

THE
DEAD
OF
SUMMER

RYAN LA SALA

PUSH

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Illustration on page 321 by Ryan La Sala

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OLLIE

TWO DAYS BEFORE

Smile big enough and you'll end up with tears on your teeth!

My mom told me that. I used to think she meant that happiness and sadness are sometimes simultaneous, but as I stand on the back of the ferry bound for Anchor's Mercy, watching the mainland vanish bite by bite into the hungry horizon, I know better.

We were never supposed to return to Anchor's Mercy—our tiny island off the coast of Maine. People who get sick rarely make it back, and my mom was *sick* sick. But then my mom got better—I mean, *Gracie* got better. She insists her near-death experience has put us on a first-name basis now. And *Gracie* decided we were returning home, despite my fears. *Don't be silly, Ollie-baby, an island can't make a person sick. You don't really believe those old stories, do you?* she protested to my protests. *Not everyone gets to go home from the cancer ward. Don't you want to go home? Don't you want to have the best summer ever?*

And I do, don't I?

So these days, I've gotten good at smiling for *Gracie*, smiling *iiiiig enough* that she doesn't catch me when I cry. I don't know why I still cry—her leukemia responded to the chemotherapy, her treatments worked, we get to go home. Things are good again, right?

But nothing good ever lasts. Every smile ends in tears. A smile is a threat to you and to me.

“You can’t spell *threat* without *treat*.” I toss these words into the wind knowing it’ll rip them up, but to my horror someone answers.

“Let me guess. Old sailor’s saying?”

I almost scream. It’s an older boy with a crisp, golden buzz cut and dimpled cheeks already bitten pink by the sun. His eyes are the same frothed green as the sea churning in the ferry’s wake. The way they look at me—curious, a little surprised—tells me he’s been trying to get my attention only I’ve been too busy sulking to notice. I suck in a deep breath, but the diesel from the engines snipes the back of my throat and I bark a cough. The boy laughs and puts a sympathetic hand on my chest, and it works. My cough vanishes and I fall just a little bit in love.

“I’m Sam,” he says.

“Ollie.”

For a second longer Sam keeps one blazing fingertip on my chest. “Ollie. Got it.” Then he surprises me again by asking, “How long have you been playing the piano?”

My fingers freeze on the railing. When I go a long time without playing, the music in my head finds a way out of my fingertips and onto whatever I touch. It’s a nervous habit I’ve had forever, but it’s been way worse lately. Probably everything in Gracie’s hospital room is covered in my fingerprints from all the phantom music I tapped out to accompany our abysmal year. Of course only I can hear it, but somehow this strange boy has been watching me, listening along. I decide to give him a chance.

“Since forever,” I say.

“I play, too. Since I was three. I could tell you were practicing something. Seemed kinda angry. Chopin?”

“I don’t remember.”

Sam’s grin swivels into deviousness. “Play me something else, then. I bet I can guess.”

I feel myself grinning, too. Challenge accepted. I line my hands up on the railing as he hovers over my shoulder, then cast my fingers into a flurry of silent notes. Tchaikovsky’s iconic piano concerto. I keep it deliberate, embellishing nothing, because I want him to guess right. Sam leans in so close that his breath brushes my ear. He smells like sunscreen and the taffy they sell on the ferry. If I turn just a little, his lips would kiss my cheekbone.

“Oh, too easy.”

I stop playing. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m not. I’ve got it.”

“You’re vamping. You don’t have a clue.” I cross my arms and tap my foot like a cartoon of impatience. The grin on Sam’s lips might be the most thrilling thing I’ve experienced in weeks. Maybe months.

“What do I win if I guess right?”

I want to shake him by the shoulders and shout, *Are you flirting with me? Are we going to kiss?*

“Satisfaction,” I deadpan.

Something sparks in his eyes. “Seems like a bad idea to wager satisfaction when you don’t know the first thing about me.”

He’s flirting. I want to flirt back, but I remember: Good things never last. Hope is a trap. I withdraw into my perfect blue coolness,

turning to the water. “I know all about you, actually. You’re one of the dozens of unaccompanied rich kids on this ferry, bound for your aunt’s beach house for a few wild weeks of macaroni salad and clam-bakes before you head back to your private school. Right?”

“Damn, Ollie’s got a bite. Are you a boy or a shark?” Sam laughs but doesn’t say I’m wrong. We watch the wake, a ribbon of churned water trailing off into oblivion. The mainland is gone now. I hide my unease with a sigh.

“What about you?” Sam asks. “Off to vacation, too?”

This is not a difficult question, but a lie stumbles into my response. “The reverse. I was just on vacation in Portland with my mom for . . .” I do the math in my head. Gracie got sick last August. We left Anchor’s Mercy last September, right after school started back up. It’s July 19 today. That means we’ve been gone for . . . ten months?

“ . . . for a bit. We’re on our way home.”

“Whoa, you’re *from* Anchor’s Mercy?”

“Born and raised townie, yup.”

“And you live there year-round? What about school?”

“There’s a school on the island, believe it or not. The entire curriculum is sea shanties and shell shucking.”

Sam laughs, maybe realizing his surprise is slightly belittling.

“So you’ve seen the legendary Sea and Fire Festival?” he asks.

My eyebrows lift. The Sea & Fire Festival happens in February. In the *offseason*. People build bonfires on the beach all along the bay, creating a smoldering chain against the wintry ocean. When it started, no one knows, but it’s a *very* townie thing.

“How do you know about that?” I ask.

