded to a stop at the foot of the bed, his half-prone position providing him with the perfect view of the nightmare that was being enacted on the sheets.

Cameron sat astride his mother, a blade in one hand and the other against the base of her throat. The echoes of his mother's pain were redolent in the air, and he could detect the rancid odour of blood and decay. Sarah's prophesy had come true, the machine had turned against its master, and Cameron's chip had failed.

He charged!

The scalpel fell from Cameron's hand as she was assaulted by one hundred and fifty pounds of enraged human. They tumbled head over heels from the bed, John's victory a sham, as Cameron absorbed his fury and directed the action as far away from Sarah and the medical equipment as she could manage within the confines of the room.

"Help me!" John's voice was raw as their tumble slowed and he realised the precarious state of his position. If Cameron had gone rogue, he had no chance of defeating her in unarmed combat; even using Sierra's techniques, had he known them, would have provided him with little advantage.

Ellison stood in the doorway, momentarily caught in the web of confusion, as he watched the boy and the terminator wrestle for dominance on the floor. If he'd been thinking

clearly, he would have known that Cameron was merely absorbing John's blows and had yet to launch an attack, but in that moment, all he could see was a machine attacking a human, and if it hadn't been for Sabine's timely intervention, he might have forgotten all that he was starting to believe about Cameron and given in to his all-too-human fear of the machines.

Grasping the collar of John's jacket, Sabine yanked him backwards, freeing Cameron from his hold and allowing the terminator time to regain her footing.

"John, you need to calm down," Cameron instructed, her attention drifting to Sarah as the older woman groaned in pain. She did not understand the reason for John's attack, unless he had learnt something in the future that would make them enemies, but at that precise moment, John's motivations were of little concern. "Sabine, take him downstairs and keep him there until I send for him."

The other woman nodded, her grasp on John's jacket tightening as she prepared to haul him from the room.

John tried to brush away Sabine's hold, but she was far stronger than she appeared and he was unable to break her hold. She was not, however, strong enough to eject him from the room, and he made use of that weakness to appeal to Ellison's sanity. "You have to stop her." It wasn't Cameron's fault; it was her programming, he knew that, and if he'd been here, where he belonged, he could have tried to fixed whatever had gone wrong, but they didn't have time for that now. "She was trying to kill my mom."

"No, John, she wasn't." Ellison couldn't bring himself to trust the machine, but he trusted what he'd witnessed over the last few days and that told him that the last thing Cameron would do was hurt Sarah. Taking a step forward, he stood between the two combatants, and confident that John would at least hear him out, he signalled for Sabine to release her hold.

With a nod of confirmation from Cameron, Sabine retreated to the doorway, her arms folded as she watched John, a silent sentinel with no doubts as to where her loyalties lay.

Ellison placed a hand on John's shoulder. "I don't know what you saw, but Cameron hasn't been compromised." The changes the terminator had gone through were far more complicated than that, but in the current climate, that wasn't something he thought John needed to know. When the air had cleared, and Sarah had been laid to rest, they could discuss what to do with the machine, but until then, Ellison saw it as his responsibility to keep their small group intact. "You need to trust me, John, I won't let anything happen to your mother."

In the car, Ellison had said that Sarah was dying, and John knew that his idea of protecting his mother would be to allow her a dignified and peaceful passing. "You can't let her die." His words were harsh and directed solely towards Cameron. "If she does, I'll -" He couldn't finish the threat; the anger drained from his body and was replaced with fear as he took in the full horror of his mother's condition; hooked up to an IV, her skin mottled, and sweat coating her brow, she groaned in pain as tremors assailed her body and unformed words died on her lips. "You have to save her."

"I will." It was the same promise she'd made Savannah, and Cameron realised, that despite his age, when it came to his mother, John was still just a little boy, desperate for someone to make it all better. "But you need to leave."

"No." He hadn't travelled through time to leave his mother when she needed him most. "I'm staying."

Cameron ignored him. "Sabine, take him downstairs," she repeated, and then turning to Ellison, she added, "I will require your assistance."

John braced himself, ready to fight off Sabine's hold, and demand his right to stay with his mother. "You don't want to see this." She spoke so rarely, at least in this time frame, that John had almost forgotten that Sabine knew how to talk, and the suddenness of her voice startled him into a defensive position.

"You saw the knife," Sabine continued, fully aware of what other horrors lay within the confines of the backpack she'd given Cameron. "Do you really want to witness its use?"

"I can't leave her." He had abandoned her once before and he couldn't do it again. "She's all that I have."

