



Ex Wives

DRACULA

**GEORGETTE
KAPLAN**



CHAPTER I

Mindy was not a happy delivery driver. Her pizza place, Dragon Pizza, had scheduled too many drivers for a Thursday night. The shop was barely big enough to fit all seven of them and the in-store employees. It was a box of a building with no counter, just a window with a big sill like they all worked in a broken-down taco truck. Thankfully, the window was always open, which meant a cool breeze. Essential in a building that was pretty much a temple to the big oven in the middle of the room. Everything else was squeezed off to the sides.

Mindy had had a double all lined-up. Two deliveries and two tips, close enough together that it was one trip as far as her gas tank was concerned. But because her idiot manager had overbooked the evening shift, he'd split the order between her and Freddy just to get them out of there. Even though the deliveries were three blocks apart. Even though Freddy drove a pickup truck to deliver pizza. A Ford F-150. How could he possibly make any money with that thing's gas mileage? And with twice the gas being burned on what could've been one trip—it was like she was the only one who'd ever heard of peak oil.

Her only consolation was that the order she did get was on her block—no need to futz with her GPS and its touch screen that hadn't worked right since a babysitting charge had spilled a Happy Meal's worth of soda on it.

And it'd be a short trip. She lived roughly half a mile from Dragon Pizza, which meant it was impossible for her to be late. A good thing for a high school student. As long as she remembered to change clothes, she could come home from school, sleep in her work uniform, wake up ten minutes before the start of her shift, and get there three minutes early. It could've been five minutes, but she just couldn't sleep with her shoes on.

Mindy's car was cool and sleek and fuel efficient—back in the eighties. In the year of our Lord 2016, her Ford Taurus had all the class of a Segway. It turned over after thirty seconds of her pleading with the ignition to stop

messing with her, instantly starting up a localized dust storm in the immediate vicinity of her tailpipe.

Speaking of peak oil, she should've bought a moped. Those things ate up gas like supermodels did milkshakes. But there was no way she would deliver pizzas in Carfax, Texas without air-conditioning. The rest of the country had weather; the great state of Texas had oven settings.

The heat-retaining bag of her order rode shotgun. All it held was a rinky-dink twelve-inch cheese pizza. Surely not the kind of delivery worth a decent tip. As she took the few turns between Dragon Pizza and her destination, Mindy rested one hand on the warm bag in the passenger seat. Hitting a speed bump and sending her order flying out the passenger-side window that was stuck halfway up would be the perfect end to a perfect day.

Trying to keep at only five miles over the speed limit but often going as fast as ten over, Mindy made it to the house so fast that her boss Dario could've done a "Fifteen Minutes or Less" sales promotion if the other drivers didn't still get their directions from road maps. But seeing the golden house number confirming her target, Mindy checked the receipt again. Yes, 214 Whitby Lane. Right beside 212, her own house. And the name on the order was Lucinda West.

Well. This should be interesting.

Mindy didn't remember the last time they'd talked. Probably wouldn't remember this time either, since a blank smile and a signed receipt didn't quite count as a conversation.

Leaving the motor running, Mindy pulled a pen from her pocket with one hand, scooped up the pizza with the other, and held onto the receipt with her mouth. She jogged up to the front door, rang the doorbell, and juggled everything into a vaguely efficient configuration before it was humanly possible for anyone to answer the bell.

Lucinda West opened the door, and Mindy felt automatically underdressed for the *Fuck Off* mat, clad in her shapeless red polo shirt, black work pants, and a logoed ball cap that was doing unfortunate things to her lack of hairdo. Lucia had always looked good—taking the hit of puberty like Rocky Balboa and emerging into a Michael Bay version of womanhood. The woman was all long golden hair, lean legs, and boobs that were, frankly, just not fair.

Mindy ran crisply through her recitation of corporate malarkey. It was missing half a dozen keynotes like “Let me know how else I can provide you with great service today” and “Thank you for giving us a chance to value our customers once more,” but Mindy didn’t think she could spew that bullshit on an hourly basis without bashing her head against a convenient wall hard enough to leave a gray matter stain.

“Hello, ma’am, thank you for ordering from Dragon Pizza, I have your twelve-inch pizza here in only twelve minutes, and your total today is only \$11.92. If you could just sign here, please.” She held out the receipt and pen and immediately thought that she’d been doing this job too long. She had to have been, going through that whole spiel before she even noticed that Lucinda was bleeding. “Mary, Mother of God!”

“Nah, you can call me Lucia.” Wobbling a little from reaching over while she stood on one leg, Lucia quickly rebalanced, pressed the receipt against the doorframe, and signed by the X. She even put a considerate 3 on the tip space.

Grabbing a piece for herself, Lucia called back into the house, “A-team, pizza!” Two little towheaded boys came running. They snatched the box away before Mindy could even warn them how hot it was.

Lucia continued, “You better save me a piece or I’m throwing one of you off Tate’s Creek Bridge. I’ll still have a spare, don’t test me!” She turned back to Mindy. “Don’t worry about it, I just dropped a glass. And stepped on it. And pulled it out.” The foot she was very much not standing on dripped. “I think I’ll take a shower. I always do that when I have a bloody nose.”

Mindy had been taking shop class way too long to be freaked out by the sight of blood. “Here, let me see—let’s go inside, sit you down...”

“No!” Lucia said quickly but emphatically. She followed it up with a quick breath. “Don’t you guys have rules about going inside customers’ houses?”

“Yeah, don’t go inside serial killers’ houses. I don’t see any satanic altars; you should be fine.”

“They’re in the back.” Lucia hopped out onto the porch. Before Mindy could help her, she’d sat down on the swing. Its rusted chains barely moved. She folded her leg across her opposite thigh. “Here. Feast your eyes, pizza lady.”

Mindy took a look. There was more blood than when her cousin had gotten her first period at their sleepover, and Cousin Betty had heavy-flow issues. “Damn. It really went in deep. That must’ve been a big chunk of glass.”

Lucia grinned as if with pride. "It was one of those Burger King collectible glasses. Now I'm out a drinking container that shows my love for *The Lion King*." A little playfully, she shoved Mindy away before the examination could go any further. "It'll be fine. I'll wrap a towel around it. I've had worse."

"Doing *what*, sword-fighting?"

"Shaving my *legs*, drama queen. Shoo, already. Your car looks like it's taking some bad shit."

Mindy looked across the yellowing lawn to her even yellower ride. As usual, the Taurus's exhaust had turned from a wistful gray exhale to a vomit of phlegmy gray molasses while she wasn't there to massage it into compliance.

"Wait here. Right back. Enjoy your pizza."

