

THE GIRL IN WHITE

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THE GIRL IN WHITE

LINDSAY CURRIE

To my son, Ben.

*Cheers to your kindness, your accomplishments,
and the amazing journey that lies ahead.*

We are so proud of you!

Sweet Molly once lived in Eastport
Sweet Molly once loved the sea
Sweet Molly lost Liam to the shadows
Now Sweet Molly is coming for ye ...

PROLOGUE

I shuffle the photos around my desk, sorting the ones I like most into a special pile. Our teacher assigned us this project over a week ago, but I'm just now deciding which images I want to turn in. It might seem like I've been procrastinating, but that's not it. I simply couldn't stop snapping pictures. I mean, this town really is beautiful. Picturesque harbors, turquoise water, and sunshine for days. If everyone who lived in Eastport wasn't so strange, I'd probably love it here.

I'm staring at a photo of a wave crashing over a cluster of craggy rocks nestled on the shoreline when it starts up...*the feeling*. I sit up straighter, too familiar with the goose bumps peppering my arms and legs. Deep down I know there isn't actually someone watching me, but that's hard to believe that when my heart is racing, and a scream is lodged in my throat.

Suddenly, I'm sweating even though I left the window open, and the air rushing in is cold.

When I look back down at my photos, *she's* there. Standing on the rocks in the picture is the old woman. The woman from my nightmares. I let my eyes flutter closed and try to force her out of my head. It doesn't work. She clings to my mind like a nasty weed, her mottled green fingers reaching for me even when I try to block them out. White eyes. Wrinkled skin. Worn rags over jutting bones.

She's not real. She's not real. She's not real.

I repeat it over and over, willing myself to be brave. When I reopen my eyes, she's gone. The photo is exactly how it was when I took it, frothy greenish-blue water rushing against the sharp, rocky shoreline. No woman. I let my head tip back and gulp at the cool air. Tears sting at my eyelids.

Everyone has bad dreams, but not everyone has the same one almost every single night. Then again, not everyone lives in Eastport, Massachusetts. Otherwise known as the most cursed city in the USA.

Lucky me.

CHAPTER ONE

Today is October first. It barged in on a gust of chilly air with red and orange leaves on its heels. Morning fog settled over our narrow streets like a cold, wet blanket, and everyone—and I mean *everyone*—is already wearing their chunkiest sweaters. For most people I know, October isn't just the end of T-shirts and flip-flops; it's the beginning of the *best* month of the year. Halloween month. The time when Eastport comes to life.

I will *never* be one of those people.

The bell above the door dings again, signaling another customer. This time it's a man and woman. They rush in, wide-eyed. As usual, their cell phones are up and they're taking pictures before the door even fully shuts behind them. The woman snaps a few pictures of the fake cobwebs Mom strung around the counter, while the man takes one of the tombstone

centerpieces on the table closest to him. Most people would just be digging their Halloween decorations out on October first. Not us. We have them out year-round. The whole town does.

I sigh and set my dish towel down then adjust the ghost-shaped apron tied around my waist. “Hi, welcome to The Hill. I’m Mallory. Can I get you a seat?”

The woman lowers her phone long enough to blink at me. I’m not great at guessing ages, but I think she’s in her thirties. Maybe younger. She looks me up and down, clearly surprised to see a twelve-year-old greeting her. “Wow. You work here?”

“This is my parents’ restaurant,” I answer, doing my best to sound chipper even though this is my least favorite place to be on a Saturday morning. I’d rather be sleeping. Catching up on my Netflix bingeing. Getting a cavity filled. Well, maybe not that. The point is I’d rather be pretty much anywhere but here. “I help them out after school and on the weekends.”

Snagging two menus off the counter, I lead them to a booth by the window. It’s my favorite spot in the restaurant, the only table that seems to get any sunlight at all. Everywhere else always feels dim and draped in shadows—probably because Mom and Dad like it that way. It’s *atmospheric*, they say. Just as I set the menus down on the table, the man clears his throat.

“Oh, um... We were hoping to be seated *in the back*.” He

whispers this last part like it's some special secret between us. I bite my tongue to keep from telling him that everyone knows why they want to sit there. Everyone has heard the stories.

I pick their menus up and make my way to the back corner of our restaurant. Dropping them down on a new table, I force a smile to my face. "This is the only table I have left back here. Is it okay?"

