

ELIZABETH A. DRYSDALE

A woman with dark hair and eyes, wearing a dark, hooded cloak, stands in a stone archway. The background is dark and atmospheric, with a misty or smoky ground. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting her face and the texture of the stone.

CURSE

OF THE

FORGOTTEN

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# Chapter One



Slipping *Frankenstein* into my back pocket, I grab my backpack from under the seat in front of me and follow the line of comatose passengers off the plane. The stale recycled air sits heavy in my lungs, my shoulder knocking into every other seat as I struggle through the narrow aisle.

I follow the trail of people to baggage claim, chewing on a black-painted fingernail. An older man decked out in a suit gives me a side glance and I stick my tongue out at him. Startled, his eyes go wide before his brows narrow and he turns away.

A chemically chipper voice announces an arrival from Houston as we march past an empty Mexican restaurant. We funnel down an escalator where our luggage waits on slowly rotating conveyor belts. My bag sticks out like a sore thumb, a faded grey that used to be black with layers of silver duct tape holding it together.

“Wren!”

Grinding my teeth, I pull my bag off the belt and look up at the woman rapidly moving toward me on stilettoed feet, her narrow figure swathed in white skinny jeans and a peach cardigan.

“Wren!” she shouts again, waving at me as she pushes through the growing crowd. “Don’t move, I’m coming!”

As if I had any other choice.

She grabs my arm with a vice-like grip and pulls me into an involuntary hug. “I’m so glad you’re finally here. Your dad and I have been so excited!”

“He’s not my dad.”

Linking her arm through mine, she gives me a red smeared pout. “It would devastate him if he heard you talking like that.”

She steers me through the airport without waiting for a response. It's not like she doesn't know how I feel. I'll never think of Mom's internet boyfriend as my dad. Regardless of how "serious" they think it is. Or that I've had to move across the country to some western forgotten desert state just to be with them. She lost the right to call us a family when she left me with Aunt Cora after Grandma died.

Walking through the double doors, I stumble in blindingly bright light and a burst of dry heat. When my vision returns, I almost run back inside. It's like I've gone colorblind. The ground, the cars, the people, everything stretches out before me the color of dust.

My legs freeze and the person behind me rolls over my foot with their suitcase.

Mom babbles on next to me, not even pausing so that I have to stumble after her. "I was so upset to have to leave you behind in New York like that. I've thought of nothing but having our family reunited this last year."

"They're not my family."

"Don't say that!" she gasps. "Just give them a little time and you'll love them just like they love you."

At this rate I'll grind through my enamel in the first day.

Mom smiles, pert-pink lips tightening as we approach her shining silver Honda. "I need you on your best behavior, Wren. Don't ruin this for me."

Ignoring her, I pull the trunk open and shove my battered suitcase inside before slamming it closed. Climbing into the passenger seat, I sigh as the air conditioning blasts into my sweat damp face.

"I know this isn't New York, but honestly, sweetheart, it's so much better. You're not going to miss the city at all." Her words pound at my skull. "It's so refreshingly real here."

She pulls out of the parking lot, the clicking of the blinker filling the silence between us. The car surges forward as she merges onto the highway headed north.

"Have you thought about fixing this up at all?" she asks, gesturing to my messy black dyed ponytail.

"It's fine."

“I just want you to have the best start possible. People here aren’t so rough around the edges.”

I glance down at my baggy jeans, the toe of my converse poking out underneath the flare cut. “I like the way I look.”

Her lips pucker but she doesn’t argue with me.

I try not to look at her, but the click from her manicured fingers against the steering wheel makes me want to puke. No matter what she says, I know what’s hiding beneath the plastic veneer she’s put up. The same grungy nothing as me. New clothes and a new attitude doesn’t actually make her any different. And I know what really lies beneath.

“I enrolled you in our local high school with your sister. She’s so excited to show you around.”

“She’s not my sister.”

Mom sighs, a crack showing through her fake front. “We’re all family now. I wish you could learn to accept that.”

“Just because you moved across the country for your internet boyfriend doesn’t mean we’re a big happy family.” My fingernails dig into my palms, leaving crescent rings behind.

