

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TJ KLUNE



SOMEWHERE
BEYOND
THE SEA



THE SEQUEL TO
THE HOUSE IN
THE CERULEAN SEA



SOMEWHERE
BEYOND
THE SEA



TJ KLUNE



TOR PUBLISHING GROUP
NEW YORK

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*For the trans community the world over:
I see you, I hear you, I love you.
This story is for you.*

“We are at a crossroads. The purpose of this hearing—and any that may follow—is to determine what, if any, changes need to be made to the current RULES AND REGULATIONS that govern the magical community. As has been covered by the press ad nauseum, the Departments in Charge of Magical Youth and Magical Adults have recently come under heavy scrutiny. With the dissolution of Extremely Upper Management, the departments are without permanent leadership.”

Stepping off the ferry and onto the island for the first time in decades, Arthur Parnassus thought he'd burst into flames right then and there. He did not, but it was a close thing: the fire burning within him felt brighter than it had in years. He itched to break out of his skin and spread his wings, to take to the sky and feel the familiar salt-tinged wind in his feathers. But he knew if he did, chances were he'd fly away and leave this place behind forever. And that wouldn't do. He'd come back for a reason.

The owner of the ferry—an ornery fellow with a pockmarked face, stained coveralls, and the charming name of Merle—called down to him from the railing ten feet overhead. “You better be sure about this. Once I leave, you're stuck here. I don't come out here after dark.”

Arthur didn't look at the ferry operator, transfixed by the dirt road stretching out before him, winding its way into a wood with a canopy so thick the light from the midday sun barely reached the moss and leaves covering the forest floor. The sound of the sea lapping at the white sandy shores filled his ears, a reminder of his youth: the good, the bad, everything. “Thank you, Merle. Your assistance has proven invaluable.” He glanced back at the ferry. “I think I'll be just fine. Should I need to return to the mainland, I'll summon you.”

“How? No phones connected on the island. No electricity. No water.”

“That will change. Utilities have been scheduled to come out tomorrow morning at ten on the dot. You'll bring them over, won't you?”

He scowled, but Arthur saw the greedy flash in his eyes, there and gone. “Rates will fluctuate,” Merle said with a haughty sniff. “Petrol isn't cheap, and running one person back and forth will—”

“Of course,” Arthur said. “You deserve to be appropriately compensated for your time.”

Merle blinked. “Yes, well. I suppose I do.” He looked down at the two suitcases sitting on either side of Arthur. One old, the other new. “Why'd you come here?”

Barely a cloud in the sky. The blue above matched the blue below. The tail end of summer, warm, but then he was always warm. The salt in the air tickled his nose, and he breathed it in until it filled his lungs. “Why not?”

“This is a terrible place,” Merle said with a shiver. “Haunted, or so I’ve heard. No one lives here. Hasn’t for a long time.” He spat over the side railing. “And when they did, we weren’t supposed to talk about it. Hush-hush, you know.”

“I know,” Arthur murmured. Then, raising his voice, he said, “Merle. You wouldn’t happen to know a man named Melvin, would you?”

“What? How did you—he was my father.”

“I thought as much,” Arthur said. Ouroboros. A snake eating its own tail in an infinite cycle. Maybe this was a mistake. The village they’d come from across the sea looked the same from this vantage as it had years before, buildings in pastels of pink and yellow and green, people in summer wear without a care in the world, safe, because why wouldn’t they be? They were human. The world was built for them.

The ferry was the same, though a few upgrades had been made over the years: a fresh coat of paint, new seats to replace the cracked and split ones. Even Merle did not bring a sense of dissonance, looking so much like Melvin, mouth turned down, eyes flat. It was the same. All of it was the same. Except for Arthur. “I knew him once.” *You too*, he almost added, remembering the glowering teenager who skulked around the ferry with a mop.

Merle grunted. “Dead now. Ten years.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

Merle waved him off. “How did you know him?”

Arthur smiled. “I’ll be in touch.” With that, he picked up both suitcases and squared his shoulders. He was here. Finally, at last. It was time to see what he could see and hope this endeavor would not be in vain. “Your kindness will be remembered. I’m off! Cheers, my good man.”

★ ★ ★

The dirt road wound its way through the thickening wood, the sun casting shadows that flickered with the breeze. He wasn’t sweating, not yet, but the road proved longer than he remembered. *Such is the folly of youth*, he thought to himself. Boundless energy where a mile could have been six or seven for all it mattered. Nearing forty, Arthur was in mostly good shape, but the days he could run endlessly were long gone.

