



DARKLY

ALSO BY MARISHA PESSL

Neverworld Wake



Special Topics in Calamity Physics
Night Film

DARKLY



MARISHA PESSL

WALKER
BOOKS

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First published 2024 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2024 Marisha Pessl

Cover illustration © 2024 Casey Moses

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This book has been typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5295-2692-9

www.walker.co.uk

These are ADVANCE UNCORRECTED PROOFS for reviewing purposes.

Please note that all contents and publishing information are subject to change. When quoting from this book, please check publishing details and refer to the final printed book for editorial accuracy.

FOR WINTER, AVALON, AND RAINE

DARKLY



The website is stark and black, like the Darkly Rasputin box, with the blood-red Victorian letters of Hecate.

The site crashed again this morning, due to heavy traffic. It's been down all day.

And I've been in a state of panic, certain I'm too late, that in true Arcadia Gannon fashion, I've squandered what little crumbs of luck were tossed my way. But now I see, as I move through the crowded school bus and throw myself into the last seat, the site is live again.

Yet my relief quickly slips from excitement to worry. Because this means I have less than six hours to catapult myself out of early retirement and seize my destiny.

THE LOUISIANA VEDA FOUNDATION

**seeks 7 high school students
to take part in an inaugural
summer internship program.**

**Earn £2,000/week
Responsibilities include:
Office organization
Community outreach
Data entry**

To apply, please answer the following:

What would you kill for?

**All applications must be submitted by 15 March at
03.00 a.m. GMT.***

***Only direlings need apply.**

I hunch low in my seat, careful to hide the screen of my phone from the kids around me—no need to give them free arsenic to sprinkle in my tea. I pull on my headphones and crank the volume to Ella Fitzgerald’s “Blue Skies.”

Yes, I’m the only junior who still takes the bus—no wheels of my own, no boyfriend or bestie to give me a ride. This has forced me to punt the smidgen of respect that should rightfully be mine, having survived nearly three years of the hellscape known as Eminence High School. I used to have friends here, but one moved to San Francisco

and became cool. The other moved to South Florida, akin to being launched into outer space.

I am the girl who runs an antique shop. And like some odd bird species sequestered for decades on a musty island, I have evolved to be at home among the old-fashioned and passé. My best friends in the world are Basil Stepanov and Agatha Sweeney, both over seventy-five, with cataracts. My ideal wardrobe consists of cloche hats and box-pleated skirts. If I had it my way, the world would go back to communicating by telegram and candlestick telephones. Two years ago, at Holiday Assembly, I tripped on the risers in front of the whole school, and as I fell, I blurted without thinking, “Jeepers!” I also know too much about Humphrey Bogart and the Great Depression for it to be remotely healthy.

I spent years trying to hide my antique nature, to pretend my natural tendency was not toward Parcheesi, needlepoint pillows that read BEE NICE OR BUZZ OFF, and high-neck silk blouses in rose, lavender, and powder blue.

But it was a whole lot of effort and stress. And it didn’t even work. Everyone still called me Nana. Now, I hide from exactly no one that I use the word *muss* in ordinary conversation.

As the bus bounces out of the lot, I scroll to the bottom of the internship page—and wish I hadn’t.

429,222

No, it’s not the number of page views or likes. It’s the number of kids who have applied.

To seize my destiny, I’m competing with over four hundred thousand teen geniuses.

I know for a fact they’re geniuses, having wasted an inordinate number of hours *not* expertly crafting my own application—as

I should have been doing, night and day. Instead, I've been freaking out over the competition, trawling social media for the thousands of hashtags that have popped up like poisonous dandelions in every corner of the internet ever since the internship was announced a month ago:

#louisianarises

#louisianaforever

#louisianalivesagain

Everyone and their brilliant cousin is applying, *literally*—from the sixteen-year-old star of the Warsaw Philharmonic to a thirteen-year-old from New Jersey who sold her first AI app to Google for seven figures; from Steven Spielberg's favorite godson to the tenor who performed "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" at the White House two weeks ago and made the president cry. Not to mention the girl who invented a sock that will never get a hole in the toe.

If that isn't enough to make me feel unworthy, the different countries of the applicants scroll relentlessly along the bottom, a simultaneously gratuitous and haunting information feed.

France . . .

China . . .

United States . . .

Brunei . . .

Republic of Belarus . . .

I'm pretty sure what all of this means is that I, Dia Gannon, aka Nana, of Eminence, Missouri, with a GPA of 2.7 on a good day and nothing to recommend me except an embarrassing knowledge of 1930s put-downs, have a better chance of getting admitted to Harvard, Stanford, and Yale as lightning strikes me while winning the Powerball lottery as the #1 USTA Junior Tennis Seed than I do of winning this internship.

Of course, the situation is so “Emperor’s New Clothes” on steroids with a healthy dash of pigs flying that when I’m not fretting about my competition, I am disturbed.

Because something is very wrong here.

Everyone is so excited to hear her name again—Louisiana Veda—groundbreaker, feminist idol, OG boss woman, ingenious inventor. This past month, there have been a zillion articles in every major newspaper written about her and her defunct company, Darkly, frothy pieces breathlessly recounting her accomplishments: her first masterpiece board game, Ophelia; her mysterious island factory; her love affairs. Oh, how much of a disruptive genius she was, a visionary, how underrated, iconic, misunderstood.

And how tragic, given the way her life ended.

Yes, it’s suddenly very trendy to love Louisiana Veda, forgetting how for so long she was ridiculed, a cautionary tale, a woman who drew too far outside the lines and got destroyed for it.

And in all the hysteria and hullabaloo, no one has bothered to notice how unlike Louisiana Veda this internship actually is.

The woman has been dead for thirty-nine years. I’ve read all the profiles written before her death and after. I know about the lawsuits, the scandals, the hate-filled editorials, the names they called her—joke, delusional, fraud, crazy, witch—the “No comments.” I know how she willed her own legend into being with the grit of a war general staging a near-hopeless offensive and a confidence that was provocative, threatening, and unheard of in a woman.

She was an orphan, after all, who never knew her parents—and never cared to.

“Right now, I might be related to Queen Elizabeth,” she announced with deadpan certainty in some ladies’ magazine, to a confused reporter who didn’t know what to do with her. “Just as

the electron, according to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, has no known location and speed, so do I live on the outskirts of the impossible and the mythical. My parents could be werewolves. That unknown makes me an inescapable force of nature."

And every few years, there are the breathless announcements from Christie's and Sotheby's auction houses, touting that the original prototypes of each game, the ones she crafted by hand, are monumental works of art, filled with secrets, hidden mysteries, and a dark, bewitching beauty—surprising everyone by commanding prices in the tens of millions, year after year.

"It is a testament to the endurance of Louisiana, how she continues to fascinate as an artist and a human, how relentlessly she holds our attention, even in death," the Director of Something or Other is always officially stating.

And never in any of this has there been any mention of a foundation.

Suspicious, too, is the announcement itself. I've been studying it for weeks, and I can categorically state: there is no concealed map, clue, invisible illustration, riddle, play, illusion, or trapdoor to be found.

If you know anything about Louisiana Veda, this makes zero sense.

Louisiana Veda created layers of deception at the openings of her games. She loved beginnings. And she took her time with them, taking players—innocent bystanders, she called them—by the hand, gently leading them through the creaking iron gate, down the path, and into her game, the sprawling forest she grew by hand. Every tree, stone, blackbird, shadow, and viper is there for a reason. Nothing is random, sloppy, or accidental in a Darkly.

A Darkly is a black fire lily, equal parts magic and danger.

It is the secret club at the end of the alley you can reach only by following faint footsteps in a locked graveyard yesterday. They are terrifying, shifting worlds of strangers and allies, ghosts and fiends, rolling hillsides cloaked in fog, out of which anything can step.

The gaming manual for Hecate is 74 pages.

The gaming manual for The Red Hounds of Garsington is 99 pages.

The gaming manual for 18 Lost Icelandic Sailors is a monster 211 pages.

So how could the real Louisiana Veda—even dead—be behind such a meager premise as “What would you kill for?” And the job duties so drearily listed: office organization, community outreach, data entry. How could her foundation understand so little about her?

Then there is the fine print: *Only direlings need apply.*

It’s an obvious reference to her eleventh game, Rasputin, the controversial conspiracy game of hypnosis. A direling is a master of manipulation, someone who spins a web of lies and kills without mercy—the winner of the game.

After public outcry in 1980, with parents contending the game promoted deceit in their children and endangered their well-being, by encouraging them to sneak out of the house in the night to play the game in backyards, playgrounds, and basements, Rasputin was pulled from shelves. Louisiana apologized, saying she regretted the game. Darkly recalled all eight hundred thousand copies.

So why would her foundation support the use of such an inflammatory term as *direling*?

“Dia Gannon! Are you snoozing again on my bus?”

I look up, jolted at the sight of the bus driver, Mr. Jasper, scowling at me in the rearview mirror. The entire busload of kids has turned to stare at me.

I realize we have pulled over at my stop, Dinglebrook Shopping Center. I grab my backpack and take off down the aisle, a few kids snickering as I pass. At least today—probably because they notice I'm unusually on edge—they don't whisper, *I smell cookies and old carpet* or *Nana, the hair looks a little blue today*.

Outside, I turn to apologize to Mr. Jasper. He might be rude, but he *is* over sixty-five and a member of AARP, which means I can't help but relate to him. But he's in a bad mood, probably due to another arthritis flare-up, and only slams the door in my face.

As the bus teeters down the highway with an exhausted groan, I shrug on my backpack and start across the parking lot.

My family's store, Prologue Antiques, is sandwiched between an out-of-business Carpetmania and the eternally popular Wok & Roll Hall of Flame.

The shop actually looks busy today, which means there is exactly one car out front that doesn't belong to an employee.



I had planned to work on my Louisiana Veda application at the shop.

