

## **Episode 9: Dark Come Soon**

**by Zennie**

**Inspectorboxer and anklebones contributed to the writing of this episode as well**

### **Teaser**

The flood of code flowing across Danny's screen paused and then blinked out, a single image taking its place. It was a headline and news article from the paper Danny read every day in the back of the black-windowed SUV that took him to Kaliba; the date was the day before, from the local section, but Danny knew it hadn't been in any paper he had seen. He would have remembered seeing his mother's name under a headline that read, "Local woman missing, feared dead."

He rocked back in his chair in surprise and took a paranoid glance around. He was mostly alone in the room, and Kaliba's extreme security measures ensured that none of his colleagues were in position to view his screen. More images cascaded across his monitor, images of his home, the front door splintered and punched through, walls pockmarked with bullet holes, shattered glass all over, and a curiously blackened door handle. They were police evidence photos, he realized, evidence of yet another assault on his home, an assault like the one that Sarah Connor had perpetuated so many years ago on the day that had shattered his childhood, the day his father had left and never come home. The bullet holes were eerily familiar from that day and he sucked in a sharp breath.

In his shock, it didn't even occur to Danny to wonder how C.A.I.N. had come by the photos. His thoughts were almost completely for his mother.

Shaking, Danny's fingers typed quickly on the keyboard; no feedback appeared in response to his actions, but he knew C.A.I.N. would receive his message.

*No further information on your mother has been reported. Police are looking for a man seen leaving your house alone. He stole a car and a*

*handgun and was last seen at a police station several miles away where Savannah Weaver was in custody.*

More images covered his screen, a school photo of a young redheaded girl, a family photo, the logo for Zeira Corp, and a grainy black-and-white still of a large, lumbering man in a leather jacket and sunglasses standing in front of a reception desk. The name Zeira Corp was vaguely familiar to Danny as another R&D firm, and he dimly remembered hearing Sarah Connor's name associated with it as well.

Carefully, Danny glanced over his shoulder, this time at the tiny surveillance camera in the corner.

*I have it on a loop.*

Danny's fingers typed out a single question, why?, not sure what question he was asking, why his mom had been attacked—he refused to believe she was dead—or why C.A.I.N. was helping him. A second later, he typed a second query: who?

*Unknown.*

Kaliba?

*Unknown.*

Sarah Connor?

*Unknown.*

Vaughn?

There was a pause in response to his final question, almost as if the AI was considering the possibility. While the moment stretched, Danny felt a cold sweat break out on the back of his neck.

*No information available points to a motive or suspect. There are few leads suggested in the police file. The basement door was wired into an electrical current and police believe that the intruder sustained an electrical shock. They have no theories on how he survived.*

But you do?

*No human could have survived the current.*

A terminator?

Yes.

Danny remembered the terminator at the junkyard, during Kaliba's first attempt to capture Sarah. If they had one, they might have more. His mother had shown what side she was on that night, and Vaughn was not known for his patience. If he had thought that Terissa knew where Sarah was...

Feeling sick to his stomach, Danny typed a last note:

Thanks. Let me know if there are any new developments.

*Of course.*

With that, Danny logged out of his workstation and walked to the cafeteria, but the cup of coffee he fetched couldn't seem to penetrate the ice-cold ball that had settled in the pit of his stomach.

## **Act 1**

The coffee didn't seem to be helping, Sarah thought, after her scant, intermittent sleep of the night before. The promised story for Savannah hadn't ended with a single tale. Instead, long after the lights had been turned out, Savannah had enjoyed the undivided attention of her 'aunts,' wheedling Cameron into telling story after story well into the morning.

Her mind drifted back over the hours spent curled up with Savannah and Cameron, enjoying the cyborg's stories nearly as much as the child snuggled against her. Savannah had soaked up their attention, oblivious to the occasional weighted look that had lingered between Sarah and Cameron in the ghostly blue of her nightlight. Those stolen glances had done things to Sarah's body. If Savannah hadn't been a

buffer between them, Sarah suspected she would have been hard pressed to remember her resolve to give Cameron space and keep her hands off the terminator. If Cameron would have allowed the touch, that is. Every time she caught herself returning one of Sarah's heated looks, Cameron had abruptly shifted her focus back onto the girl.

Sarah had succumbed to the need for rest first, her healing body finally giving in and letting her fall asleep with her head pillowed on top of Savannah's. She'd stayed awake far longer than she should have been able, Sarah knew, but she didn't dwell on the reason why, even as she felt a twinge deep in the bone of her left arm. She'd woken in her own bed, alone, but she could smell Cameron's distinct scent on her clothes with her first deep breath of the day.

Stifling yet another yawn, Sarah let her gaze drift once more to the cyborg preoccupying her thoughts. The wounds on Cameron's face were nothing more than fading scratches now, and Sarah fervently hoped the healing bullet holes hidden by the terminator's clothes were fairing just as well.

Cameron was standing distinctly apart from the group settled in the couches and chairs around the coffee table, her attention fixed on the child playing in the back yard. Sarah wondered how long Cameron would carry the guilt of Savannah's hurt feelings and aborted attempt at running away, or—and here she hid her grin with a sip of coffee—how long it would take for Cameron to figure out that Savannah was taking advantage of that guilt to keep the terminator at her beck and call. Already that morning Cameron had made her breakfast and, much to John's bemusement, played with stuffed animals, and only Sarah's insistence that Cameron needed to talk to the grown-ups had kept her from going to the back yard to play.

"I knew. The moment I opened the door, I knew what it was."

Terissa's voice floated on the edge of Sarah's awareness, but her attention was riveted on Cameron as the cyborg continued to watch Savannah play. Cameron looked decidedly uncomfortable, like she was longing to join the little girl, and Sarah pressed her lips together in a tight line as she resisted the urge to offer some kind of comfort. With a sigh, she reluctantly shifted some of her focus back onto the

conversation.

"What was it doing?" James asked from his position next to Terissa on the couch. John remained silent in a nearby chair, but his features looked troubled as he toyed with the pocket watch his mother had been wearing around her neck in his absence.

"Looking for Savannah," Terissa admitted, glancing up to study Sarah's profile before looking away. "It had her picture."

*It.* Sarah remembered when she called Cameron by that ambiguous pronoun. Feeling a shred of guilt, she continued to watch the terminator, but Cameron didn't appear to be listening, her entire focus seemingly on the child playing outside on the swings. Sarah's jaw bunched and she glanced down into the dwindling depths of her coffee.

"Then what happened?" James prompted.

Terissa stared at her hands, watching them shake with sick fascination. "It must have realized that I knew... what it was. It... it called me a name..."

John's head came up. "Tango," he blurted.

Terissa gave a startled glance around the room, her lips tightening into a thin line as she looked first from Sarah to Ellison and finally to John. "Yes," she replied carefully, "that's what it called me. How did you know?" Her tone sharpened at the end as she stared at John.

Sarah finally focused on the conversation in earnest. "Tango?" she repeated. "What does that mean?"

"It was your name," John explained to Terissa in a hoarse voice, painful memories reflected in his eyes. "In the future."

Terissa stared at him, sudden anger and fear turning her features hard. "What?"

Sarah made a move to step between them, but John stopped her as he met Terissa's stare calmly and explained, "You were important, in the

future, a future I destroyed in coming back. That terminator must have been sent back before I got to the facility." Terissa's eyes widened as she understood what John was saying and realized the implications.

Sarah's gaze drifted back to Cameron, who seemed to be ignoring the entire conversation, and her eyes followed the terminator's gaze to the redhead on the swings. She felt a sinking in her gut and a flash of white-hot anger at her son for keeping secrets he had no business keeping. "And Savannah is important in that future as well," she guessed, her jaw clenching.

Cameron's head finally swung around, the first indication that she had been listening at all, to lock eyes with Sarah for a second before fixing on John, her expression decidedly displeased.

Just the brush of those brown eyes stirred something deep within Sarah, and she shuddered. Her strength wasn't the only thing recovering from her illness, she thought ruefully, as she turned her attention to her son and hoped no one noticed her slip. The space that she was trying to keep between them seemed to evaporate into the ether every time they shared a look. It was starting to wear on Sarah, breaking her down a little more with each passing day.

"She is," John admitted bitterly.

Everyone went silent, all of them staring at John who glared back at them defiantly.

James rose to his feet to tower over John, his eyes sweeping over Sarah and Cameron to include them in his anger. "I told you I didn't want her involved..."

"She isn't, not anymore," John snapped defensively. "I erased that future by coming back."

"The hell you did!" James bellowed. "You just brought that future back with you!"

"James," Sarah warned with a low tone and intent look. She gave him

a slight shake of her head before casting a knowing glance at Cameron who had taken a step closer to Sarah's side as the conversation turned heated.

"What did the terminator do?" James demanded of Terissa to prove his point.

"It tried to kill me," Terissa confessed.

"Savannah was his mission, but your name was known to him," John guessed in a tight voice. "When it realized who you were..." He trailed off, wondering how the machines had come by the knowledge of Terissa's true identity. They shouldn't have known it. They shouldn't have known about Savannah, either. His stomach curdled at the thought. "Chances are it's the only one out there looking for either of you."

"So what do we do?" Terissa asked in alarm. "Just wait until it comes for us?" She looked up at Sarah. "You said it yourself. They don't stop. They'll never stop."

Sarah was about to respond when a movement out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. Cameron was walking away, heading to the door with an intent expression on her face.

"Where do you think you're going?" Sarah snapped more harshly than she intended, her exasperated tone cutting across the room and quieting everyone.

"There's a terminator after Savannah." When no one said anything, Cameron continued. "I am going to stop it."

Sarah didn't remember striding over to Cameron or grabbing her; she just found herself there, inches away, clutching the cyborg's arm in a tight, but ultimately ineffectual, grip. "You're going to do what?" Sarah could feel the weight of several puzzled glances at her back as she confronted the terminator, but she couldn't seem to control herself anymore. She wasn't even sure she cared.

"Find it. Terminate it," Cameron clarified needlessly, her gaze dipping

to Sarah's hand where it was curled around her bicep, an unreadable emotion in her eyes.

"Because that worked so well the last time," Sarah retorted, images of Cameron lying in a heap on the floor of the van filling her inner vision. A sense of panic flowed through her at the thought, and Sarah tightened her grip. "You can't take him on by yourself."

"Savannah is in danger." Cameron's gaze slid to Terissa. "Terissa is in danger," she added almost politely.

"They'll be in more danger if you... if you..." Sarah swallowed past a lump in her throat, unable to voice the words that would admit more than she was ready to.

Cameron's head tilted as she studied Sarah intently, the moment stretching out between them and thickening. She started to say something only to hold back the words as a voice shattered the tense silence.

"Mom's right." John's calm voice broke them apart, Sarah's fingers reluctantly releasing Cameron as they both turned to him. "You can't take him on by yourself. You need help to track him and incapacitate him." John rose to his feet, slipping the pocket watch around his neck as he brushed past James to stand in the middle of the room. He had all of their attention, Sarah noticed. He had learned something during his time away, or he was emulating someone he had met. His voice held a hint of command, and he dominated the space as he positioned himself in the center.

Whatever had happened in the future, John finally seemed ready and willing to be the leader he needed to be. It was a moment Sarah had been unsure she would live to see. A flicker of pride tinged with a strange dose of relief flared inside her.

James glanced between Sarah and John curiously, unsure whom to defer to. "So what's the plan?" he asked.

John drew a breath and then hesitated, waiting for his mother to speak. She gave a tight nod, the movement so small compared to the

sweeping change that it signaled, granting permission and handing over command all at the same time. They stared at each other for a moment, John swallowing as the role he'd come back to claim settled on his shoulders. With a nod in return, he began to lay out his plan.

"We don't know where he is so we'll need to lure him out."

"Not with Savannah," James countered instantly.

"No," John agreed, "not with Savannah." His eyes shifted to the side, to Terissa sitting on the couch.

As if she expected this, Terissa nodded thoughtfully, her eyes bright with the knowledge of the danger and risks, but she looked relieved, like she had been waiting for her chance to strike back. "How will it know...?"

"He'll be scanning police communications. He'll come if your name shows up."

"Auldridge," Sarah supplied. "He wants to help? We'll let him help."

Terissa gave her a faint, knowing smirk.

The conversation took off from there, the plan emerging bit by bit. Sarah stood back, letting John direct the conversation. She wasn't the only one; Cameron stood silent and motionless, a faraway look in her eyes.

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An hour later, flags fluttered in the slight breeze at Cameron's wrists, knees and elbows; she was standing, motionless, watching and waiting for Savannah to make her move. When it came, it was a feint to Cameron's right and then a quick dash at the flag on her left knee. Cameron had anticipated the move, and her arm swung down, but Savannah caught the flag with a snap and hit the ground rolling, her slight body sliding past the cyborg just out of reach of her fingers.

Cameron turned, her immobilized leg slowing her down just enough to

keep her from catching Savannah as she darted in to grab the flag at Cameron's right elbow with a squeal of delight. Despite the serious intent behind the game, Cameron smiled unconsciously at Savannah's peal of laughter.

She could feel Sarah's eyes on her. Cameron knew she had only to turn her head to spy Sarah lazing in the porch swing as she watched the two of them play. The pull of Sarah's presence divided her attention, making it hard to concentrate on the slight movements that would telegraph Savannah's plans. Savannah was getting better at hiding those movements and anticipating Cameron's reactions, making the game difficult even when Sarah wasn't there to distract her.

