

DELUSIONS

Thomas Monroe

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Cover by Thomas Monroe

"It is untrue, a hundred times untrue that the end justifies the means. Justice is not made by iniquity, the world and men are not transformed by means of chains, loudspeakers crying out falsehoods, and vast agencies of intellectuals paid to cram people's head full of lies. Every end requires its own means, and an end is only obtained by the appropriate means."

VICTOR SERGE

Prologue

The young woman was clinging on to her books in fear. Her terrified eyes stared at the man standing across from her. The gun he was pointing at her was trembling only slightly. But in truth it was the large knife he was carrying that frightened her. With just a bit too much force he pressed it against the throat of the young girl he was holding tightly. Her mind was going over a thousand and one ideas on how to save her but was unable to find a proper way. All she cared about was saving that young life, her own was of no importance in that moment. How was she to convince him? Just as she thought of the fitting words, the whole room started to tremble, and a bright light entered through the window. How could it ever have gotten to this point?

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Act One

Walking a Thin Line

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Chapter One

The sun was pounding down on the asphalt, resulting in dark patches all over the road. The rough rubber wheels of the old busted up dirt bike rolled smoothly over this overheated asphalt. The gas tank had a busted metallic look to it and the rest of the bike had no real color, only its old and slightly rusty form. But it ran as trustworthy as one could hope, considering its age. It was amazing how the green orange checkered pleated short skirt of the meter and seventy tall girl riding the bike stayed in place as it shot over the road at an average of forty kilometers an hour. Her skirt reached a bit beyond the middle between her hips and knees. Besides this she was wearing a white, sleeveless shirt with an orange tie and a tight black sleeveless vest. Additionally, her secondary school uniform was completed by her white socks hanging loosely over her clean brown leather shoes.

The suspension of the dirt bike gave in nicely as she hopped onto the sidewalk under the sign reading "Carlin Ming Secondary School" with below it a black yellow and green tricolor flag, onto the school grounds. The girl swayed with her bike between the other school kids, all of them nicely wearing their uniforms. The bike fluently arrived at the motorbike stall where she placed it between two expensive electrical motorbikes. A sweat drop ran down the fair skin of her face as she took off her plain silver-colored helmet with a black visor. Unlike the bike, this helmet was an expensive one, it could project all kinds of information on the black visor, including weather reports and news reports. Her long shiny golden-brown hair fell out of the helmet over her shoulders and partially forward over her face, giving her a kind and innocent look. Her deep blue eyes squinted as the sun now burned straight into them. This girl was still young, but definitely good looking. She was in fact twelve years old, and her body was well into puberty, which she had hit before most of the girls. But it might be good to know that unlike what you'd expect, a year had ten months and each month had forty days except for the first and last month of each year, which had forty-one days, resulting in four hundred- and two-day long years.

This girl, who carried the name Cara Mith, was in the first grade of secondary school. Primary school had six grades, from six years of age to eleven, and secondary school had five grades, from twelve years of age to sixteen. And after graduation, one could choose to work, go to high school or go to university. But Cara didn't care much for that yet, she was only a first grader and barely knew what educational direction she would choose over the coming years. Right now, she was following the field of study "Basic Modern Sciences."

Cara elegantly crouched down on one knee on the concrete underground to secure her bike with a sturdy chain. At the same time, she attached her helmet with the security chain through the open visor to her bike. As she stood up and wiped the sweat off her brow, she noticed two shy nerds looking at her, smiling, whispering at each other. But that wasn't a real shocker, she was a beautiful girl after all, and in only a few more years, she would probably be one beautiful, full-grown woman.

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Worriedly, Cara felt her armpits and was surprised to feel how wet they were from the sweat. Rummaging in her purple, leather shoulder bag, she took out a few paper tissues and dried her armpits, followed by a long spray with deodorant. She cared quite a bit about how she came across, whether it was sight or smell.

Since she still had twenty minutes before she had to go to class, she sat down on a stone bench near the building where her first class would take place. Leaning against the window behind her, she put her earbuds in and put on some music. It was some simple pop music which wasn't worth much, but she still liked it and that was all that mattered to her. Cara absentmindedly loosened her tie as a result of the heat, which seemed even hotter due to the extremely high humidity. These mid-summer days with only afternoon classes were real killers.

"Hey beautiful, your lips are as cute as ever," a dark-haired guy said and sat down next to Cara, who had her eyes closed.

He leaned over to give her a kiss, but she was no fool.

"Keep those dreams in that handsome noggin of yours. Ny, don't you have some kind of big scoop to write for the school paper?"

"There is nothing more interesting to write about than an extremely hot soccer chick who also happens to be the most popular first grader of them all," Ny said and placed an arm over Cara's shoulders.

"Don't call me popular, never call me popular, I'm not popular, that word reminds me too much of these stupid cheap teen school movies."

"There's our girl!!" another girl said.

"Oh brother, where does a girl have to go to get some peace and quiet?" Cara sighed and pulled her earbuds out.

"You two look so cute together," a cute, squeaky, blond girl said enthusiastically.

"Please don't start." Cara sighed, "You're giving me a headache."

"Come on everyone knows about you two, no need to be shy," another girl who had a slightly different tone of skin and jet-black hair with quite a few blue streaks in it said, she clearly was of foreign descent, "It's the classic romantic tale. He is a tall dark and handsome journalist, who is very smart and has a smoking hot, super trained body. And you, Cara Mith, you are a sexy, talented soccer player. You might be the very first female first

grader who will be placed on the core team of the Heartened Mings Soccer Team."

"And let's not forget the tiny detail that you ride a kick-ass dirt bike and are genius level smart," a third girl with short, stylish, blood red hair said in a monotonous voice.

"All four of you watch too much Channel Diskar, that shit rots your brain." Cara smiled.

"They are nice girls, a bit eccentric, but nice. The squeaky blond one's name is Chang. I only met her here in secondary school, so only a few months ago, but for some reason she showed an almost instantaneous attachment to me. She might not be the brightest of the bunch, but she has her heart in the right place. She is one of the cheerleaders. In general, cheerleaders aren't very popular, they are seen as the sport chick wannabes, but they are the fantasy of many a teenage boy. Chang was as typical as they came. The foreign looking one with the different skin and the blue streak in the hair is Gillah, one of my older friends. I first met her in second grade of primary school where she was continuously bullying me every day over a course of five months, ranging from social bullying like spreading rumors to a more physical approach like egging me when I came on the school campus or putting some disgusting surprises in my schoolbag. In that final month, I decided to fight back, which resulted in some nasty confrontations and even two real all out fist fights. After the second fist fight, the two of us were forced to spend three months in solitary detention together. It is surprising how much you can learn about someone if you spend three hours a day with someone for three months. We became tight friends after that, someone who I could fight back to back with, if it would ever come to that. And the last one of the three, the very short and tiny girl with the short red hair hanging partially in front of her face, is named Quinn. She is the quiet, intelligent type. I met her three years ago. I was dragging away my parents' old computer when she came walking up to me, curious about the specs. It took her only thirty minutes to fix it and that at the age of nine. We soon started to talk about our personal technological fantasies and kept on talking for several hours. Our ideas were ambitious, but fun and interesting nonetheless."

Cara sat up straight on the stone bench and ran her hand several times through her hair to put it perfectly in place. But when she was checking

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her makeup in a small mirror she had taken from her shoulder bag, she started to notice a slight tremble in her right hand. The big smile on her lips faded away as she attempted to take back complete control of her hand. She forced a smile on her face as she looked up at the others, attempting to blend in the conversation.

"Is something the matter, Cara? You look a bit ..." Quinn said and took off her sunglasses.

"What? Ah yes of course, sorry." Cara smiled and held her hand behind her back, "The heat's just getting to me."

"Make sure you don't topple over," Ny said.

"Who do you think I am?" Cara stood up enthusiastically and pounded her chest twice.

"She's Cara Mith!" Gillah said in an acted, overly dramatic tone as a joke.

Cara let out a loud laugh which almost made her eyes glitter. With a wide swing she threw her bag over her head as she stood up.

"I need a drink to raise my sugar level," Cara said and walked off.

"Hold on, I'm coming with you," Quinn said and ran after her.

The floors were paved with small gray and green tiles. On one side of the hallway were casement windows, of which the lowest two cases were stained glass, and on the other side were gray lockers of all different sizes. Twenty by thirty centimeter lockers and twenty by fifty centimeter lockers. The hallway was filled with other students, some were sitting on the floor, others on the window ledges and others were talking leisurely as they were leaning against the lockers. Cara walked up to the drinks machine and popped out a can of soda.

"Look, I can name a hundred and three reasons why you should get a school locker," Quinn suddenly said.