Prologue Antiques is the best place to hide and dream, a deserted secret garden where it's always nightfall, even at noon in July. This is thanks to the dim green warehouse lighting, the labyrinthine aisles clogged with shadows and towering stacks of Victorian hatboxes, the stained-glass lamps, church pews, and display cases stuffed with grand estate jewelry resembling giant rainforest beetles playing dead. There are ads for five-cent sodas no one has ever heard of—Fine Cola and Duchess Pop—faded Gibson Girls in corsets, staring dolefully out from swings. Tarnished silver, Wild West tintypes, diner jukeboxes, Southern belle crinolines, pianofortes, high-relief cameo brooches, Victorian chatelaines—I love them all. Even though I'm always trying to sell them, when I do, I'm sad. It's like losing a family member.

Unfortunately, as I slip inside Prologue today, a full-blown Battle of Old Baldy is going down.

“Gigi Gannon promised she would be here to handle delivery. Where is she?”

My mom’s two full-time employees, Agatha and Basil—both predated most objects for sale in here—stand speechless before a gray-haired customer in tweed waving his cane in their faces.

“You’re not prepared to accept new inventory? I’ve just driven seventy miles! What kind of operation is this?”

“It’s actually . . .,” whispers Agatha.

“By Jove, it’s Dia!” shouts Basil, his face brightening. “Dia, may I introduce Mr. Asquith. He is delivering pieces your mother bought last night at his estate sale in Kansas City.”

“Of course. So nice to meet you,” I say hastily, heaving my backpack behind the counter. “Where’s my mom?”

“Gigi popped out,” says Basil. “Any idea where she went, Agatha?”

Agatha blinks, a shaking hand fumbling with the beaded chain on her glasses. “I believe it was . . .”

Agatha has not finished a sentence in eight years. She is Irish and was my late grandmother’s best friend. For years, she was her right-hand woman in the shop. Now, after a head injury from a car crash, Agatha has no idea where anything is, and never will again. But given the fact that she’s eighty and is the kindest human on the planet—and as much a part of the history of Prologue as the Ming dynasty vase containing mysterious ashes and the 1960s Milan glazed chocolate doughnut coffee table that we will never sell—she doesn’t have to.

“She probably took one of the B-B-Barnabys to the vet,” says Basil. He is stuttering, which means he is fatigued and stressed, maybe even experiencing flashbacks from his time serving in the 21st Infantry Regiment in Korea. “Have you m-m-met the Barnabys?”

Mr. Asquith clearly has not met the store cats, and looks like he'd rather have a pacemaker implanted.

"Don't worry, Mr. Asquith," I sing, grabbing the clipboard. "I handle all deliveries, and I've been expecting you. Remind me what pieces we're receiving?"

"A few odds and ends belonging to my late wife, Dolores."

As he says this, a massive moving truck pulls up outside.

THE DUKE OF MARLBOROUGH'S WHITE GLOVE TRANSPORT.
LUXURY SHIPPING FOR PRICELESS TREASURES!

My heart sinks. My mom's appetite for antiques is fifty times larger than our budget.

"A few odds and ends" turns out to be: eight Swiss grandfather clocks, a billboard from the 1985 Cannes Film Festival, a road sign—GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK, 6 MILES—and a sculpture of the late Mrs. Asquith, who apparently resembled an eight-foot bronze Sasquatch with the weight of a dying white dwarf.

Two hours later, I'm still helping the movers unload and making sure Agatha and Basil remain in the stockroom, where it's quiet and cool, so they won't have heightened blood pressure from the commotion, while also trying to locate my missing mom and distracting Mr. Asquith with the Steinway on which Cole Porter supposedly composed "C'est Magnifique," to avoid writing him a check.

My family's shop, Prologue Antiques, gets its name from Shakespeare: "What's past is prologue." It was started by my grandmother, who collected a lifetime of forgotten things. When she died, years before I was born, my mother, Gigi, took over the store in the automatic way one bears a family name. I love my mother, but she'd do better with a profession that doesn't involve real estate budgets, mortgages, inventory, the precise documentation of provenance, or a detailed five-year plan—like being a dog walker.

When Gigi Gannon does breeze in, with wet hair and flip-flops, I know way too much about the late Dolores's extensive breeding operation for purebred Chinese shar-peis.

"Mr. Asquith! Hello again! Cocktail cabinets arrive in one piece?"

"Don't you mean grandfather clocks?"

"Oh, right."

Beaming, my mom hugs the man as if he's her long-lost uncle. Gigi Gannon is not beautiful. Her gray-streaked hair is too frizzy and wild, her midnight-blue eyeliner drawn too haphazardly over her eyelids. But her warmth is contagious—and mesmerizing. Such high-flying spirits cause many strangers, including Mr. Asquith, to short-circuit in puzzlement as they face the sudden northeastern gale that is my mother, trying to determine where it's coming from, if a dangerous storm is approaching.

And there is, of course. My mother is a squall—though relatively harmless, she has been known to turn more than a few umbrellas inside out and suddenly kill the power.

"I was quite miffed, frankly," says Mr. Asquith, "how you were nowhere—"

"You've met my daughter, Arcadia? She runs the whole operation."

"Who? Oh. Well, she was relatively helpf—"

"Dia, please pay Mr. Asquith so he can go home? It's a long drive back to Columbus."

"Columbus? Why would I be driving to Ohio?"

After a surprised nod at the grandfather clocks crowding the front entrance like prom kings awaiting dates that will never show, Gigi is already off, racing down the aisle.

I head after her. "Mom, where are you going?"

“Sluder invited me to his hotel opening in Farmington. He did the trees.”

“How much do we owe Mr. Asquith?”

She’s hurrying past Art and Lighting into Vintage. “Thirty grand? What do you think about gumdrop topiary for the entrance? Sluder can do it in five minutes with a chain saw.”

“It’s too dark out front. Mr. Asquith says you agreed to seventy.”

“Maybe it is seventy.”

She yanks off her T-shirt, rooting through Depression-era house-dresses.

“Mom, please stop buying things. We have to move some of these big-ticket items before we add to inventory, or we won’t make rent.”

“Did you clean out that storage room by the boiler? I remember some rainy-day treasures down there.” Gigi is pulling on a black vintage 1950s Chanel sheath, holding up her hair so I can zip the back. “Can you close tonight? Sluder wants to take me out for sushi.”

“Sure. Who’s Sluder again?”

She fishes out the black Liza Minnelli faux pearls from the costume jewelry display, which I know for a fact give her neck hives, yanks loose a tan leather Halston clutch, causing beaded purses to avalanche across the carpet, and she’s off again.

“The landscape architect.” She is walking backward, winking at me as I pick up the bags. “Love you, babe. Did you know there are over forty types of pine?”

DERRINGER STREET CHAMBERS
20 GROSVENOR SQUARE
LONDON

Louisiana Veda
Darnamoor Manor
3 Starne-upon-Sea
Thorwood, England

2 February 1965

Ky darling Lou,

I hope this letter finds you well. I hope as you read this you stand in your vast gardens--the one you never allowed me into--under a blue sky, and a flock of bluebirds chase the clouds. I hope you are filled with a sense of divine triumph. Because this lightness in this minute, your belief in the supremacy of your future and what you have built, the joy you feel upon opening this letter, anticipating my words of love -- it will be your last.

This is your termination. Your face is a rotten peach, your eyes, holes of glue, your body, a charred carcass from which the flesh will drip, your brain, a bolted cellar flooded with the foulest waters, your words, ashes that will collapse to silence in the breeze and leave no trace.

The pain you have caused me in your cathedral of lies, the deluded attempt to "do right" (as Gattie tells me you call it), the acts of evil that fooled us all, the despair you have cooked up and fed me upon which I must now gorge until the end of my days, it has carried me into the dark.

There is only one thing that gives me momentary respite, one thought that allows me to lift my head from the mud and breathe before I sink back down to the boiling depths of Hell.

And that is: I will descend on you like a locust, like a maggot, like the Devil collecting the withered soul eternally due him.

I am coming for you, my love.

And I will destroy you.

Wood



An hour later, I've paid Mr. Asquith and ushered him out, flipped the CLOSED sign, and switched off the lights in the front window displays. I've sent Basil and Agatha home early so Basil can soak his corns in Epsom salts while watching *Mister Ed*, and Agatha can make her Thursday-night walking club.

It's just me left with the Barnabys—the five lunatic black cats that haunt the store. They are half poltergeist, and they dart, skid, and leap suddenly off ledges all day, making people jump and drop precious things.

I load the Louisiana Veda Foundation website and create my account, input my name and age, birthday and address. I try not to look at the counter, because applications are streaming in by the second in the run-up to the deadline.

607,918

Germany . . .

England . . .

Japan . . .

Singapore . . .

What would you kill for?

I close my eyes and start to write. I have no plan. But after a few minutes, it feels like the door in my heart has been crudely sawed open. Words gurgle out, ugly and gelatinous. Tales of my mom and her boyfriends, with their beaded bracelets and Sanskrit chest tattoos, their guitar EPs released on SoundCloud, called “Don’t Leave”—which makes you want to do that immediately. Agatha’s silent acts of kindness and Basil’s war wounds. How I am lonely and lost, literally collecting dust balls, because after a day in the shop I often find them clinging to my shoelaces and hair. I am stuck inside this shop that I love. But wouldn’t I kill to get out of here? Out of the dust and rust, to be somewhere else, someone else?

When I come up for air and read through it, I realize I sound like a whiny young Unabomber crossed with an ornery Mr. Allnut from *The African Queen*.

I’m about to delete it all and start over when one of the Barnabys, with a shrill yowl, launches off the Biedermeier armoire and lands on the desk, right in front of me.

I push her off. Thankfully, she missed the keyboard. But she leaps back up and prowls under the desk light, mewling.

