

ONE

MEDIA HELL WEEK

I make my move. Count the stairs. Four, three, two. Jump the last step. Are they chasing me? Security guards? Don't look back. I run through the open door, sprint down the alley, go left. Are they after me?

They'll get you in the end.

With my heart bursting, I steal a look back. Shimmering cobblestones, a signboard, a few chairs. No one. There's a dumpster against the wall. I take cover. Perhaps I shouldn't run. I should go back. They'll get you in the end.

Slightly dazed, I notice the handbag, clutched to my chest like a life ring. It's my bag, but how do I have it? I close my eyes.

Breathe, Zilla. Breathe.

The makeup artist's face rushes back to me. Her kind face, with soft wrinkles and that perky bun. I can feel her fingers on my arm, the firm grip leading me to the stairs. Away from the scorching lights, out of that hostile arena, cameras sending me to screens all over the Netherlands. Hudson, the host, the devouring lion. He wanted to tear me apart. Why?

My bag, she must have thrust it in my arms before pushing me out.

'Go! Go! Down the stairs, run!'

What if he's dead? Dead. My skin turns cold, my saliva sour. Did I kill someone on live television?

Breathe, Zilla. Breathe.

Do I hear sirens? I think I hear sirens. Are the police after me? Is it an ambulance for him? Oh no. No. No. Why did I do it?

Breathe, Zilla. Breathe.

With my eyes closed, I can still see it. I can still feel it. My fist, his jaw, the force of my knuckles. How fast his head snapped back.

With one hand, I clutch my bag, trembling, knuckles swollen. Did I do that? Could I make a body slam to the ground? That sound, the thud when his head hit the floor. I think it was his skull. A wave of nausea surges up.

My hand glides over the brick wall, seeking support. Bam, there I go.

My gut seizes up, I double over. I wretch, over my bag. Just once. Then it's calm.

Slowly, I get up and press my back against the wall. Stay up, stay up, or they'll catch me. Get away. I have to cross the bridge, cross over, away from the studio, away from the place where everyone hates us.

Sirens blaring, still. Closer now. Are they coming for me? They're coming for me. The back of my hand wipes away tears, wipes the corners of my mouth. My life is over.

I fumble for my phone. Messages, top to bottom. I ignore them. Paul called, twice. My mother's photo. I decline. There she is again. Go away. I'll never speak to you again.

It's only at the traffic light that I manage to dial. He picks up straight away.

'Zilla, where are you? We're at De Gruyter.' The roar of passing cars is muted as if under a woolen blanket. I cross the road. I move faster than ever, effortlessly. So strange.

'Zilla?'

TWO

ELEVEN WEEKS EARLIER

At first glance, Paul looks like an angel, with his blond curls and deep blue eyes. A closer look, however, and he could be a Scandinavian yachtsman. And currently, one who excels in manipulating his crew. He pretends he doesn't want to disturb me, so he wanders around the kitchen, taking bowls from the cupboard and putting them in the dishwasher. When I don't respond, he moves on to the rest of our dishes. It makes me smile, though I try to hide it. He persists and starts humming 'The Final Countdown'. It's not a pleasant sound. He's the first to laugh.

'Okay.' I close my laptop. 'What's up?'

'Nothing. What are you working on?'

'A letter. One of your colleagues got in touch with me. She wants help negotiating a raise. She thinks she should be making the same as her co-star, or maybe more.'

'And the co-star's a man?'

'Of course.'

His eyes light up. 'What show is it?'

'I can't tell you. It's confidential and don't change the subject, what's going on?'

'Confidential?' He bursts out laughing. 'Don't be silly.'

His gaze shifts to the clock. 'Is it really half past eight? Holy fuck. I should bring my shirts for fitting.'

He's already on his way to the hallway when I call after him. 'They're ready, in the blue bag.'

‘My savior.’ With his coat on, he walks towards our terrace and pushes the sliding door aside. A cold draft blows in. ‘Paul!’

Grinning, he looks back over his shoulder, his hands gripping the railing. ‘The morning swimmer is ...’