"Don't start that again, Quinn, please. I've heard your fifty-two other reasons and that was more than enough," Cara said and sat down on a free space on the window ledge.

"So, you're going to hire one? I'll accompany you to the office ..." Quinn said in an urging fashion.

"Stop it Quinn, you know I don't like leaving my private stuff on school ground where any idiot can get to it, I don't even want to leave my gym clothes, soccer uniform or text books here."

"You're quite a secretive girl set on her privacy," Quinn said with a pouty face.

"No, I just don't like people stealing my shit."

"No one has ever stolen anything from you." Quinn laughed.

"A lot of people know me; you never know what kind of creeps would want to steal my stuff."

"Basically everybody knows you, you're a rising star in this school." Quinn corrected Cara, "And it is so cute you're ashamed to use the P-word."

"No, I just hate that word ... Popular, ugh." Cara actually shivered.

"Whatever, it's clear the heat has fried your ..." Quinn started speaking, but Cara automatically zoned out for some reason.

A light headed daze polluted her head and the shakes had now entered both of her hands. In a vain attempt, Cara gulped down the cherry flavored soda.

"Damn girl, you can drink!" A guy in a group of boys who were passing by said, impressed by Cara's drinking capabilities, even if it was only soda.

Cara threw the can at the guy, but he dodged it at the last moment, hitting another guy in the side of the head. A loud curse echoed through the hallway. With a pissed off face, he looked for the origin of the can. But when he finally found it, he only found two girls with wide smiles waving their fingers in a cute way at him.

"Cara, Quinn, there are better ways to attract my attention, you two devils," he said and walked up to them.

"Of course, this handsome fellow is Tom Shane. I've known him since I was a little kid, he lives two hundred meters past where I live. He is also my best friend. In this situation, the term childhood friend might be appropriate. But the most surprising thing is that a mere month ago he confessed something that blew me out of my shoes and he made me swear not to tell anyone yet. He confessed to me his bisexual nature, a little detail he noticed over the past year. But he made it

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quite clear he still liked women too. If there was anyone to whom I would entrust my life, it would probably be him."

"Sorry!" Cara said squeakily, "I wasn't aiming for you, I was aiming for that jerk."

"Good thing your aim is better with your feet." Tom said, "The next match is Friday afternoon, right?"

"Yep."

"Core team yet?" he asked.

"Why does everyone keep reminding me of my failures ... not to mention this damned pressure!" Cara said frustrated.

"Soda sugar isn't good enough for that mood, let me give you some real sugar." He smiled widely and opened his arms.

"I'm not in a bad mood and I don't need any sugar of that kind ... but how can I refuse a hug from you, sweetie." Cara smiled and gave Tom a hug.

As they were pressed against each other, Tom noticed something strange. So, he brought his mouth close to her ear and whispered something.

"You're shivering ... is something the matter? Are you sick?"

Cara loosened her grip around Tom and looked down at her white socks. While she was still gathering herself, the school bell rang, signaling that the different classes had to gather in front of the school building. Cara was in class 1MSA, together with Chang and Quinn. Ny and Gillah were in class 1MSC and Tom was in class 1LAA. As the school bell rang, Cara let go of Tom, grabbed her shoulder bag and simply left Quinn and Tom behind. They were surprised at Cara's sudden dash.

Cara ran as fast as she could. With her face paler than usual and a few sweat drops on her forehead, she burst into the girls' bathroom and entered the handicapped people's stall. Cara sat down on the toilet lid, threw her bag aside and pulled her black, light sleeveless vest open, making two of the buttons loosen a bit. After taking off the vest, she loosened her orange tie and dropped it together with her vest on the floor. She pulled open her shirt in the same fashion as she did with the vest, revealing the light pink bra she was wearing. When she had finally taken

off her shirt, she quickly opened the front lock of her bra with shivering hands. As the pile of clothes was completed with the bra, Cara vigorously started to rummage in her shoulder bag and took out a thin two by three centimeter metal case. Flipping it open, she took out a razor blade.

With trembling hands she was holding the razor blade. She couldn't help but have her gaze stuck on the razor blade. This wasn't good, she had to stop doing this. It was too crazy and dangerous. But she couldn't help herself, the urge to do this was too strong, the need for it too drawing, too compelling. The need to do this eventually won over and Cara brought the razor blade to the skin of her breasts and sliced it.

The razor blade slid through her left breast slowly. The pain raced through her entire body and made her tense up, followed by a shudder running over her spine. With every millimeter of skin she sliced, the intense pain increased. After pulling out the razor blade, she repeated this process four more times. By the time she had finished the last cut, the shakes in her body had ceased and her head was clear again. Cara's head was leaning against the toilet wall, with traces of smudged makeup and tears visible on her cheeks, looking up at the ceiling. From the cuts, blood had started to run and her tight belly was now partially covered with it. Due to a lack of attention, some of the blood ran all the way down her belly and soaked in the top of her orange green checkered skirt.

When she finally sat back up straight, she felt a bit weak, but better nonetheless. She had calmed down. Stroking the blood on her belly, a strange smile appeared on her face. Taking a few parts of the toilet paper, she started to clean the blood off her belly first and breasts next. When she was cleaned up again, she searched in her bag for a bit and took out a spray can and a pack of transparent medical patches. After spraying her breasts with the disinfectant, she covered the wounds with the patches. The combination of these two would make sure the cuts would heal in only three days, not to mention it would heal perfectly without any scars.

She slowly started to pack again and put her clothes back on. Fixing her tie, she walked up to the mirror and cleaned her face in order to reapply her make-up. She never used much makeup, only subtle and light bits to emphasize her natural, delicate beauty. It was when she was fixing her

lipstick that she noticed the blood on the top edge of her skirt, but instead of worrying, she simply ignored it.

As she walked out of the toilet, she looked as fresh, beautiful and self-contained as was possible. The hallways were already completely empty, only silence lingered with soft voices of teachers and students coming through the doors of the classrooms. Her footsteps echoed through the empty hallways in a steady rhythm. Three short knocks and she pushed the door of her classroom open.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Mister Arden." Cara apologized and smiled.

"Oh, The Mith has arrive. What makes you think you can come late to class? Do you deserve some kind of special treatment because of your high grades or because you are a sports girl?" the teacher asked in a strong tone.

"I'm sorry sir, I didn't mean to, I just ..."

"I'm marking it on the attendance list," Arden said and wrote a T next to Cara's name, making her tardiness formal.

"No, please, sir, that will be my third time I got a T," Cara said, resulting in whispers flying through the classroom.

"Well, congratulations, third time's a charm, I guess your Saturday afternoon is full."

"OH S ..." Cara wanted to curse, but was interrupted.

"Excuse me, but she was feeling sick earlier. She ran off faster than you can imagine to the toilet," Quinn suddenly said as she raised her hand.

"Look at her, the picture of health. Quinn, I know you are a close friend of hers, but you are smart enough to know that that's not going to work," Arden said and stood up, "Cara sit down so I can start class."

"My apologies sir," Cara said, lowered her head and walked to her desk.

Without bringing out a sound, Quinn's lips spelled "I'm sorry" and raised her hands, signaling her helplessness. Cara gave her an empty smile and sat down with a heavy sigh at the desk next to Quinn's.

"But Miss Mith, there is something else you have to do first," he said as he was staring at her with crossed arms.

"Excuse me?" Cara frowned.

He pointed at the flag in the corner of the classroom.

"Ooh, you've got to be kidding me." Cara sighed.

"Do it or bear the consequences."

Cara stood up.

"I pledge allegiance to the flag and the mighty nation under it. I will serve Argant as much as is within my capabilities. I will follow my patriotic duties for this nation and the gods standing above it."

Cara wasn't the biggest fan of this whole thing. She had no hate for her own country, but it did feel somewhat stupid to force people to do something like this. Quinn had a similar idea to Cara's, understanding the importance of pride in your country, but feeling that this forced silliness was useless, hell, it could have an opposite effect. But even she couldn't escape it. Quinn might have been an element of importance for the school, but that also meant they forced her to be a model student. While every school longed to have Quinn, her friends were in this school. So they forced her to say the Pledge of Allegiance, otherwise she wouldn't be allowed to join social events and her friends would also have to pay. Having the social skills of a cold potato, Quinn couldn't risk it.

"I guess there will be no motor crossing this Saturday for you," Quinn quietly whispered as she leaned over to Cara.

"Don't mention it, I feel the urge to kill him." Cara growled.

"I know what you mean, that guy frustrates me, it's not like his lessons are useful ... elementary physics? Please, that's for little kids," Quinn said in a joking fashion, but was dead serious about what she was saying.

"I know."

"Mm, by the way, Cara, can I ask you something?" Quinn asked after a while.

"Shoot."