I try to scratch under her chin to calm her, but she is upset and jumpy, tail twitching. Then she flees into the shadows, vanishing down the aisle.

That’s when I hear it.

Someone is here, in the back of the store.

In Funereal Oddities? No. It’s Fine Dining.

I listen, motionless, hoping I’m imagining it.

On the most cheerful of nights, Prologue Antiques is as murky and mysterious as a massive fish tank no one has cleaned for a year. Now, the darkness seems to conspire against me, hiding something.

I wonder if I forgot to lock the back door in the stockroom, after I took out the trash.

No. I never forget.

I can hear the ticks of the grandfather clocks, like nervous, drumming fingertips. The air vents wheeze in the ceiling. Outside, a rush of cars coast through the intersection, a honk.

There it is again.

Footsteps.

It must be Basil. A few times this year, he's returned to the shop unannounced after closing, searching for his harmonica, or his 1887 Morgan silver dollars, or muttering that he needs to disengage Uncle Bob, the howitzer cannon his troop operated in Korea. The last time it happened, my mom, hearing someone rooting around Estate Jewelry, assumed it was a burglar and crept into Armory, loading an 1873 Winchester and taking aim. When Basil came out with his hands up, he was so distressed he fainted—and not because she nearly blew his head off, but because Armory is his domain. All of the rifles and pistols in his collection are old geezers like him, slow and meandering, bullets flying everywhere except where they're pointed. He was devastated that she'd almost gotten hurt.

"Basil?" I call out, though it's doubtful he'd hear me. He refuses to update his hearing aids, wearing a pair from the 1990s with dead batteries, so they're actually hearing *thwarts*.

But it doesn't sound like Basil. His movements are soft, slow. This sounds like someone heavy, deliberately searching for something. Maybe a burglar saw the CLOSED sign, lights off, and assumed the shop was empty? Maybe my mom was blabbing again as

she waited for her oat latte at the Grind, telling everyone in line: *I own Prologue. We have a fortune's worth of antiques, paintings. Jew-elry too. Seriously, we're the Louvre, right in the middle of Missouri, and I'm not even kidding.*

He's in the stockroom now. How did he get in there?

I inch past a set of fireplace tools, and though the poker is missing, there is a pair of iron tongs. I grab them and move closer, stopping outside the door.

I feel something, a draft, followed by a faint thud.

I yank open the door and switch on the light, expecting to see a masked intruder caught with a bag of loot, seconds before he slams me in the head with the Carrara marble bust of Benjamin Franklin missing his left ear—

Only the empty stockroom stares back.

The light is bright. All of the pieces crowding the shelves, waiting to be cleaned, mended, glued, labeled—they look untouched. Nothing is tipped over, missing, or out of place.

I step inside, moving down the aisle to the back door. It *is* unlocked.

I wrench it open and stare out at the empty parking lot.

There's just a dumpster, broken pavement. Beyond that, the mangy woods are filled with inky darkness.

I strain to hear footsteps hurrying away, a car slinking off. But there is only the generic pulse of Chinese drums pumping out of Wok & Roll and the clatter of plates in the kitchen.

I close the door, locking it.

“Hello? Anyone here?”

Someone is calling from the front of the store now.

Still wielding the fireplace tongs, I sprint out, back toward the

entrance. I have every intention of using them on whoever is behind this prank.

“Hello?”

I know that voice.

I’m so horrified I stop dead.

“Anyone here?”

I manage to dart behind the display of pocket watches and peer over it, praying I’m wrong. But I’m not.

And I want to evaporate.



It's Choke Newington.

Choke of the Gladstone-Hill Golf and Tennis Club Newingtons. He looks like an accidental superhero. His real name is Herbert, and he makes people laugh, including the most calcified teachers at Eminence High. He lives on a giant estate, with a house so far away from the road it's more myth than reality. His parents are high-powered lawyers who jet to Abu Dhabi and London, and they only live in Eminence because they were childhood sweethearts here. Choke drives a blue 1998 BMW convertible with a tattered copy of *Lonesome Dove* on the back seat underneath an embarrassing pile of dirty lacrosse shorts, and he smells like windbreakers on a sailboat.

I would absolutely hate him, of course—if I didn't love him. We were best friends in preschool through third grade. I remember playing cops and robbers with Choke in the mud kitchen, and how sweet he was, always sharing his exotic lunches with me—Brie and baguettes, spicy tuna rolls with wasabi peas. He even came over for a playdate twice, which meant we roamed the forgotten aisles of

Prologue unsupervised for hours, pretending we were scuba-diving through shipwrecks at the bottom of the Pacific, chased by a supernatural octopus, which was actually Agatha and Basil meandering down the aisles, wondering how to use the pricing guns. Then, one summer, after camp in Maine, Choke returned to school with gleaming blond hair and a tan. The other boys called him *bro*. He played football during recess. And while he was never mean to me, he was gone. Like a bird when it finally notices the cage door was always open and how beautiful the world is out there.

This would all be fine, securely tucked away inside the past in the chapter called “Funny Connections Made in Childhood,” except I cannot look directly at Choke, thanks to a catastrophe four months ago.

It was a Friday after school and we ran into each other in the stairwell. There was an explosion of papers, and his head hit my chin. I tripped. He fell. I helped him to his feet, saying, “Sorry, Choke.” We stared at each other for what felt like five minutes, and I stepped toward him, sort of hypnotized, sensing he was about to kiss me. “Oh,” he blurted in surprise. “You want me to . . .” I was mortified, and I started to flee. And I would have—all the way to Miami—but he grabbed my arm, pulled me into him, and he kissed me.

That started the crazy.

We didn’t stop. Not when Ms. Peabody wandered downstairs, muttering to herself about cheese sandwiches. Not when Coach Ed and Assistant Coach Philomena lugged four massive net bags of inflated rubber balls to the first floor. We only ducked into the alcove by the fire extinguisher. What did it mean? Had Choke gotten ahold of every diary I’ve had since fifth grade, and seen his name splattered gruesomely across every page? Then Headmaster Rune

entered, arguing on the phone with his wife about why she spent three hundred dollars on a table centerpiece to impress relatives they hadn't seen in fourteen years. I pried loose from Choke's arms and ran away.

When we returned from the weekend, I was certain the earth had stopped turning.

Instead, our kiss was a bad trend. It was the pageboy haircut, zoot suits, plaid tights, hair snoods, and dickleys—an exciting new invention everyone was certain would revolutionize the world. Instead, it became a joke.

Choke never said a word to me about the kiss. He never even looked at me again. Now, every time I see him, I pretend to have amnesia.

"Oh, hey, Dia," he says now. "I didn't know you work here."

"This is my family's shop."

"Right. I remember."

"Was that you digging around in the stockroom?"

He looks confused. "What? I just came in." He indicates the front entrance. "I know the sign says Closed, but the hours say ten to eight and it's seven-forty-one."

He looks fresh, wearing white tennis things. I'm greasy, with sweat stains under my arms and frizzy hair. I also notice that not far from Choke's feet, one of the Barnabys is mistaking a pile of Moroccan rugs for a litter box.

"Is there something specific you're looking for?"

Choke's eyes drift up to the green Murano glass tube chandelier hanging over his head like a giant poison squid.

"I heard this place has cool antique jewelry. I'm looking for a ring. Or, like, bracelet? For my girlfriend, Hailee. Oh, you know Hailee."

Of course I know Hailee. Everyone knows the world's most beautiful human. Choke started dating Hailee right after our kiss. Which means unlike *my* kiss, her kiss was the invention of blue jeans.

"Sure, we have an unusual selection of bracelets, rings, and necklaces. My favorites are nineteenth-century cameos from New York City debutantes and rose-gold bangles from haunted estates in the French Quarter of New Orleans. I'll pull a few choice pieces. Do you have a particular price range?"

Choke is listening to exactly none of this. He has noticed the computer screen.

"You're applying to the Louisiana Veda thing," he says, running a hand through his hair. "I sent mine in the first week. Not sure why. I don't know anything about Darkly games. And I scare easily. Do you?"

"Scare easily?"

"Know anything about Darklys."

"A little."

"Ever played one?"

"Yes."

"Which game?"

"Disappearing Act."

He frowns. "Is that the one where you're trapped in a mansion during a snowstorm with no electricity and you have to, like, fumble around the grounds to rescue your family from a murderous fiend, who may or may not be you, losing your mind?"

"No, that's Headcase. Disappearing Act is the one where you're the park ranger searching the forest all night for the missing boy who vanished from his mom's RV."

"Oh yeah. I heard that one's terrifying."

"It is."

“Why, exactly?”

“The gaming manual stipulates the game must be played at night. Outside. There’s a small black Darkly radio that plays the soundtrack, and the music crackles with the past, creating this feeling of a separate realm. Like, anything is possible. But the story the game tells—a twisted mystery unfolding with cards, dice, and envelopes, equal parts chance and skill—it stays with you forever. It makes you question the world you live in and the people you love. You feel a bond with the other players. You’ll never forget them. Then there are rumors about the lucky few who win.”

“They’re cursed, right?”

“Or chosen. No one knows which. We owned an original, actually.”

I feel an immediate spasm of embarrassment in my stomach. I sound like I’m trying too hard to impress him. Also like one of those Darkly geeks. Grooms, they’re called—the megafans, mostly young women hiding out in the murky corners of the internet raging about how the murderous machine of macho-driven capitalism destroyed Louisiana Veda, how if it weren’t for their brutal agenda, her name would be up there with Walt Disney’s.

But Choke is smiling as he leans over the counter, his blue eyes bright. I can smell peppermint on his breath.

“Hold on. *You* owned an original Darkly? When?”

“We used to have this annual junk toss, where people all over Missouri toss their junk in this giant purple dumpster we put in front of the store for a month.”

“Oh yeah. I remember news crews interviewing your mom about that.”