Not giving Lucia time to reconsider, Mindy ran at undignified speed to the Taurus. She reached through the open window to flick the ignition off and then zipped around back to pop the trunk. Inside were a change of clothes and a cache of supplies that could've come out of a zombie movie. A worried mother's work. Mindy's mom had probably spent more on the go-bag in the trunk than Mindy had spent on the car.

After a few seconds of looking, Mindy found the first aid kit. She ran back to Lucia, who showed the same nonchalance both in eating a slice of pizza and dripping blood onto the timbers of the porch. "You got any, like, crushed red peppers?"

"You got a hose?"

"Side of the house. Watch out for raccoons, there was one hiding behind a bush there the other—"

Mindy was already around the corner of the house. She came back, yanking at and untangling the hose as she went, until she'd finally wrestled it up to the porch. There, she tried the trigger, shooting a torrent of warm water into the ground. She modulated the pressure she put on it, quickly working out a strong but supple flow of water.

"This could sting a little," she warned Lucia.

"You mean the big bleeding cut on my foot could *hurt*?" Lucia asked in faked wonderment. She held her slice of pizza up and away from herself. "Don't get my dinner all soggy."

Mindy was careful not to as she cleaned off the cut, even though she had already been tipped. Then she opened the packet of antiseptic wipes from her kit, using them to scrub Lucia's wound clean. Lucia winced. She even whimpered despite her tough façade. But when Mindy was finished, there were no tears. She sat thoughtfully as Mindy blocked up the cut with gauze and adhesive tape.

"Sorry to be keeping you from your job," Lucia said finally. "You're probably losing money."

"It's a slow night anyway," Mindy reasoned. "If I went back, I'd probably just be cleaning something."

Lucia viewed Mindy carefully, like Mindy had been set in front of her by some eccentric artist and Lucia was trying to figure out what the work *meant*. Realizing she was being stared at, Mindy looked down. She wasn't used to being a work of art.

"But still, I should go. You never know when half of Carfax will decide they need both melted cheese *and* marinara sauce in equal quantities."

"Hey, wait a sec," Lucia piped up. She offered Mindy her half-eaten slice of pizza. "Have some pepperoni."

"I'm not hungry."

Lucia's perfect eyebrows quirked, an expression of curiosity designed to make its object like when she was curious. "Listen, I'm sorry to put you on the spot like this. I ordered *before* I managed to impale my foot. I didn't know you were an emergency room on wheels when I called."

"All part of the job. I volunteer with the peewee football league: iodine, cuts, bruises, it's all good practice for the occasional customer who answers the door with no blood pressure."

Full lips formed a smile that seemed amused but not *too* amused. "Hey, I'm having some people over later. I don't mean to impose, but is there any way you could make a quick round-trip to the store? It's just one mile up the road. I was going to go myself, but people might look at me funny if I hop the whole way there, and I do not have a car." Reaching into her pants, she managed to retrieve a twenty-dollar bill from one of the uncanny imitations of a real pocket that the fashion world was convinced women's clothing needed. "Here. If you could just get some chips, some salsa, and a Redbox of anything with Ryan Gosling in it. Consider the change an extra tip."

A strong, rational instinct told Mindy to say no. Last week, Jenny had gotten fired for buying her customer cigarettes on a run, and she'd been working there forever. But there was something about Lucia that made her different from all the people Mindy could say no to. The look in her eyes was confident. So were the tone of her voice and the set of her expression.

But the way she sat lengthwise on the swing, foot drawn up awkwardly to keep the bottom from coming into contact with anything painful, screamed vulnerability. She wasn't milking it, and she wasn't hiding it. It was more like camouflage. Indiscernible unless you knew where to look. And Mindy had always known where to look.

Her car started readily, as eager to impress Lucia as she was. And with a slightly bloody twenty crumpled in her fist, Mindy was on her way to the store.

Seeing Lucia up close had been a shock. Mindy had seen her at school, of course, but it was like they were zoo animals in different enclosures. That John Hughes teen movie stuff about cliques was bullshit now, if it ever had been real. There were the same two Hogwarts houses there had always been. Cool kids and everyone else. Lucia West was the queen of the school. And Mindy was very firmly not. It was part of them, blood deep, growing out into their physical appearances like a mighty oak from roots deep in the earth.

Lucia was beautiful. No, she was sexy. It was all in the way she dressed, Mindy supposed; the makeup she put on. Lucia didn't want people to think how lovely she looked, how elegant, how well bred. She wanted people to picture her naked, and she wanted it enough to give them plenty of hints. Most of her shirts exposed her tanned, flat belly. If she wasn't wearing a skirt, she was wearing Bermuda shorts or even hot pants, in the summer. When Lucia had her face on and her ensemble polished, she was a fearsome sight. Mindy had read enough YA books to know Lucia's species roamed the entire American continent; maybe even overseas. She could've been the villain in a high school movie; the rich bitch that made the quirky heroine's life a living hell. Or at least the girlfriend of the villain, who put up with her psycho-ass boyfriend's shenanigans until the nerdy hero won her over because it was a movie. Lucia was a fine specimen of those girls who saw no difference between dating a jerkass bully and a sweet, good-natured underdog. Popular girls.

And if they had a hive mind, Lucia had to be their queen. Almost as tall as a man, she looked like an actress, if not a model: when she stood straight, the gap between her thighs was a narrow view, her breasts swelled from her slim chest in perfect symmetry, and if her belly dipped inward, it was more likely because she was wearing a corset than because she'd had two ribs removed. She was Megan Fox. She was Jessica Alba. She was the woman that women hated and boys loved.

But Lucia hadn't always been beautiful and sexy and fuckable and dangerous and all the other things villains in high school movies were supposed to be. Once, she'd just been cute. She'd had dimples and lived next door to Mindy. They'd been inseparable. BFFs before that saying was a thing, at least in their neck of the woods. Then Lucia had gotten boobs, her blonde hair had turned a shade of gold favored by fantasy movies, and her legs had refused to follow Mindy's example and *stop growing*. The cuteness had drained out of her, leaving only sex appeal. Now Mindy's childhood friend was almost gone. All but her smile. A kid's smile.

The smile Lucia had worn when asking for Mindy's help.

Mindy parked outside the grocery store and went to get what Lucia needed for her party. It was a good tip, after all. That was more than she'd gotten the last time they'd parted ways.



"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Lucia cheered when Mindy came back with a bag of groceries and a \$1.99 Ryan Gosling DVD from the bargain bin. Each repetition was a little louder.

Mindy was uncomfortable with how much it looked like Lucia would hug her. Thankfully, pom-poms didn't have much reach with her busted foot. "Yeah, well—I needed the money. New One Direction album coming out."

"Yes, good sir knight, I think this does call for a reward." Drawing a fiver from her pants—okay, were those *real pockets*?—Lucia straightened the bill before Mindy's face. "Here. Found it between the seat cushions. All yours."