"Why is there blood on your skirt?"

"Uhm, yes, well ... uhm ... forget about it."

"Excuse me?" Quinn was surprised.

"It's embarrassing."

"Huh?"

"You know, I have my period."

"How the hell did it get so high on your skirt?"

"That's the embarrassing part."

"Want something else to wear? I have some clothes in my locker ... yes you heard me right, LOCKER."

"I'll survive." Cara mumbled.

Cara cruised relatively easily through the three different classes she had that day, until five minutes before the school bell rang. Through the speaker in the top right corner of the classroom, a voice named five names, including Cara's, and told them to go to the first grade vice-principal's office. Knowing the reason why she had been called to the vice principal's office, made it even harder to go. It was so stupid when you thought about it, arriving too late in class three times and she already got called to the vice-principal's office, how silly.

"I'm sorry to leave early, Mister Angy."

"Yeah, yeah, just make sure it doesn't happen again," Angy said and continued writing mathematical equations on the blackboard.

"Sorry sir."

Cara quickly gathered her things and ran out of the classroom towards the vice-principal's office. She felt in fact slightly ashamed about being called to the vice-principal's office and the fact the whole school could hear it. Cara looked at the metal plaque reading "Vice-principal Eleanor Turner," knocked on the door and entered when she heard the vice-principal call out. As she pushed the door open with hints of fear inside her head, she saw four guys standing in the office and a lady around fifty years of age sitting behind the desk.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," Cara said in a timid voice.

"Yes, well, now I can talk to the five of you," she said and took off her glasses which now hung around her neck with a delicate chain, "The five of you are here because you are only first graders and already you have problems following the rules of the school. These may only be small things, but you're only first graders. When in first grade you already act irresponsible, we just have to keep an eye on you all, hoping you will clean up your act."

"I was five minutes late only three times!" Cara protested.

"Three times in three weeks! You are not a teacher so you don't understand, but it is very frustrating to have your class interrupted by a disrespectful student." The vice principle said sharply, "Well, I hope I made myself clear. If you five don't clean up your act now, who knows what you'll do by the time you're in the last grade. You can go now."

With lazy footsteps the four guys left.

"Miss Mith, you wait a second please," the vice-principal said, just as Cara would be in the clear.

"Son of a ..." Cara whispered.

"Watch your mouth young lady," vice-principal Turner said sharply.

"Sorry ma'am."

"Listen, what is wrong with you?"

"Excuse me?" Cara said surprised.

"I can understand it with the other four, they were already trouble in primary school. But you, you are a very intelligent, beautiful and athletic young girl. But you aren't very punctual, and I'm not just talking about your three tardiness marks. Look, you are a very bright student, but you have to shape up. You're a girl, you should be better than them."

"Excuse me?" Cara frowned, "I thought we aimed for equality between sexes in our society, oh well, I guess that only goes one way."

"What?" The vice-principle frowned.

"Nothing, never mind, I understand, I'm sorry. I'll do my best." Cara nodded.

"Well then, off you go ... and Cara, see you this Saturday."

Cara was mumbling to herself as she paced through the hallway, not angrily, but absentmindedly.

"There's our criminal." Ny suddenly jumped in front of her.

"What? Oh you. Look, I'm not in the mood, I already lost a whole Saturday afternoon this week, I don't want to lose another minute, especially not to you," Cara said and tried pushing him away.

But he grabbed her upper arm, spun her around almost three hundred and sixty degrees and pulled her body against his. As a result from his excessive use of force, when her breasts hit his chest, the fresh slashes on them opened up again. The resulting surge of pain ran through her body as if it were an electric shock, resulting in a moan slipping from between her teeth, reaching Ny's ears.

"I knew it!" Ny said with a smile.

"Listen, please, not now, I just want to go home," Cara said in a calm, serious voice.

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"You are so cute and beautiful," Ny said and brought his face closer to hers, intending to kiss her, when suddenly a hand shoved between their mouths.

"Keep your lips in check, lover boy, the lady said no." Tom came in between.

"Shane, shove off, will you." Ny tried shooing him away.

"Yeah, go away!" The squeaky voice belonging to Chang said, coming from their other side, "This is just getting interesting."

"Have a bit of respect Chang." Tom complained.

"Hey, the girl likes a good romance, and she knows it when she sees it," Ny said.

"Oh please, that girl is a dreamer. If Gillah and Cara got in another serious boxing match, she'd perceive it as true love too," Tom countered.

"Come on, if those two would be fighting, then that would be true love, come on," Ny said and smiled.

"Trust me, I've seen them fight a few times over the years and when they fight ... boy that is scary. Trust me, there is no love in those moments."

"Hold on, how old were they when they fought?" Chang asked.

"Ever Since they were kids, until recently. Oh, Gillah was a feisty little girl of the likes you've never seen before. Cara on the other hand was always a sweet little girl who would never hurt a fly, in normal circumstances, but in those moments, she was like a wounded lioness protecting her cubs. Gillah could really draw the fight out of her somehow. If you ask me, that chick is whack." Tom explained.

Cara herself was only following the conversation with half an ear. She pulled her black vest forward and peeked under it, surprised to see bloodstains on her virginal white shirt around the chest area. Seeing this instantly rendered her dead nervous and made her hands shake and sweat drops appear on her forehead. She had to wiggle her way out of this conversation. There was no way in hell any of her friends could find out about her bad habit. They would never think the same of her. Not to mention if even the slightest rumor about it would start circulating through the student population, her reputation and educational career would be at an end. Especially if people discovered it was like a drug, the

way she did this. She carefully sneaked away from the eccentric dialog, hoping neither Chang, nor Tom or Ny would notice. She had distanced herself about twenty meters from the three others, when someone else suddenly started to speak to her.

"Were our fights that bad?" Gillah asked and walked up next to Cara, placing an arm around her waist as they moved on.

"You were listening in?"

"I ... I was curious." Gillah smiled amused.

"And for all clarity, YEEEEES!!"

"Yes? Yes what?"

"Yes, those fights were horrible. I was a child, you were a monster. I still have nightmares about it frequently." Cara complained, "I love you to death, you're one of my best friends, but during those fights I was truly scared for my life, I peed myself ... each fight."

"You peed yourself? I've never heard about that." Gillah smiled.

"Oh damn, I said too much." Cara suddenly froze and a blank look appeared on her face, realizing she made a mistake by mentioning the pee-fact.

"OH BOY. That is funny ... hold on a second." A light went up in Gillah's head.

"What?"

"If I remember correctly, our last physical fight was only a year ago ... over that incident we wouldn't mention anymore. OHO, this is rich! You peed yourself when you were eleven?" Gillah said and clapped her hands.

"Listen, if you dare ..." Cara threatened.

"Calm down, you're well liked here in secondary school, I wouldn't do anything to damage your reputation, peeing yourself, bloody face and public fighting would be a bad thing. But I wouldn't mind beating up someone for you," Gillah said and tapped Cara's back.

"Hold on, we never had a public fight, it was always behind the gym or at a friend's home, except that one time which instigated our big solitary confinement."

"Oh, yes, that one was fun." Gillah smiled, but her face became emotionless again when she saw Cara's serious face.

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"Look, Gillah, we had sworn that by going to secondary school, that that part of our past relationship would be over."

"Calm down, I was only winding you up ... except for the pee thingy, that one is a keeper, my ace to blackmail you in times of need," Gillah said in a way that actually worried Cara.

"Whatever, today was just a bit too hard, I just want to go home and ... relax," Cara said, realizing the bloodstains were probably getting bigger and it would only be a matter of time before it came apparent from under her black vest.

"Okay, I'll see you tomorrow I guess."

While avoiding all other people who wanted to talk with her, Cara made her way to the bike stalls and took her dirt bike back home. Since it was four o'clock in the afternoon, the roads were still relatively quiet, a fact that would change in about an hour and a half. The wind stroked nicely over the overheated skin of her arms and legs. When she arrived back home fifteen minutes later, she was a bit too sweaty to her liking.

It wasn't really surprising that no one was home when she arrived. Both her parents were still at work. Her older brother, Sten, fourteen years old, went to the same school as her and was probably still hanging out with several of his friends, so it was quite unclear when he would be home. Although there was the possibility he had a new girlfriend, in that case she didn't want to know. And the twins, five years of age, a boy and a girl, didn't go to school yet so were probably dropped off with her grandparents. Damien and Aline, their names were. Since her parents only worked in a factory, they weren't exactly rich, but they got by somehow anyways, Cara just didn't have to expect any big presents. Her dirt bike was a present from her grandfather. He always tried spoiling her, since her grandmother mostly spoiled the twins and Sten, Cara guessed it must have been an unspoken agreement, or maybe her grandmother just didn't like her for some reason. Whatever the reason was, her grandfather gave her his full attention.