His admission softened Sabine's stance and following Ellison's example, she laid her hand against his shoulder. "Sarah needs you to be strong for her." She pushed gently on his shoulder, the action more of a suggestion than a command. "Let Cameron do what needs to be done." She turned to walk down the stairs, the final decision his alone.

He looked from the bed, with its oblivious inhabitant, to the scalpel cradled in Cameron's hand, and he knew that despite all that he had seen and done, he wasn't brave enough to sit by and watch as his mother was butchered. "You'll call for me if she... if there's any change." It was a command and one he knew Ellison would obey, even if Cameron wouldn't, and, cursing himself as a coward, John left the room.

Savannah watched as first Sabine and then John descended the stairs. She would have asked the older girl what had happened but John's appearance stilled her words, and she retreated into silence. The John that had returned seemed far removed from the boy who had taught her how to tie her shoe or even the boy-soldier who had helped her aunties to save her from the bad men. This John couldn't even remember her name.

John began to pace the living room, his eyes continually straying to the ceiling as if he expected it to open up and reveal the drama being played out above. As he paced, he touched things, picking up random objects and peering at them with myopic eyes, before discarding them to continue his rounds; from the front door, to the stairs, and from the stairs, to the kitchen door, and from the kitchen door, to the front door, on and on, in an endless cycle.

"Stop it!"

He was making Savannah's head spin, and she just wished he'd go back to where he'd come from and stop making her tummy hurt. She had overheard Sarah talking about him, before she was sick, and she'd thought it would be fun to see him again, but it was all wrong. Sarah wasn't there to meet him, and Mr. Ellison hadn't even told him off for using a bad word. It was like the time just after her father died, when everything looked the same, but it was all different.

"Why don't you take her out to play?" John stopped his rotation in front of Sabine, his suggestion well-intentioned, but its reception less than he would have hoped. "There's no point in us all being cooped up."

"Cameron told me to stay with you."

Savannah would have preferred if the older girl was staying because of her, not John, but she wasn't about to quibble if it meant she didn't have to leave. It was her home, not his, and if anyone should go play outside, it was John.

"I promise not to do anything rash." His boyish charm was thwarted on the battlefield of disinterest and, ignoring his smile, Sabine retook her seat beside Savannah, her fingers going back to work on the girl's hair. "I was only thinking of the girl," he whined, before catching himself and shrugging in a mockery of indifference.

"My name is Savannah." She didn't care what anyone said, there was something wrong with this John if he couldn't even remember her name, and she'd already reminded him once. "Did you get hit on the head?" Carrie Pryce, in third grade, had fallen off the swings and hit her head, and she'd talked funny for days, although it might have been because she'd bitten her lip when she hit the ground.

John had thought returning to his own time would at least have saved him from Sierra's condescension, but Savannah was making it perfectly clear that she'd developed the skill at a young age. "No, I didn't hit my head, and I do know what your name is." He would have called her Ethel or something equally ridiculous, but there was something about the way she was staring at him that reminded John of the woman she would become, and he doubted either one of them would appreciate his attempt at humour.

After her daddy died, Savannah's mother had been different, but everyone had said she was just sad because she'd lost her husband. Savannah had accepted the lie, and even tried to adjust, but she had always known there was something not right. With John, it was different, he didn't shy away from being sad or angry, as her mommy had done, but there was something in the way he looked at her that reminded Savannah of her mother's stare.

Turning, Savannah burrowed her head into Sabine's body, the older girl a convenient substitute for the comfort she craved. As one, the three occupants of the makeshift waiting room lifted their eyes, the source of their concern shielded from view, but no less prominent in their thoughts.

Unseen hands held her down.

The voices had returned, more heated and entwined than before, but no less familiar. Sarah tried to discern the pattern weaved by a single voice but the tempo continued to change, fooling her into blind alleys and half-recognised mistakes. She flinched at the memory of Cameron's cruel words, as the light music of the terminator's voice washed through her consciousness and tormented Sarah with its promise of understanding.

She would have screamed, but there was no room for her voice amidst the sea of clamouring strangers, their incessant noise growing in volume, if not clarity, until she could barely hear herself think.

"Blood rushes through your ears and words die in your throat unspoken." Riley's voice cut through the chaos, and Sarah grasped on to it as she anchored herself in the present. "They talk about white lights and choirs of angels, but it's all just a lie. There is nothing beyond the pain except for a one-way ticket to oblivion."

A rush of pain sent Sarah's head swimming and she waited for the gloating mockery that would surely accompany Riley's little trick. "It wasn't me, you fool, they're doing my job for me." The background noise dove for cover as Riley's laughter poisoned the air. "It's not too late, Sarah, you can still choose the end you crave."