He rounded a corner and stopped. Trees blocked the way.

Five in total, they'd grown across the road, trunks so close together it would be impossible to slip through. They reached toward the sky, towering over him, looking far older than they should have—a hundred years, if not more. But they couldn't be. The last time he'd walked down this road they hadn't been here, not even tiny saplings.

Which meant it was something else. Rather, it was *someone* else. Not the trees themselves, of course; no, he was being watched.

He set down his suitcases and approached the tree in the middle. The bark was cracked, rough against his skin as he pressed his hand against it. "Are you there?" he asked. "You must be. These are your doing, I expect."

The only answer came in the form of birdsong.

"You know me," Arthur continued. "Or who I used to be." He laughed, though there was no humor in it. "I have returned to this place in hopes of making it more than it was." Closing his eyes, he pressed his forehead against the trunk. "And I'll do it alone if I have to, but not without your permission."

He opened his eyes when the trunk began to vibrate. Moving back slowly, Arthur watched as the trees on the path trembled with a low rumble, roots bursting up through the earth like tentacles. They slithered along the ground, wrapping around trees off the road. Wood groaned as the roots tightened, pulling the trees aside to make an opening.

Only the middle tree remained. It shivered, limbs rattling, leaves shaking. He didn't flinch when a thin branch caressed his cheek, a green leaf tickling the side of his nose. In it, he heard a whisper: *The boy. The boy with the fire has come home.*

"Yes," he whispered back. "I have returned."

The tree twisted, the dirt road cracking and breaking apart. The tree roots rose up through the ground and he grinned when they acted as feet, walking the tree off to the side of the road. Once it found a place to settle, the roots sank beneath the ground once more. Ahead, dirt rose in the divots left behind, filling them in. A moment later, the road ahead was as smooth as the road behind.

"Thank you," Arthur said with a little bow. "If and when you're ready, I'll be here." Picking up his luggage, he moved on.

★ ★ ★

The moment he stepped out of the wood and saw the house for the first time in twenty-eight years was unremarkable. Set back over a jagged cliff, it loomed

above him, backlit by the sun. An empty cement fountain sat out front, the basin streaked with green and black mold. The brickwork appeared to have fallen into disrepair, cracked and broken, pieces half buried in the grass around the house. Shattered windows in white frames were surrounded by crawling ivy half covering the front. The turret—a tower that rose twenty feet from the top of the house—looked as if it would fall over at the slightest nudge. Next to the house was an overgrown garden with flowers in golds and reds and pinks, overtaking the gazebo where, at the age of nine, a boy with fire in his blood had carved his initials into the brick to prove he existed: AFB. Arthur Franklin Parnassus.

Set away from the house was a second building, one he'd never seen before. It hadn't been here when he'd left as a child, crying out against the bright sunlight after having been trapped in darkness for so long, a strong arm wrapped around him, guiding him up the stairs and out to a waiting vehicle. This other building was small, made of similar brick as the house he'd dreamed about time and time again. He knew the so-called orphanage had changed owners a time or two over the years, but as far as he could tell, no one had lived here for quite a while. The guesthouse, for that was what it seemed to be, would do for now. The windows were intact, and the roof looked to be in better shape than the main house, where some of the shingles had been blown off by storms past.

He left his luggage near the porch steps, moving as if in a dream. The path through the garden was difficult to navigate, the plants and shrubbery thick, encroaching. He passed by the gazebo, pushing his way through the wild garden. The path wrapped around the side of the house to the back, and there, affixed to the base of the house, stood a pair of double wooden doors that led underground, streaks of scorched black upon them. The doors were sealed with a rusted padlock. He had the key. He had all the keys.

He didn't go inside. He knew what was down there. Tick marks scratched into the wall. Blackened stone from when he'd burned. Perpetual darkness, aside from his fire.

A ghost, then, rose behind him, wrapping an arm around his throat, holding him captive. "You earned this," it snarled in his ear. "You'll learn your place, mark my words, boy. Say it. What are you? *Say it.*"

"An abomination," Arthur said dully as the arm faded away.

He stared at the wooden cellar doors as the sun drifted across the sky.

★ ★ ★

He couldn't do this. He didn't know why he'd thought he could. Too much. It was all too much. Arthur fisted his hair as he walked back around to the front of the house. His luggage was where he'd left it.

He bent over, hands brushing against the handles of his suitcases.

