

## Part 1

### The Betrayal

#### 1

Lizard rolled up the legs of her trousers as far as they would go and stretched her muscular legs. Her skin gleamed in the bright sunlight. She wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand.

Taking her phone out of her bag, she glanced at the screen. Where was Brody?

Ahead of her, the Detroit River made a gurgling, slurping sound that was like a mocking laugh.

Had Brody forgotten about their date? Surely not – he'd only just messaged her.

*It would be good to see you. 4 o'clock at the old harbor. Does that work for you?*

Actually it didn't work for her at all. Lizard had to be at her little sister's place by five, and it took her a good half hour to walk there. She'd ask Brody if he wanted to walk with her. Then they could talk on the way.

If he ever turned up, that was.

Lizard got to her feet, walked over to the pier and squatted down. The water flowed past beneath her. It looked lovely and cool.

She'd love to plunge into that water, thought Lizard. Then she pulled a face. To be fair, she'd probably drown while she was at it. She'd never learned to swim, and the river was very deep just here.

A few ducks bobbed past, followed by an empty beer can and a couple of cigarette butts. Perhaps this scummy water wasn't so tempting after all.

Another glance at her phone. Quarter past four. No new messages.

Five more minutes, thought Lizard. Ten, max. Then I'll go.

Lost in thought, she picked up a stone and let it fall with a plop into the murky water. The ducks, who had already floated past, wheeled around and came paddling hopefully back. They scanned the surface for a little while in search of food, but found nothing and swam off again.

The sun was getting hotter with every minute that passed. It beat down on Lizard's head, making her feel like her hair was on fire. She'd bleached it and dyed it green a week ago – Brody had said the color was badass.

Brody had moved to the area two months ago. Lizard had first seen him at school, and had liked him straight away. Brody was different from the other boys. Quieter. Softer. But also cooler. He had such gorgeous dark brown eyes and a smile that gave her butterflies.

Lizard and Brody were in the same class for P.E. Once during a basketball lesson she'd told him she did kickboxing outside of school, and that same afternoon he'd shown up at the boxing club. Since then he'd started going regularly.

Lizard and Brody didn't train together – he was in the beginners' group and she'd already been boxing for four years. But they chatted a lot. About stuff the others weren't interested in. Documentaries. Books. Brody played guitar, and wrote his own songs.

"There you are," Lizard heard someone say. It wasn't Brody, she knew that at once. The voice was much higher and raspier than his.

Lizard scanned the yard out front of the old warehouse. It was empty. In the middle of the asphalt lay an open cardboard box containing cold fries and half a burger. A huge seagull landed next to it and eyed the food with its head on one side, then shot a glance at Lizard.

“Do you mind if I grab a bite to eat?” That croaky voice again. Lizard was sure it wasn’t anyone she knew. Where was it coming from? She had the uncomfortable feeling that it was actually inside her own head. “I’m starving. And this looks so good.”

The seagull pulled a long fry out of the box and started gulping it down.

“Where the hell are you?” Lizard turned full circle on the spot, but there was nobody there. This was seriously weird. “And *who* are you?”

“You blind, or what?” The seagull glanced at Lizard again. Then it started tucking into the burger, tugging at a piece of mayonnaise-smeared meat with its beak. “Not bad. You want a bite?”

Lizard ran both hands through her light-green hair. It really was almost as if the seagull was talking to her. This was some crazy shit.

“Fast food,” the voice croaked. “Sometimes nothing else will do.”

Lizard studied the ramp by the entrance to the warehouse, the door hanging loosely on its hinges, and the high windows. Most of them were broken, and the rest were so dirty you couldn’t even see through them. The warehouse had clearly been abandoned for a long time.

Perhaps there was someone hiding in there, playing a trick on her. But – no, that couldn’t be it. The voice was far too close for that.

“Anyway – we ought to get down to business,” croaked the voice. “The fuel depot by the harbor – you know it?”

“Sure.” Lizard folded her arms. She suddenly felt cold, despite the heat.

“Be there at seven. They’ll be there to pick you up.” The seagull gulped down another chunk of burger.

“Who will?”

“Just be there, and you’ll see.”

Lizard gave a scornful laugh. “D’you think I’m crazy?” She turned again, first to her left and then to her right. “Just tell me where you are!”

“I’m here.” The gull jerked its head, spread its wings and took off. “But now I’m going. See you later.”

Lizard stared after the huge bird until it had disappeared beyond the roofs of the city.