I feel my cheeks flush. The thought of Choke watching Gigi’s infamous local news clips—where she performed stunts like climbing

into the dumpster and pulling out ugly paintings and candlesticks—renders me mute.

But then he's tilting his head, waiting for me to go on.

"When I was ten, someone tossed in this giant garbage bag. It was filled with old baby clothes. But in with the bibs and blankets, we find a Darkly. Disappearing Act. The game was a hit when it was released in 1973. Sold out at a hundred and fifty thousand copies. But this wasn't just the game. It was one of Louisiana's prototypes. One of the three she made by hand."

"Damn."

"It's like finding a Basquiat in your basement, right? We tried to find the idiot who tossed it out, because you are ridiculous if you picked up an original Darkly and shoved it in with a bunch of old pajamas. I wanted to put out an ad to find the owner. My mom refused. We fought about what to do. In the end, she convinced me the best thing to do was to play it. That's what they're meant for. Not to be put behind glass or displayed on the wall. So that summer, we rented an RV and took a road trip to the Grand Canyon, playing the Darkly every night. We camped out under the stars, brought strangers together. It was the best summer of my life."

Choke smiles and crosses his arms. "Why is that?"

I can only stare.

"Go, Dia!" my mom shouts.

Meeting her excited gaze across the game board, I reach out and flick the arrow on the black spinner. It whirls—and stops on the question mark.

"Clue," someone announces.

I try to steady my nerves as I draw the top card from the black deck. My mom flips the red-sand timer and places it on the picnic table.

I turn over the card. It's a watercolor sketch of words crudely carved into a tree trunk.

"Quercus dame greets the hawk, sunset burning nine o'clock, find the woman where she lies, severed pinky, footsteps die."

"More gibberish."

"This is giving me the creeps."

"Shh," my mom says. "Dia will solve this. You just watch."

"Thirty seconds."

The words evoke images. I close my eyes, watching them drift through my memory of the Darkly map carved and painted onto the board: eight campsites, four lookouts, thirteen trails, nine strangers camping in the park, one river. What happened to the little boy?

"When Dia was four, I'd ask her where I put my car keys. She always knew."

"Fifteen seconds."

"I call her my x-ray girl. She sees what no one else can."

"Ten seconds."

"They should send her into space. She'd find intelligent life."

"Can anyone actually win this thing, or is this just to scare us out of our minds?"

Quercus. The genus of an oak tree.

Dame, a woman.

Suddenly, the idea hits me. I grab the Disappearing Act backpack and dig through the strange objects inside: picture frame with a disfigured face, rosary beads, broken Timex watch. No, no. I pull out the plastic tree, the kind from a toy railroad set, two spindly branches raised upward—to greet the hawk? I grab the flashlight and the switchblade, fit the base of the tree into the small hole at the center of the board, turn on the flashlight, position it exactly at nine o'clock—setting in the west, a sunset. I point the beam at the tree.

Find the woman where she lies.

Sure enough, the shadow tossed onto the gameboard resembles a woman with her arms raised overhead, fingers splayed.

Severed pinky, footsteps die.

I open the switchblade and cut into the game board, exactly where the pinky would be on the shadow's right hand. The wood is soft. It gives way easily.

"What is she doing?"

"Destroying your masterpiece—"

"Two million bucks down the toilet."

"Shhh," my mom says.

"Three seconds."

I remove the cut-out piece.

"Two—"

Someone screams.

"There's something inside!"

I pull out the object: a tiny carved wood sneaker, painted blood-red. A moment of shock. Then they are all on their feet—cheering, hugging me as if I'm a hero, as if this is real, not just a game.

"Told you," my mom laughs.

"What?" I blurt. I am aware that Choke just asked me a question.

"What happened to the kid in Disappearing Act? I mean, who took him? You eventually won, right?"

I shake my head. "No, actually. In Utah, my mom met her third fiancé. Darryl was more inclined to battle-of-the-band nights at dive bars than playing a game, even a Darkly. And anyway, if I had won, I couldn't tell you. There's an unspoken pact among Darkly winners never to reveal what happens."

Choke frowns, a curious glance at the surrounding shelves. "So where is it?"

“We sold it to keep the shop.”

He looks upset. He opens his mouth to say something, probably to ask what kind of mom lets the windfall of an original Darkly slip through her fingers. But then his phone is ringing.

“Hi, Mom. Oh, can you give me one minute, I’m—four pounds, Italian butcher. Okay. Actually, I stopped first at—” He eyes me, cringing in apology as he checks his watch. “I’ll head over now.”

Choke hangs up, shuffling to the door. “Sorry, Dia, I got to run. There’s a terrible crisis—guests are arriving for the party and there’s not enough Wagyu beef. I’ll come back some other time, okay?”

The door dings closed.

I stand there, frozen. I have a foolish, humiliated feeling, as if I took off all my clothes with very little prompting in an elevator with Choke while he remained dressed. And now he just exited, whistling, into the lobby.

As I lurch out from behind the counter to lock the door, I catch sight of Choke in his BMW, window unrolled, lazy smile. The light turns green, and he’s gone, speeding away to tennis and Hailee and Wagyu beef hors d’oeuvres.

And I am left behind with mothballs and dust and hat trees.

I feel a boiling, mad resolve. I will win this internship. I will find out about this foundation. I will tell whoever these people are who Louisiana Veda was and what she means to her fans so they never produce such a lukewarm invitation with her name on it ever again.

I will get out of this shop—out of this life.

That’s when I notice the computer.

I stare at it stupidly, wondering if I’m hallucinating, if I hit my head—like Agatha did during her car accident, when she woke up thinking it was 1980.

One of the Barnabys is sitting on the keyboard, staring at me.

I race over, pushing her off.

No, no—

I hit REFRESH, BACK, REFRESH. I try to reregister, clear the cache. But the same message comes back every time, like my own reflection I can never outrun.

“Noooooo,” I scream.

The shop seems to flinch, afraid, and go still around me.

**Thank you for submitting your application
to the Louisiana Veda Foundation.
We will be in touch shortly.**



Two months later, we are all working late at Prologue, sticker-
ing furniture for our Summer 50% Off Sale.

“Holy pretzel,” mutters Basil.

Agatha gasps. “That is so . . .”

“Looks like an official funeral notice from Western Union.”

My mother pops her head out from behind a lampshade. “Oh,
yes. That came yesterday for Dia.”

I’m barely paying attention, too busy lugging a massive totem
pole from 1950s Camp Windswept in the Adirondacks from the
back of the shop to the front. As the only employee with a function-
ing back—my mom, since Sluder stopped calling, has had a pinched
nerve—I’ve been hauling heavy things all day, rearranging the shop
so it looks “fresh,” even though in Prologue that’s an oxymoron.

“Dia, come here and open this. Looks like Dracula is desperate
to get ahold of you.”

“If I were you, I . . .”

I set down the totem pole and move to the front counter, where

Agatha, Basil, and Gigi are scrutinizing a heavy black envelope under the light.

Miss Arcadia Gannon, it reads in lurid red letters.

When I read the return address, my heart stops.

I rip it open, pulling out the heavy black card.

Congratulations, Arcadia Gannon!

You have been chosen for the

Louisiana Veda Foundation's

summer internship program.

Please report 3 June 06.00 a.m. sharp

to the St. Louis International Airport,

where you will fly to

Darkly Headquarters.

London, England.

I am so stunned I cannot move.

It can't be real. Someone is playing a trick on me.

"What is it?"

"Dia?"

Agatha's blue eyes blink worriedly behind her glasses. "She isn't so . . ."

"Absolutely, I agree," says Basil with a grave nod. "It's as if Dia just read, 'On behalf of the United States Army, I regret to inform you that your father was killed in action.' That's how they did it. Switching out the words as needed, to 'taken prisoner by enemy forces,' 'presumed dead.'"

Gigi grabs the card, squinting at it as I race to the computer and load the website.

**Thank you to everyone who applied for
the Louisiana Veda summer internship program.**

Below please find this year's winners.

We ask that you grant them space and privacy.

Poe Valois III of Paris, France, age 17

Franz-Luc Hoffbinhauer of Berlin, Germany, age 17

Cooper Min of Washington, DC, USA, age 17

Torin Kelly of Dublin, Ireland, age 17

Everleigh Aradóttir of Reykjavík, Iceland, age 17

Mouse Bonetti of Lagos, Nigeria, age 17

Arcadia Gannon of Eminence, Missouri, USA, age 17

LOUISIANA VEDA

INVITES YOU

TO

DARKLY'S

15-YEAR ANNIVERSARY PARTY

WITH

SCARES, SCARS,

AND

A SURPRISE UNVEILING OF DARKLY'S
MOST TERRIFYING GAME YET

15 JUNE 1985

8 O'CLOCK SHARP

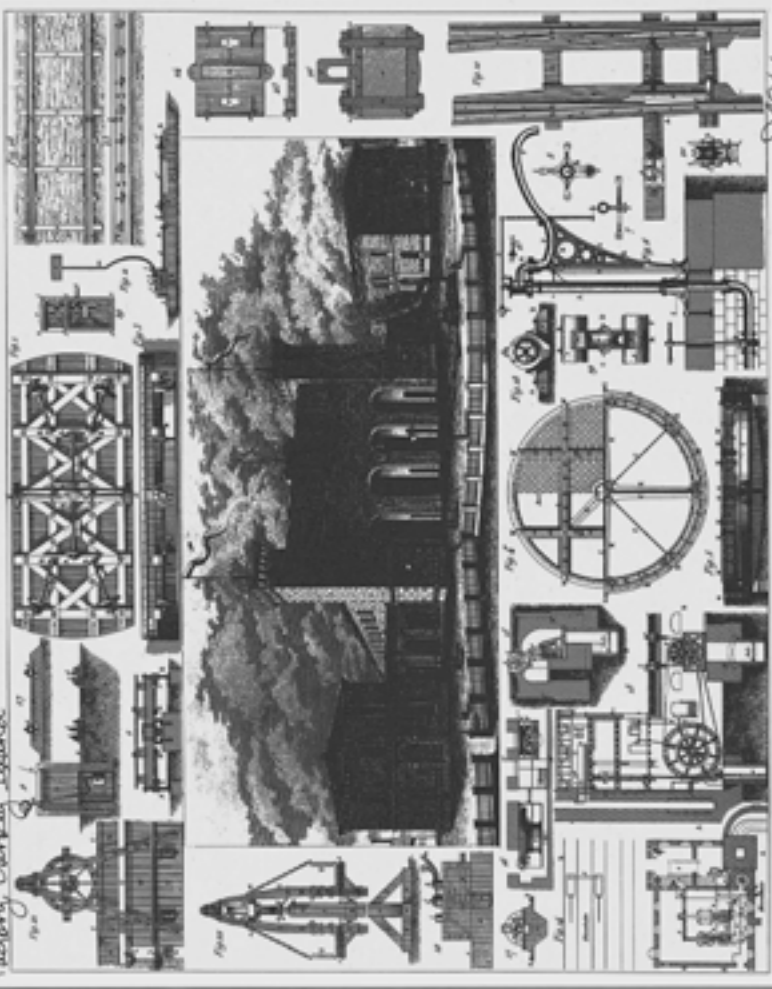
BUSES WILL TRANSPORT GUESTS TO DARKLY PIER