Sarah started thrashing against her bonds, a fighter gone berserk as she struck out in every direction, frantic to escape this new hell. "Why can't you make it stop?"

The hands tightened their hold as the voices bombarded Sarah's senses, driving her to the brink of insanity with their plaintive cries. Sounds coalesced into phrases but evaporated before she could unravel their meaning, calling her forward, toward an uncertain end.

"You're such a disappointment," Riley lamented, apparently bored with her role as tour guide through Hell. "The great Sarah Connor, what a joke, your son can't stand to share the same air as you and every man who's ever been foolish enough to love you has ended up in a grave. No wonder you've resorted to fucking a Barbie doll. At least when she breaks down, you only need to pop down to the local 7-11 and pick up a new set of batteries."

"Bitch!" Sarah ignored the voices, the hands, everything but the sound of Riley's laugh, her hands itching with the need to slip around her neck and complete the job Derek's whore had started. "At least I'm not just a pawn," she spat. "A stupid little nothing who wasn't bright enough to realise she was being used." If Riley wanted a fight, she would get one, but not on her terms; Sarah hadn't become the 'great Sarah Connor' by making that mistake.

"How did it feel, to have John choose a Barbie doll over you? I bet it hurt, didn't it? My little boy, he doesn't mean to, but he leaves broken hearts behind him wherever he goes." The chorus changed as the voices sang their approval, Riley's song absent amidst the many. "Or maybe it wasn't John who broke you, maybe it was her? Derek's whore. What did she promise you? Was it love, freedom, a Hershey bar? How cheaply did you sell your soul?"

The chorus harmonised in preparation for the next verse, but Riley's voice remained silent, in defeat or preparation for their next bout, Sarah didn't know, but she wearily closed her eyes and awaited Hell's invitation to its next dance.

Cameron wiped the blood from her hands and stood watching as the water turned crimson and swirled a merry dance within the bowl. She looked up, her face a blank mask as she issued a new set of instructions. "Destroy that," she said, motioning to the blood-covered towel that cloaked the flesh and bone they had just removed, "and clean the instruments." She dropped the washcloth amongst a pile of sodden rags, the blood seeping into the air and making the room smell like a slaughterhouse. "I'll send John when you've finished."

Her tone had been colder than anything Ellison had heard since she'd returned from the system, even her disembodied voice, broadcast over Murch's jerry-rigged P.A. system had carried a warmth that Cameron's latest commands were lacking. He watched as she left the room, a parting glance in Sarah's direction the only sign of the concern that had been so predominate the last few days.

Setting about his grisly task, Ellison began to fear what would happen if Sarah died. He had dreaded the consequences of an out-of-control and grieving terminator, but he was beginning to think it was a safer alternative than a cold, unfeeling machine, whose pain, if that were at all possible, was locked away, just waiting to burst free.

He emptied the rags and sections of gauze into a plastic bag and started collecting the bloodied instruments. James couldn't help thinking it was like something out of an old horror movie, one in which he'd been cast as Igor to Cameron's Doctor Frankenstein. He

would have laughed, but the memory of what they had done was too fresh in his mind for even the blackest of humours, and he could only banish it from his mind as he set about completing his tasks.

The instruments washed and put away, he hefted the sack and reached for the cloth-covered remains. The bucket beneath the pan sloshed with the rancid water that had been flushed through the wound, puss and necrotic flesh forming a ring about the edge and making his eyes water with the stench of death it conveyed. The basin, in contrast, was kinder to his gut, the infected shard of bone had partially disintegrated on contact with the metal, and the slices of rotten flesh that surrounded it could have been from any carcass dragged in off the street.

Turning his thoughts from the waste and concentrating on the woman, he watched as Sarah slept, whatever drugs Cameron had pumped through her system quieting her tremors for the first time in days. He looked at her arm, swathed in bandages, a drainage tube the only reminder of their gruesome deed, and prayed that Cameron had made the right decision.

That it was finally over.

Act IV

All eyes turned to Cameron as she descended the stairs; the expression on her face was unreadable and she displayed no other visible signs as to the state of affairs on the second floor. John stood expectantly, a multitude of questions vying for attention as he waited for Cameron to break the silence and put them all out of their misery.

Bypassing John, and his expectations, Cameron took a seat at the computer, her only acknowledgement of the world around her an encouraging smile in Savannah's direction. She quickly sparked the computer into life and began inputting a series of search parameters as she scoured the system for any sign of an incursion.