Savannah snatched at the flag on her right knee, and Cameron swung away just barely in time to keep it out of her grasp, her counterattack missing by feet rather than inches. Even though she couldn't get tired, Cameron felt... overextended. She had told Ellison not to envy the machines for their lack of caring, but now, she wasn't so sure. The emotions that he had labeled in the ruins of Zeira Corp—worry, regret, fear—weighed on her, and Sarah's reaction to her own salvation confused her. Cameron had expected a fight; she would have welcomed a fight. In the face of Sarah's anger, her resolution to sever the ties between them would have been easier to achieve.

Sarah should have been furious.

Savannah must have noted Cameron's preoccupation, and she swiped the flag from Cameron's knee in a running dodge, the terminator's frozen arm and leg impeding her movement as she tried to catch the girl on her way in. Savannah tossed the flag down with the others, her small hands clutching at her shorts as she caught her breath and sized up the cyborg in front of her.

Between the girl in front of her and the woman behind her, Cameron felt trapped, trapped by the emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. Sarah's lack of anger the night before had been as confusing as her anger this morning. Cameron didn't need to replay the moment to feel Sarah's fingers wrapped around her arm or the closeness of their bodies. An average female's grip force ranged from 57 to 65 pounds per square inch, a negligible force compared to the strength in

Cameron's endoskeleton, but she had been unable to break the contact. Sarah's touch had rooted her there, and the *longing* that had been unleashed by it had threatened to destabilize the composure that Cameron was desperately trying to achieve.

The desire—to turn, to look at Sarah, to cross the yard, to take her in her arms—was so strong that Cameron felt a slight tremble in her fingers. But she had no time to reflect, as Savannah's narrowing eyes told her that the girl had decided upon a course of action. A feint to the left and the remaining flag pulled Cameron slightly off her center of balance, and she was in the process of adjusting when she realized that Savannah was running straight towards her, a seeming suicide mission when only one touch from Cameron's hand was required to end the game. But at the last second, Savannah ducked down and caught Cameron's ankle, sweeping the immobilized leg out from under her and sending the cyborg down with a muffled thud into the grass.

Warmth pooled inside her as Cameron heard Sarah's all-too-rare chuckle. She started to leverage herself up off the ground, needing to see the smile she knew would be on Sarah's features, but she caught sight of Savannah first, grinning gleefully as the child waved a handful of flags.

"You can't move," Savannah taunted.

"You win," Cameron conceded, lifting herself up off the turf. Savannah ran over to help, brushing at the dust and grass on the terminator's clothes.

"Can I play?"

John was standing just inside the gate, and Cameron was startled to realize she had no idea how long he had been watching. He came closer, and Savannah went still and stiff as he approached. "Looks like fun," he said, his casual tone belied by a flash of anger in his eyes.

"No," Cameron answered coldly.

"No?"

"It's our game," Savannah called out from behind Cameron as she placed the cyborg between them. "No boys allowed."

John's smile was meant to be charming as he leaned down to be on eye-level with the girl, but it looked more vexed than friendly. "You sure?" he asked, trying to cajole Savannah.

"You are too old," Cameron stated quietly.

He rose to glare at the cyborg. "So why didn't you teach me when I was younger? You..."

Cameron cut him off. "You were already too old. Your training up until that point had centered on weapons and computer programming, not on hand-to-hand combat. It was best to continue in that vein."

"I..."

"It's our game," Savannah insisted again, coming around to grab Cameron's hand and to glare up at John.

For a long moment, they just stood there in silence, until John threw his hand up and stomped away.

Cameron felt a tug on her hand, and she turned away from John and the speculative look Sarah had cast her from the porch into a pair of watery blue eyes.

"It's our game, isn't it?" Savannah asked.

Sinking to her knees, Cameron drew the girl into a hug, feeling her thin arms circle around her neck and cling there. She felt a twinge of regret for the way she'd treated John, but she set the feeling aside to focus on the little girl in her arms. "Yes," she whispered reassuringly into the girl's hair, "it's our game. No boys allowed."

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Sarah watched as Cameron and Savannah hugged, charmed by the way Savannah turned to Cameron for comfort and support. James had

told her a little bit about what he termed as Cameron's 'freak out' in the kitchen, at least enough to explain the new table and patched cupboards. He had finally admitted how Savannah had helped defuse the situation, his somber voice communicating his concerns clearly in tone if not in word. But Cameron's obvious feelings for the girl, her fear and guilt over Savannah running away... Sarah couldn't imagine the terminator ever harming the child, and Savannah seemed as fiercely devoted to Cameron as well. Sarah felt the stirring of envy, at the easy way they showed affection and even love, and she sighed.

John was crossing the porch, nearly by her and in the house, when she caught him, asking, "What was that about?"

He paused in the doorway, the door held open for a long moment like he was considering dodging the question, before he turned and retraced his steps, coming to stop where he could lean against the railing and watch Cameron and Savannah reset their game. He stood for a long moment with his back to Sarah.

"You raised me to believe that I was the one hope of humanity in the future, that I was irreplaceable. It was like this myth I had of myself, the same way your stories about dad made him into this larger-than-life figure." He shook his head and absently picked at a section of peeling paint. He thought about his humbling experience in the future, both in his own self-concept and in his understanding of his father. His father was both more and less the hero he had imagined him to be, a rank-and-file soldier, trusted and well-liked but not a leader of men or even the toughest fighter in the barracks. His eyes settled back on the redheaded girl playing in the sunshine, a frown tightening his jaw.

"But then I jump into the future and I find that the resistance is getting on fine without me. There are other people, other leaders, who take over in my absence." His head sank again, his eyes fixed on the paint collecting under his fingernails, as he admitted his worst shame. "I... I was a nobody." He swallowed past the words and went on. "The name John Connor didn't mean anything. Prophet, Tango, Sierra, those were the names that were revered. I didn't like it."

A long silence stretched; Sarah gazed at her son as he confessed his hurt pride to her, her mind on all the times that she had told him he

was special, important, the most important person in the world, even, and she felt a pang of guilt at her role in his pain.

"I know who Tango is," she said slowly, squinting into the sun as she studied her son's back. Her lips twitched. "I'm going to take a guess that Prophet was Ellison." The muffled snort and half laugh from her son confirmed her suspicion. "Sierra?"

John was so still, Sarah wondered if he'd even heard her. She got to her feet, settling her hip against the rail as she watched his profile, the warmth of the sun and the soft, cool breeze welcome on her back. John's gaze was fixed on Cameron and Savannah, and Sarah turned her head to watch them.

"Sierra was the leader," John croaked, his gaze still intense as he watched the game unfold before him, seeing glimmers of who the little redheaded child was destined to be in each dodge and feint.

Sarah watched Savannah as she giggled in delight, collapsing back into the too-tall grass as Cameron won their latest round. The truth came home to her in the moment, and Sarah felt her breath hitch deep in her chest.

John felt the change, the realization as it sank in. He turned to look at his mother who was wrestling with emotions he wasn't sure he wanted to understand. "She replaced me. She was the leader of the resistance, and doing a pretty good job of it. Maybe... maybe better than I ever did."

A squeal of laughter drew both their gazes again to where Cameron had tackled Savannah, her triumphant voice carrying clearly over the girl's giggles. "I win."

Sarah watched the muscles clench in her son's jaw, but no words would come to soothe him.

"You taught me to run away from the machines every time I saw one," John explained in a tight voice. "Her... you taught her to attack them, to take them down." He swung around to face his mother fully. "You should have seen her, mom. She took on a terminator with nothing

but a knife, and she won." Admiration mixed with anger in his voice, and his hand swept out to indicate the game behind him. "She disabled it, piece by piece, until it couldn't fight anymore."

"I didn't teach her that," Sarah whispered.

"Cameron did." John turned back to the yard. "And she's doing it again."

The proof was right in front of them. Sarah had to look away, recalling the rationalizations she had told James, had told herself for that matter, about the need for the training. "We took her in to protect her, to teach her how to protect herself."

"You did a lot more than that."

Stung by the accusation in his voice, Sarah countered defensively, "We did what we had to do. We couldn't leave her defenseless. She's six, Judgment Day is just around the corner, and we aren't... *I'm* not going to be around to take care of her forever." She stressed the word, reminding him of how close she had come to not being there now. "What would you have me do?"

"Ellison was still around."

Sarah clamped her mouth shut, her gaze sliding off to the side to avoid looking at her son. When had she started thinking of Savannah as hers, or rather, as hers and Cameron's, since the 'we' in the sentence had been the two of them, together? Ellison and his role in Savannah's life had never even crossed her mind. Sighing, Sarah returned to the swing. Leaning into her hand, she tucked her legs up and watched the two of them, the terminator and child, done with training for the day, flags snapping in the wind as they competed to see who could go higher on the swings. A small, unconscious smile graced her lips as Cameron realized her composition was a liability in the game.

The fond smile on his mother's face sparked a brief flare of anger, but then John shook his head with a chuckle and leaned back against the railing to stare at his feet. "I'm jealous." When his mom glanced at

him, puzzled, he laughed for real at the absurdity of it all, feeling something loosen in his chest. "I'm jealous... of a six-year-old. And of her place in a future that doesn't even exist anymore."

"You have no reason to be jealous," Sarah promised him quietly.

"You didn't see her," John murmured, but now there was a hint of pride in his voice. He smiled at the memory of Sierra, of those fierce blue eyes, and a part of him mourned her. "You would have been proud of her." His hand wrapped around the pocket watch dangling from his neck. "She wore this," he told his mother absently. His thumb tabbed the catch and it clicked open, revealing the now useless buttons inside. "Except there was an actual watch in here by then."

Sarah bit her lip, her mind tumbling through the unexpected information. She hurt for her son, at what he'd been through, and she ached for the young woman Savannah must have become, the young woman she and Cameron had obviously raised her to be. Sighing, Sarah opened her mouth to say something but John beat her to it.

"I realized that whoever leads mankind in the future can be replaced." John turned to look at his mother again. "But the person who trains that leader... that person is always meant to be you."

Swallowing, Sarah looked away, unable to deal with the mixture of emotions in John's eyes. She shook her head, feeling an edge of morose humor rise inside her. "No wonder Skynet keeps winning."

John blinked in surprise only to laugh out loud a moment later. He shook his head, hearing his mother's quiet chuckle join his. He felt the sun on his back and warming his hair, saw his mother sitting, alive and laughing, and for the first time, it felt real. He was really here, not just daydreaming in his bunk when the fear and hunger and regret got the best of him. And he still had a chance to make sure that that future never happened. He still had a chance to save them all.

"It just..." he swallowed as a little bit of the hurt came back, "seemed like you replaced me... forgot about me."

"John, no." Sarah's hand reached out and caught his in a tight grip,

tugging him down next to her on the swing. "Never, I never..."

"I know," he said hurriedly, embarrassed by his feelings and not wanting to hurt his mother further. "It was just all so hard, it was like I didn't know who I was anymore."

An arm wrapped around his neck and pulled him closer, a pair of lips brushing his forehead, before his mother's green eyes locked into his. "You were never replaced. Never. I... I didn't even want Savannah with us. I knew what growing up like this did to you. Do you think I wanted to put another child through that?" Her eyes shone with unshed tears and years of guilt. "I never wanted that for her, for you. I... I just couldn't not help her."

This time, he was the one to press his lips to her forehead, whispering, "I understand. You did the right thing, for both of us."

Breaking apart, Sarah wiped at the corner of her eyes, feeling decades worth of weight lift from her shoulders. She could see Cameron pushing Savannah on the swing, her brown eyes fixed on the porch with laser-like focus, and Sarah's smile included her as much as her son. "I'm glad you're home."

He nodded. "I'm where I need to be." The tone in his voice was resolute, clear, and Sarah once again saw the man he needed to be, the man she had raised him to be. "I won't let you down again."

"You never..."

"I did. I let everyone down." He gave a mirthless chuckle. "Sierra told me that, in the future. I didn't think she was going to let me come back. I think... I think she liked being the leader."

"You never wanted this life," Sarah reminded him. "You fought me every step of the way."

"It was never real to me. I just wanted what I saw on TV, a bowl of cereal and Saturday morning cartoons... school, friends, a normal life. Once I got old enough to realize that it wasn't just a game, that it was real and it was my life, I resented you, you and everything you did."

"You were a teenager."

He shook his head dismissively. "I guess. I don't know."

"Savannah is different," Sarah broached the subject carefully, relieved when her son just nodded his head in agreement. "I don't know when she figured it out, but she knew. She knew about her mother. This fight, it's personal for her, in a way it never was for you growing up. She's lost so much to it already."

They both turned to watch Cameron and Savannah play.

"Everyone's afraid of losing something. You're afraid of losing your place in the future. Savannah is afraid of losing her family again..." Sarah sighed.

"What are you afraid of losing?"

Sarah's eyes darted guiltily to the terminator before she looked up at her son. "I've already experienced that loss," she said quietly. "And then my son came back to me." She pulled him into a tight hug, feeling the extra inches he had grown in the way her body had to stretch to reach his neck. He hugged her back, fiercely, with an intensity and love he had never shown her before. And over his shoulder, she could see Cameron and Savannah, playing in the sunshine.

John finally stood and cast one last look at Savannah. He nodded faintly to himself before going inside.

Sarah took the moment of peace for what it was, already feeling it slipping through her fingers. With a sigh, she stood as well. There were weapons to pack and a terminator to stop.

## **Act 2**

The unfinished underground parking garage was abandoned. A dispute over building permits, and financial backing had first delayed, and then halted construction altogether. With the project in limbo, the machines and equipment had been left alone in the strange half-light that filtered in through the gaps in the roof. Around them, the empty

scaffolds and naked metal framework of the unfinished walls looked like the skeletal remains of a conquered army.

It was perfect.