When she looked down again, she saw that Brody had arrived. He was leaning nonchalantly against the ramp, looking at her with those stunning eyes of his. His afro shone in the sun.

Lizard’s heart gave a leap and started to skip like a rubber ball thrown hard against the floor.

“Was that you, just now?” Her voice shook a little.

“Was what me?” Brody looked confused.

“That stuff with the seagull.”

He raised an eyebrow. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t worry, forget it.”

“Okay,” he said with a shrug. “Sorry I’m late, by the way.” He smiled at her.

Lizard’s heart beat even harder. Brody looked amazing. His top lip was slightly fuller than his bottom lip. His mouth was so soft and beautiful. What would it be like to...? Stop! She couldn’t let him see she had a crush on him.

Boys didn’t like it when you made it too easy for them.

This was something Charlene had said recently – not to Lizard, obviously, but to her friends, and Lizard had overheard. Charlene ought to know: every boy in the school had a crush on her. Lizard had been afraid Brody would go right ahead and fall for Charlene too, but he hadn't. Otherwise it would have been Charlene he was meeting here today, not her.

"Are you pissed?" he asked.

"No, it's fine." Lizard waved a hand. "Do you feel like a walk?"

Brody pulled his hair back and tied it up with a hairband he'd been wearing around his wrist. His brown eyes suddenly looked even bigger. If he'd opened his arms right now she would have run straight into them, and to hell with Charlene's advice.

"Sure," he said. "But I need to cool down first."

"You're going for a swim?" she asked, casting a glance at the deep water beside them. She really hoped not.

"I was thinking more an ice cream. You want one?"

Lizard was about to say yes when she caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. And then her heart leapt again, but this time with fear.

"Shit," she whispered.

On the rusty rails that ran between the warehouse and the pier stood three young men. They were wearing ripped jeans and vests, and their tattooed upper arms shone as if they'd greased them with bacon rind.

Neville, Renzo and Diego. The King and his entourage. That was what Lizard called the three of them, because Neville gave the orders and Renzo and Diego did as they were told. They boxed at the club too – Lizard hated them with every fiber of her being. And the feeling was entirely mutual.

Lizard looked back at Brody. He was standing just a few feet away from Neville and his boys, still smiling as if everything was fine. But it wasn't. Brody was in serious trouble.

"Hi, Lizard." The King spread his fingers wide, then balled them into fists.

Like Lizard, he was one of the few white people at the boxing club. His blue eyes were hidden, now, behind a pair of sunglasses. He too was smiling – but his smile was like a burning fuse.

"What are you doing here?" said Lizard in a hostile tone, although she already knew the answer. Neville was here to get revenge. Because Lizard had humiliated him in front of the whole club.

Neville had always been the best boxer there. Mike, the owner, thought the world of him. All the boys danced to his tune. And all the girls idolized him.

All except Lizard. She thought Neville was a loser, and completely overrated. That was why she'd always wanted to get in the ring with him: she wanted to beat him.

But Mike was having none of it. "You're good, Lizard," he'd said when she'd brought up the subject of fighting the King. "But Neville is in a different league. It'd be a knockout in the first round. He'd thrash you."

So in the end they'd just gone ahead and arranged the fight without Mike's knowledge. On the clay court behind the club, Renzo and Diego had marked out a ring. Everyone had come to watch. And everyone had thought Lizard didn't stand a chance.

But they'd been wrong. Neville was probably about three times as strong as Lizard and four times as brutal, but she was ten times as quick. He relied on his muscles, but she had the better technique.

After she'd danced around him like a mongoose around a rattlesnake for six rounds, he was so exhausted that he let his guard down – and Lizard seized her chance. The instep of her left foot caught his jaw, and Neville went down like a sack of potatoes.

When he came around, everyone was clapping and cheering. The applause was for Lizard, not for Neville. And that was a new feeling for him. Ever since then, he'd been determined to settle the score.

Neville must somehow have found out that Brody and Lizard were meeting here. Now he was going to beat Brody to a pulp right in front of her eyes – before turning his attention to Lizard.

But Lizard knew that, unlike her, there was no way Brody could take Neville in a fight.

"Get out of here, Brody!" she hissed at him.

Brody thrust his chin forward. He clearly wasn't going to abandon her. He was far too nice for that. And he probably hadn't yet realized how dangerous Neville could be.

The King and his cronies swaggered over to Brody, and Neville slung his left arm around Brody's shoulder. With his right hand he ruffled his black hair almost tenderly, causing his ponytail to come undone. Any second now he was going to hit him. It took all of Lizard's self-control to stay calm.