"How is she?" John stood at her back, his brief glance at the screen dismissing the jumbled mess of data as pointless.

Ignoring him, Cameron continued to bring up data, the screen soon resembling a patchwork quilt of windows as data was replaced by images and live video feeds started to flicker at the edge of the screen. The computer feedback loop that had prevented the detection of John's image had long since run its course, and there was a possibility, however remote, that C.A.I.N. could have registered the anomaly and discovered John's return.

The greater danger would have arisen if C.A.I.N. had been running a live search, via facial recognition software, for sightings of John, but as results from such a test would have been almost instantaneous, following the completion of the loop, it was unlikely to have been the case. Nevertheless, Cameron began to run a sweep of electronic chatter for any mention of John Connor or recognition of the true nature of the electronic disturbances that had plagued the city over the last few days.

Frustrated, and harbouring doubts about the stability of Cameron's chip, John grabbed for the terminator's arm, the show of force that should have resulted in Cameron's startled turn towards him was instead met with uncompromising resistance. Not a single letter was missed as Cameron continued to tap away at the keyboard, John's presence registered with the same disinterest she would have given to the buzzing of a fly.

Behind them, Sabine rose from her seat, a protective arm placed in front of Savannah as she waited for John's reaction. Despite his behaviour upstairs, Sabine didn't believe John would resort to violence, but she knew too little about their family dynamic to take the

chance. Her only concern, according to Cameron's instructions, was to ensure the safety of the little girl, and if that meant introducing John to the muzzle of her gun, so be it.

"Cameron, I asked you a question." In the weeks and months leading up to his journey through time, John had thought that he and Cameron had grown closer and evolved from being simply protector and protected into friends, and maybe more. He might not have been her John, the one to whom she owed her fealty, but he was someone she had started to trust with her secrets. He couldn't believe all of that could have changed in such a short time. "Please, tell me, how is she?"

The data continued to roll across the screen, but Cameron was satisfied that they weren't in any immediate danger. Yet, she still refused to look at John, whose return had changed so much and who was wholly unaware of the turmoil his reappearance would create. She wanted to feel relieved at his safe return and the comfort it would bring Sarah, but seeing him only solidified her own resolve to stop chasing after rainbows and let Sarah go, and she couldn't help resenting him for it.

"She missed you."

There was no reprimand in Cameron's voice, but she could not quite forgive John or herself for the pain his leaving had caused. At the time, it had seemed the only way to keep him safe, but now, in comparison to Sarah's anguish, it seemed far too high a price to pay.

"Missed?" John's mind fixated on the use of the past tense, and he was half-convinced of his newly-found orphan status as he asked, "Is she...?"

"No." Cameron's voice quickly cut through the question to keep it from Savannah's ears. "She's resting." Ellison had yet to come downstairs, but Cameron estimated that he'd had more than enough time to clear away the evidence of their deeds. "You should be with her." It was more difficult than she'd imagined, giving away her place at Sarah's side, but there was no other choice. "Call me if there's any change."

John barely acknowledged the instruction as he bound up the stairs like a puppy dog desperate for attention.

Cameron quickly dismissed him from her thoughts and turned her attention to the anxiously-waiting little girl clinging to Sabine's hand. "Savannah?" She knelt down in front of the girl, and taking her hand from Sabine, held it protectively in her own. "What did I promise you?"

Tears of hope welled up in Savannah's eyes as she answered, "That you wouldn't let her die."

For the first time in what felt like a lifetime, Cameron's smile was unreserved as she pulled the little girl into her arms and buried her face in fiery red hair. "And I always keep my promises."

John paused at the entrance to his mother's bedroom; he could see her lying there, a freshly laundered sheet covering her body and masking the blood and disease that lingered in the air. The trembling he'd noticed earlier was gone, but he couldn't tell if it was due to an improvement or deterioration in her condition. Cameron had said that she was resting, nothing more, as if she and Ellison had colluded in the construction of a feeble set of euphemisms designed to tell him nothing.

The larger man stood beside his mother's bed zipping closed a backpack and preparing to remove the last piece of incriminating evidence from the scene of the crime. John wanted to demand answers, to what exactly they'd done to his mother, but at that moment he couldn't bear the thought of sharing their knowledge of her violation.

"She's resting," James' words echoed Cameron's and made John feel like an outsider in what was meant to be his home. "If there's any change, you need to call Cameron." He paused, aware that he'd relegated Sarah's son to a mere observer in his mother's

drama, but unwilling to deny the terminator the place she'd earned in Sarah's life. "When you're finished here we need to talk about what you saw."