They nod vigorously. The woman starts scanning the room right away, her blond curls bouncing and waving at me as she jerks her head from side to side. I'm about to walk away and let their waiter take over when she leans forward. There's a conspiratorial smile on her face. *Uh-oh*. I know that smile.

"So, is it true?"

Her eyes dart to the wall, then back to me. I take a deep breath and remind myself to stay calm. Stay professional, as Dad would say. It's hard though. I'm so tired of this question. Tired of the cameras, the whispers, and the tour groups. My own gaze bounces to the wall, my mind snagging on the hundreds of coffins that linger just beyond it.

"No. It's just a dumb urban leg—"

My answer is cut short by my mother. She sweeps in so fast I didn't even see her coming. Dropping her hands to my shoulders, she steers me away so fast I nearly trip over my own feet. "Mallory, Mallory. Don't be silly! Of course, it's true."

Mom leans over their table, mouth spread into a sinister smile. “It happened in this very room. Although the stories are different, they all share one thing.”

“What’s that?” the man asks. He’s on the edge of his seat. They both are. I’m not surprised. This is why people come here. It’s not my dad’s homemade meatloaf and mashed potatoes or my mom’s nearly-famous cherry pie. It’s the wall. The story. *The curse.*

“The casket burst through that very wall.” Mom dramatically fans her hand out toward the wall a few feet behind them. It’s the wall that separates our restaurant from Old Shallows Hill Cemetery. Legend has it, many years ago on a stormy October night, that very wall suddenly started cracking. It splintered and broke so badly that a hole opened up and dirt started rushing in, followed by...a casket. The casket slid right into the middle of the room when people were eating. And that’s not the worst part. Legend also claims it opened. Locals *love* to gossip about the rotting, flesh-covered bones that reportedly scattered across the room, a few of them making their way all the way to the tabletops. According to one version of the story, a bone even landed in a bowl of clam chowder, and the woman eating it fainted dead away. *Gross.*

“No one knows who that poor soul was—the soul whose eternal rest was disturbed that fateful night.” Mom pauses

and walks from table to table. They're all listening now. Forks hover in midair, eyes track her every move. Yup. As usual, she has them mesmerized. "But we do know one thing."

Silence for at least five full seconds. That's how she does it. Hooks them. When Mom finally starts speaking again, a few of her customers jump.

"They're angry and looking for revenge," I've heard the words so many times that I mouth them along with her. So ridiculous. Not only is there zero proof that a casket ever crashed into our restaurant, but even if it did, so what? I don't see how that's any worse than a bird flying into the window or a car accident happening outside. I guess that's part of living in Eastport, though. According to the locals, everything bad that happens here can be linked to one curse or another.

"Revenge on anyone who steps foot on this land." Her sinister smile is back. "That means revenge on every one of you. Oh, did I mention that the entire staff who was working in the restaurant that fateful night died a gruesome, untimely death?"

A few gasps break the silence. The couple I seated immediately starts snapping pictures of the wall like it's something magical. It's not. It's just a plain old wall with some black-and-white photos of the dining room back when it was called The Roosevelt. But because this wall is the only thing

standing between our dining room and the bodies buried in the hill on the other side of it, people are fascinated. Toss in the casket story and the restaurant is *always* busy. On the weekends, people are willing to wait over an hour for one of these tables and my parents love it. Dad makes gravestone-shaped pancakes. Mom props napkins up on the tables like little ghosts.

It's bananas. We moved here because Mom said she wanted a change of pace. Dad said he wanted whatever Mom wanted. I think they just needed to get away from their problems in Chicago. Mom worked as an assistant at a law firm, and Dad worked at a bank. I heard them complain about work a lot back then. Bills, too. They're careful not to talk about that stuff in front of me, but sometimes I wish they would. Then maybe I'd understand why they dragged me to a town held together by stupid legends and bought a restaurant everyone thinks is cursed.

I walk away in a huff as another camera flash goes off. A year and a half later, and I'm finally realizing the truth: the only thing that's cursed here in Eastport is *me*.

CHAPTER TWO

“Mallory,” my father says, his scowl deepening. He wipes his hands down the front of his apron and beckons me into the kitchen. “Haven’t we asked you not to do that?”

“I was just telling the truth,” I mumble.

“Well, stop. You know better.” He looks through the door at Mom, who now has everyone out of their seats and crowded around the window facing the graveyard, and smiles. “That legend is our bread and butter. It’s why the restaurant is doing so well!”