"Thanks." Mindy took it, trying to think of a way to tell Lucia she was actually acting pretty cool without letting on how *uncool* she'd been since the first day of class freshman year.

Before anything occurred to her, they heard rolling thunder under the horizon. Teenage boy. Football team. Ford F-250. It was loud enough to rattle Mindy's teeth from there.

"That's Quentin," Lucia explained. "My boyfriend, who I love. He's not so bad. You should stay and meet him!"

"No, no—I've gotta get back. Even *my* boss isn't going to believe I got this lost on the way to my own house."

Lucia planted her hands on the sides of Mindy's shoulders, like she was locking her in place for a hug or sizing up the dimensions of her head for praying mantis jaws. It was hard to tell, but it seemed to be meant in a friendly manner. Who could tell with praying mantises, though? "Hey, when do you get off work? You should come over. It's gonna be an epic party."

"Nah, I'll... I'll still be in my work uniform."

"But you live right next door. Just change and *get over here*." Lucia gave Mindy a little shake. "It'll be fun. You'll be fun."

"Maybe if I get off early," Mindy said with all the flavor of a promise, but none of the actual calories.

"Cool. You're so cool." Lucia slapped Mindy on the back as she turned away, sending her off. "Go deliver good pizzas!"

As she got into her Taurus, Quentin nearly ran her over. Mindy was getting used to the near-miss sensation.

The rest of Mindy's evening was too dull even for her blog, and she had posted more than one "What *Star Trek* captain are you?" quiz. She went out on another run, this one up north. Got stiffed, shoveled the receipt into her glove compartment for later, and when she got back, the manager finally cut her. She tallied her tips, brought in her car topper, and started home. And all the way there, she thought about Lucia's party.

Assuming the offer was even genuine—assuming the party hadn't dissolved because someone couldn't bring ice cream sandwiches or something—assuming it wasn't already over because she'd driven five miles up the road and back again with nothing to show for it but a corporate-mandated twofer for gas money. Assuming all that, go or no go?

If she went, Mindy could pretty much guarantee all she'd do is hang out in the corner and snarf all the snacks she could. Was that really any better than

an evening of decompressing, updating her blog, maybe a movie on Netflix if she could stop herself from just endlessly scrolling through the new releases?

Then again, she was a fucking teenager and she'd never sent a drunk text. She hadn't even used chatspeak. That was screwed up. She should be spontaneous and fun loving and easygoing. And in a week from now, she would be sitting in her room, bored out of her mind, wishing she had gone to the party. Because maybe at the party she'd meet a boy or whatever, and maybe they'd go to a movie. Then maybe in a week's time she'd be thinking, *Hey me-a-week-earlier, I'm kissing a cute boy because you went to the stupid party like a great big normal!*

She was going to do that. She was going to get home, put on something cute, maybe grab a quick shower, and go over. She could bring some of her mom's dinner rolls. They were still in the Ziploc bag by the fridge, right? Everyone loved dinner rolls.

Then Mindy got home and felt, right through her Goodyear tires, a thumping LMFAO song from the backyard of Lucia's house. The words FUCK THIS were suddenly installed in big neon letters on the inside of Mindy's forehead. She went in through the front door, leaving her hat in the car and ruffling her freed hair from back to front. Her parents were on the couch watching *American Kid Swappers* or whatever. They gave her, "How was work?" and she gave them, "Good," and trudged upstairs to her bedroom, where with the windows closed, the party music became a subsonic transmission straight to her fillings.

Too tired to undo her shoelaces, she folded down onto her bed and kicked off her shoes before looking over at the window. Through it, she had a view of Lucia's house and just about nothing else. Usually, Lucia's blinds were down, leaving her with "nothing else." Tonight, they were open. And Lucia herself sprawled across her bed. Not at the party. Not with some guy. Just lying in bed.

As if feeling herself being watched, Lucia's gaze crossed the seven feet between them. She saw Mindy's slumped posture, so close to her own, and smiled wearily. She even gave a modestly excited wave. Mindy returned it, not sure what to think. Before she could figure anything out, Lucia had turned away again. Mindy did the same, staring up at the ceiling and the baby platypus poster she had up there. Baby platypus always looked like it was having a good day being a baby platypus.

She was a little tired, but she felt like she'd waste the evening going to sleep now. She wondered how she could wake herself up enough to watch some TV, read a book, or photoshop some bees into that GIF she'd found of the Pope waving both his hands. That'd be funny. Probably get her a thousand likes on Facebook. She yawned. Did people still use Facebook? Did Lucia use Facebook?

Her phone trilled—a meow from Burt Reynolds the cat, who she'd house-sat for three weeks last summer. They were BFFs. She checked her phone. Not a garbled mishmash of Spanish or a butt-dial, for once. It was a text from Lucia.

My mom's too much of a neat freak to let strangers in the house, Lucia had sent.

As if Mindy had been wondering about the carnival in her backyard. Mostly, she was just surprised Lucia still had her number.

Surprised, but oddly touched.

The next day, Mindy drove past Lucia's bus stop on the way to school. Lucia wasn't looking her way; she had her back turned while the wind played with her flaxen hair. She really was pretty, in unguarded moments.

CHAPTER 2

Mindy didn't know why everyone hated on the school lunches. Everything on her tray tasted fine, in that it was tasteless, which was an improvement on her mom's cooking. Mindy didn't know what kale was supposed to taste like, but it probably wasn't like the flesh of a dung beetle that had died screaming.

The cafeteria was basically just a very big classroom, without the TGI Fridays educational posters and such that the teachers put up. It was featureless except for the brick pillars that held it up, the bulletin board which shed extracurricular fliers like dead skin, and the glass doors that let the students see when a stray dog wandered onto campus.

Mindy ate alone, as usual, or she might as well have. The lunch room wasn't crowded and she sat far from the vending machines, so she had her table to herself except for the couple who tried to kindle a fire with their jeans. Mindy toasted them with her carton of chocolate milk and went back to her homework. Last question and...done. She decided to give her brain a rest before moving onto her World History assignments. Digging out the library's copy of *A Great and Terrible Beauty* from her backpack, she set about reading.

Her eyes rolled over the words like they did when it seemed like a book was beaming its story right into her brain. She wasn't aware of her eyes running along the lines of text, didn't know she was turning the pages, didn't even look at her food as she worked it off her plate and into her mouth. The peas, the mashed potatoes, the pudding, they all disappeared bit by bit until—*kritch!* Her spoon scraped against the mesh of the tabletop. Her lunch tray was gone. Mindy looked up from her book to see Lucia sitting opposite her.

Lucia pushed the tray back into place. "Sorry. Could not resist." She gave Mindy a slightly apologetic smile. "I don't suppose you're not really reading but simply desperately shy and secretly hoping I'll hit on you?"

