

An Excerpt from

**ISLAND OF THE
ANGRY SMILE**

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NOT SAFE

Taddy liked the routine that had settled in over the past year: wake up, eat breakfast, pack his lunch, school, sports practice, goof off after school, then dinner, homework, and sleep. On weekends, there was always room for fun and adventure. Even though they could play on their devices, he and his sisters usually found better things to do, even if they liked completely different kinds of fun. Taddy rubbed his hands together.

“Let me show you my new magic trick,” he said.

“Not again,” Parker said, rolling her eyes. “Give it up. You never fool anyone.”

“We’ll see about that.” Taddy grinned and waved them over to the dining room table. “Gather around my stage.”

Parker and Styn sat across from him. The table creaked as they leaned in. A quarter glinted in the middle like it was begging to vanish.

“Can you hurry up?” Styn said, tapping her foot. “I’ve got nowhere to be, but anywhere would be better than here.”

“I, Theodore the Great,” Taddy announced, ignoring their comments, “will make this coin go through the table with this bottle.”

He held up a plastic soda bottle and set it on top of the quarter. Then he covered the bottle with a kitchen towel.

“Ma’am, please wave your hand over the bottle and say the magic word,” he said to Styn.

“What magic word?” she asked, like she was already bored of the trick.

“The magic word,” Taddy said. He exaggerated each syllable with the dramatic flair he’d seen in old movies.

Styn waved her hand over the bottle unenthusiastically. “Abracadabra!”

Taddy pressed hard and lifted the bottle. The coin was still there.

“Unfortunately, young lady, that was not the correct magic word,” Taddy said. He turned to Parker. “You there, lover of flamingos! Would you like to try?”

“Yes, please,” she said, a smile pulling at the corners of her mouth.

He set the bottle back over the coin. “Now say the magic word—and this time, it better be the *true* magic word.”

Parker tapped her cheeks, thinking. “Hmm... I know!” She waved her hand over the bottle. “Grammy Jammy popcorn!”

Taddy pushed down hard, and with a *whoosh*, the bottle shot through the table and hit the floor with a thud.

For a moment, no one moved.

Taddy whisked off the towel. “Ta-da!” The quarter remained on the table.

“Wha... what?!” Styn’s eyes went wide.

“How’d you—?” Parker started, then stopped, a grin spreading. “My magical words did it! And I’m keeping the quarter.” She snatched the coin and flipped it into the air.

The words Grammy Jammy popcorn made Taddy's stomach growl. The buttery, candy-sweet smell filled his mind, popcorn mixed with little round candies called Twimples. It was a favorite treat.

"Let's go get some!" he said.

They rushed to the back door. Parker grabbed her stuffed dolphin, Finny, from the porch swing as she passed, and the three of them dashed across the yard toward their grandparents' cottage, laughter trailing behind.

"Time for Grammy Jammy popcorn!" Parker shouted as they burst inside.

No one answered. The cottage, usually full of Grammy and Gummy's laughter, felt strangely quiet.

Taddy spotted Grammy standing by the bed, and his chest tightened.

Instead of her warm smile, there was a strange look on her face. For the first time with his grandparents, Taddy felt something else.

Fear.

His eyes dropped to the bed. Gummy lay there, his face pale, his body shaking like someone pulled from an icy pond.

Grammy hurried to his side, her hands trembling as she pressed a cool cloth to his forehead. The room smelled faintly of medicine and damp blankets.

"Gummy has a bad fever," she said. "Quick, get some dry blankets. These are soaked through."

Styn and Parker ran to the house.

Taddy turned back to Gummy, whose chest rose and fell in shallow breaths.

"When did he get sick?" Taddy asked. "He looked fine this morning."

“It came out of nowhere,” Grammy said. “He went to the city a few days ago, even though I told him it’s not safe there anymore. He insisted he needed the right kind of wood for a project. And knowing him, he stopped by the pharmacy for candy too.”

Styn and Parker hurried in with blankets. Grammy gently placed them over Gummy, tucking in the sides.

Parker stepped closer, clutching Finny. “Here, Gummy. This will make you feel better,” she said, setting the dolphin by his side. “He always helps me.”

A knot formed in Taddy’s stomach. His grandfather was never sick. Gummy was invincible, like a gladiator who never showed pain. But now he did. Something was wrong.

Taddy stood at the foot of the bed, gripping the wooden footboard as if letting go would mean giving up on Gummy. *He’ll be okay. He has to be okay.*

Gummy motioned weakly. Taddy moved up alongside the bed and leaned in.

“Have I ever told you about my old college friend, Kene von Schmidt?” Gummy asked, his voice faint.

Taddy blinked. This wasn’t what he expected Gummy to say. He thought Gummy would talk about how he was feeling, or tell Taddy not to worry.

“I don’t think so,” Taddy said. “Who is he?”

“Kene and I were explorers in college,” Gummy said, a thin smile touching his lips. “We even planned an expedition to a mysterious island to look for strange creatures.”