Sam plays innocent. “Who, me? I’m just a rich kid bound for his aunt’s beach house, remember? Anyway, back to our competition. The song you were playing was—”

Clang! A hand barnacled in silver rings slaps the railing between Sam and me, and a plastic cup is thrust into my face. It sports a tiny umbrella and its bright blue contents smell like the ferry exhaust plus nuclear sugar.

“Cheers, Ollie-baby!”

It’s my mom—it’s *Gracie*. She matches the drink, with a tiny umbrella pushed into her aqua-blue wig. I told her to wear her normal wig, but she said, *I’m done letting my sickness define me. It’s time for the real Gracie to live.*

“We should be able to see the water tower soon! And the captain says there might be a pod of whales coming up. Oh, the adventure is already beginning. To our grand return!” Gracie knocks her own cup into mine. I’m caught between wanting to hide my mom from this boy and wanting to hide this boy from my mom. Maybe I should just hurl myself overboard. Keep it simple. Instead, I smile. Smile *big* and sip my drink.

I cough it back up. “Mom, this is tequila!”

“Sorry, Ollie-baby. The ferry bar doesn’t serve piña coladas anymore—I asked.”

“No. I mean this has alcohol.”

“Well, yes, it’s called a Blue Lagoon Margarita? We’re celebrating!”

“I’m seventeen? And it’s not even noon?”

“So? We’re on a boat. Maritime law applies.” Gracie has finally noticed Sam, and she’s putting on a little show. “Besides, when I was

your age I was serving shots to go-go boys at the Last Hail Mary, and do you know what Mary paid me in? More shots. And occasionally crabs. Actual living crabs she kept in a bucket beneath the bar for when a tourist got curious and ordered the Mercy Mai Tai Special. Nothing funnier than watching a mainlander go soft at the sight of a crab swimming in their drink! That's how she got the name Scary Mary. Bet you didn't know *that*, Ollie-Ollie-Knows-It-All!"

I knew that. Every townie on Anchor's Mercy has covered a shift at Hail Mary's at some point, and the story is practically the only staff training. Has anyone seen it happen? No. Still, for Gracie's sake, I laugh and take a big, burning gulp of the drink. My face twists up and Sam laughs at my expense. The traitor! Maybe I am not so in love, after all.

Gracie turns to Sam and brushes back her blue plastic hair, awaiting an introduction.

"Oh, Sam, this is . . ."

Gracie stares at me, eyes twinkling. Is she my mom? Or is she Gracie? Ever since her recovery, it's like she shed her old self, the self that got sick, and invented this diabolically bubbly persona, who sat me down and said, *We have a fresh start, Ollie, but this time I want us to be friends. No more Mom, okay? Just call me Gracie.* I love Gracie, I am so grateful for Gracie, I am lucky she survived. But sometimes, in moments like this, I feel a terrible loss anyway. And I think a terrible thought: *I want my mom back.*

I take a deep breath and finally say, "This is the legendary proprietor of Singing House. And the hottest hands on Anchor's Mercy. You should hear her sing-along medleys. They're famous at all the piano bars in town."

“Gracie Jo Veltman, at your service!” Gracie curtsies. “I know I don’t look it, but I’m *also* Ollie’s mom.”

Sam responds with just the right amount of doubt to flatter a giggle out of Gracie. I rush the moment along. “This is Sam. We just met.” I search for any detail other than the rich kid fact. “He has played the piano since he was three.”

“I’m at Manhattan School of Music now,” Sam says with a boastful little bow.

Shit. If I knew he was a conservatory kid, I never would have let him meet Gracie. It’s too late now. The twinkle in Gracie’s eye explodes into a mini big bang. “Oh, you *must* come to Singing House! We’ve got the most beautiful upright Steinway. It’s been in the family since my grandpa moved to Anchor’s Mercy in the sixties. I swear the sea breeze makes it play like something special.”

Sam quirks an eyebrow. “I’d love to but . . . what is Singing House?”

Gracie bats at him. “Don’t be silly, everyone knows Singing House. How long are you staying? *Where* are you staying?”

“For a few weeks, and my aunt’s place,” Sam says.

“Who’s your aunt? She lives here?”

“No, not right now.”

“She sick?”

Sam quirks his head, not understanding the question, confirming he definitely isn’t from the island. “She’s seasonal.”

Gracie reels back like Sam has sneezed in her face.

“Seasonal? Don’t tell me she has one of those big empty houses out in the dunes, does she? Oh god, I’m being rude. Obviously she does. Is she with you? Do you know where she keeps her will? Are you

a homosexual? You know, Ollie here is single and about to hear back from his own conservatory auditions. Very eligible. And very charming when he's not scowling, like he is right now."

"Mom. Please." I attempt to halt Gracie, but it's full steam ahead on the embarrassment express.

"Ollie, relax, we're just having fun! When Sam comes over, we should invite Bash and Elisa, too. A reunion of the notorious Suds! Sam, you'll have a million friends by sundown. And if Ollie isn't your type—"

Blessedly, the ferry lets out a *BWAAAAAAAAAAAAAM*. I pray the horn is loud enough to eradicate everything Gracie just said from Sam's head.

"There it is! Home sweet home!" Gracie grabs my hand and pulls me toward the front of the boat and the opposite horizon, where a shining mist has gathered. On the wind I can already hear the music of seagulls, surf, and joyful screams. We leave Sam behind in the scramble, but my mom doesn't slow down. Heaven on earth awaits, and Gracie is determined to get there first.