The wallpaper in her room was still the same pink it had been since she was a little girl. Back then she loved that pink wallpaper and wanted it no matter what, but now times had changed, and she felt a slight shame about it, but her parents simply wouldn't let her change it. Her solution was a

collection of bookcases filled with Novels, CDs and DVDs from the olden days, those used to be her grandfather's, yet another present from him. Now a days you almost didn't find those anymore. And her posters of musicians, bands, movies and series were her most important tool for covering it up. Her desk was placed so that people who entered her room wouldn't see what she was doing on her laptop, she liked her privacy.

The first thing Cara did was undress and take care of her wounds again. After putting her uniform in the washing machine, she put on a light pink tank top and black shorts and decided to go for a run, if she wanted to be part of the core team, she had to practice a lot.

Chapter Two

Quinn hated taking the bus, but she didn't have a choice. She hated physical efforts, so a bicycle was out of the question, she didn't feel at ease on a motor bike like Cara, so those were out too. It was too far to walk and she was still too young to drive a car, a driver's license for cars is only available when you turn fourteen. So the bus was all that was left. Because of her short stature, a meter fifty, she was almost always forced to stand, it were the taller people who were always able to get a place thanks to all the pushing they did, not to mention the fact that grownups and the elderly automatically got priority. She understood why the elderly got priority, but not the normal grownups. Another important reason why she hated the bus was because of the smell, especially during the summer, which made it as hot as an oven, and all the loud students irritated her quite a bit too. Normally Ny and Chang took the bus too, but for some reason, they didn't take the same bus that day. If they would have joined,

she would at least have had someone to talk to, even though the intelligence level of the dialogs with these two wasn't of a satisfactory level.

By the time she got off at the bus stop the closest to where she lived, she was feeling queasy. But the two hundred meters she had left to walk were good enough for her stomach to settle. The house was built out of stone, and was by far the biggest one of the neighborhood. Quinn's parents were, on the contrary to Cara's parents, very rich, they were diplomats. But this had as result that they were gone most of the time.

"I'm home!" Quinn yelled as she entered.

"Welcome back, Quinn," A tall brown-haired woman said as she came into the hallway.

Behind her came Quinn's little sister, tracing both her hands along the wall. Clea was six years old and blind, moreover, she was physically very weak and often got sick. Because of this, she was home schooled by the brown haired woman. Clea's hair was more orange red, while Quinn's hair was more towards bright red.

"Hey sis," Clea said and walked towards Quinn with her arms stretched forwards.

"Come here, my girl," Quinn said and gave her a hug, "Was Miss Danielle a bit nice to you?"

"She is strict," Clea said with a pouty face.

"That's only because you're a bit too spoiled," Quinn said and tapped her on the head.

"I'll be off then, see you tomorrow," Danielle said and left.

Quinn went up to her room, with Clea following her out of her own accord. Unlike Cara's room, Quinn's room was much darker, with the curtains always closed. In the center of her room stood a big desk with four computer screens on it, at first sight they seemed like four glass plates, but when an electric current was sent through them, the glass would change color and a picture would appear. Her screens and computers were the best of the best, unlike Cara's laptop, which still used an old fashioned LCD-screen.

The first thing Quinn did was turn on the radio and put some heavy rock music on, after which she took off her school uniform and sat down

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behind her computers in her underwear, a habit she had picked up over the years. Clea sat down on the bed behind Quinn without saying a word, she simply wanted to be with her big sister. After all, she was proud of her. Quinn booted her computers up. On two screens, the computer started to automatically analyze and test several programs which Quinn herself had partially rewritten and on the other two she played one of her RPGs.

"Say something," Clea simply said after a while.

"Have you taken your pills yet?"

"Don't nag."

"Hey, you wanted me to say something. And have you?"

"Mm, not all of them yet," Clea said shyly.

"Oh, come on, I don't want you to get sick again, not to mention if you get worse again, mom and dad will blame me ... again," Quinn said and turned around, facing Clea.

"Sorry, but I'm sick of it. Day in day out pills."

Quinn stood up with a sigh and walked to one of the closets and took out a box of pills which read "Black Star Corporation Pharmaceuticals." She took out a few pills and handed them to Clea.

"Why do you have my pills in your room?" Clea asked.

"For situations like this, I don't want to go all the way downstairs for them."

"You're lazy."

"Yeah, and you're spoiled."

Gillah and Tom were riding their bicycles next to each other on their way home.

"Shane, have you heard anything from Cara yet?" Gillah asked.

"About?"

"The trip next week. Everyone has already agreed and paid their part for the two cabins, but I haven't heard anything from her yet."

"I don't know, I'll give her a call this evening. But I'm not sure about it," he said.

"Yeah, you're right, she won't want to miss two soccer practices." Gillah nodded.

"It's not that, I doubt she has the money."

"Ah, of course, like that, being a teenager is expensive after all, without going on a trip."

Tom nodded and smiled.

The two of them got along very well, especially since both of them played instruments. Gillah played the drums and Tom the electric guitar. Tom had one much older brother, while Gillah was an only child. Gillah's parents had migrated from Franca, an overseas southern country, to Argant ten years ago. Gillah herself of course didn't remember those times, only the city of Ghonty in Argant.

Cara had been gone for quite a long time, because when she arrived back home, her parents had returned already. Before she could even take off her shoes, her mother called out to her.

"Cara, I want to see you in the kitchen, NOW!"

"What now?" Cara mumbled.

Arriving in the kitchen, both her parents were sitting at the dining table and her brother was standing in the corner with a weird smile.

"I heard you got called to the vice-principal's office today." Her mother said in a strong tone.

"What did you do?" Her father added.

"You bastard!!" Cara yelled and looked with angry eyes at her brother, whose smile widened.

"HEY! If he hadn't told us, we would have never known," her mother said.

"Sten, please leave, we're talking with her right now," her father sent him away.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing," Cara said and raised her hands, "It was only the third time I arrived late in class. Because of that, I have to go to school on Saturday."

"Serves you right, you just have to be more punctual," her mother said.

"Yeah yeah," Cara said and walked off.

"HOLD ON YOUNG LADY!!" Her father yelled.

"Oh, come on!" Cara sighed, "What?"

"The balance on your bank account," her mother said.

"What about it?" Cara frowned.

"It's ZERO! You have zero credits left on your account."

"Oh, yes, I meant to talk to you about that." Cara smiled uncomfortably.

"You aren't allowed to go on the trip with your friends." She added.

"WHAT?! But mom!" Cara complained.

"No buts! Normally we'd ground you too, but since we're going on vacation with the twins, you'll be home by yourself, Sten will be gone too after all. And since all your friends will be gone you'll be all alone ... that's decent enough punishment."

"Hey, you can't do that! That's unfair."

"Bummer." Her father added dryly.

"OH, I HATE YOU, BOTH OF YOU!!!" Cara yelled and ran up to her room.

"She's going to hate us for that for a long time," her mother said.

"I know I know, she really wanted to go. But we had to do it."

Cara slammed the door of her room shut behind her as hard as she could, making the picture frames next to the door shift. She locked her door and paced angrily through her room. Her anger had rarely been this high, she even let out tears. She only saw one way out of this storm of feelings. After closing the curtains, she lay out a bath towel on her bed which she had hidden behind her nightstand. With shaking hands, she took off all of her clothes and sat down on the bath towel. One other thing was hidden behind her night stand, a small wooden box. Out of this box she took a razor blade and without waiting another moment, she started to cut herself, but unlike while she was in the toilet stall at school, she did it a lot harsher, a lot faster, a lot deeper and a lot more. First on her breasts and next on her lower legs and ankles, all places which would definitely not be seen while wearing her uniform.

After she was done cutting herself, she lay motionless on the bath towel on her bed. The blood was running down the sides of her body, soaking in the towel.

Her mother had discovered the towel hidden behind the nightstand a few months ago, together with a few books of pornography she had bought including gay and normal ones. The truth was she didn't feel any sexual urges, she originally thought it was because she was wrong or maybe slow so she bought them out of curiosity, as a kind of jump start. But she never felt anything sexual, not in the slightest. But when her mother found them, she felt she had to have the sex talk, combined with a short lesbian talk.

Cara felt this had been the most uncomfortable talk she had ever had. She didn't understand what all the fuss was about.

Fully relaxed, she lay on the bed. She started to rub with her hands in the blood, a smile appeared on her face. The feeling, smell and sight of blood was oddly comforting to her. But what happened next truly frightened her.

"You are an odd duck," someone said.