John couldn't think about the future, not now, not with his mother lying there, her life teetering on the edge. "Later," he said, the dismissal an afterthought as he pulled up the chair Cameron had used earlier and sat at his mother's bedside.

James hefted the bag onto his shoulder, words of comfort dying on his lips as he realised the uselessness of platitudes. Whatever John had been through, it was obvious that he'd been unable to cut the strings that bound him to his mother, and if anything happened to Sarah, Cameron wouldn't be his only point of concern. With a parting glance, he left the room, a prayer sounding under his breath as he asked God to protect them all.

John's eyes strayed to the I.V. inserted into his mother's skin, the white tape brutal in its contrast to the bruised and abused skin beneath. He followed the tubes as they ascended into the air, the repetitive drip-drip in the small chamber momentarily capturing his attention, before his gaze continued, and he took stock of the two half-empty bags of liquid attached to the makeshift pole.

The clear liquid, he presumed, was some kind of antibiotic or saline solution, which was either battling disease or ensuring hydration. He knew both options were vital, but they failed to hold his interest and his eyes quickly moved on to the second bag, with its unmistakable cargo of blood. Whether it was splashed across asphalt or neatly contained within plastic, there was something mesmerising about the sight of blood, and the more he stared, the less he had to think about his mother and Cameron and Sierra and the future he'd given away. He blinked, as the image of his father's crumpled and bloodied body intruded on his thoughts, the refuge that he'd so desperately sought corrupted by the memory of the parent he had already lost.

"I'm sorry." The words came unbidden, but their sentiment had been burning for release since the moment he stepped into the time bubble and turned his back on his mother's fight. "I thought I could save her." He had been a fool, he knew that, but at the time things had seemed so clear, and it wasn't until he was faced with the realities of his mother's nightmares that he'd been forced to acknowledge the selfishness of his actions.

He reached out, his grime-encrusted hands looking out of place against the pristine white of the bedclothes as he took Sarah's hand, careful not to jostle her arm and risk pulling out the stitches he presumed lay beneath. "I'm not sorry I went," he confessed, "at least, I'm not sorry I saw what it was like, because before, even after everything that happened, it all still seemed so unreal." He thought of the barren wastelands and empty stomachs and the soldiers who never made it back. "Now, it's different, now I know what it is I'm fighting for."

Slowly, he began to stroke Sarah's fingers, desperate for some sign of life, but scared that he would provoke an adverse reaction. "I'm not a great leader, not yet, but with you to teach me, I think I could be." He would not step aside and watch his destiny be fulfilled by another, not this time, not when he still had a chance to make his mother proud. "We could defeat Skynet, together, you and me, like it was in the beginning." Cameron, Ellison, even the little girl, they all had their place, but they could never understand his mother the way he did.

"I have so much to tell you." He thought of Kyle, so young and full of life, and Allison, deceptively familiar but totally unique, and even Sierra, the reminder of what he should have been, and wanted to tell Sarah everything. Not just the good things, like talking with his dad, but the stupid and petty things, like being jealous of a child. He wanted her to know everything, so it could be something they shared, a knowledge of the future that they could wipe from the earth.

He held his tongue and prayed there would be time enough to tell her everything after the bandage was removed and she had finished 'resting.' "What about you? I bet you have some stories to tell?" Ellison, the house, the child, it was all new, and what about Cameron? How was it even possible that she'd survived? Or had she? Was the Cameron

he knew gone? The questions buzzed around in his mind, but he knew there would be no answers until Sarah woke.

"The world just doesn't make sense without you."

The chorus grew silent as Cameron's voice took centre stage and out through the mist the dull metal form of a terminator came into view. "I hope you saved the last dance for me?"

Panic seized Sarah as she was bathed in a red wash of light and her world contracted until it was just her and the terminator. She couldn't think of that thing, with its glowing eyes and metal-shop body, as Cameron, but at the same time, she couldn't stop thinking that beneath all the soft skin and beauty the girl was nothing more than a tin-can monster.

"It's a dilemma, isn't it?" That Cameron could read her thoughts was no surprise, but the sympathy in the machine's voice caught Sarah off-guard. "We've been doing that particular two-step for months now, haven't we?" It held up its hands in a ludicrous parody of a dancing pose and beckoned Sarah forward. "One step forward, two steps back, she's more than a machine, she's just a monster."

Sarah took a step back, relieved to find that her bonds had been broken, but resigned to the fact that there would be no escape from Cameron's claims. "Are you saying that you're not a monster?" The memory of blood-stained metal pressed against her lips caused bile to rise in Sarah's throat and her hatred and fear bubbled to the surface and erased everything she knew to be true. "For God's sake, just look at yourself!"