“Did you go?” Taddy asked.

“Know this,” Gummy whispered. “If you ever cross his path, you can trust him. Trust him.”

The fever is making him say strange things, Taddy thought. He nodded anyway.

“Why don’t you put yourselves to bed tonight?” Grammy said, guiding them toward the door. “Please pray that Gummy will feel better in the morning.”

“Love you, Gummy,” Parker whispered.

Gummy’s eyes found hers for a moment before another wave of shivers took him.

“Will he be okay?” Parker asked as they entered the big house.

“I hope so,” Styn said. “We need him since our parents... you know.”

Their mom had been working later and later and sometimes didn’t come home at all. Their dad never joined them after the move.

Taddy had been the closest to his dad. They used to be like best friends, wrestling, throwing the football, and playing video games. But now his dad only called every few weeks.

“What are you up to?” he would ask.

At first, Taddy told him about his room, his friends, and trampoline practice. Lately, he just said, “Nothin’.”

“Come on, buddy. You must be doing something interesting.”

Last time, Taddy wanted to tell him that Gummy was teaching him woodworking. But he knew Dad would probably brag about what he used to build back in the day and promise to teach Taddy the “right way” when he came back.

“Really, nothin’. Just school,” Taddy said.

He listened in silence while his dad rambled on about this and that. He said he moved to another state where there were more job opportunities. *Blah. Blah. Blah.*

“Love you, son,” Dad said at the end.

“Uh-huh,” Taddy replied. *If he loved me, loved us, he'd be living here by now.*

Now Gummy was sick. *I can't lose him too.*

Morning came with the smell of freshly baked blueberry muffins, Gummy's favorite, drifting through the house and drawing the kids downstairs to the kitchen. Taddy's stomach growled. For a moment, the sweet scent pushed his worries aside.

Parker peeled off the warm muffin top and ate it like a cookie. “I'm not going to school today,” she announced between bites. “I am not leaving Gummy.”

“I don't feel like going either,” Styn said.

“Then school's not happening for me,” Taddy said, unwrapping his second muffin.

“I want to see him,” Parker said. “But I don't want to wake him if he's sleeping.”

The kitchen went quiet. For a moment, all they could hear was the ticking clock above the sink.

Just then, Grammy came through the back door. Her shoulders were slumped, her steps slower than usual. Taddy felt a lump rise in his throat. The warmth in her eyes had dimmed.

“Is Gummy better?” Taddy asked. “We prayed for him last night.”

“Thank you,” Grammy said softly. “He slept some. I called the doctor again this morning, and someone will be here later to check on him.”

“Can we stay home?” Parker asked. “We don't want to leave him.”

“Of course, sweetheart,” Grammy said. “I'm sure just knowing you're close by will make him feel a little better.”

“Can we see him now?” Styn asked. “Is he awake?”

“Well...” Grammy looked down, avoiding eye contact. Taddy’s worry deepened.

“Grammy, is he going to be okay?” Taddy asked.

“It might be better if you visit from the window and not go in,” she said.

The kids traded glances.

“Why can’t we go in?” Taddy asked. *We went in last night.*

“It’s better if you don’t. It’s safer if you...” Grammy’s voice trailed off as she tried to hide the tears welling up in her eyes.

Safer. Mom had used that word when they moved. Now Grammy was using it too.

Something bad is attacking Gummy.

He remembered him saying, “Safe means under the care of the One who watches over us. That doesn’t mean you won’t face danger. It means you don’t have to face it alone.”

“Safe from what, Grammy?” Taddy whispered, though in his mind it felt like he was shouting.

“The Sorrow.” Grammy’s voice dropped. “Kids, I have something to tell you.”

No one seemed to breathe.

“It’s a disease that’s been spreading very quickly. They saw it first in the city,” Grammy said. “And now it’s here. I think Gummy has it.” She wiped an invisible spot from her apron.

“Some. It will make him more comfortable, but it won’t take the disease away,” Grammy said. “His own body has to fight it. Time will tell.”

Taddy appreciated that Grammy didn’t hold back on the hard truths, even when it was hard to hear. And this was hard to hear.

“But Mom works at a science company,” Taddy said. “Maybe she knows something that will help.”

“I don’t know. Perhaps,” Grammy said. “I’ll check with her.”
“Will Gummy die?” Parker’s voice cracked.

Grammy bent down and put her hand on Parker’s shoulder.
“Let’s pray and do all we can to help him,” she said gently.

They went to the cottage and looked through the window. Gummy wasn’t shivering now, but his breathing looked strange to Taddy. Grammy went in to care for him.

Won’t she catch The Sorrow? Taddy thought.

“I’m too joyful to get The Sorrow,” Grammy said, as if she could read his mind. “I’ll be as safe as possible.”

She’s acting brave to be brave, Taddy thought, remembering something she had told him when he was scared.

Over the next several days, Gummy didn’t get worse, but he didn’t get better either.

The story continues in Island of the Angry Smile.