He’s not wrong. The Hill looks great now, but the first time I came here it was a dump. The people who owned it before us were so behind on their rent I guess they stopped fixing things that broke. The counters were dingy, the leather on the booths was cracked and patched, and the floors were

chipped from one too many fumbled coffee mugs. Even the paint was peeling. I had no idea why my parents were interested in it. Before this, their idea of homemade dinners was those little meal kits the grocery store puts together—the ones that include all the ingredients *and* a recipe card. Then they suddenly wanted to move across the country and become restaurant owners?

So. Weird.

I blame my uncle Ricky. He's a real estate agent in a neighboring town. If he hadn't given my parents a sneak peek of this listing while we were here to visit him, none of this would've happened. I'd still be in Chicago, where people aren't obsessed with witches, and curses, and ghostly stuff. I wouldn't be living in a rental because we still can't afford a house. Oh, yeah...I'd also be sleeping right now, instead of wiping down crumb-covered tables.

“Plus, this is probably going to be our best month!” Dad exclaims. “You know how Eastport gets in October.”

Unfortunately, I do. Eastport has a population of seven thousand people. But during the summer and fall, our most touristy months, that triples. Apparently, some big television show on the Travel Channel featured our town ten years ago. They called it “quaint, yet foreboding,” and talked about how we have no less than seven graveyards within our city

limits. They also brought up all the bizarre legends people tell around here. Everything from ghostly apparitions by the sea, to haunted lighthouses, and of course, coffins crashing through walls. It brings a lot of weirdos here. *Especially* in October.

“Look,” Dad starts. “I understand this isn’t exactly your cup of tea. But this place,” he sweeps his hands out over the plates of steaming waffles and bacon waiting in the pickup window. “This place is paying the bills. It’s also keeping you in those fancy sneakers you love so much.”

Dad looks pointedly at my brand-new pair of Converse shoes. I really wish I hadn’t worn them today.

“I just don’t understand why we can’t have a *normal* restaurant.”

“What’s normal?” he poses.

“I don’t know. Maybe somewhere where Mom doesn’t go full-on haunted house every day?” I toss my hands into the air, bringing them down just as Arthur, the restaurant sous-chef, walks by with a plate of Six-Foot-Under Scrambled Eggs. It crashes to the ground thunderously, drawing a few shrieks from the dining room.

Mom pops her head into the kitchen. She eyes the mess on the floor. After a moment of shock, she claps. “Well done! Sorry about the mess, of course, but your timing was perfect!

I was just reenacting the casket crash and you two brilliantly provided the soundtrack!”

Leveling an *I told you so* look at Dad, I kick my feet out one at a time to get the bits of scrambled eggs off my shoes. Mom rushes back out into the dining room. I’d like to think she’s refilling coffee mugs, but I know better. She’s weaving more stories. Dark ones.

Sigh. I don’t know why I bother. There is no normal in Eastport.

Dad washes his hands and takes up his usual spot by the grill while I scoop up the eggs from the floor. “Look. Forget your shoe addiction. This restaurant is also keeping you at Harbor Point. You want to stay there, don’t you?”

I look up at the mention of my school. Harbor Point is my favorite place. It’s the only silver lining to living in Eastport. “You know I want to stay there. I worked hard to get in.”

“Yes, you did,” Dad says with a smile. “They would have been fools not to admit you. You’re talented, Mal. Very talented. But fancy art schools aren’t cheap.”

I know what he’s getting at. We never could have afforded a school like Harbor Point back in Chicago. We always had money for the stuff we needed, but there was never any extra. No fun dinners out, no limited edition sneakers, and definitely no private art school where I can take photography classes. It took

over a year for the restaurant to make enough money for us to afford it, but now that I'm finally there, I'm never looking back.

"I'm sorry," I say, my cheeks heating with guilt. I want to be a travel photographer someday, visiting faraway countries and taking pictures of toucans and ruins and...well, anything other than the same old stuff here. Plastic cauldrons brimming with fake fog. Oversized spiders perched in lawns. Graveyards around every corner. Harbor Point is my way out. "I'll play along next time."

"Thank you." Dad cracks a few egg whites into a skillet but drops the yolks in a different bowl.

"What's that going to be?" I ask.