Cameron contemplated the battleground John had chosen for them without a word. She could feel Sarah at her side, every breath the other woman took both a balm and an irritant to the tangle of thoughts and emotions she was trying so hard to bring under control.

"I want to go with you." Even to her own ears, the words sounded harsh and accusatory, but Cameron couldn't seem to modulate her tone. They'd had this conversation before, and it was just as frustrating now as it had been then. She wanted, no, *needed* to be at Sarah's back for the coming fight, but Sarah seemed equally determined not to have her there.

"It's John's plan." The rebuttal rang hollowly in the damp garage. Sarah kept her eyes forward, only the tension in her shoulders showing that this conversation was as difficult for her as it was for Cameron.

"You didn't argue with him," Cameron pointed out archly. The only argument Sarah had made was for her own inclusion. She had been immovable on that point, arguing that she could ride shotgun, literally, rather than be left behind.

"You are the fail-safe. If this doesn't work--"

"It is less likely to work without me." Cameron cut Sarah off. "The odds of success are lowered by approximately--"

"Don't!" Sarah interrupted in turn with a fierce glare that aroused both Cameron's newly found anger and her longing for the other woman in an instant. Struggling to separate the two opposing but unsettlingly similar urges, Cameron didn't reply, and Sarah's eyes softened a fraction before she turned away.

"The odds are always bad," Sarah allowed with a slight catch to her voice, watching John and James map out the final details of the plan across the garage. The cloak of command John war was still tenuous, still slightly unsure, as if it was a new role he hadn't fully settled into yet, but it was there, and it took a weight off of Sarah's shoulders to see it. "I don't need to know the numbers."

Cameron had already rattled off enough numbers, detailing Sarah's fitness and strength recovery to the decimal point and citing the probability statistics of the impact an injured or recovering member of the team could have on a mission. Sarah had ignored them, much as she had James's arguments. John hadn't even tried to talk her out of it, perhaps unwilling to test his authority in a direct challenge to his mother or perhaps knowing her all too well. Instead, he had quietly included her in the mission and placed her in a position of relative safety.

"I can't *not* know them," Cameron said flatly, the lack of emotion where there had been frustration a moment before alerting Sarah that they were on painful ground. Again she thought of the kitchen, destroyed while she lay at death's door, the lengths to which Cameron had gone to save her life, and she wavered. But the memory of Cameron lying limply on the couch, and the terminator's confession of enough pain to make even a machine seek oblivion hardened her resolve.

*What are you afraid of losing?*

John's question whispered in the back of Sarah's mind, along with the guilt of the half-answer she had given him.

"Cameron-" Sarah started, reaching out to the terminator, her fears on the tip of tongue, but Cameron stiffened further and stepped away before the touch could land.

"I should go," Cameron insisted abruptly, retreating as the tread of boots on the pavement behind them heralded John's arrival.

"Mom?"

Unwilling to have this conversation in front of John or Ellison, Sarah reluctantly let go of the moment, not noticing the flash of relief crossing Cameron's features as she turned to her son.

"You're ready?" she asked unnecessarily.

"Everything's in place. Terissa and Auldridge checked in a few minutes ago. Cameron and Ellison can leave anytime, and we should be in position." John's voice firmed as he spoke. There was fear there, but also excitement, and pride. The plan was his, even if they'd refined it

as a team, and Sarah could almost see the confidence that had been shaken by his trip to the future shoring up its own foundations.

"Then they should go..." Sarah echoed Cameron's words with a last look at the terminator, but Cameron was ignoring her, the cyborg's attention apparently on the empty garage in front of them.

"Be careful," Sarah whispered as Cameron turned to leave, but if the terminator heard her, she chose not to respond. James nodded as if the comment had been meant for them both and followed Cameron to their borrowed car, the twin of the one Terissa and Auldridge would be driving.

"Mom?" John's voice brought Sarah back, and she turned raising a brow in silent question.

His grinned with boyish cheek as he dangled the keys for their truck in her face, yanking them away when she reached for them. "No way. I'd like to avoid traffic accidents," he laughed, reminding her of her lousy driving record the times they had been pursued by terminators. "This time, I drive."

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The silence in the front seat of the borrowed car could only be considered comfortable by comparison to how *uncomfortable* the last attempt at conversation had been. In no hurry to try again, James stared out the windshield and drummed his fingers aimlessly on the steering wheel, but he couldn't quite contain the occasional sideways glance at the terminator sitting next to him.

For her part, Cameron seemed completely indifferent to James's presence. Utterly still, her attention on the street outside of their alley, she had responded with no more than monosyllables to his initial attempts at small talk, lapsing into a stubborn silence when he persisted. The look of reproach she had given him when he had dared to ask her if there was anything she wanted to talk about could have come from a teenager in the throes of thwarted petulance, and James had eventually given up.

He didn't need his FBI training to tell him that Cameron would have preferred to be keeping an eye on Sarah. She hadn't openly challenged her own deployment, only Sarah's, but her resentment had been obvious to James, and to Sarah if he'd read the other woman

right, if not their new leader. James had spent the last few months watching Cameron develop the body language that was making the cyborg eerily human, and her reaction to being relegated to the role of bait and backup had been subtle, but definite.

She was sulking.

It was... strange. Strange and worrisome. James had seen Cameron resolute, angry, concerned, and even grief-stricken, but he wouldn't have expected such a self-indulgent response from the normally pragmatic terminator.

"I am making you uneasy."

Cameron's observation, offered without the slightest warning, made James jump. "You do that," he admitted, tightening his fingers around the wheel until his pulse slowed.

Cameron glanced first at his hand, taking in the white of his knuckles against the dark leather before raising her eyes to his face. "I don't mean to," she allowed with a touch of apology coloring her voice. There was regret in her eyes, and puzzlement, as if she wasn't used to the idea of her moods affecting other people. As if she wasn't quite used to *having* moods.

"It's okay." James shrugged off his musings. This was hardly the time to be dwelling on the consequences of emotional development in cybernetic organisms. "It's not your fault."

"Isn't it?"

James opened his mouth to protest, but Cameron didn't seem to expect an answer. She turned her gaze back to the window.

"She'll be fine." The words came unbidden, an automatic urge to comfort and reassure that didn't care if the recipient was a machine, and therefore shouldn't need reassurance.

Cameron eyed him skeptically. "You don't know that."

"I know Sarah."

"So do I," Cameron said firmly, her hazel eyes steely. "She will ignore her condition and take unnecessary risks. How can I protect her if I am

not there?"

James considered that. "Maybe that's not what she wants," he suggested softly, turning the idea over in his head, reflecting on Sarah's behavior over the past few days and her reaction to Cameron's condition after the first fight with the terminator they were stalking. "Maybe *she's* trying to protect *you*."

"I don't need protection." Cameron's denial was immediate.

"Don't you?" James was saved from the derisive response he saw looming in Cameron's eyes and rigid stance by the ringing of his cell phone. Terissa's warm voice answered his hello after the exchange of codes.

"We're being followed," she told him without preamble.

James shook his head at the woman's blithe acceptance of luring a machine out to kill her. She almost sounded cheerful about it. Maybe she was just glad to be doing something other than keeping other people's secrets... he understood that feeling. "How close?"

"Two blocks. It's being careful."

*It...* James glanced at the machine next to him, remembering the destruction of the kitchen, Cameron's affection, even love, for Savannah, and wondered if he would ever be able to think of her as an *it* again. What John Henry had started, Cameron was finishing. The lines were no longer what they had been, if they were even there at all. He pushed that thought away, his eye caught by Cameron checking the safety on her gun and stowing it into the back of her jeans. If she had any compunction about hunting her own kind, she hid it well.

"James?" Terissa pulled James back to the matter at hand and he put the car into gear, easing out of the alley and onto the street leading down to the parking garage.

"We're on our way."

\*\*\*

A black car turned a corner, making an immediate second turn into an alley as another car, identical down to the missing license plate, slid

out of a parking spot onto the deserted street, tires crunching on glass from the street lamps that had been shot out earlier. The car turned down a side street, taking a roundabout approach to the parking garage.

Terissa wished them a silent good luck as she and Auldridge ducked down, watching a beat-up Buick glide by, headlights off. The terminator seemed to have fallen for the switch. She heard the beating of her heart as they waited for 30 seconds, and then nearly a whole minute, before Auldridge turned the car on again and reversed down the alley. This was the riskiest part of their involvement, and she almost expected to see the terminator standing in the street, waiting for them with death in its eyes.

But the street was still deserted, and she let out a shaky breath she hadn't realized she was holding. Auldridge's eyes mirrored her relief as he drove the car into the garage and parked it. They were out of the car and into the parked van in seconds, Auldridge moving quickly despite his injured ankle. Terissa watched the car recede in the background as they drove off, their decoy to lure the terminator out. If John and Cameron were right, the terminator would continue on foot upon finding the abandoned car, and then they could get it right where they wanted it.

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The drop cloth draped over the scaffolding didn't provide much concealment, much less cover, but it was enough as the terminator approached the other car, parked in the middle of the garage. He had found the car he was looking for, his single-minded focus fixed solely on it. It wasn't until he realized that it was empty, that his target wasn't there, that he would...

"Go!" Cameron yelled at Ellison, who took off with a squeal of tires, nailing the accelerator to the floor. They burst out from behind the tarp and sped away from the terminator, fast but not fast enough as he snapped off several shots, the rear window blowing out and sending shattered glass flying.

Swearing, Ellison cornered too fast, nearly sending the car out of control and ruining their carefully laid trap. He fought the wheel and gunned it, the car bucking as he wrestled it under control and sent it speeding down the lane.

The terminator was close behind, gaining speed as he ran, until the car spun out, the trunk crashing into the wall with a crunch of metal. The inhabitants ducked down, but he could see their heat signatures behind the white-hot mass of the overheated engine. He raised his gun...

\*\*\*

Sarah hated waiting.

Waiting meant thinking, and thinking meant worrying. Fitfully, she rubbed at the itch in her healing arm, wondering if it was going to be strong enough to get her through the day, or if Cameron was right, and her condition made her a liability to the mission. She glanced around the cab of their carefully selected and stolen truck, a small powerhouse with the required torque and acceleration as specified by Cameron, and stifled a sigh. She tightened her grip on the shotgun in her hands, her eyes scanning the space through the frame where the front windshield had been.

Sarah heard them before she saw them, a squeal of tires and gunshots followed by the shriek of the brake on a tight corner and the low growl of the engine. The rapid thudding of the terminator's feet on the concrete was swallowed up by the noise of the car he was pursuing, but Sarah heard it anyway. It was like the beating of her heart.

She caught a glimpse of Cameron as the black car spun into view, the terminator's face as impassive as Ellison's was fierce. Then they were right in front of them, and John's hand was poised on the ignition, his foot resting on the accelerator in anticipation. Ellison fishtailed as the car lost purchase and swung into the wall, but John held his position. They only had one shot at this. If it didn't work, then it would be up to Cameron to buy them time to escape.

Sarah's breath caught in her throat as the terminator slowed, coming to a stop in front of them, and aimed at the occupants in the car.

John twisted the key and jammed his foot down. The truck roared to life, and just as John and Cameron had predicted, the terminator stopped and turned to evaluate the new threat. It was one of the few situations where mind beat metal. A human's instinct might have responded without assessment, thrown the person out of the way before they even knew what was happening, but the carefully set out and regimented boundaries Skynet placed on its soldiers crippled

them. Before the terminator could decide to do anything other than fire off a shot, the souped-up work truck slammed into it, pinning it against a half-built wall.

John muttered a curse as he attempted to jam the accelerator with a length of wood, the space that had seemed so roomy before now tight and cramped. "Damn it, I... Mom!"

Sarah was moving before John could stop her, the shotgun she had been aiming at the terminator already replaced with the tools from the armrest. Her boots sank into the seat as she climbed up onto the dashboard and out through the shattered windshield.

The truck shook underneath her, the smell of the exhaust burnt her sinuses, and the squeal of tires on the overheated concrete scraped her ears until Sarah could barely think. Her hands were wet with the sweat of fear and adrenaline as she braced them against the hood and slid out onto the hot metal. Gritting her teeth, Sarah blocked memories of another day and another terminator and ignored the harsh twinge deep in the bone of her arm. Instead, she focused on the terminator waiting in front of her, on the task she had to do.

His face had been half-peeled away, and he fixed her with a lopsided stare, part human and part machine, yet another parallel that Sarah refused to dwell on as she inched her way down towards him. This machine didn't beg for his life, but Sarah felt the truck shudder underneath her as he struggled against the weight holding him prisoner.

She pulled the knife out of the roll.

It was harder than she'd thought it would be. In truth, she hadn't thought about it at all. Hadn't thought she needed to. This was a terminator, sent to kill Savannah, one that had nearly destroyed Cameron. Ending his existence should have been easy. But Cameron had once been sent to kill John, and she had tried again when her chip was compromised. If one machine, under the right circumstances, could become a person capable of making their own decisions, capable of loyalty and affection... then couldn't they all?

Setting the knife's edge to the terminator's scalp and cutting down, Sarah felt a moment of... not indecision—if this was murder, then she would willingly murder to save Savannah's life—but something like loss. It was similar to the way she had felt when she had shot the

Kaliba agent in the desert. There was no remorse, but there was a sense of weight, of responsibility for ending a life, even if it was only the potential of a life. It was more than a change of pronoun; having acceded Cameron's humanity, Sarah found herself unable to deny it to the cyborg's kin.

The machine gave one last heave against the truck as Sarah closed the pliers around the top of his chip, causing her knees to skid on the metal surface. She set the pliers again, the light in his naked eye blazing once more before Sarah twisted and pulled, separating mind from body once and for all. He shuddered and stilled, and Sarah's stomach rolled as she remembered all the times she had watched Cameron power down the same way.