Cara looked up in fear and was shocked to see someone sitting at her desk, legs crossed. But this person, this young woman, was strange, Cara could only imagine she was hallucinating, this couldn't be happening. This woman had a strange gray-blue skin color and black hair with a strange blue shine to it. She was wearing wide cotton pants, white and semi-transparent, with black panties under it. On her upper body she was only wearing a metal bra. On the left side of the young woman's beautiful face, she had a strange white tribal tattoo, and her eyes were a strange light blue which had a silver shine too it.

"Who are you? What are you doing in my room? How did you get in?" Cara asked nervously.

"Normally when I look in on teenagers like you, they do quite different things, you know how it goes with those raging hormones. But you, it's the first time I met someone who does things like that," the woman said.

"Answer my questions," Cara said as she covered her bloodied body up with her bathrobe.

"I'm Hathor and it's definitely my pleasure to meet you," she smiled and gave a slight bow to Cara.

"What are you?" Cara asked.

"That doesn't matter. I see you have a problem."

"Excuse me?"

"That cutting, you do it to suppress urges you have, to have a very good feeling, am I right?" Hathor said and leaned forward.

"Yeah, so?"

"You do know there are better ways of feeling satisfaction than that, right?"

Cara kept silent and looked away. She didn't want to hear what she had to say.

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"You know it would be a lot better like that."

"NO! I can't, it is wrong!" Cara reacted.

"Why? Why would it be wrong? Do you think it is wrong?" Hathor asked in a strange and soft voice.

"No, no, I don't think it is wrong, to be honest. I would love to do that, but you know I can't, according to the laws of society, it is wrong," Cara said as she paced up and down her room.

"Is it really wrong? Think about it."

"Well, it is the law, but ... but ... I don't see why," Cara said in a slightly depressed tone, "But just because I don't think it is wrong, doesn't mean I can do it, sadly enough. No, I can't do that, no matter how much I would want to."

"We'll see about that, it won't be long before that cutting won't be enough anymore, trust me. You are a nice and kind girl, but you have no choice," Hathor said.

Hathor stood up, unlocked the door and left the room, closing the door behind her. Cara immediately ran to the door and opened it, but Hathor wasn't there anymore. Cara had no clue what just happened, but she didn't care about that, she cared more about what this person had said.

Cara was about to start cleaning the blood off her body, when the ringing of her cellphone drew her attention. With Hathor still on her mind, she picked up her phone.

"This is Mith," she said absentmindedly.

"Cara, it is Tom. I called to ask you about next week's trip," he asked, but there was no reaction from her, "Cara, are you still there?"

"What? Yes, sorry, I'm just a bit distracted," Cara said and rubbed her eyes, having forgotten there was still blood on her hands, covering her face with it, "Yes, and about the trip, I can't go. My parents punished me because of the detention and the balance on my bank account."

"Well, maybe I can talk with them, it wouldn't be the same without you."

"No, that's okay."

"It's really no problem."

"Listen, we'll talk later, I have other things on my mind. Bye," Cara said and hung up before he could react again.

After taking care of her cuts, she put on her nightgown and sat down at her desk. She attempted to study for the two tests she had the next day, but had trouble concentrating. Her dialogue with Hathor kept haunting her mind. But eventually she was able to memorize everything she had to for the tests.

The breakfast table was as boring as ever. Sten was messing more with his cellphone than actually eating. The twins were playing with their food and wanted to make Cara angry, but she was still half asleep and didn't care much for their provocations. After shoving the last piece of her sandwich with cheese in her mouth, she drank her glass of milk in two big gulps. Having prepared her shoulder bag and sports bag, she left without saying a word to her parents. Immediate forgiveness wasn't an option, what they had done was despicable.

The weather forecast on the inside of her helmet visor predicted it to be another hot day. Cara honestly hoped that in four days, the day of the match, it would be pouring, she was good with rain after all.

Cara was just about to start her dirt bike when she noticed her neighbor trying to draw her attention. So she got off her bike and took off her helmet as she walked over to him.

"What's the matter Mister Cole?" Cara asked.

Cole, who was in his fifties, was one of the only people in the world who didn't take the Black Star Corporation's slimming pills yet, resulting in a pudgy gut. As always his hair was relatively messy and he was wearing beige shorts and a light gray shirt.

"You're young and strong, would you mind giving me a hand?"

"What do you want me to do?" Cara asked with a sigh, "I hope it doesn't take too long, I need to get to school. I can't afford being late ... again."

"I need some boxes from the attic, but the ladder is way too steep and dangerous for me. Would you help me?"

"Yeah sure." Cara nodded.

Inside the house, it was relatively clean, but also somehow sad. One small sofa facing the television and curtains almost permanently closed. A bunch of closets filled with who knows what, but no pictures of family or friends. This man must have been leading a sad existence. The steep ladder leading to the attic was on the second floor. Cole explained which marked

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boxes Cara had to take and that she would be able to reach them without getting off the ladder. So, Cara got up.

"I know what he's doing. Mister Cole has always been like that. I've heard the stories ever since I was little. Mister Cole was a pedophile, he was never convicted, but everyone knew the truth, they all knew the sick and twisted things he had done to little children. And right now, he is staring up my skirt, enjoying the view. I knew from the moment he asked for my help he was planning to do this. I doubt he will try anything. He needs only one more accusation to be locked away forever. I'll just let him enjoy the view, after all it is better that he looks than actually acting out his fantasies, and it's not like I feel insulted or anything. Not to mention, better me than the twins."

Cara met up with no one before her first class, it wasn't on purpose, but at least it gave her some extra time to think of an excuse. The only person she came across was Quinn, who was in the same class as her after all.

"You look down." Quinn whispered as they stood in line to go to their class.

"Yeah, it's because I can't go on our trip."

"What? That's such a bummer. How come?"

"I'll explain later. And it's not like you'll miss me."

"I will, now I'll have to take care of my sister by myself."

"So, I was just a babysitter." Cara frowned.

"Of course you were." Quinn smiled.

After three periods, which included a History test and a Math test, it was time to meet up with the others for lunch. The truth was she wanted to cut herself again, but she was already covered by far too many cuts from the day before, so she knew she couldn't do it again. The incapability of fulfilling her needs reminded her of the talk she had had with Hathor the day before.

"No no no, that's not an option." Cara whispered to herself, "No matter how much I want to, I can't do that."

Social and moral conventions forced her to put aside any and all ideas she had, Cara might have thought differently about them, but she was smart enough to understand it was not allowed in society.

"Hey, wait up!" Quinn called out to her, but Cara kept on walking at the same fast pace, a pace Quinn had difficulty following with her short legs.

Quinn ran up to her and grabbed her arm.

"What's wrong with you? You really seem off today."

"Sorry, I was just submerged in my thoughts," Cara said in a calm tone.

"Still thinking about the trip?"

"Something like that."

"I could pay for you if money is a problem, you know I wouldn't mind." Quinn proposed.

"No, it's not that."

"Fine, I'll change the subject. How were your tests?" Quinn said.

"They were fine. I won't have a perfect score, unlike you, but it'll be good enough."

"Yeah, mine went perfect again." Quinn nodded with a smile, "But you disappoint me, those tests were a piece of cake."

"I know, I know, I was not on my game today, but our last two hours are PE."

"Aah, don't remind me, the only class I barely pass, all the others are perfect." Quinn sighed.

"How much did you have on your last report card for PE?" Cara smiled.

"Fifty three percent," Quinn said with a sad face, "But for all the others I had an average of ninety eight percent, which should actually be a hundred."

"I had a ninety four percent for PE." Cara said proudly, "The only class I can beat you at."

Cara was eating her sandwiches in anticipation of the others, who were probably dying to grill her for the reason why she couldn't come. She would probably get some "I told you so"s thrown at her head concerning the balance of her bank account, Tom had warned her enough not to spend too much money.

It wasn't a surprise they were disappointed she couldn't come, but as predicted, some of them, including Tom and Gillah, said it was her own fault. That didn't take away the fact that they saw the punishment as too harsh.

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"Harsh punishment when your child does something wrong doesn't work, parents should first listen to their child and talk about where the problem lies," Quinn said.

"Well said!" Cara clapped her hands.

"So, what are you planning to do the coming vacation?" Gillah asked.

"Nothing. Since you're all gone and my parents will be too, I'll be alone. But I'll keep myself busy somehow," Cara said.

"Ny will be disappointed, he figured he could make his next move," Chang said.

"He can try and make all the moves he wants, he'll never succeed." Cara smiled.

"Poor guy." Chang added.

"No, stubborn guy." Tom added.

"Where is he?" Gillah asked and looked out over the cafeteria.

"He's busy for the newspaper," Cara said as she bit her sandwich.

"Of course he is." Gillah sighed, "That reminds me, shouldn't you be training?"