NO CAMERAS

BLINDFOLDS REQUIRED

Factory, Darkby Island

c. 1870





“London? For the summer?” my mom shouts. “Leaving in two weeks? Why not join a colony on Mars and get emancipated, while you’re at it?”

We are setting the table for dinner. Gigi is so distraught she has set out eight glasses, four soup bowls, and five salad forks, even though it’s just the two of us eating takeout from Wok & Roll.

“How did this internship even happen? Someone contacted you?”

“No. I applied. Same as thousands of other kids.”

“How do you know it’s not a scam, so they can extort money from us?”

“No one is extorting anything, Mom.”

“You remember Disappearing Act. Don’t you see? Someone is coming out of the woodwork now, saying it’s theirs and we owe them a fortune.”

“This has nothing to do with that, Mom.”

But Gigi slings herself into a seat at the table, staring at nothing in front of her, face red. I know her panic has little to do with me leaving and everything to do with Sluder not answering her texts.

She's scared to be alone again, and the Darkly internship happens to be the shiny new object within reach, to seize and try to smash against the wall.

"What will you do all day? Isn't this Louisiana person dead?"

"There's a foundation. I'll be learning about contemporary art auctions, and board-game creation, and manufacturing."

That's a lie. I've heard nothing about what I'll be doing. Thankfully, Gigi's too swept up in her own distress to notice how suspicious this sounds.

"We can't afford it."

"Everything is paid for. And I get a weekly stipend."

"I'll have to hire two new people for the shop."

"Basil already posted an ad in assisted living. He's interviewing two people this week."

Gigi doesn't seem to hear me, gnawing her fingernails. "No. I'm sorry, Dia. I need you at the shop this summer. We have to clean out that storage room by the boiler, and there are a million things to deal with, and—"

"No, Mom."

The anger, when it comes, feels like a great swing of an ax on a long-dead tree.

"Because I'm up all night paying *your* bills, fixing *your* accounting errors and loan applications, and paying taxes, trying to make sure we don't lose everything and end up on the street, I bomb every test at school and fall asleep daily on the bus. So you are very much mistaken, Mom. *I am going!*"

Gigi stares at me like I just shot a gun an inch from her forehead. She starts to cry.

"London's just so far," she says.



The Veda Seven, the internet calls us.

In the aftermath of the announcement, with our names made public, there is a flurry of online speculation as to who we are and why we won.

Are they ingenious prodigies? Brilliant teen sensations? How did these random mystery kids no one has ever heard of beat out six hundred thousand others?

Was there some kind of Darkly lottery? Random names pulled from a hat? Are these kids nepo babies on steroids—the progeny of the most powerful secret families on the planet?

“Pourquoi ces gens?” a French influencer sneers on TikTok, cutting to crude stick-figure cartoons of each of us with seven dancing question marks for faces.

I read and watch every post across dozens of languages and hundreds of feeds, filled with embarrassment and disbelief, as if I’m floating above myself in some parallel universe. Because the Arcadia Gannon they are hashing over—like she’s the odious self-centered starlet of a popular TV drama—has nothing to do with me.

One of the rumors, which starts to gain momentum days after the announcement, is that none of us are real, that we've been created out of thin air to inflate the price of the Darkly games. This is because all seven of us are *unvisibles*, as someone on X calls it, kids who have chosen—for their mental health, privacy, or some other personal reason (which, in my case, is because I have an enormous antique store to run)—to maintain a strict zero-internet presence.

Of course, I'm already aware of this, having tried and failed to find a crumb of personal information on the kids I'll be working with all summer—kids with names so opaque it's like Louisiana Veda invented them herself.

Poe. Franz-Luc. Cooper. Torin. Mouse. Everleigh.

They are invisible vaults that do not unlock with any type of search. Even looking up their last names and cities leads to no obvious information about their families, just pages of generic returns and obscure genealogy records of people alive a hundred years ago.

Only Valois turns up anything specific—Poe-François Valois is a Zurich-based financier who is chairman and CEO of various international real estate companies.

In the absence of anything credible, I invent glittering personalities, faces, wardrobes, and mammoth IQs for each of these kids, which only fills me with more dread.

How could I have won along with them?

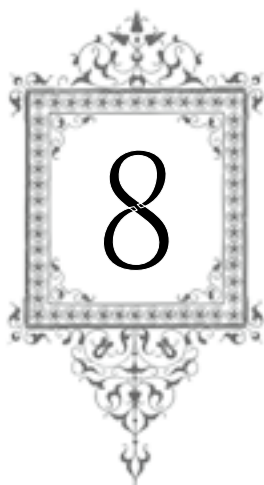
If I'd secretly prayed my newfound celebrity would trickle down to a more positive experience at Eminence High, I'm disappointed. My win is the equivalent of a rain leak in the gym roof.

I catch people staring at me, whispering, but in the bugged-out, bewildered vein of *Why her? I mean, Nana, of all kids? Seriously? Do meritocracies even exist anymore?*

“The Louisiana Veda Foundation is clearly an outreach program for those in their End of Days,” a few kids joke on the bus.

Once, across the courtyard after school, I meet eyes with Choke Newington. He stares at me with an expression that isn’t usually there. He looks serious, even a little angry. Is he also outraged that I won, aggrieved by the unfairness of it all?

But then he’s swept into the riptide of his friends and Hailee—gone.



Not that I have time to worry about any of this. I have eighty-nine pages of fine-print forms to fill out. Parental agreements, legal releases, medical evaluations, including thirty-two pages of something called a Loaded Psych Eval 3—all of which must be signed by a parent or legal guardian.

A man by the name of Nile Raiden, senior barrister at Deringer Street Chambers—“preeminent practitioners of global law,” according to the London firm’s taciturn website—sends me an icy email stating that “failure to complete all attached forms by the assigned deadline will result in immediate release from the internship. Forgery, deception, and diminished transparency will also be grounds for dissolution. Should you find any of the foregoing unsuitable, please notify me, and the offer of internship will be bestowed upon a runner-up.”

Nile Raiden’s photo reveals a thin, unsmiling bookmark of a man, with cropped russet hair, a sharp stare, and an otherwise unremarkable face. It’s his résumé that is ornate and sprawling.

Experience as a barrister for over twenty years. A broad range of complex criminal cases, intellectual property law, inheritance, fraud, defamation. Year of silk: 2006. Year of call: 2001. His father, Wood Raiden, is one of the firm's founders.

It's all very intellectual and highbrow—a world away from me and Eminence. I sense there is no room for error here.

And so I am calculated.

I fill out all the forms myself. I make an appointment with my pediatrician to complete the medical documents. Thankfully, she's either too overworked or has seen too much lately to question the brazenly disturbing questions, including "Have you ever felt the need to notify authorities about the patient's potential for violence? If so, please describe."

I keep the completed documents stowed in the lockbox under my bed, waiting for the moment when my mom is at her most distracted.

Because Gigi Gannon can abruptly pay attention. She can, out of the blue, put on her Groucho Marx glasses and study something with unwavering concentration for *hours*—rental contracts, antiques restoration history, the inlaid wood pattern of intertwined rosebushes on a Louis XIV table—finding the minute mistake that escaped everyone else's notice.

Then she will dig in, bringing a dramatic end to the proceedings, standing her ground like Moses announcing an incendiary eleventh commandment.

Though she's dropped the subject, remaining mute at any mention of my absence from the shop this summer, I can tell she's still stewing. She'd love to find a valid reason for me not to go.

And there are reasons. The contracts are exhaustive and

one-sided, granting total rights to the Louisiana Veda Foundation in the event of anything at all happening in the known and unknown universes. Ever.

All phones, laptops, tablets, and recording equipment must be relinquished upon arrival. *These personal items will be returned upon completion of the internship. Communication with personal family members and friends may be achieved at Derringer Street's discretion by email at a designated computer center.*

And yet, even considering that, one clause in particular stands out.

In section Q, page 37 of the “Professional Employment Agreement,” concealed after a paragraph about property damage, it reads: *And unto all parties herein, I, Arcadia Gannon, hereby release the Foundation from liability in the event of my death, decapitation, and/or dismemberment.*

I do some research, learning that this language is actually pretty common for people employed at large manufacturing plants operating heavy machinery, like paper pulp digesters and vacuum drum washers.

Is this just a blanket bit of legalese the lawyers threw in for good measure, in case of a fatal accident? Or does it mean we are going to work in the Darkly factory?

It's an electrifying thought—too outlandish to seriously consider.