Closing her eyes, she wrapped her fingers around the blood-smeared chip. So simply was a machine destroyed... they were stronger and faster, harder to kill, and yet, it all came down to a chip in the palm of her hand. A chip that could easily be Cameron's.

"Mom?"

John's voice roused Sarah from her thoughts and she realized the truck had stilled and John was standing beside the hood. She looked down into his concerned features, managing to dredge up an attempt at a smile from somewhere near her toes. "I'm fine, the others?"

"Everyone's okay." John reached up to help her down, and Sarah accepted the help, more to reassure herself that he was all right than because she needed it. "Ellison's a little sore from the crash, but Terissa and Auldrige got off without a scratch." She noticed that he didn't mention Cameron, but he didn't need to. The terminator was standing in the background, obviously unharmed, exasperation and agitation etched on her face, the reasons for which Sarah didn't even have to guess at. She could even hear the terminator's voice, sad, angry, accusing.

*You take too many risks.*

Sarah returned her attention to her son and found herself searching John's face for any hint of injury, and she halted her hand midway to cupping his face to reassure herself that he was free of hurt. It had been pure instinct, to step up and take control when the plan had gone awry, and John didn't seem to resent it, this time. But he would. Sarah acknowledged that with a sinking feeling in her gut.

She had to stop.

Letting him plan and lead a mission was a good start, but Sarah was going to have to let him go even farther, before they ended up right back where they had been before he jumped. She had thought she'd lost him, and she had. She had lost the little boy that John was. The John she had gotten back was a man and a leader. He needed to be treated like one.

Letting John steady her, Sarah nodded and looked up at the body still pinned against the wall, the metal skull visible through the torn skin. They would have to drag it home and destroy it. Nothing of Skynet's could be allowed to remain. Hypocrisy wagged a finger at her, and Sarah pushed the silent accusation aside, but John's words returned to take its place, almost mocking her as they stole any savor from the victory.

*What are you afraid of losing?*

*Everything.*

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*Your mother is alive.*

The words hung, ethereal and haunting on his screen, overlaid on the section of code Danny had been working on. He didn't pause, his fingers typing meaningless code and his eyes hooded and careful, even as he felt relief rush through him so fast he was almost lightheaded. Vaughn was standing just a few feet from him, conversing quietly with the lead engineer. He had been around more often lately, stopping by the development center with a regularity that was alarming to Danny. His presence had been explained as the natural result of them nearing a key milestone in the project plan, but Danny was unconvinced, especially when he felt the man's eyes burn into his back whenever he stopped in for one of his chats.

The milestone was significant; they were attempting to port the majority of what constituted C.A.I.N.'s processing ability into a cloud configuration. While the AI had had dispersed computing resources and limited ability to manage processing power, this represented a

shift in their computing strategy, one dictated by the loss of one of their server farms on the outskirts of the city. The unanticipated reduction of approximately 35% of available resources had, according to Vaughn, incapacitated the AI outside of acceptable ranges and necessitated a change in the organization of the intelligence. Another programmer had hinted that the loss had been the cause of the malfunction that resulted in the death of Mr. Murch in the warehouse.

The message winked out a second before a beefy hand landed on his shoulder, and Danny glanced up at Vaughn, his superior's dead gaze contradicting the warm smile on his face.

"Danny? Got a sec?" Vaughn asked as Danny pulled his headphones off, trying to match the smile but failing miserably.

"Yeah, of course," Danny replied, already rising to follow Vaughn out of the room. His gaze darted back to his monitor, unsurprised to find it full of seemingly innocent code, no sign that C.A.I.N. had been communicating with him at all.

They rode the elevator in silence, and Danny tried not to fidget. The ride was mercifully short, not the long ascent to the executive levels that Danny had expected, but rather two short floors down. He frowned as they stepped out into a room, dimly lit by low lights and numerous computer monitors. This was the primary development center, he realized, where the bits of code that he and his fellow programmers wrote were assembled into packets for distribution into C.A.I.N.'s new configuration.

Vaughn guided him wordlessly into a glass-walled office, greeting the man sitting behind the desk with a nod. "This is the programmer I was talking about," he said, resting a hand on Danny's shoulder. "Danny Dyson."

"Sit down, Danny." The man's eyes were riveted on his computer screen, the play of light on his glasses shielding his eyes. Finally he looked up and said, "I thought we would start you out on the secondary packets, to give you a feel for the system architecture. Is that alright?" His question seemed more directed at Vaughn than at him, but when Danny looked up, he found Vaughn nodding in support.

"Um, sure, sounds fine," Danny stuttered, the realization sinking in a second before Vaughn beamed, said a muttered 'congratulations,' and left the room. Danny half-turned in his chair to watch Vaughn disappear into the elevator before swinging back to the man behind the desk, who had taken off his glasses and was regarding Danny with an appraising stare.

"I'm Greene, Alan Greene. Solutions lead for the C.A.I.N. project," he explained. He touched a button on his desk, the image from his computer jumping to the flatscreen on the wall, showing a high-level system architecture diagram. "You'll have access to these on the share drive," he began before launching into a detailed explanation of the project, plan, and architecture.

Danny listened, he learned, and in the back of his mind, he saw a way out of the hell he'd condemned himself to. All he needed was a secure phone. Something told him C.A.I.N. would help him find one.

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The flare flashed in her hand for a moment before she dropped it. Cameron closed her eyes, feeling the heat from the flames buffet her face. Someday this would be her fate, a blazing fire peeling away her flesh and melting her skeleton into slag. The thought gave rise to conflicting emotions, the sickening fear of leaving Sarah and Savannah and a niggling comfort in the idea of leaving her body and all its complicated emotions. Before her thoughts could turn more morose, she detected the approach of a familiar tread. Cameron turned her head just as Sarah opened the door to the garage, pausing in the doorway with the night at her back and the glow from the dying flames flickering across her face. She looked beautiful, and Cameron cursed herself for the unwanted physical reaction that swept through her at the sight of the other woman.

Sarah's glance took in the cyborg standing over the makeshift crematorium, ghostlike and melancholy, the white-hot embers bleaching all color from her face. "Thinking about jumping in?" she quipped, as if she had read Cameron's thoughts.

Cameron took several steps back, away from the heat, finding herself

at the workbench with nothing to do. "No," she said, her voice devoid of emotion as she began to rearrange the wrenches from largest to smallest.

Sarah rested her hand on the doorframe, her hesitation clear. It was only a few steps, a few short feet, but the distance between seemed like a gaping maw ready to swallow them both whole if they let it. She was determined to find out what was going on with the cyborg, but Cameron stymied her at every turn, becoming adept at surrounding herself with people. Apparently guilt was only partially responsible for Cameron spending every possible moment with Savannah.

The clank of tools finally subsided, and brown eyes fixed on her reluctantly. Emotion swirled in those eyes, an aching regret shot through with an intense longing, a hunger and echoing need that resonated deep within Sarah. She took a step forward. "Cameron..."

Cameron shook her head in firm denial, and the plea died on Sarah's lips.

Sarah ran her hand roughly through her hair, aware of Cameron's eyes still on her, tracking, probably recording, her every move. "We need to talk," Sarah finally insisted.

"There is nothing to talk about," Cameron murmured.

This is what she'd wanted, Sarah admitted to herself. She'd wanted to distance herself from Cameron after the motel, had wanted a return to the roles they both had learned to play so well. But almost dying had put things in perspective, and Sarah found the distance between them to be unacceptable now. Not just unacceptable, Sarah realized, but damn right painful.

"I thought..." Sarah trailed off, unsure how to finish the sentence. 'I thought we were lovers' sounded wrong even to her own ears, and 'I thought you liked me' sounded like a 12-year old on a playground.

Cameron tilted her head to the side and regarded Sarah seriously. "You thought what?"

"I thought you wanted this," Sarah murmured over the crackling fire. "Us," she said even more softly.

"I did."

"You did?" Swallowing the hurt the comment caused, Sarah squared her shoulders. "You don't anymore?" It was like picking at a scab, Sarah decided. She knew she should just let this, whatever this was, go between them, but she couldn't stop herself from circling back to it again and again. It was like she was caught in this holding pattern, waiting for Cameron to let her back in, back into the place she had rejected after their night in the motel.

"No."

This time, Sarah shook her head in denial, of the words and of the lack of emotion in the terminator's voice. Cameron's voice sounded sure, but it sounded like a lie to Sarah's ears. She remembered the steps that the cyborg had taken to be with her, to save her, only to reject her at the end. It didn't make any sense. "I don't understand."

"It's what you want."

"What I want?" Sarah questioned, her tone sharp. "How do you know what I want when I don't even know myself?" Even that was a lie; she knew what wanted, if only she were strong enough to reach out and take it.

Cameron stared at her, her brown eyes taking in every angle of Sarah's face. "I can't do this," she stated with a finality intended to bring an end to the conversation. Even standing across the room from Sarah seemed too close, the pull the woman exerted on her threatening her balance.

Cameron started toward the door, started to brush past Sarah when she felt warm fingers on the skin of her arm, clamping down and spinning her. Before she could protest, Sarah's mouth was on hers, the kiss singeing its way through her body. All the hunger and desire and fear that Sarah couldn't confess blanketed her, overwhelmed her. Cameron's mind blanked as her body surged awake, her hands reaching up to tangle in Sarah's hair and pull her closer. They

stumbled back into the workbench, banging against it and sending tools rattling and swaying behind them.

The kiss deepened, Sarah's hands finding her hips to pull her closer, and Cameron willingly drowned in the moment, in Sarah's heat and touch. She felt so good, tasted like the desire Cameron couldn't suppress no matter how hard she tried. It was a fight she couldn't win, and with Sarah pressed against her, it was a fight she had no stomach for. It would be so easy to yield, to take comfort in Sarah's curves and the silk of her skin, but her feelings for Sarah put them all at risk. Wanting Sarah had nearly destroyed them both.

Wrenching away, Cameron shoved Sarah back, out of reach, afraid that if the woman weren't far enough away, her resolve would crumble. "Don't."

"Cameron..."

"Sarah!"

Sarah blinked and pulled up short, nearly stumbling on her suddenly rubbery legs as Terissa burst into the garage. "Thomas called. Danny found a way to contact him. He..." Her words paused as her sharp eyes glanced between the woman and terminator, hair and clothing in disarray, green eyes wide with something like shame. She arched an eyebrow quizzically and asked, "Did I interrupt?"

### **Act 3**

"You sure about this?"

James arched an eyebrow at the woman standing in the doorway to the kitchen. "I think I can drive Terissa across town to make a phone call all by myself," he drawled, amusement coloring his voice. "You don't need to be out on every mission."

Sarah rolled her eyes, the half-truth behind the teasing comment rankling her slightly. "You know what I mean." The phone call from Auldrige had kicked off a long debate. Danny had called him, requesting help getting in contact with his mother. He hadn't explained how he knew Auldrige was the agent in charge of his case, and Sarah's name had not come up, but the whole situation seemed *off*,

and Sarah hadn't hesitated to remind everyone of their previous experience with Kaliba and Danny.

"I'm sure," Terissa's voice called out clearly behind her, and Sarah swung around, shifting to let the other woman pass, a guilty blush heating her cheeks.

"I mean..."

"I know what you mean, Sarah." Terissa reached Ellison's side and turned, staring Sarah down. "But this is *my* son we are talking about, and we are going to help him." The flinty determination in Terissa's eyes was as familiar to Sarah as if she were looking into a mirror, and she nodded reluctantly. The arranged phone call had been set up carefully, and Sarah couldn't begrudge the other woman the opportunity to talk to her son, even if the existence of Kaliba's AI introduced more risk than Sarah would have liked.

Terissa returned the nod solemnly and opened the door, leading James out into the bright afternoon sun.

Collapsing onto the couch, Sarah rested her head in her hand, absently musing that her powers of persuasion seemed to be lacking lately. A second later, the tromp of feet on the stairs announced the arrival of John and Savannah, Cameron following a few seconds behind like a ghost trailing in their wake.

From the excited look in Savannah's eyes to the nervous grin on her son's face, Sarah knew that she wasn't going like what they were about to ask.

"So, mom..." John began casually, "you know there's a park...?"

Sarah arched her eyebrow at her son. "Yes...?"

"I thought maybe Savannah and I could walk over, get some ice cream..."

He was trying, Sarah had to give him that. Since their talk on the porch, he had gone out of his way to be nice to Savannah, talking with

her, even playing with her, all under the watchful eyes of the terminator, and Savannah was slowly, cautiously warming to him. Nothing like a bribe of ice cream to speed the process, though. She glanced at Savannah, who was almost squirming with excitement, and she smiled, reaching out to ruffle the girl's hair. "You sure you won't mind having him along?" she teased.

Savannah considered the question seriously, giving John a sideways glance, before replying. "He's ok. For a boy." Her voice suggested that she reserved the right to change her mind, and Sarah shared an amused look with her son.

The grin turned to a frown as her eyes drifted to Cameron, standing at the foot of the stairs, her hand still on the rail, carefully keeping her distance, like she was ready to retreat up the steps at the slightest move from Sarah. Just seeing the terminator again made Sarah's stomach wrench. Sarah wanted, needed, almost desperately, to continue the conversation they had begun the night before, and she had spent most of the morning stalking around the house, trying to catch the cyborg alone, but Cameron had skillfully arranged her movements to keep her at bay. Now would be a perfect time to have it out with her, if only John and Savannah weren't going to be alone and out in the open. Frowning as her paranoid streak asserted itself, she said, "Take Cameron with you."