Mindy reared up. "That was a lot of adjectives."

"I'm just fucking with you." Lucia hovered her hand over Mindy's little bowl of baby carrots, begging silently until Mindy made a permissive gesture. Lucia took one and crunched it. "That's a good book," she said, her mouth full but her voice still clear.

"Huh? Oh, oh yeah—I guess so." Mindy rubbed the dust jacket self-consciously. "I haven't finished, so, uh..."

Lucia wagged an eyebrow. "Surprised I know how to read?" She took another baby carrot.

"No, of course you can read..." Mindy said a little too apologetically for what she now realized was a joke. "You're in high school," she finished lamely.

Lucia let her off the hook. "Plus, I'm a cheerleader. We need to know how to read to spell out words. Otherwise how will the football players know what to do?"

Mindy giggled. She'd forgotten how *bright* Lucia was. High school seemed so monochrome, and Lucia was like a little splotch of color even when she wasn't doing anything. From a distance, you couldn't see it, but when she was up close, Lucia was just so alive.

Lucia kept going, picking up one more baby carrot and rolling it between her fingertips. "Not that I've seen you at the games."

Mindy hid behind her book. "I'm not big into sports."

Lucia preened up to look at her, so Mindy dropped the book to look back. Lucia gave her a brief smile. "Well, there's a game this weekend, and I will be there wearing something I can't blame men for jerking off to. Why don't you come? Give contact sports a chance."

That, more than anything, took Mindy aback. Lucia was surprisingly easy to talk to; it was even easier still to slip into their childhood friendship like it was a set of old clothes. Actually having Lucia proposition her set off a little pang in her. She remembered all the distance between them. And she didn't know if Lucia was closer than she'd thought or if all that space just made her feel safe throwing stones, since Mindy was too far away to hit back.

"I don't know..." Mindy said at last. She wavered in the face of Lucia's expectant look. Her words got chopped up into some needed order. "If you're there, okay."

Lucia happily chomped the carrot she'd been playing with. "You know, you look so smart in those glasses, but when you don't speak in complete sentences—totally ruins it." She plucked just one more baby carrot as she rose. "See you Saturday."

The next time Mindy saw Lucia, she was trying to kill someone.



Mindy was coming out of class the next day, going to her locker, the one with *No weed here* written on it. She was about to exchange one back-breaking load of textbooks for another when she heard all the sounds of a fight stampeding down the hallway.

Squeaking shoes, grunting, high-pitched profanities, and the arrhythmic slap of flesh on flesh.

Mindy wasn't immune to interest. She waded through the crowd that always gathered at these things, expecting to see another gay kid standing up to a bully because *Glee* had done a song about it.

Instead, she saw Lucia had jumped on Quentin's back, one hand buried in his curly locks and pulling hard, another punching him in the shoulder in a not-at-all-friendly way.

Their words overlapped as they spun around, Lucia's high and shrill, his pained and slightly hysterical. "*Get her off me fucking cheating asshole calm the fuck down I'm gonna kill you crazy bitch fucking shiv you!*"

Mindy's brain popped open the thought that it was only a matter of time until a teacher or school safety officer put in an appearance, separated them, and as the school system's approach to violent behavior was more enlightened since Columbine, treat them both as if they were Nazi war criminals. And just like that, she'd thrown herself through the onlookers, grabbed Lucia by the waist, and pulled her off Quentin.

Lucia was slimmer than her, but she helped hold up three people at every cheerleading practice. The fact that they were probably bulimic didn't take away from that. But Mindy had more body mass, and she'd taken Lucia by surprise. She dragged Lucia back six feet before she started resisting, digging her feet into the linoleum floor.

"Seb, little help!" Mindy called. Sebastian Brewster, Seb, a foreign exchange student from Romania or thereabouts, pulled out of the crowd. Mindy remembered being mock-UN partners with him last semester. He'd found it really funny whenever the Bulgarian delegates said something, and they got a B+ on the assignment. That was his entry in the Encyclopedia Mindy.

He wound his arms around Mindy's waist and helped her pull, a Human Centipede that managed to overcome Lucia's berserker rage. Pulling against Mindy's grip, she slipped and slid on the floor, banging her knees on the tiles multiple times as Mindy tried to calm her down.

"Hey, hey, it's me, I've got you." She barraged Lucia's ear with whispers, trying to talk her down like she was doing a show on Animal Planet. "He's not worth it, okay? Let's go—"

Lucia caught her breath. Mindy still felt her heart going a mile a minute. There was a feverish heat coming off Lucia, but she stopped struggling against Mindy, letting herself be held. Seb let go. Mindy didn't. So they just stood there, Mindy now embracing Lucia from behind, as the cheerleader jabbed a finger at the recovering Quentin like she could fire a bullet from it.

"Just so everyone knows, he cheated on the hottest girl in school because he had an *away game*. Enjoy your sluts, genius motherfucker!"

"Let's go," Mindy repeated, pulling at Lucia, getting her to take a few steps back with her.

Quentin wiped at the blood from where she'd clawed at his cheek. "I gotta get some suck action before a game. You knew! You should've come to support the team, but thanks for putting your boyfriend-girlfriend shit before the Dragons!"

"Fuck you, Quentin!"

Mindy heard big, official footsteps coming down the halls. She tugged insistently at Lucia. "Bathroom, Lucia, *let's go*."

Lucia barely let herself be led away.

"Listen, Mindy—" Seb began.

"Daisy McDowell would've let Billy get a beej if he needed one!" Quentin shouted after them.

"Daisy McDowell's a fucking A-cup and Billy's into dudes!" Lucia shot back before Mindy could shove her into the nearest restroom.

Seb tried to press on. "Mindy, I was wondering..."

"Hold that wonder," Mindy told him, following Lucia in.

The bathroom was empty, thank God. Mindy barely had time to look for Lucia before the blonde ran past her, kicking the wall hard enough to put a dent in the plaster. "Fuck!" she screamed.

"Hey, Lucia, hey..." Mindy tried to think of something to say, but someone came through the door then. "Use the boys' room!" she ordered the intruder.

"This is the boys' room," he stammered.

Mindy took a closer look at him. He had very long hair for a boy. "I like your hair."

Jabbing a finger at the row of urinals Mindy had failed to notice, he left. No sooner was he out the door and a few muffled words were exchanged on the other side than there was a knock from outside. Mindy gave Lucia an awkward pat on the head, mouthing promises to be right back, and went to answer it. It was only as she was actually pulling the door open that she realized how weird it was to knock on the door to a public restroom.