The miles pass in silence before she turns the blinker on again, getting off at the Greendale exit. The irony of the town’s name isn’t lost on me as more of the same dusty brown permeates the landscape.

We drive down a main street barely worth mentioning, just a few slumping stores covered in a layer of tan dust before she turns again and pulls up to a ’70s brick split level.

“At least try to smile. It would do wonders to soften the edges of your face.”

I contort my mouth into a grimace and she sighs again, turning off the car and getting out, her heels clicking against the cracked sidewalk. Grabbing my suitcase and slinging my bag over my shoulder, I follow her into the house.

The walls of the entry way are painted a cheery yellow, and at the top of the stairs a half bald man clutches the arm of his cheerleader-type daughter.

“Bill!” Mom yells, despite how close they’re standing to us. “I’m so glad you’re here to meet my Wren!”

She shoves me forward, my sneakers squeaking against the tile.

“Welcome to our home, Wren,” Bill says, smoothing the nonexistent wrinkles out of his tan button up shirt. “We’ve been so excited for you to get here.”

Their smiles look straight out of an orthodontist office.

Mom rushes up the stairs and into Bill’s arms, leaving a lipstick kiss on his cheek. “Isn’t it so great? Our whole family finally together?”

Bill opens his mouth to say something, but I cut him off. “Where’s my room?”

“I thought we’d spend the evening together,” Mom says with a pout.

“You want my suitcase to sit by the door all night?”

“It’s this way,” Bill’s daughter, Ruby, says. She points down the stairs and I pick up my suitcase and follow her into the dark split-level basement.

Ruby flips a switch and the narrow hallway is flooded with yellow light. She turns to the left and gives me the rundown of the three closed doors. “Yours, the bathroom, and mine.”

Out of sight of either of our parents, the fake smile slips off her lips.

“Sweet.”

I turn the knob and shutter myself in my new room, closing the door as quickly as I can. Leaning against the doorframe, I don’t bother turning on the light. There’s nothing here that light would improve.

The curtains covering the half window are two inches too short, letting in the last burst of orange light before the sun goes down. The walls are painted a pale lavender, the white wood frame of the twin bed is pushed under the window, illuminating the pattern of pansies sprawling across the comforter. The bed and the dresser are the only furniture, both carved in a whimsy more suited to a little girl, and definitely not fitting for anyone who actually knows me.

Throwing my bag down, I climb on the bed and pull my book out of my pocket. The words swim in front of me as I try to concentrate. Leaning against the headboard, I close my eyes.

I only have a year left, just one year before I can go back home and get on with my life.

A soft knock echoes through the nearly empty room. “Wren? Are you coming up for dinner?”

“Not hungry.”

“Are you sure? It was a long flight, and the food they serve on planes is barely palatable if they feed you at all. Plus, you’ll want to keep your strength up for school tomorrow. Bill grilled some hamburgers. Don’t you think you could come up and say thank you?”

I roll over, giving her my back despite the fact that she can’t see me.

“Wren?”

After a long pause she sighs, and I listen to Mom’s heavy footsteps as she heads back upstairs. She may have made me come out here, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to play nice.



The pounding on the door is anything but gentle as I roll over, the faint hints of morning sun peeking through the gap in the curtain.

“Get up, Wren. You have school today!”

Groaning, I turn over and press the pillow over my head.

“If I don’t see you upstairs in ten minutes, I’m coming in.”

I toss the pillow at the door with a thump and Mom’s footsteps recede up the stairs. Stumbling toward my suitcase while pulling off my tank top, I unzip the front pocket and grab my deodorant and slather it on. Another dark tank top and a zip up hoodie lie on top of the unorganized mess inside my suitcase. Tugging them on without thinking much about it, I head into the pristine white tiled bathroom and give my eyes a thick outline of black eyeliner and brush my teeth. A jeweled barrette sits on the counter. I slip it into my pocket with a grin.

Ruby audibly gasps as I climb the stairs from where she sits with a half-eaten bowl of cereal at the island counter. “That’s quite a look.”

Shrugging, I sit next to her, waiting for Mom to see that I’ve surfaced.

“Wren! That can’t be what you’re wearing to school,” Mom says, voice hushed as she turns around from the pantry cupboard holding a box of Captain Crunch.