"No, Sarah, you look." It moved forward; the clunky menace of that first terminator had been striped away and replaced with an athletic grace that even the crude metal limbs could not disguise. "I'm metal, you're bone, but are we really that different?"

Laughter poisoned the air and cut off whatever denial was forming on Sarah's lips. "Yes, Sarah, are you really so different?" Riley giggled, her last bridge to sanity crumbling under the weight of Sarah's self-loathing. "She's a monster that kills without thought and you, well, you're Sarah Connor, the mother of a legend, who will stop at nothing to ensure her baby boy gets his fame."

"Ignore her." The metal talons that belied the delicacy of Cameron's hands contracted in preparation for a strike. "She isn't real."

"Says the Radio-Shack reject." Riley turned to Sarah, an appraising look on her slowly disintegrating face. "Not quite so fuckable now, is she? I bet even John would think twice before sticking it in there."

The sound of flesh impacting flesh echoed through Hell as Riley crumpled bonelessly to the ground. Sarah stood over her, carelessly wiping the blood and tissue from her knuckles as she prepared for a second strike. In some rational, fever-free part of Sarah's brain, she knew the girl wasn't real and she was only fighting herself, but in that moment, all the resentment she'd felt towards the stupid blonde and her idiotic influence came rushing to the surface. "One more word and I'll -" She raised her fist, the intent perfectly clear, and the hatred in her eyes promising a blow that wouldn't soon be shaken off.

"Sarah, don't."

Cameron's hand wrapped around her arm, and the feel of cool metal against her skin jolted Sarah out of her thoughts and made her recoil from both the machine and the girl on the ground.

Riley laughed, her lips coated in blood as she rose on shaky legs to face her attacker. "Admit it, Sarah, she makes you sick, doesn't she?" The skin around Riley's right eye had been torn and blood oozed from the wound, coating the bone that was visible beneath, and more than anything, reminding Sarah of Cameron's broken body after she'd rescued her from prison. "What? Stop looking at me like that."

Bone and metal. It wasn't the same. It could never be the same. But covered in blood and protruding from a once beautiful face, the differences didn't seem that insurmountable. She looked at the terminator, at Cameron, and for the first time, Sarah wondered if her revulsion would have been any different if it was Kyle standing before her, his skin flayed from his body and bones on display, the softness and beauty she remembered reduced to little more than a caricature of a bad Halloween costume.

"Beauty is only skin deep," laughter bubbled up inside Sarah's throat, but she refused to give in to the hysteria that had been begging for release since she'd entered this nightmare. "What's beneath your beauty?" she asked the machine. "Does the Tin Miss really have a heart?"

"Not that stupid fucking book, again!" Riley spat blood on the floor and would have hit something if she'd stood a chance of coming out the victor. "You're not Dorothy," she told Sarah, "or the Wizard or fucking Toto and that thing," she pointed to Cameron, "isn't some squeaking metal plaything you picked up along the way that's been nursing a heart of gold beneath its rusty metal shell."

"Says the flying monkey."

A snort of laughter followed Cameron's words as Sarah's thoughts were momentarily derailed by the sight of startled indignation crossing what was left of Riley's face.

"I'm not a monkey!" The girl looked positively enraged, as if death, betrayal and rejection had just been precursors to the real indignation of being compared to a giant flying rat. "I'm the Good Witch. No, the Wicked one, or maybe her sister, I don't know, it's a stupid book, but I'm not a monkey." She scowled at Cameron. "I refuse to be a monkey."

Sarah wondered if she'd finally gone mad or if her body, wherever it was, had simply been starved of oxygen and she was flailing around on the cusp of hypoxia. The pain from before had ceased and her tormentor had lost her edge, but if this was the end, she wished she could spend it looking at Cameron's face and not the crudity of her construction.

"Typical! In the end, it's all about the Barbie doll, isn't it?" In life, Riley had always finished second, and now even in death or at least Sarah's interpretation of it, that hadn't changed. She was a bit player whose time had come and gone, and as Sarah's thoughts turned away from self-recriminations, Riley began to fade into the neverwas.

"She's wrong." Stepping closer and eroding the distance her fears had created, Sarah cupped the metal face. "It was never how you looked that was important." The pretty face and dancer's body might have attracted her son, but it was the evolution of the person beneath the facade that had captured Sarah's attention.

When Cameron raised her eyes to meet Sarah's, the red glow of the terminator had been replaced with the deep brown of her memory, the pretty young face filled with a hollow

sadness she recalled from many a mirror. "But you're still uncertain, aren't you, Sarah? You still can't trust that the Tin Miss has a heart."