The factory has given rise to almost as many legends as Louisiana Veda herself. In 1970, after the success of her first game, Ophelia, with her newly minted fortune, Louisiana bought a secret island somewhere off the coast of England.

There, she built her factory.

She was so careful to hide the location that supposedly she bought five phony factories across England to use as decoys.

In the aftermath of her death in 1985, a handful of former employees went public, anonymously damning Darkly with tales of enslavement, Louisiana the insane dragon lady who tortured workers with her crushing demands and lethal temper. Crying and screaming and other strange sounds echoed all night across the sprawling fortress, which was characterized as a kind of labyrinthine prison.

Supposedly, there was the Test Floor, where numbered strangers were bused in to road-test the new games. They were forbidden to leave, not for months, forced to wear blindfolds and live in locked cells, playing new games for weeks at a time, enduring hours of interrogation. No one was allowed to utter the name Louisiana Veda. And when the mastermind in question deigned to visit—there are tales of a tall and silent figure watching from the doorway, wearing a black hooded cloak, her face always obscured—no one was allowed to say a word to her, or even glance in her direction. There one minute, gone the next, she was never spotted twice—*like a poltergeist, like a madwoman the executives wheel in and out of her locked tower for lurid effect, an embarrassment.*

There was also the Origin Floor, an area where Louisiana and a handful of trusted creatives toiled day and night to conceive each monumental new game.

The accusers went away as swiftly as they appeared. I never really believed the stories.

But they were another expansive stone addition to the mysterious wall that is Darkly—too high to see over, no known beginning or end.

There are rumors today that the factory has been left to rot. Monstrous vines twist through the roof. Hallways are spangled

with mold. Entire wings supposedly burned down in a fire, Louisiana's original sketches and drafts, her grand plans for future Darkly games, all destroyed.

Now and then, some daredevil kid will video her attempt to track down the location, scaling fences and trespassing through some random old laboratory. *This must be it*, the girl whispers, shivering into the camera. *This is where she built her empire. I can feel her energy.*

But it's all bogus.

It's only when I have one day left to turn in the documents that my mom returns home from another first date. She wanders into the kitchen, opening a fresh bottle of merlot, lipstick on her chin. That's when I fish the signature pages out from under the bed.

"All he talked about was reupholstering his chesterfield sofa. I mean, how does anyone think that's good conversation for a first date?"

"That's awful. You forgot to sign these, Mom."

She takes the pen and scribbles her signature. "He didn't ask me one question. Not one. I could have been a wall sitting there. What are these again?"

"Tax forms." I flip to the next page. "This was the pediatrician?"

"Michael? No, he's a serial entrepreneur, which appears to mean 'unemployed.'" She signs the next page and the next.

"You're going to meet someone wonderful this summer. I can feel it." I gather the papers and slip out.

"Maybe the universe is trying to tell me, 'Love yourself first,' you know?"

"Definitely. Good night, Mom."

"Love you, babe."



“What may I bring you for dinner this evening?”
I turn from the airplane window to see the first-class attendant smiling down at me. I study the elegant menu clutched in my hand.

*NORMANDY LAMB CHOPS WITH MINT YOGURT SAUCE
SIDE OF ROAST BOEUF WITH CAMPAGNA POTATOES
AND HENS OF THE WOODS
POULET ANGLAISE WITH CELERIAC COMPOTE*

“I’ll take the chicken, please.”

“And to drink?”

“Water. Thank you.”

She jots this down and moves to the passenger behind me. I return my attention to the billowing pink clouds out the window, twisting my shoulders into an uncomfortable angle to make sure my face is hidden from the other passengers in row 1.

I am a ball of nerves. I feel more fragile and awkward with every mile I am whisked from home.

I never should have left my mom. I never should have left Prologue or the Barnabys, Basil and Agatha, or Missouri.

Because, with the exception of Missouri, they won't be able to survive without me. It was clear when I said goodbye this morning. Agatha was whispering to herself, unable to find her glasses, even though they were hanging around her neck on the beaded chain. My mom was tying a price tag of \$19.99 on a French garniture set worth \$5,000. Basil was stuttering when he asked if I might have time to pick up a Venti coconut latte at Starbucks for him before I left, even though I had just handed him that very beverage. The Barnabys were jumping around like mad, scratching the furniture and leaping onto chandeliers. My mom noted this was a sign all five were about to have kittens, which caused her to wonder how the tomcat got in—the disturbing fact that Prologue Antiques is about to be taken over by a fiefdom of jumpy, black shadow-cats utterly lost on her.

Making matters worse, something else on this plane makes it clear I have no business being here, and upon landing, I should book a flight home and join witness protection.

Because there is another one of us on the airplane.

The boy in 1F.

I first noticed him standing in a bookstore in Terminal 8, when I was trying to find the gate for my connecting flight. He was flipping through an aggressively thick paperback and was so gorgeous that I actually backtracked to make sure he was real, and also to see the title.

Anna Karenina.

An hour later, he was boarding my plane.

He saunters in, tall with moody black hair in his eyes, gray

sweats, a cigarette-alley slouch. He sets down two massive leather duffels, one in the aisle so no one can pass, one in the seat beside him that belongs to a bald businessman, who for some reason is intimidated and waits in silent irritation. I notice the side of both bags is emblazoned with a gold Victorian royal pV3, which instantly sets off an alarm bell due to the fact that I have committed the names of the other interns so intrinsically into my brain it's hard-wired to pick up on anything, however minute, that could evoke one of them.

It must be Poe Valois III of Paris, France, age seventeen.

But that's not even the crazy thing—the boy is carrying a black leather briefcase, and it is *handcuffed to his left wrist*.

Like some kind of gangster.

Whatever priceless thing is inside, it's been orchestrated with the airline ahead of time. Because as soon as the flight crew see this boy, they're on high alert, crowding around him and nodding like he's a sultan. The boy pulls a necklace from his shirt, revealing a collection of tiny strangely shaped black keys. Using one in the form of a circle to unlock the cuff, which falls open in an accordion way I've never seen before, he hands the briefcase to the pilot. With a grave nod, as if it contains the boy's own beating heart, the man whispers, "Thank you for your trust, sir," before vanishing with it into the cockpit.

And then—as if nothing at all extraordinary just happened—the boy sits with a yawn, pulls out a laptop covered with cool stickers, and starts to compose a classical symphony using some kind of elaborate composition program.

He writes musical notes across nineteen bars, wearing the same absorbed scowl I once saw on a silver-print portrait of

Beethoven—not looking up for an hour. The reason I know it’s a symphony is, at one point, he fusses with the buttons on his headphones and they lose the Bluetooth connection, and the most beautiful, brooding orchestral music I have ever heard blasts out of his computer into first class.

A few people look up in surprise, and he kills the sound.

“Sorry for the disturbance, ladies and gentlemen,” he announces with a sheepish grin.

He has a lilting French accent. So it *is* Poe Valois III of Paris, France.

Never in my life could I have imagined a boy to make Choke Newington look dreary. But here, impossibly, is such a boy. His hands look like they regularly sculpt life-sized human figures out of wet clay. His eyes are dark yet warm. I find myself thinking it must be the light in first class that makes him so perfect, and upon disembarking in five hours to the harsh fluorescents of an airport, he will devolve into a moderately handsome teenager in keeping with the rest of humanity.

Except why is he on this flight out of New York City? If he lives in Paris, wouldn’t he simply take a train through the Channel Tunnel, or a quick flight from Charles de Gaulle, or use his family’s private helicopter? Because he looks like he regularly enjoys a helicopter. Possibly one of those stadium-sized yachts drifting around the Mediterranean, too.

Everyone smiles and goes back to sleeping or watching a movie. Not me. I can’t take my eyes off him, wondering how I’ll survive a summer working in close proximity to him.

He eats dinner, picking at the Normandy lamb chops.

After that, he uses the bathroom.

After that, he motions to the flight attendant with a shockingly tiny gesture that could only have been learned after spending his childhood in an echoing château—nothing else could explain the expectation that, *mais oui*, everyone is attuned to his movements at all times. Instantly, the copilot emerges with the mysterious briefcase.

Poe turns on the overhead light, opens the case in his lap, using another one of those odd keys around his neck, and he removes a Darkly game.

I am astonished. It's an original. Removing an original Darkly in flight, even if it *is* first class, is like unrolling Andy Warhol's *Shot Sage Blue Marilyn* in a back booth at McDonald's.

The businessman seated next to him does a double take.

"Is that an—"

"Absolutely," says Poe with a mischievous smile. "Want to play?"

The businessman chuckles. "Which one is it?"

"Eighteen Lost Icelandic Sailors. 1978. Recover the drowned bodies of the missing sailors, take over their ghost ship, discover why they perished, unearth their hidden diaries that contain their hideous secrets about what went down on their voyage, send their bodies home to grieving families for a Christian burial, all the while trying not to drown, go mad, or be devoured by a twenty-seven-foot sea monster."

The businessman leans in, studying the ornate wooden board. I've seen photographs before, but they did not do it justice. It's a maritime ocean map emblazoned with the legendary Darkly scroll, carved with detailed circles and nonsensical words, drawings, diagrams, and odd crisscrossing longitudes.

"And that's—"

“Louisiana Veda’s original prototype. One of two copies in the world.”

“I had a client who bought one,” the businessman notes. “The Death of Alice Something—”

“The Demise of Alice Hayes. One of the ghost games.”

“Ghost what?”

“After Louisiana’s death, they discovered fifteen original games she had created. Never released or mass-produced. They go for the highest prices. Conquistador. Fringe Theory. The Donwaldt Island Mystery. The games released during her lifetime are called the vitals.”