“Is that for me?” I ask, pointing at the box.

Ruby slides me an empty bowl and I snatch the box and pour myself a bowl before Mom can start her tirade.

“I tried to tell you before, this isn’t New York, people don’t dress like that here, or scowl so much. Can’t you just try to fit in a little? For me? This move is very important to me. We’re going to be here a long time and I just want the best start for us.” She looks near tears, but her mouth stays in a tight line. “Now, if you didn’t bring anything acceptable, I’m sure Ruby wouldn’t mind sharing something with you until we can get you more appropriate things.”

Ruby gives me a half smile, her eyes still wide as she watches me shovel down the cereal. She’s wearing a nondescript pair of skinny jeans and a floral blouse with a cream cardigan thrown over the top, a single silver ring winks on her finger, and her blonde hair is straight and shining down her back. No, thank you.

“It’s just school. This is the same thing I wore last week to school. I’m sure it’s fine,” I say, dry crumbs scattering across the counter.

“Like I just said, you’re somewhere new. You should try a little harder to make a good impression. Do you have any idea how hard it was to get you enrolled in the middle of the school year?”

I put the spoon down. “Then why didn’t you just leave me with Aunt Cara? I didn’t need to come out here, we were all pretty happy with the situation when you took off to live with your boyfriend and abandoned me.” No one had to pretend anymore.

Mom’s jaw twitches. “You’re here now, with your family. It’s time for you to get used to it. Now, if you won’t borrow something from Ruby, then I’ll have to take you shopping after school today. Be sure to come home promptly after last bell.”

Mom marches from the room, heels clicking against the cream floor tile. Ruby grabs her pink backpack from where it slumped against the side of the white cabinets.

“Should we get going?” she asks.

“If we must.”

I follow her down the stairs and through the front door. She gives me a sidelong glance as we walk along the cracked sidewalk.

“What?”

“Don’t you want your backpack?” she asks.

I shrug. “What for? I don’t plan on doing anything today.”

Her mouth makes a small *o*. “But we’re going to school. I’m sure they’ll have tons of make-up work for you and new assignments to keep up with us.”

I shrug again. Her shoulders tense but she doesn’t push it. The corner of my lips quirk in a smile. I know not caring about school really plays into the “I don’t care” persona I’ve got going on, but honestly, I finished everything I needed to for this year back home. I took all the required classes for junior year during fall semester and was going to use this one to get ahead of my senior year. There’s only a couple classes I need before I graduate. I’m sure the high school already knows this, Mom made me send my transcripts two weeks ago to make sure everything would go “perfect” when I got here.

It’s a short walk to the school, only a couple blocks before an old yellow tinged brick building labeled “high school” comes into view. It’s like this town has been frozen in time, everything looking only a little bit sadder than it must have during construction.

Dew sticks to my shoes, bleeding through the black canvas tops as we jump across the grass. A few other students linger on the stone steps, laughing and talking as we push past them through the double doors.

I catch my reflection in the glass window of the door and smile at my black blur as it swings shut. Ruby points at the door to the left of the main hallway. “That’s the main office. I’m sure they’ll want to see you first thing.”

“Sure.”

She speeds up as she passes the office and goes down the locker lined hallway.

Whatever.

A heavy woman with a ’50s coif sits behind the counter height front desk. She gives me a wide smile.

“Can I help you?”

“I need my schedule or whatever. It’s my first day.”

“Oh, you must be Bill Waterford’s daughter,” she says with a grin, going through the files on her desk.

“I’m not his daughter.”

Her smile fades a little, but her hands don’t stop moving.

“Well, Bill called last week to tell us you’d be coming and your school sent us your transcripts earlier this month.” She pulls out my file and gives a low whistle as she thumbs through it. “You’ve certainly been busy, haven’t you? Your counselor hasn’t set up a schedule for you yet. I’m sure he wanted to know what your goals were here before he slapped you into any old class.”

“How considerate of him.”

“If you go down the hallway, his office is the first door on the left,” she says with a smile.

I saunter down the hallway, feeling my low-rise pants shift against my hips. The door hangs open and I knock on the red-painted doorframe.