"I have two hours of PE and soccer training after classes today, isn't that enough?" Cara said and looked towards Gillah, "What about you?"

"Well, at least I'm not the big star and hope of the Track Team and I ride my bicycle every day to and from school." Gillah defended herself.

"The leg muscles you use to ride a bicycle are completely different from the ones you use when you run." Quinn said in a monotonous absentminded voice, "No matter how much you ride your bicycle, it won't change your running capabilities."

"Haah!" Cara yelled.

"At least it keeps me in shape," Gillah said.

"I see, you're just lazy." Cara nodded, "Just let me know if you want to go for a run, I do it almost every day."

"Yeah, sure whatever."

Cara had always, ever since she was in first grade of primary school, brought her own sandwiches, unlike most students, who bought warm lunch at school. Unlike the common cliché, the food made in the cafeteria was actually quite good, the only reason she brought her own lunch was out of habit, and maybe monetary reasons. In truth, Cara's family wasn't

THAT poor, they simply had to watch their expenditures, something which wasn't very easy when there was a teenage girl in the family and a second one on the way with Aline. Cara's parents worked in one of the Black Star Corporation factories, which was low pay. Cara knew it might not be such a bad thing to find a side job to pay for her expenditures, but she figured people already had to work their whole lives after graduating from school. She was in no hurry to start working already, not to mention it would cut into her study and training time.

But if she were to think too much about studying, training, working, the everyday drag of the everyday life, she couldn't help but ponder on life itself, the meaning and use of it all. Every time her mind would wander down that path, she would force herself back, fearing depression if she thought too much about it all. But this wasn't a groundless fear, it was something she had witnessed before. If you were looking for a true genius, it was Quinn you needed. But in the three years Cara had known Quinn, Quinn had already gone through three phases of deep depression, and she was only twelve. Seeing this in Quinn made her fear for herself. Would she too fall into the dark pit of depression? That was something she truly feared.

Seeing Quinn silently following the conversation, only occasionally adding something to it, made her wonder what she was thinking about the whole time, what was going through that incredible mind of hers? Cara couldn't help but think of Quinn as more of a lone wolf type. Not exactly anti-social, but rather naturally excluded. While people like Chang, Tom and Gillah were more the natural social types, with Cara herself more in between them and Quinn, not naturally social, but not as secluded as Quinn either. Quinn was offered more than once the possibility to skip a year, make school more challenging for her, but every time, she turned it down, against the will of her parents. If she would have wanted, Quinn could already be in the best university of the country. But already being so very secluded, Quinn knew that being amongst older students would only make it worse, it would only drive her deeper in her depression.

"I have always wondered why Gillah did what she did all those years ago when she bullied me. She was an aggressive and strong girl, but there was more to it

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than that. My guess is that the problem lay with the occasional racist views people had of her kind. I myself never insulted her racial background, but I know some people had. It is amazing how horrible children can be. All that struggle probably made her angry and she took it out on someone weaker than her, she took it out on me. But I never blamed her, after all, right now, she's one of my most important friends."

Cara's gaze shifted to Chang.

"And then there is Chang. In a way, she is as perfect as they come. She isn't very smart, but she is happy and has an honest heart. Ignorance is bliss. While she is as saintly as an angel, I myself feel like I am more of an ancient devil in disguise, but isn't that what all humans are, devils in disguise, waiting for the mask to come off? Ninety nine percent of all humans are capable of doing horrible things beyond what they had believed themselves capable of doing. If that is the truth, I think she is part of the one percent that isn't capable of such things."

Cara felt her hands shaking again, but couldn't do anything about it, after having cut herself that many times the day before, she couldn't cut herself without waiting for the other cuts to heal a bit. This made her remember the talk with Hathor, how she mentioned simple cutting wouldn't be enough. It was then that she noticed Hathor standing in the doorway leading to the hallway. Cara instantly stood up and ran to the door, leaving her stuff and the others behind without a word, but Hathor simply turned around and walked off. Cara ran, through the hallways, looking where Hathor could have gone to. She eventually came across her in an empty stretch of hallway.

"Are you insane? Coming to my school? What if someone sees you?" Cara whispered.

"Don't worry, nobody saw me." Hathor assured her.

"Does that mean you are real or a hallucination?"

"Don't insult me by calling me a hallucination!" Hathor said slightly angry.

Even though she said it in an only slightly angry way, Cara was actually scared shitless by her, there was something massive about her anger.

"I ... I'm sorry," Cara said shyly.

"Have you thought about what I said?"

"A little too much."

"So, it has started."

"Quite convenient, you show up and a day later I feel like I can't satisfy myself anymore."

"I have great timing." Hathor smiled.

"So, who are you? What are you? And ... what ... what do you know about my problem?" Cara asked carefully.

"I ..." Hathor started but was interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Cara!" Quinn yelled as she entered the hallway carrying Cara's shoulder bag and sports bag.

Cara looked over to Quinn and returned her gaze to Hathor, but she had already disappeared.

"You have to stop running off like that," Quinn said, breathing heavily, "Man, you run fast."

"I ... I'm sorry."

"Why did you suddenly run off?" Quinn asked as she tiredly dropped Cara's bags on the floor.

"I thought I saw someone I knew," Cara said and looked back at where Hathor had stood, "I must be losing it."

"You do seem a bit besides yourself, for a few days now."

"I've just been nervous about the soccer practice. The coach will give the names of the renewed core team after practice today," Cara said and picked her bags up.

"If you say so." Quinn said with a frown, "But, if there is something wrong you can't tell Gillah or Shane, you can always talk to me, you know that, right?"

Cara stared for a while at Quinn.

"No, I'm fine, but thank you anyways," Cara eventually said with an uncomfortable smile.

Quinn knew all too well Cara was hiding something, she could easily read her. But she didn't press it any further, she had the right to her secrets, after all, Quinn herself kept her phases of depression a secret. Whatever Cara's problem was, she would tell her when she felt the time

was right. Pressing her on the issue could have one of two results. One, it could scare Cara and drive her away. Or two, it could anger her and drive her away. One way or another, there was a big danger she would lose her best friend.

Tom, Ny, Quinn, Chang and some other people were sitting on the bleachers looking down on the soccer field where the track team and the soccer team were training.

"Man, Cara seems in great shape," Chang said.

"No kidding, she's killing them." Ny nodded.

"She's a perfect example of how women can compete with men if they're well motivated," Tom said.

"That's well put." Chang smiled.

"It is a fact however that women are physically weaker than men, no matter how much you give them equal opportunities, this shows itself in the fact that there are only three girls amongst the eleven players on the core team," Quinn said without looking up from her laptop.

"There will be one more after today though," Chang said.

"We'll see about that. And I didn't say that putting men and women in the same team was a bad thing, on the contrary, it pushes them harder than in an all-girls team." Quinn added, "At least I think. I'm not sure it, though. I do fear the girls getting hurt by the guys in the heat of the moment. I guess that would be a good argument against it."

"What do you know about all that? You suck at sports," Chang said and turned her back towards Quinn.

Quinn looked up from her laptop for a second, smiled and turned her attention back to her computer screen. It was then that she came across an interesting news report.

"Today at approximately one in the afternoon, the government of Excelsis has officially surrendered to the continuing assaults of Argant's brave troops." The news anchor on her laptop screen said, "This was a direct result of the fall of Excelsis' capital, Alabaster. A spokesman from the president said that this major victory was a result of perfect cooperation between Argant military forces and the Black Star private army. The superior weaponry delivered to the Argant forces as a sign of good faith by the Black Star Corporation was a very comforting gesture. An

official of the Black Star Corporation announced they would assist with the rebuilding of the liberated cities and assist with the introduction of civilization, culture, advancements and enlightenment. The Black Star Corporation announced they would not rest until the native people had it better than under previous dictatorships. With the whole continent now united as Argant, the government plans on further strengthening the defenses of every major city on the continent before planning any further liberation campaigns. A strong pulse exists amongst high officials to change the name of our beloved country to Argant Union, signaling to the rest of the world we are one united nation, one united people, one union of many cultures."

"Oh boy." Quinn sighed and shook her head.

"So, they're finally done?" Ny said as he leaned over and stared at Quinn's screen, "A united Argant."

"Let's hope they're finished. Their intentions might be good, but the way they do it makes a lot of innocent people suffer," Tom said.

"Good intentions? I doubt it," Quinn said and scrolled through the article, "I just hope the Black Star Corporation has been satiated."

"What do you mean?" Ny frowned, "The Black Stars simply assisted, they didn't take initiative."

"Just forget it," Quinn said and closed the article.

"More importantly, I think it's about time," Chang said and pointed at the soccer team gathered around the coach.

They all went silent and waited for Cara to walk up to them and tell them the good news, after all it had been coming for quite some time. She calmly ascended the bleachers.