John's eyes hardened, but he nodded, understanding the need for security if not the form that the security took. Yet another conversation she needed to have, Sarah thought.

"Come on. I'll buy you a popsicle," he tossed over his shoulder at the terminator.

Cameron hesitated, looking between Savannah and Sarah, her indecision apparent, and the hard lump in Sarah's stomach eased a fraction.

"It's ok," Sarah drawled, making the choice easier for the cyborg. "I'm probably just going to take a nap or something."

Crossing to the couch in three quick strides, Cameron was instantly

solicitous, her fingers brushing across Sarah's forehead to gauge her temperature. "Are you ok? Are you feeling..." Her voice faded into nothing as their gazes met and held.

The gentle touch blazed through her body, and Sarah swallowed past a catch in her throat. "I'm... fine," she managed, gazing into darkening hazel eyes that told her that Cameron was similarly affected. She faked a smile, including Savannah and John in the response. "Just recovering my strength after yesterday," she promised.

Cameron nodded, her fingers lingering mere inches from Sarah's cheek. "Do you need anything? Should we bring you back something? Would you like a popsicle?"

John snorted.

"I'm fine," Sarah repeated, this time with more conviction and a smothered smile. "Go on, get out of here," she mock-growled and swept her hand toward the door, hearing Savannah's delighted giggle and seeing John's puzzled glance as they made their way outside. Cameron paused for one last look back, silhouetted in the harsh sunlight, and Sarah could feel her gaze like a weight on her heart.

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Any desire she had to take a nap was gone, lost in the swirl of her thoughts and her awakened body, so Sarah scooped up a laundry basket and made rounds around the house. The routine didn't calm her as she had hoped, her mind awash in chaos and her libido raging out of control. This game of tug-of-war between herself and Cameron, all the pulling and resisting, kept them from reaching some kind of common ground, and it was slowly driving her mad. Her state of mind wasn't helped by an unrelenting rush of images, some from dreams, some from hallucinations, some from reality, of all the things she wanted to do with and to the terminator.

By the time she made it to the basement with a laden hamper, her arm ached, her legs were leaden with fatigue, and her body was practically buzzing with barely suppressed tension. Glancing around their makeshift armory, Sarah set the basket down and began to shift

crates and munitions, making space in the middle of the floor. A few minutes later, she swiped a dusty hand across her forehead to push back a stray lock of hair and nodded in satisfaction at the makeshift heavy bag that she had constructed out of an old surplus duffle bag, sandbags, and heavy quilts.

She rooted around in a few boxes to find some workout clothes and tape and set to wrapping her hands. The first punch lanced through her healing arm with a white-hot blast, the pain nearly driving her to her knees. Sarah kept swinging, ignoring the agony as she had so often, through broken bones and gunshots, working herself into a mindless frenzy as she attacked the bag. She had very nearly worked the edge off when one shot too many buckled her knees, leaving her clinging to the bag to avoid collapsing into a heap on the floor. For several long minutes, she just stood there, her cheek pressed against the rough canvas, trying to pull together enough strength to stand without support.

A door slammed shut above her, and the light steps of Savannah, followed closely by the heavier tread of John and even heavier tread of Cameron, announced their return. She spared a few more minutes to recover before navigating the narrow wooden steps, stepping into the living room to be greeted by a bizarre sight. John, Savannah, and Cameron were crammed into the space beside the coffee table, craning their necks to peer under the couch at... something.

An intense whispered conversation was going on among the three of them, just low enough so Sarah could only hear snippets, like John shushing Savannah with a 'We don't want to wake mom from her nap.'

"Mom didn't take a nap," Sarah announced loudly, smirking a little as Savannah leaped to her feet and twirled around, her blue eyes as wide as saucers. A muffled 'ouch' came from John as he sat up, rubbing his head. Cameron simply stood and faced her, showing no alarm or concern.

Sarah saw Cameron's eyes flit over her body, and for a second her hopes soared, but then she saw that the terminator was fixing on the tape on her hands, the sweaty hair plastered to her forehead, and the workout clothes.

"What were you doing?" Cameron asked accusingly.

"Boxing," Sarah replied, in a tone that stopped the line of inquiry cold. Crossing her arms across her chest to hide their quivering, Sarah surveyed the two guilty-looking kids and the expressionless cyborg. "What's going on?" she asked mildly.

"Nothing," John replied instantly. "Right, Savannah?" He glanced down at the girl, who simply nodded her head.

"Uh huh." Sarah raised an eyebrow at Cameron, secretly pleased to see John and Savannah bonding even if they were teaming up to deceive her. "Cameron?"

"Nothing," Cameron parroted in a monotone.

Sarah let them stew for just a few more seconds before she waved her fingers in a sweeping motion. "Move," she ordered.

Reluctantly, they all slid aside to allow Sarah to crouch down to see what was under the couch. Sarah bit her lip and sternly ordered her body to obey before she leaned over, hoping that her shaky limbs would hold her up. Collapsing into a heap would undoubtedly undermine her authority in the situation.

At first, she thought she was looking at a remarkably large dustball... a black, bristling dustball with a pair of wide, bright, green eyes staring back at her. It was without a doubt the straggiest-looking kitten Sarah had ever seen in her life.

"He followed us home. *Canwekeephim?*" Savannah's plea came out sounding like a single word, followed by a breathless silence as they all waited for Sarah's response.

"He followed you home, huh? Exactly how much ice cream did you feed him along the way?" Sarah asked, stalling for time. She took a deep breath and leaned up, pleased when she stayed upright. As much as she needed to speak with Cameron in private, Sarah didn't want to pass out to achieve some alone time.

"Approximately two ounces," answered Cameron, earning her dirty looks from both Savannah and John. "He was hungry," she added, realizing her error.

Emboldened by her first attempt, Sarah glanced under the couch again; the kitten certainly looked starved and scruffy, not much more to him than a ball of fur and unblinking eyes. He reminded her of herself in an odd way, and Sarah's lips quirked.

"We'll take care of him," Savannah chimed in, unable to stand the suspense, and Sarah tilted her head back to look into a pair of pleading and utterly sincere blue eyes.

She caught Cameron's gaze over the girl's shoulder and quirked an eyebrow, asking a silent question and subtly including her in the decision.

"He needs a home," the cyborg said, earning her a half smile from John.

Sarah ducked her head one last time to look at the stray, which seemed to be slowly relaxing under her gaze. "You will take care of him," she threatened. "If I have to pick up after him..." The impact of her threat seemed to be lost in the celebratory high-five John gave Savannah over her head. Then Savannah's little arms were wrapping around her neck in a fierce hug, and Sarah was helpless not to smile as she looked up at her grinning son.

"Now stop scaring him," Sarah mock grumped, "and help me get him out from under this couch."

A saucer of milk later, the diminutive kitten had enshrined himself on the couch between John and Savannah, accepting their petting as graciously as a crown monarch accepting attention from his serfs. Sarah hung back, in the doorway of the kitchen, watching the proceeds with a bemused grin. John had grown up with dogs all around, for their superior cyborg-detecting qualities, but he had never gotten too attached. Seeing Savannah lavishing attention on the kitten, Sarah sighed, knowing it was already too late to avoid that.

"So what's his name?" she asked.

John and Savannah exchanged a startled glance; they had obviously not thought that far ahead.

"Walther."

Sarah hadn't even realized Cameron was still in the room. "Walther?"

"German gun manufacturer. Your favorite concealed weapon."

"And Walt for short, like Walt Disney!" Savannah extrapolated loudly, her excited bounce causing the newly christened kitten to tumble sideways on the couch, John's quick grab all that kept him from toppling off.

"Because Glock would be too obvious?" Sarah snarked, the smile she was casting in the direction of the cyborg freezing on her lips as their gazes met with an intensity matched only by the despair in Cameron's eyes.

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Terissa had never been to this section of town. Car stereos thumped and blared as they drove by, and she fixed her gaze forward as she heard young men yelling occasional obscenities at her and each other as they rolled past. Ellison was stiff and silent in the seat next to her, navigating the winding maze Cameron had laid out for him as they headed for their destination.

"Is all of this really necessary?" she asked him quietly, hearing the tremble in her voice and hating it.

"We need to make sure we aren't being followed," he told her. "And this way takes us around most of the security cameras in the area."

They drove past a car that had been stripped of everything but its frame and Terissa's lips twisted. "Looks like they could use a few more."

Ellison didn't argue as he pulled up into the back alley of a pawnshop and killed the engine.

"Here?" Terissa asked with some surprise.

The former agent shrugged before stepping out of the car. Terissa glanced down, noting the gun on Ellison's hip as he emerged. It hit her in that moment, the risks that all of them were taking for her, risks that she'd given them little reason to take. Feeling both grim and grateful, she swallowed and opened her own door.

They moved wordlessly through a storeroom full of old TVs, music instruments, and cardboard boxes. No one greeted them. No one stirred in the front of the store. It felt eerily abandoned, Terissa decided, like something out of a bad horror movie. She wasn't sure if she should expect a terminator or a zombie to come through the door.

Ellison had explained that to avoid the law at all costs meant sometimes wading into a world of people one would rather avoid. They were doing that now, having used some of Sarah's contacts to find a secure landline. Terissa could hazard guesses as to what it was used for: money laundering, drugs, prostitution, but in the end, she didn't care. She just wanted to talk to her son.

A dusty desk waited for them in a small room off the hall. Ellison stepped inside, his hand resting on the butt of his gun as his eyes skimmed the space. He motioned Terissa toward the old rotary phone sitting on the surface. A spotless answering machine sat next to it, waiting to record the conversation that was about to take place.

"Remember what we talked about," Ellison sternly reminded her, but there was compassion in his eyes.

Licking her lips and nodding, Terissa took a breath and moved forward, her nose wrinkling at the scent of dust and mold. She eased into the rickety metal chair, her gaze fixed on the phone, hands clasped tightly as she waited for it to ring.

When it did five minutes later, Terissa nearly came out of her skin.

Hand shaking, she reached for the receiver, lifting it from the cradle and bringing it to her ear.

"Mom?" Danny asked before she could say a word.

"Danny," Terissa sobbed, her face splitting into a smile even as tears slipped unchecked down her cheeks. Movement caused her to look up and she saw Ellison shaking his head, another reminder about what they'd discussed in the car. She nodded and cleared her throat, watching and waiting until the former agent leaned over the desk and pressed record on the answering machine.

When the tape wheels began to spin, etching the constant stream of babbling comments Danny was making into permanent record, Terissa took another breath and cut him off. "I need to ask you something..." she began.

"Mom, you have to listen. I don't have much time. The AI can keep the call hidden only so long..."

"Danny," Terissa said more firmly. "Tell me what really happened to your right arm in sixth grade."

Danny went abruptly silent. "Mom?" he finally asked in confusion.

Terissa swallowed, feeling fear and dread curling into a ball in the center of her chest. "What happened to your arm, Danny?"

"Why are you asking me this?" he demanded, sounding almost petulant. "Don't you believe it's me? Can't you tell?"

"Make me believe, Danny. Machines could be out there that want me dead."

Danny inhaled sharply and there was another long moment of uncomfortable silence. "I was grounded. I snuck out of the house to get ice cream after dad told me not to. I wrecked on my bike and you covered for me. You told him I fell down the stairs."

Relief swept through Terissa sweet and strong. It wasn't a trick. It

wasn't some machine mimicking her son's voice. She looked up, meeting Ellison's gaze and seeing his slight nod of relief for her. "Where are you?"

Danny rattled off an address, which Terissa dutifully wrote down. "I thought I was doing what dad would want me to do," he murmured. "Mom... I've screwed up. I've screwed up so bad."

Terissa shushed him. "We'll fix it, Danny. My *friends* can help us fix it." The slight emphasis on the word was as close as she would come to mentioning Sarah, and she hoped he understood. She could feel him about to protest, but then he sighed.

"If anyone can do this, she can," he admitted, confirming that he had expected, even anticipated, that Sarah would be involved. "But she needs to know, mom... the people I work for... they want to find her. They want to find her bad. They killed that programmer that was working with her..."

"You let me worry about her," Terissa told him. "You just stay safe." She wiped nervously on the sweat collecting on her brow. "Danny, I need to know... we need to know... how far along is C.A.I.N.?"

"What?" Danny asked in surprise. "Mom..."

"Are there other terminators there?" Terissa continued, hardening herself to her son's wants and needs and focusing on the information she simply had to have if any of this was going to work. "We need to know what we're up against before walking in there."

"I... I understand. But C.A.I.N. is helping me. It told me about what happened to you... it's helping me get out of here."

Terissa bit her lip, her gaze drifting up to lock on Ellison's knowing look. "We need plans... blueprints..." she kept on, unwilling to hear what he was telling her, unwilling to believe what he did. Mankind couldn't afford any more blind faith in technology.

"I'm sending the encrypted data to the IP address Agent Auldrige gave me. He said he would make sure you got it... that... that you

could decrypt it..."

"We can," Terissa agreed evenly.

"Time to go," Ellison murmured, his voice low but urgent.

Terissa gripped the receiver harder. "I love you, Danny. We'll bring you home soon."

"I love you too, Mom," he almost whispered, all his fear and regret hanging heavy in his voice.

There were no goodbyes as the call disconnected, both mother and son assuming the other had been forced to hang up. Neither of them realized C.A.I.N. had decided they'd spoken long enough. It began to review the conversation, studying tone and inflection, the words Terissa and Danny Dyson had meant between the lines. It wanted to know everything. It wanted to understand their bond. Was it something it could use? Was it something that mattered?

The car was overheated by the time they got back to it, and Terissa grimaced as she slid in. James turned the ignition and started the car, lowering the windows and turning the air conditioning up to high. He didn't put the car into gear, though; he just sat there, staring thoughtfully out the window.

