



THREE

# BENNY

PRESENT DAY

It had been mere hours since Benny agreed to play Evelyn's game, and now she and her mother were in their minivan packed with boxes. They were moving again. Her mom gave Sal notice immediately. There was no vacation time for a waitress on the job less than a month.

Truthfully, Benny didn't mind. She wasn't that attached to Boston—they'd been there less than a month, after her school year had ended in Vermont—but the thought of being homeless in a few weeks if she didn't find Evelyn's mysterious island made her feel queasy. The thrill of learning about the game, the inheritance, and Evelyn's letter had worn off slightly and now Benny was worried again.

Where would her mom move them next if this didn't work out?

"I'm excited. Are you excited? We're going to find this island together," Mom declared. "Be a team like you and your grandmother were when you played games." They were sitting in stalled traffic on the Long Island Expressway, two exits before it ended at exit 73. According to the GPS, they'd continue on for another thirty-five minutes to Greenport. "Won't that be fun?"

Benny had read and reread Evelyn's letter several times now, but she was no surer about how to find this island than she had been when Peter told her about the game. She'd read the journal pages too. The journal seemed to be from when Evelyn herself was twelve, and the few pages Benny had were about a day Evelyn and her friends had set out to visit their island—this sort of mystical-sounding place—when Evelyn met a strange man named Captain Jonas Kimble. Only Evelyn and her friend Aggy were able to see Captain Kimble and his vessel, which sounded like a pirate ship.

Was Evelyn for real with all this?

"Benny?" Mom prodded. "Isn't that a good idea? Us working together?"

"Yes," Benny said automatically, putting her feet up on the dash, the tips of her dirty white canvas sneakers staring back

at her. Was it a good idea? She wasn't actually sure. Her mom tended to get distracted easily. She'd need to be laser focused to find this island. June twelfth was in a less than two weeks. That wasn't much time.

If she did find this island, their money woes would be over. But if she lost...

She wouldn't. She was no quitter.

"If you're going to help me, you should probably read Evelyn's letter," Benny added. "It gives the first riddle. And then there's her journal."

"Her journal..." Mom repeated, thinking. "What does she write about?"

"The pages I have are marked *Entry One*. She talks about the island. It almost sounds...fake," Benny admitted. "Sort of magical? This guy shows up and kind of shoos them away before they get to the island. I kind of get the feeling she thinks he's a pirate."

"A pirate," Mom repeated. "I didn't think there were still pirates around in the 1800s. At least not the kind you're thinking of."

"Neither did I," Benny agreed. These pages didn't give her much to go on. She wanted to read more of Evelyn's story, but according to Evelyn's letter, to do that, she'd have to solve the riddle to find the first clue.

“When we get to the house, you can borrow my phone and google *pirates of Long Island*,” Mom suggested.

“That’s a good idea.” Benny couldn’t wait to get her own phone—Peter had said they’d provide her with one when they got to Greenport.

Just then the traffic started to move again. “YES!” Mom shouted. “We’ll be at Summerville House and the resort before you know it.”

*Let the game begin*, Benny thought, and her fingers began to tingle. What exactly was she getting herself into? *A new house*, she told herself again. *A place with air-conditioning. Possibly a new car*. She’d believe anything Evelyn wrote if it meant making these things happen.

A few minutes later, they were off the highway, driving past an outlet mall and every box store she could imagine. Soon the stores gave way to farmland and open fields where grape vines grew on trellises in long rows. Horses and cows grazed in the distance, and signs for various vineyards began appearing.

“Why don’t you read me the letter aloud?” Mom suggested. “And don’t forget the riddle.”

Benny pulled the letter and the journal pages out of her backpack again. The backpack was loaded with her most prized possessions. She didn’t have much. There was a small

wooden bird her father supposedly carved for her mother when they dated, and her travel games, like Scrabble and Tenzi. A book of crossword puzzles she'd gotten at the thrift store. A worn paperback copy of *Ready Player One*, which was her favorite book, even though it was superlong. Patiently, Benny read aloud:

Dear Everly Benedict,

I believe I am your great-great-great-great-great-grandmother, Evelyn Terry, and I've been waiting for you to break this curse for a very long time.