The businessman is rapt. “My client spent a fortune buying the thing. Another on tutors, psychologists, mathematicians to help crack it. He was hell-bent on winning. Poor man died in a car accident without making it even two squares down the board. His wife went nuts. Swore it was the game that killed him. She made sure it left the family. Donated it to MoMA with the provision that it could not be displayed until fifty years after his death.” He frowns. “But is it really wise? Taking that out here? Isn’t it worth, like—”

“Four million pounds. Yes. Do you know what they say about Darklys?”

“Not really.”

“They own you. Not the other way around. Like bloodhounds, they’re loyal to the death. Surprisingly impervious to abandonment. They bond with their first owner and will do anything to be played, again and again. But not won. Never do they wish to be won. People claim if you have a Darkly in the house, put it in the back of your closet under a boatload of junk, forget about it. Within days it’ll be out on a table under a light, waiting. No one will remember putting it there.”

“But it’s all nonsense.”

Poe smiles. “Want to find out?”

The man laughs, an uneasy frown—*Who is this kid?*—and returns his attention to his spreadsheets.

Though as he types, I notice, he cannot stop looking back at the game.



From the desk of Louisiana Veda

Mr. Wood Raiden
25 Eaton Place
Belgravia, London

6 February 1965

Dear Wood:

After the hikes across the lonely mountains, after all we've seen and done, the love we shared, the fortune you and your army of leeches have gorged upon--fruits of the kingdom I built--you should know better than to threaten a law of nature. So, consider this:

First, the rain will come. Then, the roof will cave. Then, you drown.

L



*T*here's still time to back out, go home before you make a fool of yourself, my mind chatters as I wheel my bag through Heathrow Airport.

In the chaos of customs, I lose sight of Poe Valois III. But as I step out into the cool, gray morning, the crowd jostling me as they make their way to the taxi line, I notice a gray-haired man in a black suit standing a distance away with a sign.

GANNON, it reads.

Poe stands beside him, talking intently on the phone, duffels at his feet, the briefcase shackled again to his wrist. His looks have not diminished in the frank light of morning. In fact, he looks even more windswept and cool. As I approach, it takes everything in my power to pretend not to notice him. But that's like pretending not to be struck by lightning.

"Gannon?" asks the man bluntly. He has a thick British accent and the harried demeanor of someone chastised for running late.

"That's me."

With a curt nod, he takes the handle of my suitcase, pulling it toward a gleaming black London taxi by the curb.

“What about the others?” Poe asks, pocketing his phone with a frown.

The man heaves my suitcase into the trunk. “I’ve only got Gannon and Valois.”

“You were on my flight.”

I feign blasé curiosity as I turn to him. This makes him smirk, which means he was well aware of me gawking at him for seven hours, like some runny-nosed kid at a zoo unable to pull herself away from the leopard exhibit.

He holds out his free hand. “I’m Poe.”

“Dia.”

“Are you also in the dark about this internship?”

“Definitely.”

“I wonder if the other interns weren’t fools like us and refused to sign those draconian contracts, so it’ll be just the two of us all summer.”

This prospect renders me mute as we climb into the taxi. Working alongside Poe and only Poe for the entire summer would be the equivalent of being a pebble of moon rock in orbit around Alpha Centauri.

I start to worry about the taxi ride. How will I maintain an hour’s worth of conversation?

But Poe makes himself at home in the back seat, in a waft of cologne that smells like a forgotten closet in Versailles. He props his long, muscular legs up on the pull-down seat opposite, dons a beanbag neck pillow, headphones, aviator sunglasses, and with a monster yawn and a tap on his phone—I lean in, curious to see what

kind of music mythic boys listen to; it's M83's "Couleurs"—he appears to settle in for a nap.

I am left trying to ignore his sprawling presence. It's like trying to forget a lion dozing beside me. I feel the simultaneous need to play dead, run for my life, and make detailed scientific observations. For example, his fingertips are smudged black and red-brown. Is it oil paint from the masterpiece mural he has been painting since he was seven? Dirt from a recent archaeological dig in Greece? On the inside of his left wrist is a tattoo. It's a long cylinder with a double helix of lacelike DNA twisted around it. Along the side are letters and roman numerals.

TPS.XXIV.III.XXIV

TPS. It must be the initials of the girl he loves. Theodosia Palmer Salvatore? Tabitha "Peaches" von Strickenbaum? She must be a raven-haired classical pianist who looks like Ava Gardner.

And 24/3/24. The date of the fateful twilight when they first kissed?

As the taxi veers onto the highway, I force my attention from Poe to the window, watching the squat brown houses and small European cars grow fewer and fewer, until after an hour of driving we are bouncing down a deserted country road.

"How much longer until we reach London?" I ask.

The driver looks uneasy as he meets my gaze in the mirror.

"Not London, miss. Thornwood."

Thornwood?

That's wrong. The email from Nile Raiden clearly stated we would be residing in Central London, within walking distance to foundation headquarters.

And yet after another half hour and a stop for gas—petrol—we

are bouncing down a dirt road. Wizened trees reach overhead, blotting out the sky. Poe has not stirred, his head tipped back in the seat, mouth open, occasionally shuddering like a screen door not closed all the way.

Every time I consider nudging him awake, asking if he's heard of Thornwood, I lose my nerve and continue to stare out the window, at once mesmerized and worried by this motley overgrown forest with its half-dead trees and scabbing bark.

We stop in front of a crude steel gate. It looks like something outside a military compound. The driver unrolls the window and types a six-digit code into a rusted panel. With a blood-curdling wail, the gate pulls open.

We drive on, lurching in the ruts and mud. The forest grows dense. Black brambles and ferns and bulbous gray rocks soak up the morning, replacing it with looming nightfall.

We speed around a bend. Abruptly the road veers downhill. I grab the door handle so as not to be flung on top of Poe as we swing out into a rocky shoreline and jerk to a halt.

Yards away, a narrow pier juts out into choppy, silvered water. A distance beyond that is a white van and a sagging gray boathouse, where five people are filing out and making their precarious way down the boardwalk over the rocks, awkwardly hauling suitcases.

The other interns.

They're heading for an old boat moored at the end. A green flag whips wildly at the stern. I can make out the legendary white Darkly scroll. Though I'm too far away to read it, I know the notorious tagline is scrawled underneath, the cryptic phrase endlessly debated.

Wander where the witch lies.

Who exactly is the witch? Louisiana? Is she a force of good or

evil? What kind of lie is it? Is she lying on the ground, sleeping, dying, or telling malevolent tales?

Whatever it means, the general consensus from Darkly fans is that it's an empowering call to arms, a salvation, and a battle cry.

Though I spent the past few weeks dreaming and worrying, agonizing over what I would be doing all summer, with whom and why, now I understand I have no idea what is going to happen. Perhaps this internship isn't so unlike Louisiana Veda, after all.

Poe, roused from sleep, pulls off his sunglasses.

"What's happening?" he whispers, squinting out the window.

"We're going to the Darkly factory," I say as I climb out.

22 December 1966

NORTH NORFOLK SENTINEL



DEADLY FIRE KILLS FAMILY

A family of five, including three young children, were burned to death early Sunday evening when a fire swept a dwelling at 11 Hollywick Street, Southland. After an investigation Chief Fire Marshal Lewis J. Willard declared that fireplace embers were improperly disposed of hours before inside the house. He does not suspect foul play.



Poe and I make our way down the dock, hauling our bags against the onslaught of wind.

I notice our taxi is already pulling away, vanishing down the road. Something about the hasty exit seems deceptive, and I stop to stare after it, shivering at the sight of the empty beach. The opposite shoreline isn't visible, cloaked by dense fog.

I assume someone from the foundation will be here to welcome us. But as Poe and I step alongside the boat—the *Elvira*, it's called, and it looks bruised and barnacled, like it just surfaced from the bottom of the sea—I see there is no one else here, only the interns.

They sit in sulky silence on the benches along the bow, clutching their belongings, scowling every time the boat jerks or a spew of salt water flies. And I can't help but stare. Because the whole world has been wondering about them, and *I* have been wondering about them, but nothing comes close to the vibrant reality.

They look like characters torn from five different novels.

There's a grim girl, at least six feet tall, with chin-length peroxide-blond hair and bangs that hang in her forehead like the thick bristles

of a broom. She wears a kelly-green fifties chiffon dress that is way too big, and she sits staring out at the fog with hunched shoulders, arms and legs crossed, which gives her the air of a tightly knotted rope. Her mud-caked combat boots are propped on a blue backpack.

Beside her sits a girl with an Elvis swirl of black hair on top of her head, the ends dyed neon blue. She's Asian, with a focused, no-fools-will-be-tolerated frown. Even though the boat rocks and bounces, she reads a thick hardback in her lap while absent-mindedly flipping the charm on her necklace, which appears to be in the form of a single gold eye.

Then there is an overdressed boy wearing an expensive-looking suit, gold watch, two giant Louis Vuitton bags beached at his feet. He is Black and is tying with expert speed a red silk tie around his neck in a Double Windsor knot.

Next to him is a redheaded girl with black glasses and uncombed hair in a messy bun, which appears to be an unsuccessful attempt to hide how scarily beautiful her face is. She is dressed in oversized gray sweats and, having removed her sneaker and sock, is inspecting her big toe's mangled nail, which looks like it's about to fall off.

Finally, there is a heavy blond boy with flushed cheeks, wearing a neck brace. His T-shirt reads UNBEKANNTES FLUGOBJEKT, and he's the only one who seems remotely friendly, smiling at us.

"Can't wait any longer, have to come back later for the skivers."

An ancient woman, with a face as wrinkled as a ball of furiously discarded paper, peers out from a door in the hull. She spies Poe and me, scowling.

"Expecting an Order from Saint Michael, are you? Go on, take a seat. Got to get a ramp on the mornin' to miss this storm, or I swear on the soul of Saint Thistle, this is the final hour of daylight you burrs'll ever see."

Her British accent is like a mouthful of pine cones. I can hardly sift through what she said before she vanishes back into the hull, door slamming.