Coach Bakula was Mindy's favorite teacher by a factor of a million and one, and he wasn't even a teacher. He was the coach of Millarca High's seven-time championship football team, but if that weren't enough to make him small town royalty, he also volunteered to teach English class.

He was handsome in that ageless Hollywood way that seemed to be a constant from year thirty to year sixty, but without the Botox or plastic surgery, just a weirdly orange tan and some white in his hair and goatee. The business suit he wore everywhere was slightly undone, tie loosened and jacket hung up on the back of a chair somewhere.

"Everything okay in here?" he asked gently, sneaking a look at Lucia before averting his eyes respectfully.

"Yeah," Mindy said. "We just need a minute."

"Take all the time you need. I've got Quentin doing sprints until he learns some manners. Or vomits. Whichever comes first. Meantime, I've got a feeling this bathroom is going to be out of order for the next few minutes." He flashed her one of those yellow folding floor signs before splaying it out at his feet. "Put it away when you're done. You've got me next, so I'll just forget to take roll until you get in."

"Thank you, Mr. Bakula. Big time."

"Go. Be a good friend." He shut the door.

Lucia had slid to the floor, back against the wall thumping her head rhythmically against it. Mindy sat beside her. She offered a handkerchief before Lucia started crying.

The sight of the white cloth in her hand got Lucia started. Hot tears leaked out of her, under too much pressure to stay inside. "Fucking asshole," she murmured.

Mindy put a hand on her shoulder. She didn't know quite what to do. She'd never had a friend breakdown in front of her. She didn't even cry that much herself. She'd seen a hundred movies and TV shows where someone cried, still looking sexy and perfect and beautiful, and someone comforted them, looking caring and masculine and confident. The women in those shows didn't cry like Lucia, with her face all blotchy and her eyes bloodshot.

Mindy took out another napkin from her purse and held it under Lucia's nose. She'd grabbed a whole batch of them at work. Lucia instinctively blew. Mindy wadded up the napkin and tossed it into the trash bin. Three points.

At least she'd stopped crying.

Mindy used another napkin to wipe under Lucia's eyes and rub off her runny makeup. Lucia sat there passively, letting Mindy mop her up. Then her head fell to one side, and Mindy almost got out of the way before she realized Lucia meant to rest it on her shoulder.

"I really tried with him," Lucia said. Her voice wasn't rattling with emotion any more, it was just quiet. Which was even worse. "I really thought I was a good girlfriend. I was gonna—wash his clothes and fix him pies and shit. I would've done anything to be a good girlfriend."

"You were a great girlfriend," Mindy assured her. "He's just an idiot. He's an idiot who never even got to know you well enough to know what he's gonna be missing. He's gonna be big and fat at the high school reunion, and you're going to be super-hot and married to a senator. He won't even know why he let you get away."

"I did anal!" Lucia cried to the florescent lights. "What more is a girl supposed to do, huh?"

“Nothing. You’re pretty and smart and funny and own a cheerleader outfit. He’s just a goddamn idiot. He’s like the guy who dates Diana Prince and crushes on Wonder Woman, but he doesn’t even know that Diana Prince *is* Wonder Woman with glasses and a different hairdo. Screw that guy. He doesn’t know he’s dating Wonder Woman.”

Lucia gestured for another napkin. “It’s the week before Valentine’s Day,” she said listlessly and blew her nose.

“You don’t have to even *do* Valentine’s Day. I don’t.”

“Yeah, but you’re, like, a hobbit. I have to do something. That fucker’s not taking Valentine’s away from me. That’s the one holiday that is all about women. You never hear about a woman getting shit because she forgot to get her boyfriend something. Feminism, Mindy.”

Mindy felt a little like resting a head on Lucia’s shoulder herself, she felt so drained catching the shockwaves of Lucia’s explosion. She sat there beside her, a lump.

“We should have a fucking Galentine’s Day.” Lucia nodded to herself. “Yeah. We’ll go shopping and eat at a fancy restaurant and go see a romantic movie—they’re for us anyway...”

“You...wanna spend Valentine’s Day with me?” Mindy asked.

“Yeah, what, like you have plans?”

“My parents book a suite at the Renaissance on Valentine’s Day. I get the house all to myself, so I watch *Game of Thrones* really loud in my underwear. I don’t even fast-forward the naked scenes at all. I’ve caught up on whole seasons that way.”

Lucia was staring at her. “Bitch, you want bloodshed, nudity, and midgets, you go shopping with me.”



Lucia’s and Mindy’s houses were almost nothing alike, except they both had first-floor additions in almost the same spot, extending toward each other like they were going to lean on one another. The roofs almost touched, so when Mindy saw Lucia sitting on the little “balcony” outside her bedroom window, she thought for a dumb moment that Lucia was actually in her room.

Lucia waved at her. Mindy waved back, but gave her a confused look.

Lucia shrugged.

Feeling awkward, Mindy picked up her closest textbook and gave it a little shake.

Lucia rolled her eyes but in an understanding way.

Mindy lay down on her bed and pyramided her book on her tummy. It was a little nice knowing Lucia was there, almost watching over her.

Then she heard something fly through her open window and flap onto the foot of her bed. Mindy sat up. Lucia had disappeared back into her room, but she'd left a card.

It was a Valentine's Day card, a picture of Bane from *The Dark Knight Rises* on the cover saying, *You think being my Valentine gives you power over me?* On the inside, another bit of Tom Hardy stock art said: *It does.* There was a bit of text seemingly intended for Quentin that Lucia had Xed out so thoroughly nothing remained except an ellipsis. Then Lucia had penned in a new message: *You're the only good thing about this week*, followed by a smiley face with a wobble for a mouth.

CHAPTER 3

Carfax Mall was all done up with flowers and pink and hearts in a way that was almost tasteful. Budgetary constraints. Had to be.

What surprised Mindy was how thrifty Lucia was. She'd brought her credit card, expecting she'd be cutting it up by the end of the day, but Lucia walked right by the boutiques to go to smaller businesses, thrift stores that all seemed to know her by sight. Once she had Mindy in front of the staff, it was like a general giving his lieutenants a battle plan. Dresses started materializing, skirts and blouses and jeans and belts that everyone said would look great on her. But only those Lucia okayed went into the dressing room.

"Those glasses have got to go," Lucia told her. "We need to LensCrafters your shit...it's like from the feet up, girl, girl, girl, eighties stockbroker."

"I like my glasses."

"I like singing Macklemore songs, but I know better than to do it in public." Lucia rushed them into a well-sized dressing room like it would fortify them against a zombie apocalypse, giggling as she threw the lock closed. "Alright. We need to know your dress shape."

"You mean size?"

"No, shape. They can be higher or lower. Depends on the girl. Pull your shirt up."

It all happened so fast, Lucia running her from one store to another, showing her how to dress and what to wear, all the tricks of the trade. It was like a movie montage more than Mindy's boring little life.