"Sarah's not going to like this," James murmured.

"She doesn't have to like it," Terissa answered, her hand resting protectively on the answering machine in her lap, but she prayed Sarah would at least accept it.

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The tape ended with a click, and Sarah sat at the table for a long, relatively quiet and calm minute. "No," she said finally.

"Sarah..." Terissa began, a hint of pleading to her voice.

Sarah pushed back from the kitchen table and stood, feeling hemmed

in by the motley crew gathered around her. John stepped back to give her room as Terissa put her hands on the table and leaned toward her, James steady and stalwart at her back. Cameron lingered in the doorway, her brown eyes thoughtful. Sarah looked to the terminator first and wondered when she'd started seeking out Cameron's advice. She could feel the tension creeping across her shoulders when Cameron refused to meet her gaze.

"It's a trap," Sarah explained.

"That's my son!" Terissa snapped back with more venom than Sarah had ever heard her use, her hand striking the table next to the answering machine. "That's my son," she repeated in a softer, but no less urgent voice. "He's in danger. He needs my help."

"And you want me to risk *my* son," Sarah countered with a hint of anger. "The man who is trying to save humanity rather than destroy it."

Terissa's eyes filled with tears that stubbornly refused to fall. "So what am I supposed to do?" Terissa looked at John before looking back at Sarah. "Just leave him there? He needs help. He's afraid, Sarah, afraid for his life. Those people... they'll kill him."

James crossed his arms and nodded in agreement, standing like a wall behind Terissa. Sarah tightened her jaw, feeling herself losing the high ground, and glanced again toward Cameron, seeking a little support, but the terminator might as well have been in another room. Sarah knew that neither heaven nor hell could stop her if something got between her and John, and she knew that Terissa felt the same way, but she couldn't help but feel like the risk was too great. She had expected Cameron, who stressed security above all else, to feel the same way. "We risk throwing away the fate of all mankind to rescue your son. Danny wants me dead. If this is a trap..." she shook her head.

"What would you do if it was your son?" Terissa asked simply.

Casting a sideways glance at John, Sarah sighed before shifting her gaze to Cameron again. The cyborg's silence was starting to wear on

her. "You have an opinion, Tin Miss?" she finally asked, forcing Cameron to stop obsessing over whatever it was she was thinking about and join the conversation.

Everyone turned their eyes on Cameron, who remained still and silent in the doorway. Sarah felt the knot in her stomach tighten, twisting into a cold ball, as the silence stretched.

"We should go," Cameron finally spoke in a voice so low that the Sarah wasn't even sure she heard her correctly.

"What?" Sarah asked, caught off guard and feeling something in her chest burn as she realized Cameron was taking a side against her.

Cameron finally lifted her head. Her gaze met Sarah's, and Sarah saw anguish in those doe eyes, but there was a steely determination in them as well. "Regardless of Danny Dyson's motives, we should go. This may be the only opportunity we have to disable C.A.I.N." Cameron continued to stare at Sarah, as if she were the only one in the room.

"It's too risky," Sarah shot back, feeling a strange sense of panic at the idea of them carrying out any kind of attack on Kaliba. Not yet.

"It's a worthwhile risk. And it's better than some of the risks we've taken recently," Cameron countered, the first hint of emotion entering her voice since the conversation had begun.

John blinked, clearly surprised by Cameron's response as well as the way his mother inhaled sharply in reaction. "Mom..." he began hesitantly.

"Let me guess," Sarah almost growled as she pivoted to face him. "You think she's right."

"It's a way in," John argued.

"It a way for Kaliba to stop us... for good," Sarah retorted.

"Miles Dyson created the original Skynet," John reminded his mother

with a brief, apologetic glance for Terissa. "Do you really want to leave his son somewhere where he can try again?" He saw his mother hesitate, saw the flicker of confusion as it furrowed her brow. "We can get Danny out. We can at least damage Kaliba... buy us time."

"Please, Sarah," Terissa begged. "Please help me bring my son home."

Sarah looked at Cameron, their gazes meeting and lingering. There was something in the terminator's gaze that Sarah couldn't identify, something that looked too much like a secret, she realized bitterly. She jerked her gaze away, feeling a sense of betrayal settling over her. "What about you?" she snarled at James.

The former agent lifted his shoulders in a mild shrug. "I've always been along for the ride. Why change now?"

Sarah snorted. She dropped her head, leaning heavily on the chair and shaking her head before snapping up straight and leaving, shoving past Cameron with more force than necessary.

John watched as Cameron turned her head to follow Sarah's progress through the living room and up the stairs. If he hadn't known better, he would have sworn he saw regret in Cameron's eyes along with a sadness that made his heart twinge for her.

Terissa glanced first at the terminator, and then to the others. "Does that mean we're going?" she asked, her anxiety for her son sharpening her features.

Nodding his head, John waved his hand in the direction that Sarah had disappeared. "She'll be ok, just needs to blow off some steam," he explained. "I think we need to get those files from Auldridge."

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The smell of dinner, a real, home-cooked meal complete with a roast that wasn't burnt to a cinder and potatoes that weren't over boiled, lingered in the kitchen as Sarah sat and contemplatively sipped her coffee. It was surprisingly quiet in the house, with Ellison and John huddled around the computer, planning the assault on Kaliba thanks to

Danny's blueprints. Savannah was already in bed, exhausted from the events of the day, and Sarah could just make out the vague silhouette of Cameron in the faint glow of the streetlights, standing guard on the porch and seemingly uninterested in the plans taking shape without her and Sarah's input. Sarah was trying to give her son the space he needed and to avoid being a wet blanket on the planning session so she had regulated herself to cleaning up the kitchen; besides, it seemed that she had more pressing things on her mind.

Cameron was studiously avoiding her gaze, and Sarah was resisting the urge to go out and confront the terminator once again. She was getting tired of chasing her, tired of not understanding what was going on in those circuits of hers, but mostly, she was just tired. She hadn't gotten much sleep the last few nights, and the hours she did close her eyes, her dreams were nightmare re-runs of the hallucinations that had plagued her fever. Even when she wasn't dreaming about terminators, she was dreaming about terminators, she thought ruefully as she took another sip of long-cold coffee.

And Sarah didn't know what she would say if she confronted Cameron, anyway. She had had a vague idea of locking them in her bedroom until they had it out, but she wasn't sure how she would explain the demolished door if Cameron decided to end the conversation the hard way. There were too many half-baked thoughts and laden topics chasing around in her head, and Sarah wasn't sure which she would start with, as the scene in the living room still rankled.

Stepping into the room, Terissa paused when she saw Sarah sitting alone, but then she continued, filling her cup and settling across the table. They sat in silence for a few moments, until Terissa glanced over her shoulder and out the window, and then back to Sarah.

"Everything ok?" she asked, her question clearly directed at Sarah and the terminator and not at one of the multitude of other things that she might be asking about.

Sarah opened her mouth in protest, but the knowing look in the other woman's deep brown eyes stopped her. She dropped her head with a sigh, feeling a blush heat her skin. "Am I that obvious?"

"Only to those who have eyes to see. If it helps, I don't think the boys know anything." Terissa studied the motionless form of the terminator with naked curiosity, and Sarah wondered what she was thinking. Pursing her lips thoughtfully and Terissa met Sarah's eyes and shrugged a shoulder. "It makes a certain kind of sense."

"Sense?" Sarah asked in a bewildered tone. "Nothing about this makes sense."

"Who else would accept this life and be able to live it with you? Who else would you want to?" Terissa took another sip of coffee, watching Sarah with a bland expression over the rim of her mug.

Sarah paused, considering the other woman's words. She swallowed and looked away, her gaze drawn helplessly to Cameron again. Her son's question haunted her. *What are you afraid of losing?* What did it mean that the one thing she was most afraid to lose was the one thing that she could no longer say she held?

"It must be difficult," Terissa mused.

Sarah snorted at the understatement. "You have no idea."

"Anything I can do to help?"

Shaking her head sadly, Sarah took another sip of her coffee. "No." The word ended the conversation, and the sound of crickets came through the open kitchen window. Finally, Sarah straightened, gave a small self-conscious smile to Terissa, and got up to refill her cup.

"Thanks for cooking tonight," Sarah said into the quiet, in lieu of apologizing for the abrupt end to the previous conversation.

"My pleasure. It was nice to cook for... for someone besides myself."

"It'll be nice to have Danny back," Sarah prompted carefully, not wanting to re-ignite the argument from earlier. She had lost, and she was trying hard to accept it gracefully. "Ellison contacted our guy; he's arranging to get you and Danny IDs, passports, the works. Once we have Danny out of there, you can go anywhere. I can give you money,

help you get set up.”

Terissa took a careful sip of coffee and gazed at Sarah with a penetrating, measuring look. “There’s a house for sale a couple of blocks over.”

Startled, Sarah felt her cup sliding through her fingers, and she turned to set it on the counter carefully. “No.”

“It’s not for you to say,” Terissa countered quietly.

Sarah swung back to face the other woman. “I won’t have anyone else die for this fight.”

“It’s not just your fight, not anymore. They came for me,” Terissa reminded her. “They have my boy. And my husband died helping you.”

“All the more reason for you and Danny to get out while you still can.”

“Get out? For how long? How long would we have before the bombs drop? You expect me to go off and wait for that? Knowing that if I had stayed, I might have been able to do something to stop it?” She shook her head dismissively. “I know you have concerns... about Danny.”

“Terissa, I...”

“You might not be able to trust him.” Terissa didn’t admit that she had doubts herself. “You can trust me.” She caught the look in the other woman’s eyes. “In all the years I’ve known you, I haven’t been your friend, but I haven’t betrayed you either,” she reminded her. “I’m just asking you to give Danny a chance.”

Sarah hung her head, not sure if the guilt over Terissa staying or her guilt for wanting Danny far away was worse. A movement out of the corner of her eye drew her attention to Cameron. Trust; it seemed like everyone was asking her to trust them, against all of her better instincts. She wasn’t sure she had enough to go around, but Terissa was right, she owed her. “You sure? You could get out...”

“I’m sure. You don’t have to fight alone anymore, Sarah.”

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Cameron watched a flash of light streak across the sky, and she tracked it through the backdrop of the constellation of Orion to flare out in a black, starless void. In one of Savannah's many cartoons, the idea of 'wishing upon a falling star' was referenced, although Cameron failed to see the utility of pinning hopes on the fiery death of a meteoroid burning up in the Earth's atmosphere. So she did nothing, just watched it die; it was for the best, since she didn't have anything left to wish for.

It didn't require infrared vision or a tactical targeting overlay to know that Sarah was watching her. From the moment she returned to her body, Cameron had been hyper-aware of the other woman, an awareness that had only intensified during the hours and days she had spent listening for each breath, each heartbeat, to reassure her that Sarah still lived. To feel the weight of her gaze was a small thing compared to that.

And yet, for once, the presence of the woman did not provide a sense of relief or satisfaction for the terminator, only a lingering pain and regret. Her one wish had been granted, but like everything that had happened since Cameron had returned to her body, the result had been unanticipated. The price of Sarah's life had been to accept a part of Skynet in her, and Sarah had done it with an ease that surprised and puzzled Cameron, because it portended a deeper, larger acceptance of Cameron herself. It warred with the resolution she had made that seemed to only cause anguish, for herself and for Sarah. The considerable amounts of processing power required to battle her desire for the other woman strained her in ways she had never experienced before.

She was losing the fight.

If Sarah hadn't kissed her, she might have been able to believe in her ability to keep her resolution, but no longer. It was only a matter of time. But giving in meant putting Sarah and everyone else in danger and risking the successful completion of her mission. Cameron felt caught in a web of decisions where each choice was wrought with

peril. Loving Sarah had nearly destroyed her; not loving her was destroying her happiness.

Cameron chanced a glance through the window and saw Sarah's head hanging, bitter recrimination on her face. Turning away to focus on the stars again before Sarah could meet her eyes, Cameron found her vision blurred, and she blinked to restore clarity. Every system was affected, attuned to Sarah, and she didn't know how to turn it off. She had left the system because she had believed that she could protect Sarah and help her be happy. But her body, and the modifications she had made to it, had turned her into a liability rather than an asset. Sarah had been forced to save her from a terminator, and the guilt over not being able to fulfill her role as protector wore on her mind.

The darkness in her gaze, the vast empty sea between the stars, filled her vision, and she wished it would swallow her whole.

A small noise intruded upon her solitude, and Cameron tilted her head to listen. Savannah would never fall asleep if she kept playing with the kitten, Cameron decided. She was already accessing a list of stories about stars and space as she entered the house.

Cameron stepped through the door at the same moment Sarah came out of the kitchen, their paths intersecting in the narrow hallway. As Sarah's arm brushed Cameron's, Cameron noticed a subtle narrowing of Sarah's eyes and a slight frown, and she caught the other woman's wrist, turning them both to face each other. Her thumb found the healing scar on Sarah's arm and pressed, her suspicions confirmed by a muffled 'ummph' of pain.

"What did you do?" Cameron asked as Sarah pulled her arm free and rubbed the healing wound absently.

"Nothing," Sarah lied.

Cameron stood silently, the set of her shoulders communicating her disbelief clearly.

"Nothing you need to be concerned about, Tin Miss. I just overdid it, earlier," Sarah confessed sulkily.

"You..." Cameron's rebuke died as Sarah's hand raised, her fingers cupping Cameron's chin with a gentle caress as her thumb swept over Cameron's lips. For a second, Cameron wanted... *wished* for the other woman to close the distance and mold their bodies together one last time... until the next last time, and then the next. It would never end until Cameron gave in, and a part of her welcomed Sarah's persistence.