"Thanks, man," said Neville, grinning at Brody.

Brody gave a half-smile. Then they high-fived each other.

"What's going on?" said Lizard.

Brody shrugged off Neville's arm, nodded to Renzo and Diego, and walked away. Without a word. Without so much as a backward glance at Lizard.

It was as if someone had tipped a bucket of ice-cold water over her head and punched her in the gut at the same time. All of a sudden she felt so weak that her knees almost gave way beneath her.

Now she understood why Brody had wanted to meet in this isolated spot. Not because he had feelings for her – quite the opposite. Neville had asked Brody to lure Lizard into a trap. And Brody, who was new to the area, who was a victim and in desperate need of friends, had agreed to do it.

"So," said Neville. Beads of sweat glistened in his thin moustache. He clasped his hands together, interlacing the fingers, then turned them inside out so they cracked. "Ready, Lizard?"

## 2

Neville walked slowly toward Lizard. Renzo and Diego started moving too, approaching her from the left and right.

Lizard felt like curling up into a ball, covering her face with her hands and crying. But she couldn't. She mustn't show any weakness now.

"Three against one?" To her relief, her despair wasn't audible in her voice. "Wow. Not taking any chances this time, huh, Neville?"

"Don't worry." Neville spat on the ground. "I'm gonna beat you all by myself."

"First time for everything, I guess." Lizard put her fists up. This time it would be a bare-knuckle fight – without boxing gloves and mouthguards. And without rules. At the club, this was strictly prohibited. But they were a long way from the club now.

Neville was only a few feet away by this time. Lizard could smell the sweat dripping from his powerful body: a sharp, pungent smell.

He balled his hands into fists, spun around and aimed a kick at her with his right leg. His boys hooted and jeered. Neville's foot missed Lizard by several inches – she'd ducked underneath it, and now she dodged as he came at her with a left hook.

Just as she had in their last fight, she let Neville stay on the attack as she ducked and weaved. She knew she had to tire him out if she was to stand any chance of beating him. But by now, Neville had realized this too.

He tried to hit her with both fists at the same time. In a competition he would have been disqualified immediately, but this wasn't a competition: it was a fight that would end with blood. This, too, was clear to both of them.

Lizard was drenched in sweat, and they hadn't even been fighting for five minutes. The sun beat down on them as if it wanted to join in the fight.

Neville continued his frenzied attack – he still hadn't landed a single blow. Lizard leapt left and right, she crouched, she sprang over his legs as he kicked. She sensed that he was getting out of breath, and this spurred her on.

Again she dodged one of his punches and, as she did so, crashed into Renzo or Diego – she didn't know which was which. Whoever it was shoved her off him as hard as he could, right into the path of Neville's fist.

The punch hit her on the left temple. She felt like her head was coming away from her body, breaking up into a thousand sparks and burning up. She staggered, and Neville seized the opportunity to land another punch. This time he hit her in the forehead. She turned away, tried to jump aside, but there was another of his henchmen forcing her back into his path.

Neville hit her in the left eye. It was like a firework exploding in front of her face. She didn't feel the pain: that would come later.

The King stuck out his foot to try and trip her up. He was panting hard.

There was no point trying to dodge him. Renzo or Diego would just have pushed her back into the ring.

Lizard saw him raise his right fist. And then she made a split-second decision: she would end this here and now. She lowered her fists and jerked her head forward to meet his bare knuckles. There was a dull, dry cracking sound as his hand made contact with her forehead.

Neville let out a howl. She'd broken his fingers.

Lizard spun around, threw up her left leg and kicked him in the shoulder. It wasn't a hard kick, more of a toe-tap. But it was enough. Neville staggered backwards, lost his balance and fell.

His boys looked down at him in dismay.

"Shit," said Renzo or Diego.

"You stupid bitch." The other one, who was slightly taller, turned to Lizard and drew back his right fist.

She put her fists up, lowered her head, rammed it into his chest, and fled.

Shit, shit, shit! Lizard knew most of Detroit like the back of her hand – in any other neighborhood she would have been able to escape. But she hardly ever came to this isolated part of town. If she hadn't had such a crush on Brody she would never have agreed to meet him here.

She ran alongside the water for a little way, then turned into a narrow alley between two warehouses.

She could hear loud panting behind her, and quick footsteps. Neville's boys were chasing her – perhaps Neville himself was back on his feet too.

Lizard sped around a corner and almost tripped over a rusty metal bar lying on the ground in front of her. She wasted valuable seconds trying to pick it up so she could defend herself with it. But it was too heavy.