INT. DRESSING ROOM 1 - DAY

LUCIA, our heroine, heartbroken but sexily so, runs her hands over the sides of her comedy sidekick, MINDY: a GINGER with round

GEORCETTE KAPLAN

cheeks, freckles, and a bulb of a PUG NOSE under a curly mop of hair. She finds the narrowest part of Mindy's WAISTLINE. A shitty single by GREEN DAY plays on the soundtrack because our CORPORATE OVERLORDS declared it so.

INT. SHOE STORE - DAY

Lucia and Mindy try on HEELS. Lucia shows her friend how to walk around in them. She exaggeratedly SWINGS her hips, then puts her hands on MINDY'S HIPS to show her how to shift her body weight the right way.

INT. HAIR SALON - DAY

LUCIA explains to Mindy that her THICK CURLY HAIR will look a lot better if she DOESN'T BRUSH IT and washes it only EVERY FEW DAYS instead of every twenty-four hours. Mindy agrees to TRY IT.

INT. DRESSING ROOM 2 - DAY

LUCIA tells Mindy about properly fitting her bra, because if she's got it wrong, her BREASTS WILL BE SORE, she'll look TEN POUNDS HEAVIER and the girls WILL NOT BE AS PERKY AS THEY COULD BE. Borrowing a TAPE MEASURE, Lucia checks Mindy's underbust while STANDING, BENT OVER, and LYING DOWN. It TAKES A WHILE. This is a subject Lucia IS PRETTY PASSIONATE ABOUT.

And then the eighties movie montage was over and Mindy realized she was in a makeup store. An actual *makeup store*, where the employees wore matchy-match outfits and name tags and hats and you had to bust out a credit card to pay for stuff. And Lucia had bought her some eye shadow with a French name, along with a bunch of other stuff, and had taken her into the cramped employee space in the back to put it on her. She was so intent that Mindy would've giggled if Lucia hadn't been so insistent on her holding still.

"The key," Lucia was saying, sounding like she had an IQ of 240, "is to separate the socket line up top from the crease. We do not put shadow on our creases unless we're, like, Asian or something. Really Asian, too, not *Last Airbender* Asian." She stopped to check her work, then smiled like it was the shape her mouth was made to fit into. "You're so pretty."

Mindy looked away. Why did people feel the need to humor her—condescend to her, really? She knew what she looked like. "No I'm not."

Lucia grabbed her by the chin, holding her still to work her lips with some gloss. "Shut up, you're cute and sexy, deal with it."

But Mindy knew she wasn't. Lucia was the one who was pretty. This close, she could see it in every pore. She was made of awesome. Especially her lipstick. The last time Mindy had tried to put on lipstick, she'd looked like Ronald McDonald, but Lucia's lipstick was amazing. It was so red. Red and red and red.

Mindy looked away again. This time Lucia let her.

"Okay, done! Ready to start your modeling career? Wait, wait, no, not yet! I want to see how you look in that Matthew Williamson dress."

Mindy's ears grew even hotter, which seemed impossible without them achieving nuclear fusion. "Good, I can look *completely* ridiculous."

"Well, true, you're no *me*, but that's not so bad." Lucia gathered up the spoils of the hunt into one of their shopping bags. "It's always the best food that has flies buzzing around it, y'know? Guys like Quentin." Lucia realized her thoughtlessness in one epic contortion of her face. "Oh. Oh! Not that you look bad or anything. You always look great—I mean you belong with someone who likes you even with your awful fashion sense. For your heart and shit. Come on."

They drew the attention of mall security, going into the nearest boutique with a bunch of shopping bags already full, but Lucia just laughed when Mindy pointed it out to her. They were only going to use the dressing room, after all.

Inside the coffin space of a dressing room meant for one, Mindy held the dress over her body again. Light olive-green with white daisy lace embroidery, green bead raffia and sequin embellishments. It didn't grab the eye like Lucia's wardrobe did, but Mindy liked how it looked on her. Lucia was right about that much.

"I'm stealing this from you," Lucia said, dragging a pink Alexander Wang crop top from one of Mindy's bags. She held it before her chest in the mirror, looked undecided, then peeled off her Famous Last Words tee to try it on.

Her bra was Armani—one of those things you saw on girls who were someone's thinspiration. Mindy was staring. She hated that she was staring. Then Lucia unhooked her bra. Unbroken by straps, the expanse of her back was long and smooth, and you just wanted to touch it. Like it was a dolphin or something.

"Hey, you sure you want to do that?"

"Why? You think there's a hidden camera in here?" Lucia turned to her, and Mindy thanked Isaac Newton that physics kept her bra in place. Mostly.

"No," Mindy said. "Wait, is there? No, I just mean, in front of me."

Lucia smiled fondly as she took her bra all the way off. Mindy shut her eyes. "Mindy, besties share everything. Including what their nipples look like."

Mindy gestured blindly, but stopped when she had a nightmare vision of accidentally grabbing tit. "It's just...Would you take off your clothes in front of a straight guy?"

Lucia snorted. "Yes. Obviously."

"I mean, a straight guy you weren't dating."

"He'd have to buy me a drink, but—"

"Is there a situation where, like, you'd take off your clothes in front of a guy because he was gay and didn't care but not in front of a straight guy because he'd be perverting?"

"Well, I'd have to be wearing cute underwear, because those gays can be vicious when it comes to ladies' undies, but—whoa, do you think I'm gay?"

"No! Me, I'm—maybe."

"Maybe you're gay? What, did you just see Olivia Wilde?"

"Like, maybe I'm gay, maybe I'm straight, maybe I'm bisexual, maybe I'm demisexual—"

"What is that? That sounds like one of Luke Skywalker's friends. And would you open your eyes already? I promise I'm decent."

Mindy opened her eyes. Lucia had put on the pink shirt.

"That looks really cute on you," Mindy said.

"Thanks. I know. Tragically, I am ninety-nine percent heterosexual. I am entirely into dicks and Olivia Wilde."

Mindy took a deep breath. She felt like she should be panicking. Why wasn't she panicking? This was the first person she'd told about being less than straight, which also happened to be the first chapter in all those books about kids who got run out of town or lynched or burnt at the stake. And Lucia made her feel so *calm*. "The point is... I don't know where I'm going to end up. So I'd understand you being, like, concerned to take off your shirt and end up in my spank bank or whatever."

"Mindy," Lucia put her hands on Mindy's shoulders, "I would be honored to be in your spank bank." She pulled her jeans a ways down her hips. "Look how cute my underwear is. Look at my gay guy underwear. This is the underwear RuPaul would wear if he didn't have a dick."

Lucia had her laughing again. "Stop it! You're gonna make me pee."