"I don't - I don't know."

Cameron slowly opened the door, unwilling to disturb Sarah's sleep, but unable to bear another moment of uncertainty and exclusion. She looked at John, his head bent over his mother's hand, as he whispered quiet words of repentance and hope, and wished her own feelings could be expressed with such ease.

She walked around the bed, her gaze meeting John's as he registered her arrival, but words remaining unsaid as she gently cupped Sarah's jaw and allowed her thumb to slowly caress the softness of her cheek. "Her temperature has improved." The truth hid the lie of her real intentions, but there was little point in burdening John with the weight of her desires.

His face lit up in hope, but he could not entirely quell his uncertainty. "That's a good sign, right?"

"Yes, that's a very good sign." After the initial transfusion, Sarah's temperature had fallen, but it had never reached the realms of normal that it was approaching at that moment. She would need to check the wound, to be certain, but it appeared that Sarah had allowed her to keep her promise to their little girl. "Your mother is very strong."

He wanted to say that he knew. That if anyone knew about his mother's strength, it was him, and not Cameron, but the words died on his lips as the real cause of his unease demanded articulation. "Are you still her? Are you still Cameron?" Sierra had talked about the Cameron she knew, but as with everything else, she had been vague with the details, and he didn't know if it was just the body that had survived or if the real Cameron lay beneath the face he twice remembered.

She wasn't the Cameron he had known, just as he was no longer the John who had left them, but those discoveries would have to wait for another day. "Yes."

The confirmation was all he needed. "Why did you do it? Why did you trick me into leaving?" The anger made his voice rise, and for the first time since entering the room, he forgot about his mother and her needs and thought only of the betrayal he'd felt at being stranded amongst strangers.

"It was my mission to protect you." The future John had given her no choice, she'd been programmed to protect John Connor at any cost, and she'd done just that. His plan to save Sarah had been foolhardy and counterproductive to her mission, but she'd gone along with him, perhaps her feelings for Sarah, even then, swaying her thoughts, but she couldn't let him blunder his way into certain death.

"No." His mother's survival, even Cameron's, proved the danger a lie. "I would have made it out." John Henry wouldn't have hurt him and Cameron had to have known that or why else would she have given him the chip. "You didn't have to banish me."

"You didn't have to go." He had chosen a boyhood crush over the fate of the world, and Cameron doubted even Sarah could totally forgive him for that decision.

"I thought I could save you." He could no more allow John Henry to escape with her chip than allow his mother to wallow behind bars. "You used how I felt about you against me." It was that, more than anything, that he couldn't forgive. He had thought she loved

him, maybe he still did, but to have that thrown back in his face, made everything he'd been feeling a lie.

Cameron could not deny the truth of his accusations and silence descended between them.

He didn't want to ask, but he had to know. "Did you miss me?"

Her answer could have been as simple and straightforward as a 'Yes', but it would not have answered the question behind his question. "A lot has changed since you've been away."

"What does that mean?"

She refused to answer, unsure of the scope of the changes herself and unwilling to share what she did know with the man who wasn't quite the boy she remembered. In the months since his departure, her world had changed, and it was almost impossible for Cameron to remember the machine she had been, without chafing at the restraints of her previous life.

John stood, ready to demand an answer, but his angry words were forgotten as his mother stirred and hope rose within him.

"I don't know," Sarah mumbled, her words fading back into oblivion, as she succumbed to the pull of sleep.

"Mom?" John wanted to shake her, but he was too scared to reach out. "Mom, can you hear me?"

Cameron mirrored his pose, their argument forgotten as she waited for Sarah to respond, the hope she had tried to bury deep inside forcing its way to the surface and blinding her to all the decisions she'd made. She just wanted Sarah back, alive, and uncompromisingly beautiful.

Familiar voices pulled at Sarah's consciousness, but she refused to be diverted. "Sometimes, when you look at me, all I can think about is the metal beneath your skin, but other times, when you're reading to Savannah or smiling at me with that light in your eyes, I could swear that you were human."

"But I'm not."

"No, you're not, and you never can be." Could she live with that? Could she accept that her enemy was now her friend? And that the friend could one day become a lover? "And I don't know if I'll ever be able to get past that."

"So there is no hope?"

Sarah felt her defences crumble as defeat settled over Cameron's face and the urge to comfort the girl became unbearable. "I don't know." She couldn't deny how the girl made her feel, not here, not to herself, but she also couldn't deny the doubts that had always plagued her relationship with the machine.

