

GOTH GIRL, QUEEN OF THE UNIVERSE
by Lindsay S. Zrull

Chapter 1

All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream.
Edgar Allan Poe, "A Dream Within a Dream"

I'd be safer if I tried to blend in, but I've never been the kind of person who hides.

My black lace-up boots announce my arrival at Detroit River High. I own the corridor like I'm a model on an ironic linoleum runway in New York City. To my left, a group of band nerds snicker and stare at my glossy black lipstick. It doesn't matter. You learn a lot of rules as a foster kid who transfers between schools every few months. Want to know what the most important one is? Foster Care Pro-tip number one: The new girl is always a freak. Just embrace it.

"Hey, new girl!" someone yells. I pause, then turn to face a tiny blonde with the build of a ballerina. She's holding a plastic Starbucks cup in her hands. Her posse stands a few feet back, watching with obvious excitement. I smell a dare.

"Can I help you?"

"I think I saw you in *The Wizard of Oz*," she says through a fit of giggles.

I roll my smoky eyes and start to turn back around, but not before I get a face full of ice water. The shock of the cold makes me gasp. Everyone screams in laughter.

"Look! She's melting," someone yells.

There goes a perfect mascara application.

The hordes always think their jokes are clever. They're not. I've heard them all before.

Keeping my pride intact, I walk confidently in the direction of the nearest bathroom. The bell rings. Everyone rushes toward their nearest classroom, like cockroaches running for cracks in the walls. After slamming the bathroom door behind me, I cram the rubber stopper into the floor gap. I'm going to need some semblance of privacy to fix this disaster. When I finally get a glimpse of myself in the mirror, I groan. Mascara runs down my face in long, dark rivers. My lipstick is smudged, and the contouring I carefully applied to my round cheeks is patchy now. It took me two hours to perfect my look this morning. Thankfully, I took a dozen selfies before I left my new foster house, so I can still upload my masterpiece on Insta.

Now, I don't mean to sound like I'm some self-obsessed caricature. I worked hard for my confidence. I plan on keeping it intact, thank you. This look is my armor. I am an ethereal warrior, painted for daily combat. Besides, when you've spent your entire life bouncing from foster homes to group homes and back again, the fans start to feel like the only constant in life. They are the only real family I have.

But what to do now?

A good goth queen is like a good Girl Scout. We are always prepared. I take the emergency makeup bag out of my satchel and get to work. Prioritizing the disaster-relief tactics makes handling stressful situations like this easier. Step one: Wipe off the drippy mascara. Step two: touch up the contouring. Step three: select a different lipstick. Now I'm in the mood for Goddess Green, with its earthy tones and tiny green sparkles. Let's see how the mindless hordes like that. Those witches won't get the best of me today.

When I finish my new look, I admire it in the greasy school bathroom mirror. Not bad. I reach into my satchel and dig around for my decade-old phone. It's the most I could afford on

the monthly allowance I get from my social worker. The Edgar Allan Poe case I found for it is one of my prized possessions, however. The patron saint of goths stares up at me with his perplexed eyes, accented by his pinched tortured-poet brows.

I take a few selfies and upload them onto my Instagram, @GothQueen_13. I have followers from all across the goth spectrum. While I'd categorize my look as Nu Goth, since almost everything I own comes from thrift stores, I try to incorporate Victorian Goth aesthetics whenever I can—without the price tag. Hey, not every goth queen can afford ball gowns and corsets. A little second-hand velvet here, a nice vintage choker there, and I can look like the modern version of any classic gothic literature heroine.

On Insta, I add a caption about not letting the bullies win. My fans love it when I post about being myself in the face of ignorant buttheads, even if they don't know what my real adversity looks like. Aka: the foster care sob story.

When I'm done, I scroll through comments from this morning's look.

LiZZ13: "OMG you're like a dark LOTR elf!"

BloodFeud29: "What shade of lipstick is that? It would go perfect with my fae aesthetic.

☺"

LizardsRQT: "Seriously, how do you pull off masterpieces EVERY SINGLE DAY?!"

Reigna_NYC: "DM me. I'm your mother."

...

Wait. What?

My hands grip the cool white basin of the sink, grounding me where I stand, while my mind soars backward. Back to the last time I saw my birth mother.

I was seven. We lived in a small, dingy apartment that smelled of cat urine from years of tenants before us. We'd only lived there for a month when my mother started acting strange. New rules emerged without explanation. (1) No leaving the house. (2) No turning on the lights. (3) Keep the blinds closed. (4) Never speak louder than a whisper.

At first, the new rules were a game. Bumping around in the dark was a challenge I was happy to accept as a seven-year-old. But as time went on, I saw warning signs I'd witnessed in my mother many times before. These always led toward horrific events, like morbid bread crumbs of premonition. My mother began staying up all night, peering through the window blinds in the darkness. She paced in the living room for hours on end. She held conversations with herself, which were difficult to follow. She grew angry when floorboards creaked beneath my feet. At some point I realized we were in hiding. From who or what, I never knew.

I was vaguely aware that other kids my age were going to school. I watched through the blinds as they left the apartment building in the mornings and played outside in the late afternoons. The silence—the invisibility—began to eat me up inside. Have you ever wondered if you are *real*? I was a ghost, trapped between four cigarette smoke-painted walls.

One early evening, my mother fell asleep for the first time in days. I dared to turn on a lamp, keeping one trembling hand braced on the light switch while I watched my mother where she slept on the couch.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Someone pounded on the front door, startling my mother from sleep. I fumbled for the light switch, but it was too late.

“What have you done?” my mother whisper-hissed at me, her eyes wide.

I loved my mother, but I was terrified of her when her eyes grew wild. I'd seen her like this before, many times.

The banging continued.

"I know you're in there!" someone yelled. "Open the door or I'll call the police!"

My mother grabbed my hand and dragged me into the bedroom. "Get under the bed."

I dropped to my stomach and shimmied under the bed frame, pushing aside long-forgotten socks covered in dust bunnies.

"Don't make a sound," she whispered as she pulled the bed sheets low so their seams brushed the floor in front of my face. I watched the pads of her feet walk out of the bedroom, disappearing back into the living room.

The lock chain on the front door rattled as my mother opened it. I can't remember what was said. All I remember was the unnatural calm of my mother's voice in the presence of screaming anger. I remember forgetting to breathe until my lungs felt like they would burst. But what I remember most from my hours under the bed was how I held my body perfectly rigid while I watched a family of spiders crawl around my frozen hands.

Sometime late in the night I must have fallen asleep. I woke up sore and groggy. Sunlight striped the floor from between the blinds. I held my breath to listen. The voices were gone. I dragged my body out from under the bed as quietly as I could, then I paused to listen again.

No sound.

The bedroom door creaked when I pushed it open. The echo reverberated in my bones.

Still nothing.

My hands instinctively covered my mouth, to muffle the sound of my heavy breathing as I tiptoed out of the bedroom and into the living room.

No one was there, not even my mother, who hadn't left the apartment in weeks. I checked every room. I was alone.

My mother never returned.