“Wren! I’ve been expecting you.” A heavy-set man stands behind his desk, tucking his tie against his chest. “Come in.”

Sitting in the generic office chair, I balance it on the back two legs. His smile falters as he sits back down.

“So, I thought it’d be best if we went over your transcript in person.” He glances at my file and then over at me, his jaw twitching. “You weren’t what I was expecting.”

I raise an eyebrow at him and he looks down at my transcript. He pats down his hair, what little of it is left, and leans toward the computer.

I give him a tight-lipped smile and the printer behind him goes off. As he turns to grab the paper, I palm a small picture off his desk. He hands me the still warm paper with my schedule printed on it. There are only four blocks of classes, not the eight I’m used to. He’s signed me up for two study halls, American Literature, and a gym class.

“If you can pass American Literature, then you’ll be ready to apply for graduation this year.”

“Apply?”

“Well, you’re a junior and we want to make sure you’re genuinely ready for college. Have you thought about where you’d like to go to college?”

Instantly the flyer for NYU flashes through my mind but I just give him a shrug.

“Why don’t you make an appointment with me in the next few weeks so we can go over your options? Knowing what you want to do will make a big difference when applying for graduation.” He gestures toward the door. “It was

excellent meeting you, but you'd better run along before you're late for your first class."

Biting my cheek and shaking my head, I leave his office and the hallway the secretary's desk is in. The hallway that was empty when Ruby and I got here is flooded with students and the deafening roar of their noise. Glancing down at my schedule, I bite back a laugh as my first class is a study hall.

There's a map printed on the back of my schedule and I use it to lead me through the labyrinth of hallways to the library. It's the only room I pass that isn't full of people.

Grateful for the silence, I find a seat by the wall of windows and settle in for the next hour and a half. There's a small trash can next to me that I dump the counselor's picture that I took into. Pulling *Frankenstein* from where it's been folded in my back pocket, I concentrate on the words and ignore the hum of announcements coming through the speakers.

This day can't be over soon enough.



The day passes uneventfully, the American Lit class not posing anything close enough to a threat. Definitely nothing to warrant the counselor's worries.

When the final bell rings, I don't bother waiting for Ruby. I walk through the front doors, snapping the pile of bracelets on my wrist.

The chill in the air of spring should mean the world becoming a bit greener, at least it would at home. Here it's just a dull brown. Not even the beginnings of weeds sprout from the cracked sidewalk.

I take a deep breath to rid my lungs of the smell of chalk dust that feels like it's seeped into my skin. Buses pass me, the sound of laughter coming from the open windows.

It feels like defeat to go home right after school. I don't want to give Mom the satisfaction of following orders. Back home I'd spend the majority of my free time on the streets with my friends. Sometimes we'd have enough spare change to hit up the Chinese place on the corner by our apartment complex.

I wonder what they're doing now. If they even miss me.

Whatever, if what the counselor was saying is true, I could be home by this summer. So worrying about what they're doing without me is pointless.

Instead of following the road back to Mom's, I cut through a dusty field. I straighten my shoulders, ignoring the nagging fear at the back of my mind that whispers of snakes hiding out here.

A pair of black handlebars stick up through the brown grass to my right and I skip over to it. Wrenching the bike out of the dirt, I'm surprised to find it in decent shape. Rust is the predominant decorative color, but the chain spins when I press on the pedals and the wheels are still pumped.

I'd prefer a skateboard, but any wheels are better than none.

Grinning, I climb on the bike and take off through the field, onto the street, and through the row of houses behind the school. Picking up the pace, dry air blows through my hair, lifting it off my neck. Town only extends two blocks past the school, and I pedal hard for the desert.

I get as far away as I can while still being able to see the outline of the last row of houses. Just in case.

Climbing off the bike, I clamber up a wide low rock. I peel the paper off a granola bar I find in my pants pocket and chomp down. The sun grows blood red as it crests the mountain range in the distance.

Why anyone would want to live here is beyond me. Why Mom would leave New York for this is even more baffling. She couldn't pay me to stay here after I graduate.