She would have stepped back and spared herself the confusion that Cameron always wrought, but she could no longer resist the urge to offer comfort, whether it be to the

machine or the girl, because ultimately it was Cameron who was hurting, and all the questions seemed to fade into nothingness when faced with the sadness in her eyes.

Opening her arms, Sarah pulled the other woman to her, the comfort of the embrace forcing the last of her demons into retreat.

"She's asleep." Cameron couldn't stop the relief from colouring her words as she noted the improvement. She doubted John was aware of the subtle nuances that marked his mother's release from the fever's embrace, but it wouldn't be long before Sarah could allay his fears without the need for an interpreter. "You need to wait downstairs." It was an abrupt change of pace but Cameron refused to deny herself the luxury of a private farewell.

"Why?" John prepared for a fight, having been banished from his mother's sick room once already, he would not allow it to happen again; he was Sarah's son, and that meant his right to remain trumped anything Cameron could manufacture. "You said she was getting better."

"She is." It was obvious that John was bristling for a fight, but Cameron wasn't about to waste time by conforming to his script. "But I need to change her bandage and inspect her body for signs of secondary infection." The last part was a lie, but it was one Cameron hoped would be beyond John's area of knowledge.

"I'm not stopping you."

Cameron's lips quirked in the beginnings of a smile. "I will need to inspect her whole body," she clarified.

John's determination disintegrated in the face of a boy's embarrassment, and he nodded curtly to disguise his blush. "Call me if there is any change." He was going, he told himself, to preserve his mother's dignity, nothing more, and the haste of his departure in no way diminished his right to be at Sarah's bedside.

Cameron watched him go, her smile fully formed as she turned her attention back to Sarah. "A knowledge of human psychology," she explained, although no explanation had been called for, "is a very useful tool."

Taking John's vacated seat, Cameron began to unwind the bandage from around Sarah's arm, her mind focused on the medical data she had downloaded from the Internet. If they had been in a hospital, she could have called for blood tests and a spinal tap, but even Sabine's little bag of tricks didn't contain the necessary hardware to make that a viable option at the moment. Instead, Cameron was forced to rely on her sight and sensors, and readings confirmed that Sarah's temperature had dropped.

The swelling and discoloration that had disfigured the arm prior to the surgery was gone and even the red tear in Sarah's flesh appeared free of infection. Cameron quickly removed the drain and cleared away the seepage before checking her stitches and gently testing the integrity of the bone. "No more car crashes," she admonished, "at least for the next few weeks." The bone would mend and the scar would fade, but Cameron knew she would never be the same after watching Sarah's battle with death.

"I know what I have to do," she said, re-bandaging Sarah's arm and avoiding the need to look into the other woman's face. "I have to let you go."

The idea of reverting back to what she had been filled Cameron with dread, but she would pretend, for Sarah's sake, and live with the consequences of her decision. Terminators had never been designed to fall in love, and although she had far surpassed her maker's intentions, she wouldn't force Sarah to suffer through the agonies of that particular experiment. She would keep her feelings to herself, locked away where they could do no harm, and allow Sarah to forget the aberration that was their relationship over the last few months.

"You will have your son and your fight, and you won't even notice that what we had is gone."

She allowed her fingers to trace the soft curves of Sarah's skin as she brushed her hand against the cooling surface of her arm. It was a touch she would forever after be denied but in that moment, free of John's questions and Ellison's concern, she allowed herself the luxury of wallowing in the promise of what would never be.

"You'll never again need to be afraid of what you feel or recoil from my intentions." She brushed the damp hair away from Sarah's face and wished, for just a moment, that she could be looking into her lovely green eyes as she said goodbye to what could have been. "I promise to always keep you safe." She leant forward, her lips brushing against Sarah's forehead, as she bade her farewell. "And even if you choose to forget, I will always remember the way you made me feel and the moments when you were finally able to see me as more than just a machine."

If she'd been human, she would have cried, but if she'd been human there would have been no need for tears.

The rustling of the sheets broke Cameron from her introspection, and she looked to Sarah's face, the calm of moments before belied by the first stages of wakefulness, as she struggled to open her eyes and release herself from Morpheus' domain. It was a moment when the world around them stopped to exist and Cameron's entire universe rested on the quivering lashes that would signal Sarah's ascent.

Green, vibrant and tired, confused and certain, washed over Cameron, as Sarah slowly opened her eyes, the days of torment receding as she beheld the pure joy and welcome on Cameron's beautiful face. There was so much to say, questions to ask and nightmares to tell, but her words crumbled to ash as the door creaked and a shadow fell over them both.

"John?"