Renzo or Diego came racing around the corner. When he saw her, he slowed down and dropped his head and shoulders like a predator about to pounce.

"She's here!" he called, without turning his head.

Now Neville's other accomplice appeared around the corner. He too stood still, legs apart, head and shoulders lowered, blocking her way.

He grinned scornfully at Lizard. "Your turn," he said, sounding almost affectionate.

She turned without a word and started running again. Rounded the next corner and came to an abrupt halt. It was a dead end.

A few yards ahead of her, the alleyway ended in a high wall. *FUCK*, someone had spray-painted on it in blood-red letters.

How apt.

Renzo and Diego came strolling around the corner at a leisurely pace. They didn't need to hurry – they had all the time in the world. They knew Lizard was trapped.

"Want me to do it or shall I leave her to you, Renzo?" asked the shorter of the two. At least now Lizard knew which one was which. Not that it helped at all.

"Leave her to me." Renzo licked his lips.

"Out the way, you two," snarled a third voice from behind them, and now Neville came prowling around the corner. His right hand, the one Lizard had broken, hung limply at his side. But he still had his left hand – and two strong legs. With her back to the wall like this she didn't stand a chance. "She won't get away from me this time."

"He means business. The bastard." Suddenly Lizard heard the croaky voice in her head again. And then she spotted the seagull, perched on a gutter diagonally above her. It stared down at Lizard with its eyes like tiny black beads surrounded by yellow circles. The gull's slightly curved yellow beak with the red spot at the tip shone like the blade of a knife. "He's going to destroy you."

"What are you doing back again?" Lizard looked up at the bird angrily. "Go away! *Piss off!*"

Neville spat contemptuously on the ground. "You wish." His friends laughed. None of them were paying any attention to the seagull – they didn't seem to have noticed it.

"I'm on your side," the bird croaked. "And I'm also your only chance, if you don't mind me saying so."

The boys didn't react to this observation. Neville was squaring up, getting ready to attack.

The gull was right. Neville and his cronies were going to make mincemeat out of her. Lizard had humiliated the King, and the punishment for that would be severe. Whatever the seagull had in mind, it was Lizard's only way out of this mess.

"On my command, you just run right past him," said the voice in her head. "Okay?"

"Okay," Lizard replied, her eyes trained on Neville.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the gull take off from the gutter. Two quick beats of its wings, then it shot towards Neville like an arrow.

"Run, Lizard!" yelled the voice in her head. "Run as fast as you can!"

Lizard ran.

And as she ran, she saw the seagull swoop at Neville. Its sharp beak hacked at his eyes. With a horrified shout he drew in his head and shielded his face with his arms. The gull, with military precision, zoomed over the top of him and then wheeled around and attacked again.

“What the hell is it doing? Crazy asshole bird!” Lizard heard Diego roar as she turned the corner.

“She’s getting away!” Neville’s voice was shrill with panic. “Go after her! Get her!”

Lizard ran at full pelt. She sprinted to the end of the alley, then turned down a narrow street that led to the harbor. There was nowhere to hide down here: she knew that because this was the way she’d come earlier. But hiding was pointless anyway. The King and his goons evidently knew their way around this neighborhood a lot better than she did – they’d have found her in no time. If she couldn’t shake them off her, she was done for.

Lizard’s lungs were burning and her head was pounding. Her left eye was swelling up: it hurt like hell, and the street ahead of her looked hazy, as though she were viewing it through thick fog. A little way away, a bus was pulling into a bus stop.

The footsteps of her pursuers came closer and closer. Glancing back over her shoulder, Lizard saw that Renzo had nearly caught up with her. He was fresh – unlike Lizard, he hadn’t used up all his energy fighting.

Renzo was reaching for her.

You’re not going to catch me, thought Lizard.

*Run as fast as you can!* she heard the gull croak again. She forced her legs to move faster.

The bus was only a few yards away now. The doors beeped and, with a soft hiss, began to close. In the nick of time, Lizard threw herself through the doors and onto the bus.

For a few seconds she lay there, exhausted, gasping for breath.

There weren’t many people on the bus. The few passengers were all sitting near the front. That was lucky. It meant they wouldn’t see Lizard’s swollen eye. She really didn’t feel like answering any probing questions right now.

Lizard took a few deep breaths before sitting up and looking out of the rear window. Renzo and Diego had stopped in the middle of the road and were watching the bus drive away. They looked incandescent with rage. Lizard would have liked to give them the middle finger, but she didn’t have the strength.