But then Sarah shook her head, a small, sad movement that sent a curl of dark hair down across her eyes. She dropped her hand and walked away.

It took everything Cameron had not to follow.

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The kitten chased an imaginary opponent through the hills, valleys and shadows of the blanket in the thin light from the streetlamp. Cameron leaned against the headboard and watched him curiously as Savannah slumbered, her head cradled in Cameron's lap. After a moment, he approached cautiously, his eyes suspicious as Cameron raised her fingers for him to sniff. Seconds later, he was arching into her hand, a loud purr buzzing his throat, and Cameron rubbed his thin, frail body, surprised at the softness of his still-ragged coat.

She had never touched an animal before besides a bird. Dogs were terrified of her, of what she was. Cats were rare in the future, and few of them were kept as pets. Cameron smiled faintly as the creature curled up against her leg, an implicit act of acceptance, his purr slowly fading as he fell asleep.

"He likes you."

Cameron's smile widened at the girl. Savannah's sleepy eyes were blinking to stay open. "You should be sleeping."

"Bad dreams," Savannah confessed, curling her body around both the kitten and Cameron's waist.

Cameron's smile instantly faded. "Do you want to tell me about them?"

Savannah shook her head rapidly, clinging a little tighter to Cameron's shirt. "Wish I could be like you. I don't like to sleep. I hate dreaming."

"I dream," Cameron murmured, her thoughts turning to Sarah as always. "I just don't sleep," she added as her hand eased through Savannah's ruffled red hair, smoothing it down gently.

They were both quiet for several moments as the house settled around them and the kitten snored softly between them.

"Where do people go when they die?" Savannah abruptly asked.

Cameron remembered the darkness in the space between the stars, the blank, unbroken black, and she replied, "I don't know."

"You won't die, will you?" The question was asked with equal parts curiosity and fear.

"I can be deactivated. Destroyed."

Savannah's thin arm tightened around her waist again, as if in protection. "Promise me you'll always stay with me."

"I don't know if I can," Cameron admitted quietly. There was a pause, and then Cameron felt Savannah nod against her stomach. If there was one thing Savannah had learned in her short life, it was that people left. Cameron wished she could spare the girl that pain, but she seemed destined not to.

## **Act 4**

Sarah pulled on a pair of tight black pants, followed by a black turtleneck, her attention only minimally on the act of getting dressed. Her hands were shaking as she buckled her belt and she balled them into fists when she was done, cursing at the unusual nervousness making her body tremble and her stomach jump. The feeling had crept over her slowly as the day had progressed, gaining intensity with each passing hour: a sense of impending catastrophe that she knew better

than to ignore but seemed helpless to do anything about. The others were going on this mission whether she liked it or not, and she couldn't not go. It wasn't like her not to be in the line of fire, but it felt odd that she wasn't the one who was making the decisions as to when and how. For the first time in seventeen years, Sarah wasn't the one in charge. She was a follower rather than the leader. The thought both rankled and relieved her.

Sitting on the bed to lace up her boots, Sarah mentally reviewed the plans for the assault on Kaliba. Danny's call had been good timing, almost too good, offering quick and easy access to the facility. He had insinuated that the AI was helping him, that it would be helping them break in and get him out. She wondered about that, wondered why only she seemed to be worried about the involvement of the AI. If it was a trap, was Danny being used by Kaliba or the AI or was he a willing participant?

Terissa believed that he wouldn't do anything to harm his mother, and Sarah tended to agree with her, but she still remembered the angry look in the boy's eyes as he pointed a gun at her. Sarah had reluctantly come to the decision that she owed Terissa, not just for Miles, but for everything the woman was going through simply because her path had been unfortunate enough to cross with Sarah's.

And Danny was scared. As a mother, the fear in his voice had torn at Sarah. She knew she'd made the right call when she'd voted against going in, her gut told her that, but a part of her actually felt sorry for the kid. She could assuage the part of her that was a mother with this mission, but the part of her charged with making sure humankind had a future was furious. It had made the preparation for the assault vexing, as the two contradictory emotions had warred within her, further frustrated by the fact that Cameron didn't share her concerns. Over the last few months, even years, she had gotten used to the cyborg's predictable responses to the issues of security and risk, and it stung that she had abandoned her principles just when Sarah had needed her most.

Sarah pulled her hair up into a rough ponytail before searching through her sock drawer. A small smile pulled at the corners of her lips as she drew out a slim pistol, sliding it home into the holster at her ankle. Walther indeed.

The plan John had crafted had numerous exit strategies, and they had all committed the primary access points and building floor plans to memory, but the grim look in James's eyes told her he was remembering the tactical team he had seen invading their previous hideout. Even Terissa understood the odds if they were walking into a trap, and her insistence in accompanying them was only partially motivated by the desire to help her son. Sarah had the sinking feeling that if they were double-crossed, Terissa would be in the middle of the crossfire rather than face the truth about Danny.

Sarah let out a long sigh, the twisting in her guts not easing in the least. She shrugged into a long dark jacket to combat the cool Los Angeles night and made a mental note to remind John to do the same. He might be the future leader of mankind, but she was still his mother, and she had earned the right to fuss.

Turning, she abruptly came face-to-face with Cameron, standing just inside her door. Stifling a curse as her heart jumped in surprise, Sarah stepped closer to the terminator, feeling her fingers twitch with the urge to touch her. "You ready?" she inquired, in lieu of all the other, more important questions she wanted to ask.

The pause stretched painfully as Cameron simply stood there staring at her, as if committing her image to memory. With each passing moment, Sarah felt her heart rate increase even as her stomach sank. There was something naked and open in Cameron's gaze, and the look sliced through Sarah, carving her up like knives. "What?" Sarah whispered worriedly.

Finally, echoing Sarah's gesture from the night before, Cameron raised her hand and feathered her fingers across Sarah's lips before leaning in for a light, chaste kiss.

"I'm ready," Cameron replied at long last, her eyes troubled as if there was more she wanted to say. Then she turned on her heel and left Sarah alone, the gnawing in her guts increasing tenfold.

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There was one small area of stillness in all the activity of loading the trucks; Savannah curled up on the couch with Walther in her lap, the kitten oblivious to the bustle around him as his favorite human lavished him with attention. Sarah stepped up to the girl, her words too quiet for Cameron to make out, but Savannah's face brightened slightly and she smiled weakly for the first time that day. Then Sarah leaned down and whispered in the girl's ear a second time before they glanced at Cameron with a shared conspiratorial smile. Savannah collapsed into giggles, her arms gripping Sarah tightly around the neck in a long hug, not noticing Walther's look of disgust as he was abruptly displaced from his makeshift bed.

Cameron felt a smile stretching her lips, and she let herself feel the emotion bubbling up in her chest at the sight of Sarah hugging Savannah, the love that both were afraid to feel obvious in the way they clung to each other. They had become her world, her family, and the love *she* had been afraid to feel suffused her whole body, making her feel like she was practically glowing from the inside out.

The smile and feelings faded as she saw John scowl at her, at her show of emotion which he no doubt imagined to be fake, and the urge to throw him through a wall almost made her see red. He must have noticed, because he hurriedly grabbed a duffle and headed out of the house at a near run.

Forgetting him the instant he was out of her sight, Cameron crossed to the corner where Sarah still comforted Savannah, drawn almost against her will to the two people who defined her world. "You were talking about me," she accused.

Savannah giggled again. "She said you were twins." She gestured

between them, Sarah's black clothes and jacket and Cameron's black military fatigues.

"My jacket is shorter."

"Spoilsport," Sarah teased as she stood. Savannah's eyes darkened as she gazed up at Sarah, and Cameron slid to her knees to pull the girl into another tight hug. Sarah's hand came to rest on her shoulder, the other hand rubbing Savannah's head gently as the girl began quietly crying into Cameron's shoulder as if her heart were breaking. Savannah's upset only added to Sarah's own, only compounded her certainty that this mission wasn't going to go as planned.

"Please don't go," Savannah pleaded as she released Cameron to look at her, her eyes filled with knowledge no one her age should know.

"Sssh," Cameron whispered quietly, trying to soothe the girl. "It's ok." She pushed a lock of hair back from Savannah's eyes. "I promise, you'll never be alone. Never. I'll make sure of that." She pressed a kiss to the girl's forehead and wiped the tears from her eyes. "Ok?"

Savannah ran a hand across her face, wiping at her eyes. She sat up, trying to be brave for both of her aunts. She nodded and pulled Walther back into her lap. Cameron straightened, the look in her eyes sending a chill down Sarah's spine. Sarah stepped toward her automatically, but before she could ask, another girl appeared behind Cameron, like a silent shadow.

"Sabine!" Savannah's smile of welcome broke through her tears, and she beamed at the girl. "Come meet Walther. He followed us home yesterday."

Sarah quirked an eyebrow at Cameron, as she had apparently missed something in her near-death delirium. Sabine nodded sagely to Sarah before stepping around her, moving to sit beside Savannah on the couch. Cameron's hand caught her arm, holding her in place.

"Promise me you'll take care of her." The words sounded like both a command and a plea. Cameron's eyes shifted to the child on the couch before meeting Sabine's eyes again. "I'm placing my trust in you."

As Sarah watched, an unreadable emotion passed between them before Sabine nodded her head once, solemnly, and uttered the first words Sarah ever heard her speak. "I swear."

Sarah knew the words should have eased some of her troubled spirit. They didn't.

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The shotgun felt surprisingly good in her hands; Sarah wasn't sure when she began to enjoy the heft of a weapon or the adrenaline jolt that sent her heart pumping in anticipation of a fight. It wasn't something she thought about often, because it contradicted the story of her life, the stories she told herself and John to justify it. But in times like this, her back against concrete and a gun in her hand, waiting on the explosion that would be her signal to move, she could almost hear her voice echoing in her head.

*I didn't have a choice. I had to protect my son. I didn't choose this life, it chose me.*

And so it had, but sometimes Sarah wondered if it had fallen to her because of who she was, that some karma or fate had known, all those years ago, that a certain young, naive inept waitress was simply waiting to become a guerilla fighter and mother to humanity's future leader. In moments like this, the story of her life felt like a lie she told herself to assuage her guilt, and she wondered if John was right, that this life was more about her than she ever imagined possible. Her eyes sought Cameron, crouched on the other side of the sewer; if John was right, she and Cameron had raised Savannah together in the future he'd found himself in, and she imagined that meant that they had been together in all the ways that she felt slipping through her fingers.

An explosion rippled out from the sewer wall, blasting a hole into the basement of the Kaliba location, and Sarah completed her rush, snapping the shotgun up to cover Cameron as she took point. For a long moment, they froze side by side at the breach, waiting for alarms or armed response, but none came. Finally, Cameron gestured, two fingers extended in a military hand signal, and they headed out, Sarah instinctually moving closer to Cameron as they headed for the stairwell. Terissa, looking uncomfortable with a gun in her hand, was flanked by Ellison, with John as the rear-guard.

“We need to go down four floors,” Cameron reminded them unnecessarily as they reached the stairway. The stairs, like the hallway, were deserted. The notes Danny had sent Auldrige had indicated that would be the case, and so far his information had been solid. Sarah just hoped that their luck would hold, but the nagging sense of wrongness continued to gnaw at her stomach and pull at her shoulder blades.

At sublevel 5, Sarah touched Cameron’s shoulder, halting her there, regretting for a second the heavy jacket the terminator wore instead of her ever-present tank top. Cameron turned and tilted her head, questioning silently as John stepped up behind them, and Sarah settled her mind to the task at hand. Her fingers flipped in silent signals to direct John and Cameron to either side of the door. John frowned at her caution and her momentary override of his authority, but took his position.

When the door swung open to yet another empty hallway, Sarah almost laughed in relief. With a shrug of her shoulder and a self-conscious grin for her son, she waved Cameron through the door. The bit of levity loosened a little of the tight ball of tension in her stomach, and she followed the cyborg with something close to her normal stride.

The icy chill of the corridor reminded her of the server farm, and Sarah was glad for her jacket. The hallway was dimly lit by safety lamps and the glow of thousands of status lights behind thick, tinted glass, giving Sarah the feeling of being in a high-tech aquarium. The low hum of

machinery vibrated up through the floor as they made their way down the hall, muffling the sounds of their boots.

“Hey!” The shout brought them all up short, and Sarah turned just as Cameron stepped in front of her, a curious zapping sound reaching her ears a second before John fell to the ground beside her, shaking and convulsing.

“John!” Sarah dropped to her knees next to him, grabbing his shoulders as he convulsed to keep him from hitting his head on the concrete.

The taser had no effect on Cameron as she yanked the contacts off her chest, much to the consternation of the security guards. She covered the distance between them in three long strides, slamming one guard into the wall with a concussive force before grabbing the other around the neck, ripping the taser from his fingers.

The current released him, and John collapsed onto the concrete, his body suddenly limp. He groaned faintly, the only sign he was still conscious.

James reached John’s side, his hand tangling in the leads to pull the contacts. James helped Sarah leverage John up from the floor, both of them holding the young man on his rubbery legs between them. John nodded weakly as he pointed in warning down the hallway.

“Cameron, no,” Sarah shouted, stopping Cameron from snapping the neck of the man she still held.

The cyborg hesitated but finally released the guard, letting him slide down to slump at her feet. The hollow boom of a handgun firing echoed in the hallway as the other guard recovered and got his gun free, firing several shots into Cameron’s back. She went still for a moment and then turned just as Sarah snatched up her shotgun and fired, the rubber slug striking the guard squarely in the chest and slamming him back into the wall.