Poe, with a mild grin, throws on his duffels and climbs aboard—his briefcase drawing a few curious stares. I step after him, taking a seat beside the redhead.

My only thought is that they all just had a heated argument. Nothing else could explain how sullen and mad they look, how intent they are on ignoring each other.

Poe looks amused. “Thanks for the hero’s welcome. I’m Poe.”

“Dia,” I say.

“Mouse,” says the Black kid, eyeing us with a distracted smile.

“I’m Franz-Luc,” says Unbekanntes Flugobjekt in a thick German accent. “But you can call me Franz if that is easier.”

“Cooper,” says the Asian girl, barely glancing up from her book.

“I’m Everleigh,” says the blond girl in the green dress.

“Torin,” says the redhead, shoving her foot back into her sneaker.

It’s then that Everleigh—Everleigh Aradóttir of Reykjavík, Iceland—pulls her gaze from the water. Her face is splotchy, and her crystalline-green eyes are red from crying.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” she whispers.

“Oh, God, not again,” says Torin, rolling her eyes.

“Seriously,” says Cooper. “You need to chill.”

The girl ignores them. “We should have gotten word to you to send help.”

“You should try some deep breathing for relaxation,” says Franz.

Poe stares at her. “What’s the matter?”

“She’s been freaking out since we got here,” mutters Cooper.

“When did you get here?” I ask.

Cooper shrugs. "Late last night. First she tried to call a taxi. Then she tried running away. She ran all night in the forest, screaming there was no way out. She found the fence but couldn't get over the barbed wire. Slashed her whole arm."

I notice the painful-looking scratches, which explains why she's holding her arms tightly crossed.

"They're keeping us captive here. Against our will."

"That's not true," says Cooper. "The captain *told* you. The foundation people are waiting for us on the island to give us orientation. After that, they'll take you to the airport. So stop whining about it."

"I don't want to go to an island. I want to go home. I'm not even supposed to be here."

The kid named Mouse is ignoring all of this, staring with confident ease out at the water, as if the rest of us are strangers having an embarrassing tantrum in a doctor's waiting room, people who have nothing to do with him.

But the sight of this girl having a panic attack and the others surveying her with cold irritation, it makes me lean over and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"Don't worry," I whisper. "I'll help you leave if that's what you want."

She jerks away from me, glaring. "You don't know anything."

Suddenly, the door to the hull opens again, and everyone jumps as the old woman scrambles out. This must be the "captain" Cooper was referring to, I can only guess. Wiping her filthy hands on her grease-streaked overalls, she moves to the helm.

"How long is this boat ride?" Franz asks.

The captain pretends not to hear him, flipping switches, squinting dead ahead.

Franz continues to smile. “I have a history of extreme seasickness. Any advice on how not to throw up? Staring at the horizon doesn’t work for me, and neither do the acupuncture wristbands.”

This admission appears to be akin to announcing a hatred of the sea, because the captain turns and surveys Franz with marked disgust before darting along the sides of the boat, untying the ropes. Ornerly tufts of silver hair jut out from her old striped fishing cap. She looks cracked and sun-dried, like a once-pristine doll forgotten on a beach for twenty years.

Moments later, we are motoring out into the bay. Everleigh has descended into a shaken trance, staring ahead as if she expects at any second, something—a sea monster—to emerge from the fog.

That’s when I notice the book Cooper is reading.

The Unfiltered, Unflinching, Illegal, Utterly Dangerous Darkly Gaming Manual, Version 4.0 by 4 Anonymous Champions.

I peer closer, my eyes straining to make out the tiny words on the page.

I am unable to lawfully detail anything of what I found when the prize was at last placed in my arms, when I summoned the strength to unlatch the heavy black lid and stare inside. But let’s just say it was a kingdom revealing the stunning breadth and scale of Louisiana’s genius and vision. It was a secret invitation to the labyrinth, a confession, and a dream. A death, too, because she never did live to see any of these things come to fruition. But oh, my, what if one day—

Suddenly, Cooper slams the book closed and, with a hostile glare at me, shoves it into her backpack.



I grasp the boat railing for dear life, my hair whipping my face, freezing waves drenching me.

My right leg is asleep from stepping hard on my suitcase to prevent it from flying off the boat every time the *Elvira* is blasted by a whitecap. I keep my eyes locked on the captain, partly for reassurance, partly out of curiosity. The way she works the controls, never needing to actually glance down at the needles or gauges, staring at the waves without the slightest hint of worry—though once I swear she actually reprimands them; “Blaggards!” she shouts—suggests the old woman has taken this journey a thousand times before.

Where did she come from? Did she know Louisiana? Our presence appears to be a horrible nuisance, because she doesn’t look at us, not once. She seems eager to deposit us, wherever we’re headed, as quickly as possible and be rid of us.

As the minutes tick by and the sea and mist show no sign of relenting, it starts to feel as if we’re spinning in a doomed airplane inside a cloud, no up and no end. I start to panic, not unlike

Everleigh, who seemed so hysterical and fragile before but now appears to have a valid point. She stares grimly ahead, her torso frozen twenty degrees forward, making her look like the battered wood mermaid nailed to the bow of a pirate ship.

However arrogant and annoyed the other interns were before—all of that has been stripped away by the sea, leaving them sodden and shivering. They look out with dazed incredulity, probably wondering, like me, how the glamorous public reality of winning the illustrious Louisiana Veda Foundation internship turns out to be *this*.

Just as I start to imagine the headlines (LOUISIANA VEDA INTERNS VANISH INTO WATERY GRAVE) and the ensuing #justiceforthevedaseven, and how my mom will mourn me (*How can I keep Prologue afloat now?*) and Choke Newington hearing about my death (Choke, to whom I will be as vague in his memory as the cashier who handed him his Starbucks through the drive-thru window last week)—only then does something appear out of the fog ahead.

It's an enormous dark shadow. That's how it looks at first.

No, it's a cliff—a black mountain rising out of the sea.

The ocean rages against the rocks along the shoreline, plumes of seething waves exploding. And rising atop the island, the fog thinning around it as if in deference, turning its dark face toward us, as if sensing intruders—

The Darkly factory.

It is a sprawling expanse of intricately layered gray stones. The facade is massive—four archways like four open mouths. Two monumental towers like devil's horns pierce the sky, dark-green Darkly flags atop the spikes.

The captain, a pleased smile as if spotting an old friend, braces herself against a fresh blast of wind. She cranks the wheel, and the boat veers inland with a yowl. I can see that beyond the cliffs

spangled with silver grass, there are other structures on the island. But nothing I can make out really through the fog, only a jutting roof, a steeple.

We barrel toward an old dock, which resembles a long fish bone picked over and tossed along the shore. There is a faded billboard, some of the panels missing.

WELCOME TO DARKLY. WANDER WHERE THE WITCH LIES.

Three men in tan trench coats are waiting for us, I see, hats pulled low against the wind. As we jet closer, the shortest one steps forward, waving.

“Welcome!”

It is a surprisingly cheerful voice. The man is middle-aged, with thinning copper hair and a corporate folding-chair stiffness—a welcome sight in this wild place. I recognize him immediately as the attorney who sent all the emails—Nile Raiden. His smile has an official tightness, the kind normally seen in marble lobbies behind concierge desks.

The captain maneuvers alongside the pier, and the two other men with muted stares help us disembark.

“Good morning to you all!” shouts Raiden. “How was the journey in? Uneventful? We must proceed swiftly. We have a very tight schedule. If you could each just deposit your phones, recording devices, cameras, everything, er, *here*— Where did—? Oh . . .” Flustered, he points out the filthy plastic barrel behind him, which looks like it normally houses fish guts. “Do not fret. Your luggage is heading around to the other side of the island. The ascent there is not as steep. Less of a chance your pajamas end up floating around the North Sea.” He chuckles thinly.

Turning, I see now the two men with the captain are motoring

swiftly away with our belongings, heading around the jutting rocks of the cove.

“Aren’t we’re staying in Central London?” asks Cooper.

But Raiden is already off, striding down the dock with a grand wave of his arm, as if he’s a real estate agent escorting potential buyers through a new house.

“This is Torment Point! Named by Louisiana herself. When she was first brought to the island, it was this spot that sold her. She knew she would build the most incredible world here, on this dark and howling island. Now we really must get a move on. Time is not on our side, I’m afraid!”

Maybe it’s the fact we’re confused and freezing, maybe it’s the man’s flighty exuberance, but none of us move. We only watch him go.

I didn’t notice it before—it was concealed by the gray grasses fringing the rocks—but a precarious set of black wood steps zigzag up the cliff face. They look like they’re clinging there due to static. Raiden is starting up them.

Poe, hugging the briefcase to his chest, considers the scene in thoughtful surprise. Franz is busy peeling off his foam neck brace, wringing out the seawater. Cooper is looking tearfully back the way we came, as if praying that out of that grayed nothingness a rescue boat will appear. Torin looks like a scared little girl. Everleigh stares after Raiden with deadpan gravity.

Only Mouse is unfazed. Even though he looks like he just drowned, his blue suit completely soaked, he tosses his phone in the barrel and takes off down the pier.

“You don’t have extreme reservations?” Franz calls after him.

“My curiosity has beaten my fear,” Mouse shouts over his shoulder.

Raiden has stopped on a landing midway up on the stairs, waving.

“Let’s go, please! All of your questions will be answered during the presentation!”

For the first time, I hear biting impatience in his voice, like a concealed switchblade in his hand suddenly catching the light. Then it’s gone.

“There is a great deal to cover! Not a second to waste, I’m afraid!”

A MYSTERIOUS SUMMER INTERNSHIP.
A LEGENDARY GAMES DESIGNER NOW DEAD
— LEAVING A DARK LEGACY.

YOU DON'T OWN THE GAME. IT OWNS YOU.

DARKLY



MARISHA PESSL

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