Dad pushes the edges of the egg around until it stays in a shape he's happy with. Then he uses a wooden spoon to hollow out two circles toward the top. Grabbing the bowl off the counter, he gently sets one yolk in each circle. They look like bright yellow eyes popping out of a...

"Sunny-Side Up Skull!" He announces, sliding the eggs onto a plate and holding it out proudly. I nod, too grossed out to do much else. Who in the world would want their breakfast to resemble a skull with gooey eyes? Just then, a burst of applause sounds from the dining room. I look out just in time to see Mom taking a dramatic bow with a large fake bone in her hand.

Mmmm-hmm. Maybe Dad's skull eggs are going to be more popular than I thought.

"Hey, why don't you get out of here. Go hang out with your friends for a while," Dad suggests.

Hope blooms inside me. I quickly crush it down. Saturdays are The Hill's busiest days. Last weekend, there was a line outside until almost two o'clock in the afternoon!

Dad catches my uncertainty and nudges me toward the door. "Go. Janette is coming in early today, so we'll be covered."

"But who will clean up the tables?" I ask.

"Mom."

"And the cash register? Who will take care of that?"

"Janette," Dad chuckles.

I cross my arms over my chest. It can't possibly be this easy. "Who will seat people?"

"Stop," Dad laughs. "Everything will be fine here. What I'm worried about are those dark circles under your eyes, kiddo. I think you need a day off, okay?"

He has no idea how true that is. I rush forward and give him a hug. "Thank you!"

"You got it. And chin up. Things might seem tough now, but remember that Dentons don't—"

"I know, I know. Dentons don't give up." I finish his sentence for him.

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Peeling the apron off my waist, I wad it up and stuff it into my backpack. Time to get out of here before Dad changes his mind. Or worse, before Mom realizes what he's done.

CHAPTER THREE

I hit the sidewalk in a rush of adrenaline. Even though the skies are gray and a cold drizzle is falling, I couldn't be happier. This is the first Saturday in a loooooong time that I haven't spent all day cooped up in the restaurant. I could call Emmie or Bri and go shopping. I could snap some pictures. I could take a walk or maybe even go to a movie. I could...

Sleep.

Just thinking about crawling into my warm and fluffy comforter makes me yawn. It has been a long time since I had a whole Saturday to myself and even longer since I got a good night of sleep. It's virtually impossible. When we first moved to Eastport, the dreams didn't happen as often. Maybe once a month. Now? They're pretty much every night. *All* night. Sometimes they're so vivid that it takes me hours to convince

myself it wasn't real. That I'm safe. No wonder the skin under my eyes is always puffy and my friends keep asking if I'm okay.

"Mornin' Mallory!" Mrs. James waves from the doorway of the flower shop. She's a nice, older lady. Round and pink-cheeked even when it's cold outside. Today she's wearing a black T-shirt with a cauldron in the center. It reads *Eastport, MA. We'll put a spell on you.* Her wild white hair is covered by a baseball cap with a gravestone protruding from the top.

I pull a smile to my face. "Hi, Mrs. James."

"Got the day off work?" She waves some kind of garden tool in the air. It's pointy and pronged and looks more like a murder weapon than something she could use for potting. "C'mon in and I'll tell you all about the shadow that drifted down my hallway last night! It was positively terrifying!"

I nod and wave, hoping she'll think I can't hear her over the hum of cars on the street. I do *not* want to hear her story. People here are talkative. Too talkative. And it's never normal conversation, either. It's always some strange story they're hoping will become popular enough to end up one of Eastport's newest legends. And Mrs. James's flower shop? No thank you. I like plants and all, but her shop isn't cheerful or flower-filled. It's grim. Cobwebs stand in the corners and chipped pots filled with scraggly weeds line the shelves. I wrinkle my nose up at the memory of the smell. Mom says it's just fertilizer, but the

sour odor is so strong that it stays in your nose long after you leave.

I hurry down the street, desperate to get away before anyone else starts talking to me. Each store I pass is more decked out than the last. Black and orange ribbons are wound around the light posts and gauzy ghosts hang from the tree branches. The square is decorated like a graveyard. Plastic tombstones stand in rows and a scattering of fake bones dot the grass. A huge banner that reads *Happy Anniversary* is stretched between two giant maple trees.

Ah. Right. I remember now. Dad said something about this October being extra-important because it's the anniversary of the first recorded Eastport legend...er, curse. You'd think the town would celebrate the day it was founded, but no. They celebrate the first curse instead.