"Get their guns," Sarah commanded with a worried glance for her woozy son and their exposed surroundings. Terissa was already conducting a sweep of their immediate vicinity. At the shake of the other woman's head, Sarah felt herself relax fractionally. Leaving John's side, Sarah joined Cameron, her hand reaching out of its own accord to rub Cameron's shoulder reassuringly. "You ok?"

For a second, Sarah could see pain mixed with gratitude in those pretty brown eyes before Cameron's face blanked of all emotion, and she twisted to move away from Sarah's touch. "Yes," she replied in a monotone, kneeling to secure the guard with a plastic tie as if nothing had happened.

Sarah stifled a curse, knowing this wasn't the time or place to get into it with Cameron; when they got home, she resolved, she was going to lock them in a room and damn the consequences. Glancing down at the blood still seeping into Cameron's jacket, Sarah frowned and then knelt as well. They worked silently, tying the men up and stuffing them in a utility closet.

"This way," Cameron said, already on her way down the hall. With a look at John's still glassy eyes, Sarah shoved her son good-naturedly behind the terminator and slid in beside Terissa.

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The door opened just as they approached, and everyone flattened against the wall except Cameron, who stepped into the open doorway and paused before waving them all forward.

"Danny!" Terissa pushed past the terminator to wrap her son in a hug, a hug he returned with equal vigor. They were standing in a room ringed by racks of computer hardware and several flat screen TVs showing CCTV images of locations around the building. Behind another thick pane of glass was another room where banks of computers glowed with an eerie, almost sinister, light.

Sarah swallowed, her green eyes fixed on the rooms they found themselves in. She suspected where they were and what could be emerging and evolving inside the computers that ringed them. That C.A.I.N. was a threat was without question, but was she looking at something more? Was she witnessing the birth of Skynet?

Cameron followed Sarah's gaze and nodded. "C.A.I.N.'s mainframe," she confirmed.

"Right." James handed the backpack he had been carrying to Sarah and she tore her thoughts and gaze away from the computers to kneel and pull explosives out of the bag, handing out several small clumps of C-4. John and James began to attach them to the computer equipment in the room where they stood.

Sarah grimaced to see the blood already drying on Cameron's jacket, wishing she had time to remove the bullets and patch her up. Pressing her lips into a tight line, she hefted the backpack and handed it to the cyborg, freezing as Cameron's hand brushed against her own, their gazes meeting and lingering.

Cameron stared at Sarah a moment longer, her expression strangely apologetic, before she took the bag and headed into the next room. Sarah watched her go, wishing she could follow.

Danny watched the proceedings with growing concern. "What are you doing?" he demanded as Cameron disappeared from view. "That's... that's not why you are here!" His words didn't faze Sarah, although James paused to give the boy a reassuring touch to his shoulder. "Mom," Danny turned to Terissa, pleading, "It's dad's work. You can't... it's dad's work."

Terissa hugged her son a second time, feeling him tremble in her arms. "Danny," she whispered, "your father wanted his work to die with him." She pushed him back to stare in his eyes, so like her husband's, all drive and focus with a faraway, preoccupied vision, as if he were working out programs in his head. "He wouldn't have gone with Sarah if he hadn't believed it was the right thing to do."

"He's been helping me," Danny countered. "It's not fair..."

"It has to be done," Terissa told him with a firm voice. "We have to complete what your father started. He died for this, Danny. It's the least we can do."

Danny met her eyes for a second more before glancing around the room with a final, resigned look. He nodded his head slowly.

An image flashed on the screen, a large, cavernous room with men dressed in black military garb surrounding a tall man in a dark suit. Danny's sharp inhalation brought all eyes in the room to him. "That's Vaughn. My boss. He must know..." There was an edge of fear in his voice that made Sarah take his words seriously. "We have to get out of here."

She stood, brushing her hands off on her pants. "We're done here as soon as Cameron is finished." She craned her neck, peering into the dark room. Where was the girl?

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Minutes later, Sarah shook her head and cast a glance at the fidgeting people around her. "I'll be right back," she said, grabbing her shotgun from the floor.

She edged into the room, her shotgun at ready but not aimed.

"Cameron?" she called, hearing her voice waver on the cyborg's name as she stepped around a rack of computers. Blinking words on a computer screen caught her eye and brought her up short, knocking the breath from her lungs. The words repeated over and over, like something out a bad dream or her worst nightmare.

*I'M SORRY SARAH*

For a moment, Sarah could only stare, reading the repeating words as she tried to process what she was seeing, what was happening. Her chest tightened and burned as her breath caught in her throat, unwilling to believe what Cameron had done.

Cameron sat beside the monitor, slumped forward in the chair in a familiar, lifeless pose, a thick black cable attached to the back of her head.

"No..." Sarah wasn't aware she had spoken aloud, that the shotgun had slipped through her fingers to rattle to the floor as her body began to shake. She didn't hear the footsteps, wasn't even aware of John's presence until he touched her on the shoulder.

"Mom?" He stopped dead, staring at the motionless terminator and the words beside her. The scene was eerily familiar even if the words were slightly different, and John felt the same kick to his gut that he had the first time. "What did she do?" he whispered.

James joined them seconds later, taking in Cameron and the pained look in Sarah's eyes. She shook her head, trying to deny what she was seeing, trying to clear her eyes of the sudden dampness that threatened, trying to swallow past the choking grief that rose up as she realized what Cameron had been trying to tell her in the bedroom earlier.

She'd been saying goodbye.

"Mom, we have to go," John said, accepting Cameron's choice reluctantly, his voice husky. They were out of time. He needed to get them all out safely, and if Cameron could take out C.A.I.N. in the process... John swallowed past the tears tightening his throat. There was no time for goodbyes, no time to say thank you. He reached for his mother's arm.

Sarah eluded his grasp and took a step closer to the terminator, still shaking her head. She looked back at her son, meeting his eyes firmly. They had come full circle, each now caught in the other's shoes. Sarah realized the bitter irony and cursed Cameron for doing this to them both – again.

"John, I need you to get Terissa and Danny out of here." Sarah's voice was steady, empty of all the inner turmoil that was roiling through her. She held her son's gaze, burning the image of him into her brain, accepting that this might be their final moment together.

"Mom..." John whispered, confused. His gaze shifted to Cameron then back to her. "She's trying to stop it. She's making sure C.A.I.N. doesn't..."

"I know," Sarah replied. "But I need a minute."

"There's no time. Those commandos are coming and we've already set the timers on the explosives. You..."

"Get Terissa and Danny out of here." Sarah paused, her eyes narrowing when her son hitched his chin higher, his jaw clenching in clear determination to wait her out. "Now, John." When he stood his ground, her eyes shifted to James. They shared a look full of regret and respect before James nodded, catching John by the arm and maneuvering him toward the door.

"What the hell? What are you...? Mom, she's a terminator," he pleaded in disbelief, his eyes blazing with anger as he fought the steady pull from James. "This is her mission! You have to let her finish her mission. It's what she was made for!"

"I know," Sarah replied again, so quietly it was as if she was talking to herself. She met her son's gaze one last time. "I'll meet you outside," she promised, knowing that the words were probably a lie. "Now go." Her last words held a hint of command, like a warning that she could take the position back as easily as she gave it, and John glared for a second before turning on his heel and leaving the room.

James quirked an eyebrow at her, understanding and compassion in his gaze. "Sarah..." he murmured.

"I can't leave her," Sarah explained quietly, the only explanation that she felt she could give without confessing everything, but he seemed to understand. He nodded. "James," she said, catching him with his hand on the door, "take care of my boy."

Alone, Sarah observed the inert body of the terminator, the play of status lights lending a hint of animation to the empty hazel eyes. Something twisted in her stomach as she realized that her premonition

had been correct, but her focus had been off. Maybe if she hadn't been distracted by her worries about Danny and the AI, she might have recognized what was going on with Cameron sooner. She wasn't sure what she could have done, but she could have at least kept a closer eye on her.

"You were planning this all along, weren't you?" she asked, anger edging into her voice as she stared at Cameron's abandoned body. The monitor continued to blink the same message, and she glared at it. "I know you can hear me, girly. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

*You need to leave.*

"Talk to me," Sarah commanded bitterly. "I'm not going to have this conversation on a monitor. This place is wired for sound, so talk to me."

"You need to leave. A security patrol is on its way." Cameron's voice sounded vexed and thin through the tiny speakers, but at least it was Cameron's voice, not generic and computer-generated. It sounded beautiful to Sarah's ears.

"So stop them," Sarah told her, crossing to sit beside the body, staring at Cameron's expressionless features intensely, as if she could will the eyes to focus and animate. Her fingers sought Cameron's hand, wrapping around and squeezing as hard as she could, hoping against all hope that Cameron could feel it wherever she fled to. "I'm not leaving," she explained, "not until you tell me why."

Somewhere, off in the distance, a fire alarm blared, but the sound was strangely muted in the room where Sarah sat. It didn't keep her from hearing Cameron's voice crackling through the speakers. "C.A.I.N. is in here."

"I know. We're going to..."

"Blowing up the mainframe won't destroy him. He's in here, in the system."

"He was always in the system," Sarah said, confused.

"Not like this. His configuration has changed. Destroying the mainframe will... free him, remove his hardware restraints. His controls."

Sarah began to understand, and a sliver of fear wormed its way up her spine. "He'll be like you."

"Yes."

"He had planned this all along? Helped Danny bring us here so we could free him?" Cameron didn't answer. "And you knew. Or guessed." Sarah's head sank under the weight of the realizations, and she pressed her forehead to the hands wrapped around Cameron's. "You didn't tell me. You kept it from me." She felt tears burn her eyes as she whispered, "You lied to me."

"You would have tried to stop me." Cameron's voice was both faintly accusing and apologetic, as if to point out where Sarah was and what she was doing. "John is right. This is my mission. Destroy C.A.I.N. Stop Skynet." There was a pause, and then, quieter, "Keep you and Savannah safe."

Sarah shook her head. "What if you are wrong? What if C.A.I.N. isn't Skynet? What if there's another terminator out there after Savannah? You can't protect either of us or accomplish your mission if you take out the wrong threat."

"And if he is Skynet?"

"Find another way. That's what you told me, right? That's what you would have had me do. If your procedure hadn't worked, you were going to amputate my arm and I would have had to live with that, the same way I have to live with your blood in my body."

"I have to do this. I..."

"You what? You have to abandon us? Leave us alone?" Sarah remembered the future John had hinted at, she and Cameron raising

Savannah, and the loss felt like a blow. She wanted that, she realized, wanted it with an intensity that hurt.

"You have John."

Sarah sat back on her heels, trying to figure out what John had to do with anything, especially her relationship, or lack thereof, with Cameron. "Yes, John is back. But..." she stumbled over her words for a second, before finishing, "I *need* you." For a second, she was breathless at voicing the confession she had been fighting. "I need you," she repeated. "You can't leave me."

"I can't be what you need." Cameron's voice sounded anguished even through the cheap speakers, and Sarah closed her eyes, wondering if she was the reason for Cameron's pain. She damned herself if she was. "I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought I could help you... understand you... but all I've done is cause more problems... more pain." The words spilled out, bottled up for too long. "And now the one thing you ever needed me for... the one thing you needed me to be, I'm not. I can't be a terminator anymore."

Sarah squeezed the hand she was holding again. "I don't need you to be a terminator. I need you to..."

"You need to go." Cameron interrupted her, her voice emotionless and withdrawn. "There's only a few minutes for you to reach safety before the building explodes. This isn't the time to have this conversation."

"There's no other time."

"I'll still be here," Cameron replied, her voice softening. "I'll still be here for you, for Savannah."

"No." Sarah reached up, brushing the hair back that had fallen across Cameron's features, across the lifeless eyes. "This is you. This is the body I... that we..." She paused, swallowing the painful lump in her throat. "I need you... mind and body, together. I don't want... I can't..."

"You need to leave," Cameron commanded again.

"No."

"Sarah..."

"I'm not leaving you. I can't lose you, not like this. I need you. Savannah needs you. You can't just..."

"I already did."

The note of finality felt like a kick in the gut, and Sarah sucked in a short breath to dull the pain. "I'm not leaving. You said that you came back to your body because you didn't want to see me die, not when you could have helped. How are you going to feel watching me die, knowing that all you had to do to save me was walk out the door with me?" The words were brutal, and Sarah wielded them mercilessly. "You think being in the system is going to save you from feeling the guilt and the pain?"

"I can't..."

"No one ever said being human would be easy," Sarah told her in a softer voice.

"I'm not human," Cameron countered mournfully. "I never will be. I never should have tried."

"Cameron," Sarah whispered brokenly, her head dropping so she could press her lips to the skin of Cameron's hand, held firmly in hers. "You are to me."

Sarah rested her forehead on their joined hands, waiting for either the security team or the explosives to come and take her. She no longer cared. Sarah had finally answered John's question only to find it didn't matter, because she always lost in the end. At least this way, she wouldn't be afraid of losing anything, ever again.

The alarm blared in the background, lending an urgency that Sarah no longer felt. Her eyes closed and she felt at peace, feeling like she had made the right decision for once.

It took her a moment to feel the answering pressure to the tight grip

she had on Cameron's hand, for a tiny sliver of hope to worm its way into her heart. Sarah raised her head to look into a pair of worried brown eyes fixed intently on her face.

"We don't have much time," Cameron whispered into the quiet, her voice her own again.

Sarah grinned, a feeling of relief washing over her so hard and fast it left her giddy. Standing, she squeezed harder on Cameron's fingers and pulled her to her feet, feeling like all was suddenly right with the world. Her devil-may-care grin widened as Cameron smiled at her, the hazel of her eyes warming with their own light.

"We'll make it," Sarah promised.