The desert to the left of me dips down. I walk along the crumbling edge of dirt of what was probably an old riverbed, listening to the small clumps of dirt hitting the rocky bottom. Ahead a particularly large dirt clod hits the bottom with a hollow thud, even though I'm not even close to it.

I stop walking, turning toward the riverbed with a tilted head. Something's not right. Drawn in like a spell, I make my way down the steep incline.

Rocks skitter suddenly under my feet and I grab the dirt wall to keep from falling. A jagged piece of stone catches my palm, ripping a red line through my palm. I rip my hand away and curse under my breath.

Moving my hand sends a hot flash of pain through my arm. It jolts me back to the present, and I shake my head. The top of the riverbed looks so much farther away than it did from above. Cursing again, I ball my fist and ignore

the pain to protect it from the dirt floating through the air. I want to turn away and leave, but I can't. Something pulls me forward, farther into the riverbed.

The dirt clod that initially caught my attention shifts. I only have a second to look at it before the ground around it crumbles away and I scramble back against the earthen wall.

A two-foot section of the riverbed falls into the widening hole, rocks pinging as they bounce off whatever lies underneath.

My breath comes in short gasps, my hand clenched over my rapidly rising and falling chest. A metallic looking reflection sends a small glint of light out of the hole. I lean forward a little, to see where it's coming from, and another several feet of riverbed falls away, revealing a glittering pile of something in the late sunlight. Could it be gold? I heave a shaky laugh. That would be perfect. I lean over farther, pulse racing. The ground shifts under my feet and I back up. Okay. That's fine, I don't need to see what's down there. I can always come back later.

I turn toward the wall of the riverbed and using a few rocky handholds, I start climbing back the way I came. I make it a few feet off the ground when the rock I'm holding onto dislodges from the wall and I'm falling down. A strangled scream rips from my throat as I get closer to the hole. I grip the wall, digging my fingers in the earth until my nails are filled with dirt, but I stop short of the pit.

Taking a deep breath despite the quivering in my limbs, I try to climb out again. I take it much slower, testing each hand hold before using it. After a tense ten minutes, I pull myself onto ledge.

Laying there, I let out a breath of shaky laughter. Tears stream down my face as I roll onto all fours. I use the palm of my hand to wipe them away, ignoring the tingling in my ripped palm. The sun sinks below the jagged mountains, making it seem later than it actually is.

I stumble toward the bike and pedal it into town. The trip back feels much longer than coming out did. Maybe because of the line of red blood dripping down my wrist and splattering into the dry earth.

Dropping the bike into the fake green grass surrounding Mom's house, I let myself in the front door. The rich smell of baking bread fills the entryway as I climb the half flight of stairs into the main floor.

"I thought I told you to come right after school." Mom's disapproving voice drifts over me as I enter the small galley kitchen.

Her hair is pulled into a tight blonde ponytail as she mixes something in a large plastic bowl. The timer on the yellowed counter ticks down as I lean against the doorframe.

"Don't you have anything to say for yourself?" She glances up at me and stops moving with a gasp. "What happened to you now?"

I shrug. "Fell."

"You fell? You look like you've been rolling around in a gravel pit!"

Looking down at myself, I realize she's not that far off. A thick layer of grime covers my black pants and shoes, sticking to the skin on my arm.

Mom closes her eyes, mouths one, two, three, and opens her eyes with a dazzling smile. "Clean up and come back for dinner. The meatloaf will be ready in about twenty minutes."

Shaking my head, I jog downstairs and into the small bathroom. I leave my clothes in a pile, dirt falling off them to settle on the white tile. Turning on the shower, I wait until steam fills the air before climbing in.

The hot water cascades down my back, washing away the dirt and turning my skin red. I put my hand in the water, flinching as the water makes it burn. The dried blood refuses to budge, so I grab the bar of soap off the ledge and scrub it against my skin. The foam turns pink before I wash it off.

It smells like lavender which doesn't surprise me. Of course a vanilla like Ruby would like a smell like *lavender*.

When I'm sure every inch of my skin is dirt free and the bottom of the tub no longer has the flaked remnants of my adventure, I turn the shower off. My feet sink into the plush white bath mat and I grab an equally white towel from under sink and wrap it around my body while I dig around for something to wrap around my hand.