Molly Flanders McMulligan Marshall, otherwise known as Sweet Molly, supposedly lived here over two hundred years ago. Her twin brother Liam was a ship captain on one of Eastport's largest fishing boats. He died at sea in a horrible storm and Molly never got over it. Most folks around here believe the storm was already building when he was sent on that final fishing voyage and that Molly was the only person in town who protested. Everyone else said he'd be fine, that the barely-scraping-by town couldn't do without the haul he was

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expected to bring back. But when he didn't return, Molly's fear turned into grief. Her sadness grew and grew until one day, legend claims she walked down to the lighthouse in her best white nightgown and vanished in the morning mist.

Everyone loved Sweet Molly, so her presumed death shook the people of Eastport to their core. But what shook them the hardest was the news that with her final breath, Molly had cursed the entire town for choosing their precious fishing trade over her brother's life.

I snort at the idea. First of all, how could anyone possibly know what Molly said with her final breath? And secondly, I've probably heard five different versions of this legend since moving here. Some say Molly drowned. Others say she disappeared before she even touched the water. They do all agree on one thing though—her spirit roams the coastline by the lighthouse late at night, and if you dare to cross paths with her, she'll drag you beneath the frigid waters and into a watery grave as revenge.

Not something I'd celebrate, but whatever. Sweet Molly is the centerpiece of the town's monthly parade down Gaunt Street. *The girl in white*. A different resident dresses up in a flowing gown with a face full of cheap white convenience store makeup, then dramatically makes the trek to the lighthouse where she vanishes. Really, she just ducks into the trees

while folks *ooh* and *aah* like they don't know where she went. Everyone follows, including my friends, my parents, and a super creepy old man who plays a piano on wheels with keys made of bone.

Keys made of bones. What kind of town owns such a thing? Seriously.

A breeze suddenly whips through the trees, startling me. It's cold...so cold I shiver. The gray sky is darkening, and an ominous rumble of thunder echoes across the water. Black clouds roll in from all directions, casting shadows that give me the chills. Then the feeling comes, the one I get every time I'm alone. It's the sensation of eyes on me, of being watched even when I can't see anyone. I hate it. Scanning the area, I sigh. Like usual, there's no one there. I shake off the feeling, wishing I could be back in Chicago for just one day. Just one afternoon to walk down the streets of my old neighborhood where everyone would be minding their own business instead of trying to come up with new and more annoying ways to entertain tourists.

Thunder snaps again, this time louder than before. The clouds look especially dark floating against the light green of the water. I instinctively pull my camera out of my bag, remove the lens cap, and take a few photos. Who knows, they might come in handy for a project in the future.

I'm just about to start running so I don't get caught in the storm with my camera when I notice a frail-looking old woman hobbling along the dock. Is that our neighbor, Mrs. Barry? I take a few steps closer and narrow my eyes on her form. It has to be her.

Ugh. I have no idea why she's down here, but Mom would kill me if she found out I left her right before a huge storm. She's ninety-two years old and lives alone, but everyone in town pitches in and helps her with little stuff. Groceries, paying bills, getting around. And since I'm the only one here right now, it looks like I'm her helper today. So much for sleeping.

I jog toward Mrs. Barry. She's mumbling, pacing back and forth next to the water like she's looking for a lost item. Maybe she dropped something in the water? If she did, we'll never find it. The water is deeper than it looks by the docks.

"Mrs. Barry?" I call out. She doesn't turn around. Lightning cracks overhead. The sound is sharp and leaves my ears ringing. The trees jutting up all around me look gnarled now, creepy against the angry backdrop of clouds. Whoa. We need to get out of here quickly.

I pull to a stop right behind her. "Um, Mrs. Barry? I don't know if you've noticed but it's going to storm so I think maybe I should help you get home."

Silence.

“Mrs. Barry?” I repeat, this time a little louder. Maybe she has more trouble with her hearing than I thought.

She stops moving but doesn’t answer. Odd. I wait a long few seconds, then gently lay a hand on her shoulder to get her attention.

Mrs. Barry turns around slowly. Her movements are jerky. Strange. It isn’t until she’s fully facing me that I see the one thing I’m positive I’ll never forget as long as I live. *Her eyes.* They’re completely white. No color. No pupils. Just...white.