"*Do not!* I just got that outfit right. Well, wait, not quite right—" Lucia took off her necklace, a simple gold cross, and put it over Mindy's head. "You're not, like, waging war on Christmas or anything?"

"Mm?" Mindy found a mirror, looked at the little crucifix in the hollow of her throat. "Oh no. Just not sure if God really cares about someone...eating sushi or whatever."

"Well, take that off if you're going to eat sushi, just in case." Lucia straightened it. "It looks nice."

"Yeah," Mindy agreed. "Wouldn't be disappointed to find this in a Cracker Jack box."

Lucia slapped her arm. "Ho. It's my grandma's. She gave it to my mom, and my mom gave it to me before—anyway, it's official. You're my baby. I've adopted you."

"Can I have a pony?"

"No."

Cut. Print. Fade to a Jamba Juice bar, where they waited in line because every boy and girl that had ever shared a boob felt compelled to also split a smoothie. Mindy had been pretty quiet. She'd had a lot of mental versions of this conversation, where she told someone and they had a big fight about slumber parties and yelled at each other and threw stuff, and it was all very dramatic. There was Linkin Park music, and she had a good cry.

Now she'd told someone, and there was no drama. No accusation that she was perverting on them or planning to "convert" them or any of the other horror stories she'd read online. Lucia seemed more curious than anything else. Maybe not bi-curious, but...

"So!" Lucia whispered in her ear. "You don't know if you're straight or gay. There a word for that?"

"Questioning," Mindy whispered back.

"Got it, got it, simple. How does one becoming "questioning" anyway? You weren't, like... I mean, you didn't walk in on your parents doing it or anything?"

"No, just lucky, I guess."

They got to the front of the line. Lucia ordered something with enough ingredients in it to sound like a magic potion. Mindy ordered the same. When Lucia brushed her elbow along Mindy's ribs, she paid. Galentine's Day was killing her allowance, but spending time with Lucia was worth it. *Someone should figure out a way to pay cute people to keep you company. Oh, yeah. Prostitution.*

Most of the couples left the store as soon as they got their drinks, on their way to one PG-13 activity or another, so they stayed, sitting in a booth near the back of the store. Lucia and Mindy and all their bags. Lucia was looking at her with that look that'd been seared into Mindy's brain ever since she'd told her parents. Someone who had questions but didn't know if it was pushy to ask.

Say what you would about Lucia, but she wasn't indecisive. "But how's that work? People either like pizza or they don't. They don't look at a slice of pizza and ask if there's a third option." Then Lucia drank from her smoothie like it wasn't a big deal either way.

Mindy blew out a gust of air that brushed the fine hairs on her forearm. "You've never looked at a girl and thought she was so pretty, you didn't know if you wanted to be her or...the other thing?"

Lucia grinned at her like Mindy was a kitten that'd gotten tangled in string. "Fishing for compliments now?"

"Not me, obviously!"

"Why obviously?"

Mindy shook her head to clear it. "Or a guy. Okay, a guy. A guy who looks really hot, and you know he's hot, but you still wouldn't screw him."

Lucia looked away thoughtfully. "Mads Mikkelsen," she said under her breath, nodding.

"It's like that. Kinda. Sorta." Mindy picked up her drink and turned it around in her hand. "I'm explaining it bad."

Lucia picked up her drink and held the lower half against her head, the ice helping with the Texas heat. "Is it weird that I'm asking? If you don't wanna talk about it—"

"I don't mind. It's just..." Mindy paused. She watched Lucia put the smoothie down. "Whether I'm going to be marginalized and persecuted for the rest of my life or whether I'm going to be normal."

Lucia's eyes sought hers. Lucia's were so blue that they seemed to glow. They stared at each other for a moment. "Are you scared to be gay?"

Mindy looked away. "Okay, that—"

"Sorry," Lucia said quickly.

"That's an okay question, but...we're at a Jamba Juice."

"We are at a Jamba Juice!" Lucia said, changing the subject very naturally. She picked up Mindy's empty cup. "You want another? Anything with seaweed is good. Seaweed is the chocolate of the smoothie world."

"Get me another one."

Lucia got back into line, leaving Mindy with her thoughts and a small panic attack. She hadn't pictured telling someone going like this. Telling a friend. Having a friend. It'd always just seemed...kinda obvious to her. Of course she wasn't *normal*—she wore horn-rimmed glasses and plaid pants and big, baggy T-shirts and Timberland boots like she was going to hike her way from Home Ec to Calculus. People saw her that way; so what did Lucia see her as?

Lucia returned, shoving Mindy's smoothie into her hand. "Okay, we've gotta book. You took a hell a long time coming out of the closet, and *Frankenstein* starts in two minutes."

"*Frankenstein*?" Mindy asked, trying to remember if Boris Karloff had been scheduled for the local Alamo Drafthouse that month. She thought it was all Christopher Lee.

"*Frankenstein: Rise of the Prometheans*," Lucia said in her best trailer voice. "I've been looking forward to it all month. Haven't you been paying attention to me?" she asked, throwing in a fake pout.

They reached the theater just in time, so there were ten minutes of previews, commercials, commercials for previews, and public service announcements that were really commercials to sit through *before* the trailers started in earnest. Mindy guessed people had liked movie trailers too much for the powers that be not to mess with them.

At least she still had her smoothie. Lucia had said "please" and had bent over really far, so the ticket-taker let them take their "outside food or drink" into the movie. She slurped it loudly, in competition with Lucia. The movie they were about to watch had opened as counterprogramming to *Valentine's Day 2: The New Breed* and a Ryan Gosling movie, so they had the theater to themselves. Between that and being teenage girls, they resumed their conversation.

"So, if you woke up one night and Chris Hemsworth was in your bed, naked and shit," Lucia began, "you'd kick him out because you might be gay? Follow-up, same question, Natasha Henstridge."

"Natasha Henstridge?" Mindy asked.

"You don't know who she is?"

"I know who she is, just—wow, dated much?"

Lucia stretched out, kicking off her flip-flops and putting her bare feet up on the seat in front of her. "I saw *Species* as a kid, and it gave me a total lesboner for her. She's cute, and it's an analogy, work with me."

"I don't know. I have no idea what I'd do with a naked guy or a naked girl. Good thing it hasn't come up much." Mindy followed suit, putting her Timberlands up on the seat in front of her, though she worried about breaking it. They were good-sized boots.

Lucia poked her in the side, right below her waist. "Because I could set you up, if you were looking in the guy department."

"I'll think about it."

"I could get you a picture of the dude's penis first, if that would help. Because you can just ask and they'll send you one. Boys are such sluts."

Lucia laughed. It felt good for Mindy to join in. Like they were singing a duet.