I actually laugh when I pull out the small first aid kit from the back of the cabinet. Of course.

Pulling out a few Band-Aids, I lay them out over my palm. It takes three of the regular size to completely cover the cut. The skin around the cut is puckered but not red yet. I should be fine.

When I get in my room, I grab my suitcase and flip it upside down, emptying it out onto the vacuum lined carpet. Digging around, I find some clean-enough clothes. Aunt Cara wasn't super worried about little things like laundry.

I brush my hair and leave it to air dry before heading upstairs. As much as I don't care about being with "the family," the rumbling in my stomach has me eager for dinner.

They're all sitting at the table off the kitchen when I get to the top of the stairs.

"Nice of you to join us," Mom says with a frown. "I thought I told you twenty minutes."

"Hard to keep track of time in the shower." I shrug and slide into the seat at the end of the table, a couple of chairs from Mom and Ruby.

Bill clears his throat. "Now that we're all together, let's bless this meal."

They reach out to hold hands, Mom and Ruby holding theirs out to me. This is a hard limit for me. Mom lifts her eyebrows at me, but I don't move to take their hands. I cross my arms over my chest and lean against the back of the chair.

Mom sighs and nods to Bill. He nods and bows his head, uttering a short prayer of thanks. They release hands and go right into eating, the only sound for a few minutes is the clinking of forks against plates.

"So," Mom says, her plate half empty. "Wren, how was your first day of school?"

I shrug, spinning peas around my half-eaten meatloaf. My appetite has vanished since I left home. "It was fine. I think I'll finish this year."

There's a thud as Mom's fist comes down on the table. She glances at it in surprise before looking back at me with a plastic smile. "What do you mean? Are you saying you'll be able to finish you junior year on time?"

I match her fake smile. "No, I mean I'll be able to graduate in May."

"I won't sign permission for that." She turns back to her food. "You'll finish your senior year just like everyone else. There's no reason to skip it."

“No reason at all, except for the fact that I’ll be finished with all the classes I need.”

“I’m sure there are some electives you haven’t taken yet. It could be fun to have a year of elective classes.”

I tilt my head at her, jaw dropping. “You can’t be serious.”

“I think it’s a great idea,” Bill adds.

“I don’t think you’re ready for real life yet. Life with us for another year will put you in a much better place when you go to college.” Mom takes Bill’s hand and squeezes it.

“You’re insane! I’m not taking a year of empty classes so you can live out this Stepford dream you have going on!”

Mom narrows her eyes. “I think you should be excused. You’re obviously exhausted from the day.”

“But I am ready. I have plans. New York plans. If you’d just—”

“That’s enough. You need to leave now.” Mom’s hands are white where she grips the table.

I slam my chair into the table so hard the glasses rattle and stomp down to my room.

Throwing the bedroom door closed behind me, I flop onto the bed with a sigh.

There can’t be anything she can do to stop me from graduating. If I’m finished with classes then I’m finished, what more is there to do? I’m not going to hang around for her vanity, no matter how many dainty frowns she gives me.

I hate that now that she’s gotten her life together, I’m supposed to just fall in line and change mine too. Then somehow she thinks that this will make up for everything. For leaving me over and over again and always choosing whatever man over me. I don’t need her to pull my life together and one more year of high school isn’t going to be enough to make her into a real mom.

Tossing the pillow over my head, I take some deep breaths to get our latest altercation out of my mind.

My palm twinges as I close my hand in a fist.

Sitting up, I pull the Band-Aids off and stare at the red streak running through my hand. This afternoon was definitely something that’s never

happened to me in New York. Safe in my room, my mind is free to wander over what happened.

I don't know why I felt like I had to go down there, but now that I've seen something, I can't just let it be. What was in that hole? Something was definitely reflecting sunlight out of it. If I were at home, I'd assume it was just water reflecting sunlight, but I'm not home anymore. Did I discover some old gold mine? This is the West after all. Isn't that how just about every town was started out here? By miners and cowboys?

Chewing on my top lip, I cover the scrape up. If I can find some rope, I'm going back tomorrow. There has to be something good about being stranded in this backwards town. If I discover gold here, I'll call it even.

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