"And?" Tom asked.

"I didn't make it." Cara shook her head, clearly having trouble with it, barely able to hold back her tears.

"What? Why?" Chang asked.

"I don't know." Cara whispered and ran off.

They all looked at each other. Gillah ran up the bleachers.

"What's wrong with her?" she asked, breathing heavily.

"She didn't make the core team," Ny said and looked at Cara running off in the distance.

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"Why?" Gillah asked, but they simply shrugged.

"I'll go talk with her," Tom said and ran after Cara.

Cara sat on top of the fence between the school campus and the forest behind it, head resting in the palms of her hands. She had the feeling it was all falling apart. Not only didn't she make the core team, she became more and more dependent on her cutting. A fear in her whispered that as her cutting got worse, her soccer would get worse too.

"Hey there sunshine," Tom said and climbed on the fence to sit down next to Cara.

"I can't believe coach Stephson left me out of the core team." Cara whispered.

Tom sighed deeply and placed an arm over Cara's shoulders.

"Well, instead of sitting here, pouting like that, you have to show him you're good enough! Show that old bastard what he left out of the core team."

"How? Apparently he doesn't like what he saw during practice. And it's not like I can show it to him during the match," Cara said and wiped her tears away.

"Yes you can, I'm pretty sure you'll be one of the three substitutions in the next match, THEN you can show him," Tom said and shook her.

"I guess so."

"No more guessing, only actions. Now go shower because you STINK," Tom said with a smile.

Cara was in no hurry to go and shower. Arriving at the girls' locker room, she simply sat down next to the door. There were two reasons why she didn't want to shower with the others. For one, she was shy about appearing naked in front of the other girls and secondly, if she were to shower with the others, they would see the cuts on her chest and lower legs. So, all she could do was wait. But she was sitting down for only five minutes when someone walked up to her.

"What are you sulking about?" The guy asked.

Cara looked up and saw it was Incanto, fifth grader, defender and captain of the soccer team. His half-long white hair was lying backwards with the sweat of the practice, he had a cool air about him.

"I'm sorry," Cara said and looked down at her own feet again.

"I talked with coach Stephson about you."

"What?" Cara was shocked, "Why?"

"Because he should give you at least one chance in the core team."

"Did he agree? Did he put me in the core team?" Cara asked enthusiastically as she crawled to her feet.

"No, I'm sorry, he's not a big fan of putting first graders in the team. But he would consider it for next time. He also said that I could train you for a while in private. So, what do you say? Want to continue practicing for a while?" Incanto proposed.

Cara took a deep breath and nodded. Incanto gave her a slap on her back and winked at her. Together they ran back towards the field. Gillah and the others, who were waiting outside for her, were surprised to see her jog by with Incanto.

"Interesting development," Quinn said with one eyebrow raised.

"I see, this is the story of the handsome popular guy falling for the shy girl." Gillah clapped her hands together.

"No no, this is the story of the geek and the cool guy fighting for the same popular girl." Chang shook her head, "And the geek always wins."

"What? But I'm not a geek," Ny said worriedly.

"My point exactly." Chang smiled, "This one goes to Shane."

"HEY!" Tom protested.

"Be happy, you get the girl."

"I don't want the girl, she's my best friend."

"That's always how it starts." Chang smiled.

"Isn't he too old for her?" Quinn added absentmindedly.

Incanto was doing his best to see how good Cara precisely was.

"So ..." Incanto said.

"Ask me what you want to ask already," Cara said as she was concentrating on the ball.

"Uhm ... do you see yourself playing soccer professionally?"

Cara was actually surprised at what he asked.

"I don't know," Cara said, still frowning, "I'm only in first grade."

"Yeah, but you clearly are talented."

"I don't know, I still have more than four years to decide."

"So," Incanto said after a while.

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"Is there something else you want to ask?"

"I've heard rumors."

"Rumors?" Cara frowned.

"Yeah, about you and Ny," Incanto said, still looking at the ball.

Cara froze immediately, she wanted to look up at Incanto, but couldn't. She couldn't believe what she had just heard.

"Those are nothing but rumors," Cara said calmly.

"I see, good to hear." Incanto smiled, "If you ever have the time and are in the mood, maybe we can go out some times?"

Cara was afraid to say anything, how were normal people in her situation supposed to act? What would a normal girl say when a handsome, kind young man asked her out. She didn't have the faintest clue how to react. Cara knew all too well what love was, she loved Gillah, Quinn, Tom, Chang, but she loved them as close friends, not the way girls would love someone like Incanto or Ny. And with a lacking sex-drive, she was completely hopeless in situations like this.

"Uhm, well, maybe" was the only thing she could say.

"Good, that is ... good." Incanto smiled, "I know there is a four-year difference between us, but don't worry about that, there is no reason to push you."

"Okay," Cara said and knew she had to smile, but wasn't able to.

The two of them continued their training, with Incanto doing his best to help Cara. The others were still waiting for her to finish her soccer practice. All of them were curious at what Cara would have to say about Incanto. Little did they know, however, that Cara herself wasn't excited about all this. What was she to do? It would be a good thing to have a boyfriend, at least that way she would seem normal. But would anyone be fooled by a fake act of love? Wouldn't the person she was together with not notice that her love did not go beyond the level of friendship? A cover relationship was all a very good idea, but Cara herself thought it too horrible, rude and insulting for the person she would be cover dating, no one deserved such an insult, not even Ny.

"Oh dear, my lady, you are quite an active one," Gillah said jokingly.

"Oh, don't start," Cara said with a smile and shook her head.

"I think he's interested in you," Chang said.

"No duh, he asked me out," Cara reacted.

"You've got to be kidding me," Ny said in panic.

"Well, he doesn't waste time," Tom added.

"What did you say?" Gillah asked.

"That I'd consider it," Cara said, voice emotionless.

Cara had her fill of shitty teenage love stories and simply walked off, ignoring what else they had to say. And now that everybody was finished in the locker room, she could take her shower at ease, not fearing that anyone might see the cuts on her chest and legs.

"There are only a few things sexier than a girl in the shower," Hathor's soothing voice said, coming from behind Cara as she was still showering.

Cara turned around and seeing Hathor instantly made Cara cover herself up.

"Oh please." Hathor smiled, "I've lived longer than you can imagine, even though you are a pretty and hot girl, and I wouldn't mind having a swing at you, this visit is purely business."

"A swing at me?" Cara said, now actually blushing, purely because she felt quite flattered.

"Is that so surprising?" Hathor said and walked up to Cara, "You are still pubescent, but you are beautiful and charming, and you have a nice body, more grown up than other people of your age, not to mention that flat chested little twerp, Quinn. And if it is the fact I am interested in girls that surprises you then you are as close minded as virtually any intelligent creature. The notion that someone has to be either homo or hetero is foolish. If you truly look at the nature of any intelligent being, whether human or otherwise, is it not true that every single person is neither homosexual nor heterosexual? In fact every single person is bisexual to a certain degree, everybody has the possibility to love both men and women, given the right circumstances. I am fifty fifty."

"I really don't care about your theories," Cara said and turned her back to Hathor.

"Except for you of course, you are asexual." Hathor added, and gently touched Cara's back, "Too bad."

"You said you were here on business," Cara said as her face became serious again.

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"Ah yes sorry, we got off topic," Hathor said and distanced herself from Cara again, "Do you really think you can hide who and what you are by dating a boy? Don't be foolish. The best way to hide it is through the satisfaction of your urges."

"I don't want to hear it," Cara said.

She took her towel, wrapped it around her and walked out of the showers. As she entered the locker room, she was shocked to stand face to face with Gillah.

"What? Gillah? What are you doing here?" Cara said, afraid she might have heard something.

"Who were you talking to?" she asked as she looked in the showers, but saw no one.

"Uhm, well, no one. What did you hear?"

"I heard two voices, but I didn't understand anything if that's what you're wondering about."

"I see. Good," Cara said to herself.

"What are you hiding?" Gillah said and looked deep in Cara's eyes, "You've been acting strange for a while now."

"It's nothing," Cara said quite aggressively and walked up to the locker where she had stored her clothes.

"If you don't want to tell me, that's fine," Gillah said and walked off again, feeling slightly insulted.

"Wait!" Cara stopped her, not wanting any problems with her friends, "I've just been under a lot of stress. I was talking to myself under the shower, talking about private things."

"And you feel like you can't talk to me about these things? Like you can't trust me?" Gillah asked feeling left out.

"I know I can trust you, but that doesn't mean I should tell you every detail about me, everyone is entitled to his or her secrets. You of all people should understand that, you too have things you never told anyone else, and probably never will," Cara said and dressed herself, hoping she wouldn't notice the cuts, especially the ones on her legs, since those weren't covered up by her towel.