This letter will be difficult to comprehend, but I've taken careful measures to ensure my inheritance is left to you. To collect it, however, you'll need to play my game and complete it by June 12, 2025. The objective? Find something very important to me—an island that has been lost to the world. This task may seem impossible, but I know you can do it.

I've written an entire journal explaining what happened in the days leading up to the island's disappearance. For reasons I can't disclose in this letter, I have divided the journal up. Each time you

decode another riddle in my game, you'll receive more pages from my journal. Everything fantastical I've written in this journal actually happened. And everything that happened is my fault. But all is not lost. Knowing you will come along someday has given me hope.

I know now that you can break the curse.

Find the island.

Save them.

All of them.

I'm counting on you.

With deep love and  
admiration,

Evelyn Terry

Here is your first riddle:

Treasure, the object of this game,  
Waits on an island with no name.  
Find one or two of my favorite tomes  
Sitting somewhere in my home.  
Take care to read behind the lines  
For that first clue, so bound to find.

“Wow,” Mom said, her eyes on the road. “When Peter said Evelyn wanted you to find an island, he really meant it. This isn’t going to be easy.”

“No,” Benny admitted. “But she wants me to win, right? So I’m sure each clue she left me will lead me closer to finding it.” *I hope.*

“Yes, but what does she mean by a curse? Or *save them?*” Mom asked. “Save who?”

“I don’t know,” Benny said, looking at Evelyn’s handwriting again. “The letter is confusing. She seems afraid to say too much. And the first pages of her journal don’t talk about anyone needing rescuing.” Benny assumed there had to be more Evelyn wasn’t telling her yet. She had to assume the first clue would offer more insight and journal pages. She just had to find what Evelyn had hidden. “I’m just going to focus on the first riddle. Clearly, she wants me to find one or two of her favorite books, right?”

She looked out the car window at a beautiful robin’s-egg blue wooden sign hanging on a large shingle: *Terry Inn Resort, two miles ahead. Terry Estate Vineyards, straight ahead.* Benny looked at the letter again and bit her lower lip. She still felt like she was missing something. What did Evelyn mean by *break the curse?* She wrestled with the riddle for a few minutes till she heard the GPS say, “*Your destination is on the right.*”

Benny sat up straight when she saw it. “Hold up! That’s our house?”

Mom screamed, “Yes!” She took one hand off the wheel and shook Benny’s shoulder. “That’s our house!”

The minivan reached the end of the long driveway, and Mom cut the engine. To their right was a path to the Terry Inn Resort, and to their left was the house. Benny recognized Summerville from Peter’s photo, but in person, it was even more stunning. It had gabled roofs, bay windows, and two brick chimneys nestled on either side of a rooftop patio. Several porches and balconies overlooked the waterfront behind the house, and in the distance, they saw two pools—one at the inn and one at the main house.

Benny and her mom looked at each other and jumped out of the car. Mom’s eyes filled with tears. “Benny... This is our *house*,” she repeated.

They’d never had a house of their own before. They’d rented an apartment on the first floor of a house with Grams, and when she’d passed away, they’d rented apartment after apartment in large buildings, never having a place to truly call home. Benny bit her lower lip to keep from crying herself. *This is our house...for now. If I don’t find the island, Evelyn takes it all away.*

“Welcome!” The voice was clipped and Benny detected with a hint of a British accent.



Benny and her mom turned to the front door, where an older gentleman was waiting for them. Benny quickly sized him up: in his sixties, salt-and-pepper hair, cared about appearances (he was wearing khaki pants and a sweater vest in June). Maybe he also liked birds, since a small black bird was embroidered on his vest pocket.

“Am I to assume you are the new lady of the house?” he asked, looking directly at Benny.

Benny looked at her mother, who was wiping her eyes. “We both are.”

The man smiled. “Noted. Lynn and Everly ‘Benny’ Benedict, I presume?”

“That’s us,” Benny said. “And you are?”

The man’s blue eyes looked almost as gray as the clouds that speckled the sky (it looked like it might rain). “Wallace Ingram, but you can call me Wally. I am the caretaker of the main house. Summerville has been awaiting your arrival for a long time.”