Mindy trailed off into another drag on her smoothie, slurping on the icy dregs at the bottom. "You were right about seaweed. For something that is one part weed and one part sea, it is not bad."

"Here." Lucia took Mindy's straw and put it besides hers in her smoothie. "Case you get thirsty."

The lights dimmed, and the stereo system got louder to signal "We're starting for real now." Even with no one else in the theater, Mindy spoke softly. Or maybe it was just what she had to say.

"We'd still be friends if I were gay, right?"

Lucia faced her in the sudden darkness. "Of course. I'd just start calling you my lesbro."

"Okay." Mindy sat back in her chair as the green of an MPAA-approved trailer finally came up. "Strong reason to be straight."

During the obligatory scary part of the movie where the heroine went into a dark and spooky apartment despite knowing there were monsters running around and it turned out there were monsters inside, Lucia grabbed hold of Mindy's hand. She didn't let go, even after Frankenstein saved the *Maxim* cover girl.

Toward the end, after a battle that broke most of the laws of physics that Mindy could name, the main bad guy lay defeated on the ground, his katana knocked far away. "You can't kill me!" he said, with all the gravitas a British character actor who hadn't managed to be cast in Harry Potter could muster. "You're Frankenstein... You're a hero! And I'm an unarmed man!"

"I'm not Frankenstein," said the guy with the conspicuous but not unattractive scars. "I'm his monster!" Then he dropped a refrigerator on the poor bastard.

Frankenstein: Rise of the Prometheans was the worst movie Mindy had ever seen. She had never had a better time at a theater.

They walked out of the mall, pausing briefly, regretfully, at the window of the jewelry store. Inside was a heart-shaped necklace that could be broke in half so two people could wear it. One half read *Best friends*, the other half read *Forever*. Lucia groaned lustfully as Mindy led her away.

Mindy drove them back home, where Lucia kissed her on the cheek and took back her necklace before she scurried out of the car to her own house. Mindy watched Lucia disappear through the front door before ambling to her own house. She noticed her parents' car in the driveway.

A sewer main had burst at the hotel, so the romantic evening had been cut short. Her dad was saying maybe they were getting too old to make a big to-do about Valentine's Day anyway, and it'd become one of those mild arguments that Mindy supposed cropped up when people had been married since the dawn of time. They suspended it, like halftime in a football game, to gently waterboard Mindy as to who she'd been with for Valentine's Day: Had she been with a boy? What was his name? No need to be embarrassed.

And Mindy pretended to look through the fridge for something to eat, replying *no*, it was just her friend Lucia, *yes*, just a friend, not a lesbian, a *cheerleader*. Her parents were ex-hippies and considered themselves pretty liberal, and maybe that was so for Texas, but Mindy thought they were more *ex* than *hippie*. They'd prefer Mindy be friends with gay kids, not be one of them.

They were great, really. She'd known one boy at school who'd kissed another boy and had been sent to a gay cure program that might as well be called Camp Lobotomy. Compared to that, her parents could lead a gay pride parade. But it was *so* obvious that their vision of their little girl hadn't been so butch, and they were still holding onto that picture in their heads. Like it was a losing lotto ticket, with them hoping the gambling syndicate was gonna call and say that there'd been a mistake, it really *had* won. That grated on Mindy, despite all the love and tolerance. All it took was one kernel between your teeth to ruin a tub of popcorn.

But wouldn't it be great if just a few more people could be like Lucia? Make bad jokes and ask questions and look at this whole *thing* that even she hadn't figured out as just another part of her, not some terrible secret like she was the Green Goblin or a Martian from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*?



She saw Lucia again at school the next day. The cheerleader looked perfect as ever. Perfect face between heart drop earrings, perfect breasts under a zip-front hoodie covered in little pink hearts, perfect ass in J. Brand skinny jeans, perfect toenails exposed by her wedge sandals. Perfect boyfriend holding her, kissing her, playing with her hair like it was his.

Mindy didn't cry. She didn't feel sad. She wasn't angry. But all of a sudden, she was driving home, and she didn't know why it was so hard to fill her lungs with air and just breathe.

Lucia was next door when she went into her room. Mindy didn't look at her. She needed to study. She didn't even notice her, not even a little bit. Not until she heard the voice outside her window.

"Knock knock."

Lucia was straddling the little bumped-out addition on Mindy's house that almost touched the little bumped-out addition on Lucia's house. *Shit, she's gonna fall.* Mindy ran over and threw open the window.

"You're gonna break your neck."

Lucia rolled her eyes. "You're supposed to say 'Who's there.'"

Mindy stepped out of the way and gestured for Lucia to come inside.

"Knock knock?" Lucia repeated meaningfully.

Deep breaths, Murphy. "Who's there?"

Lucia grinned as she answered: "Easily offended bear."

"Easily offended bear who?"

"Fuck you!" Lucia laughed at her own joke, perching herself on Mindy's windowsill. "Next-door neighbors," she said wonderingly, looking into Mindy's room. "You ever watch me get dressed in the morning?"

"You don't get dressed in there."

"Ha! You checked. You're such a perv."

Mindy smiled, but she didn't really mean it. Didn't smile with her eyes, as Tyra Banks would say. "Speaking of pervs... Heard you're not on the market anymore, West."

Suddenly Lucia wasn't smiling with her eyes either. "Lots of couples have fights, Mindy. It's not like me and Quentin broke up. Not officially. Officially-officially."

"He cheated on you."

"It was a blowjob."

"You can get herpes from a blowjob. It counts."

Lucia tried not to laugh, but her cheeks ballooned up until she just couldn't take it anymore. She giggled, and Mindy giggled with her because she didn't have any words to *tell* Lucia how special she was, how beautiful, how funny and clever and amazing she could be. How could she not know?

Mindy stopped laughing before Lucia. "Just tell me one thing. Why him? You could have anyone you want. Why someone who—why Quentin?"

Lucia spoke lightly, but it took an effort. Or maybe that was just Mindy's imagination. And she just *wanted* it to be hard for her friend. "Girls like me are supposed to date guys like that, you know?"

Mindy shook her head.

"C'mere." Lucia pulled her into a hug without waiting for an answer. "You're going to find someone. And it won't be like me and Quentin. It'll be easy. It'll be really, really easy for you two. How hard could someone have it? Being in love with you?"

The phone rang back in Lucia's room, a million miles away, and the ringtone was as harsh as a dentist's drill.

"I gotta take that," Lucia said as she slipped out of Mindy's hands. "It'll be Quentin. He said he'd call. He says we need to work on our relationship."

"You shouldn't be the one doing the work," Mindy said, but Lucia had already turned around and stepped over to the little balcony of her house and acted like she hadn't heard a single word of it.

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EX-WIVES OF DRACULA

BY GEORGETTE KAPLAN

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