"I get your point yes." Gillah nodded, sat down on a bench and stared up at the ceiling, "I have these kind of secrets about my parents. You won't

believe the stories I've heard from them, what they've been through back in Franca before they migrated here, what they've done. If some of the stories would come out, it would land them in jail."

"You don't have to tell me," Cara, who was standing with her back to Gillah, said and looked backwards at her.

"It's because I heard those stories from them, that I can't stand the arrogance of the people here in this country. I think if more people had gone through what they went through, the crime rate would be much lower." Gillah continued.

Cara kept quiet. She only knew the basic facts of the civil war in Franca and had heard some stories, but hearing of them and living through them was something completely different.

"I can imagine then that you aren't happy with what the Black Stars are doing," Cara eventually said.

"Classic manipulation of public opinion. Starting as a pharmaceutical corporation and curing obesity, several cancers and other diseases, instantly earning the respect of the public and making the CEO basically the richest man on the planet. As a next step they start taking over smaller electronics companies and start branching those out and commence research in those branches too. By that time they were probably already using backhanded ways to destroy and undermine rivaling companies. Of course, that was never shown on the news, I still wonder how much money it took the CEO to keep some of the things they did quiet."

"You think it's that easy?" Cara asked.

"Also, the government sees the Black Star Corporation as an important scientific asset. They cured some of the worst plagues messing with the public. Before they brought out their slimming pills, eighty percent of the population had some form of obesity, which was the fault of the government in the first place, saying being fat was acceptable, that it was okay to weigh too much, and at the same time they said too skinny was bad. The government was slowly killing their own people, letting their arteries clog with all kinds of disgusting stuff. So when the Black Star Corporation cured that problem, the government felt like they owed them."

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"So when the Black Star Corporation does something bad, the government looks the other way," Cara said as she tied her shoes.

"Exactly. And they will be sorry about that in the near future. I'm not saying the government is not to blame too, it's just that they are much worse. And it's then of course that they started to build their own security team, which soon expanded into a private army, and the start of the weapons research. With promises of improving the life standard of the conquered cities, they are still well liked by the public."

"Who knows what their agenda is." Cara sighed and stretched her hand out towards Gillah, having no clue what to say to this angry and frustrated girl.

"I just can't understand why anyone would want to do things like that, cause more pain than necessary. History is filled with bullshit like that. What makes humans prone to violence, I wonder?"

"It's nature, I'm afraid and not only human nature. It is also present in the animal kingdom. History's filled with bloodshed, the bloodshed just gets handled differently since the introduction of radio, the internet and television." Cara added.

"I guess that's true. Man, the world is fucked up."

"No kidding." Cara smiled.

Chapter Three

Cara was absentmindedly painting her nails as she was staring down at her textbook of French. It was in moments like these she felt like a normal girl, yet she could still feel the need knocking in the back of her mind. But even though she wanted to cut herself, she did her best to suppress the urge. After her talk with Gillah, Cara was more determined than ever to keep her urges under control, she didn't want to disappoint her.

"Cara!!" Her mother yelled from downstairs, "You have a visitor. It's Chang! She's coming up right now."

Cara had barely screwed the cap back on the bottle of nail polish when Chang knocked on her door.

"ONE SECOND!!" Cara called out as she remembered her ankles weren't covered up.

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Cara quickly took several strips of cloth and wrapped them around her ankles and lower legs. After closing her bathrobe completely, she unlocked her door and let a wide smiling Chang, wearing a nice and casual outfit, in.

"Chang, what can I do for you?" Cara asked as she closed the door behind her.

"Can you please help me with my French? I'm really bad at it."

"Sure, but wouldn't it be more logical to ask Gillah?" Cara wondered.

"For being a French chick, she's really bad at it." Chang smiled.

"Not a surprise, her parents brought her up with English so she would be better able to integrate in society. But what about Quinn? She's WAY smarter than me, she's on a different plane of intelligence."

"That's true, but she scares me," Chang said.

"She scares you?" Cara smiled.

"She's so imposing." Chang frowned.

"Yeah, I know." Cara nodded with a smile, "I know I'm smart, but she's something else."

"So?"

"Yes, I'll help you."

Chang was sitting at the desk, reciting lines and words in French, while Cara was sitting behind her, playing with Chang's hair, correcting her when she made mistakes.

"I'm sorry to hear you didn't make the cut."

"What are you talking about?"

"Soccer."

"Oh, yeah right that," Cara said and let go of Chang's hair, "I guess I'm not good enough."

"That's a dry way of looking at it. You don't make it, so you're not good enough?"

"Isn't that how it goes? Listen, I'm not in the mood to talk about it."

Chang meant well, but talking about this only brought Cara on the edge again, wanting to cut herself. She brought her two shaking hands together, attempting to control the shaking, but she knew it was only temporary, she would have to do something about it, at least once Chang was gone.

Cara was sitting on the bench in her soccer uniform, staring at Incanto, suffering on the field. It was a bad day for the Mings, already 0-2 behind and it was only forty-four minutes in the first half. Cara scratched her left arm which was bandaged tightly from wrist to shoulder. She hated it, but over the past few days, her cutting urge had driven her to cutting her arms. Although for the moment, she was more interested in the depressed and bad performance of the team, but she couldn't help them, sitting on the bench. Even though the team was losing, the crowd was still cheering, hoping the match would turn around. And as the halftime whistle went, the team walked off the field, heads hanging low.

"Listen kids." The coach said, "I won't sugarcoat it, you all sucked out there. If it goes on like this, it'll be 0-5 by the end of the match. Look, we're doing well in the standings, this is an important match. We can't fuck it up. Josha, you're off, Mith, you're on. I don't often put first or second graders on, don't make me regret my decision."

"I'll do my best sir." Cara nodded.

Incanto gave a tap on Cara's back and nodded at her. Cara took a deep breath trying to calm herself down, this was her big chance, now she could show herself in a match for longer than fifteen minutes.

"Mith, I want you as a deep attacking midfielder, support our striker and if you see an opportunity, you can take it. We need to take some risks. Now shape up!"

Knowing she would participate in the match; Cara started to stretch and jog alongside the field during the remainder of the half time break.

"Hey hey hey!" Gillah tapped on Tom's arm, "Is it my imagination or is Cara warming up, preparing to go on the field?"

"It seems that way." He said with a smile, "That's very early, it's only half-time. But that gives her the perfect chance to prove herself."

"Hey, Shane, what happened to her arm?"

"She said it happened when she crashed her dirt bike," Tom said.

"Do you think she was really so stupid to go riding off road with a match coming up?" Quinn said dryly, a hint of skepticism in her voice.

"Yeah, it feels like a cheap lie." Gillah said, "But if she said that that was what happened, I believe her."

"Let's just hope she kicks ass out there, that's all that counts," Tom said.

"Exactly." Quinn nodded.

The roar of the crowd was deafening when it was announced Cara would start in the second half. Whatever Cara might think of herself, she was still wildly popular amongst the students. The bleachers were juddering under the enthusiasm of the crowd. Ny, Tom and Gillah jumped up and cheered as loud as their lungs would allow it, they wanted their friend to hear their enthusiasm. While the others were enthusiastically jumping up and down on the bleachers, cheering like a bunch of insane monkeys, Quinn was still sitting down, quietly clapping for Cara. She might have been smarter than Cara, a LOT smarter, but that didn't mean she saw herself as better than her. Quinn saw herself as a piece of trash. That girl entering the field was the person she wanted to be. Smart, sweet, funny, beautiful, respected by everyone at school, from Quinn's perspective, Cara was perfect, while everyone around her saw Quinn as a freak, save for maybe Shane and Cara.

As Cara heard the crowd getting lively, she turned around. Cara's heart skipped a beat upon hearing and seeing this thundering roar.

"Is sis going to play?" Damien asked.

"Big sis is so cool." Aline clapped her hands.

"This is one hell of a day." Cara's mother said, "First she has a great rapport card, ninety six percent average, and now she has a chance to star in this match?"

"Maybe we punished her too hard," her father said.

"Well, we can't take it back now."

"Yeah well, she showed you." Sten smiled.

Cara was doing well right off the bat in the second half, but the opponents knew. Cara was fast and agile, but weak with physical contact, after all she was a girl. It was hard and frustrating for Cara, but she kept at it, waiting for that one chance. And twenty minutes into the second half, she had her chance. After a fast counter of the Mings, Cara had the ball and was facing two defenders, with Incanto by her side. As she was giving the impression she would take the shot herself, she suddenly gave a quick pass to Incanto, who shot as hard as he could, hitting the goalkeeper's underarm, making the ball bounce in the goal right on the goal line. Cara