A voice said, "Arthur." Loud, clear, as if someone stood on the porch right in front of him.

He lifted his head. He was alone.

Except that wasn't quite true. Because he saw something he'd missed upon his arrival: a tiny yellow flower growing through the warped wood of the first porch step. Barely the size of his thumbnail, the flower had persisted, pushing through the wood until it reached sunlight.

He walked toward it slowly. Reaching the porch, he crouched down in front of the flower, touching the yellow petals gently, sun-warm against his fingertips. Rebirth. Perseverance. Color. Life. Everything important in the smallest packages.

He smiled, and for the first time in a long time, felt something right itself in his chest. "Well," he said, "if you can do it, I suppose I can too."

★ ★ ★

Summer drifted toward autumn, the leaves changing, the air not quite as warm. Arthur stood on the porch, sanding down the railings so he could repaint them. He was thinking white to match the windowsills he'd already redone. Merle had proven to be an asset of sorts, one who grumbled about all the materials Arthur brought to the island on a weekly basis. To be fair, his grumblings subsided upon receipt of payment. He'd even halfheartedly helped load supplies into the back of a maroon van that Arthur had purchased weeks before.

Arthur had almost finished sanding the last railing, and it was time to check the grout between the kitchen tiles to make sure it was drying correctly. He was about to step back into the house when something fluttered at the back of his mind, the gentle touch of butterfly wings against skin.

He looked at the road.

A woman stood there, wearing a long flowing white dress, her feet bare. Her head was cocked, her white afro like a cloud. In her hair, pink and white flowers, opening and closing in the afternoon sunlight. Her skin was a lovely shade of deep brown. She looked ageless, her youthful face at odds with her dark eyes, ancient and unsure.

Her wings—four appendages growing from her back, each longer than Arthur’s arms—fluttered slightly, translucent, the sunlight shining through them and sending a cascade of colors onto the ground. Her bare arms rested at her sides, her delicate fingers shaking slightly.

Arthur walked down the steps slowly. When he reached the bottom, he stopped, more nervous than he expected to be. He wasn’t sure what to say, where to begin.

She glanced over his shoulder to the house before looking back at him. “You’re here.” She sounded like he remembered, soft, melodic, with a tinge of sadness.

“I am,” Arthur said.

“Why?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” he said simply.

She nodded as if that were the answer she thought he’d give. She took a step toward him, and beneath her feet, grass sprouted through the dirt. Behind her, he could see similar grassy footsteps showing her path up the road.

“This house,” she said. “This place. It should’ve burned.”

“Yes.”

“And yet here you are.”

He smiled quietly. “Here I am. And here you are. Together again.”

She shook her head. “How can you stand to be here? How can you even think of...” She sighed, her wings drooping. “I thought about destroying it. After ... after you all left. I thought about coming here and opening the earth to swallow the house whole.” She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

“But you didn’t.”

“No,” she said. “I didn’t.” She looked away off into the trees. “And now I wonder why. Why I didn’t do it. Why I waited. Why I even came here today.”

“I can’t answer that for you,” Arthur said. “All I can do is tell you that things will be different this time around. I will give the children what I never had: a place to be whoever they want to be, no matter what they can do or where they come from.”

“You can’t do this alone.”

“I can,” he said. “And I will if I have to.”

“No,” she said. “You won’t.” She marched by him without so much as a glance in his direction, snatching the sandpaper from his hand. Muttering under

her breath, she climbed the steps and frowned down at the railing. She nodded, and then began to sand down where Arthur had left off.

“Your dress,” he said. “Do you want to...?”

She paused. “It’s fine. It’s just a dress.”

He watched her for a long while, feet refusing to move. When she eventually looked up at him, he said, “Hello, Zoe.”

Zoe Chapelwhite said, “Hello, Arthur.” Her bottom lip trembled. “I’m...” Then, in a breathy rush, “I’m so sorry for—”

He held up his hand. “I don’t need that from you. I never have.”

“But I did nothing to stop—”

“Zoe,” he said. “You aren’t to blame. You never were. You ran the risk of outing yourself. If they’d discovered you, they’d have come for you too.”

“We’ll never know,” she said, eyes on the railing.

“Perhaps,” Arthur said. “But you’re here, regardless. What does that say about you? Something good, I expect.”

Eyes wet, she said, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore.”

“Emma Lazarus,” Arthur said, pleased. “Yes, Zoe. We will take them all in.”

“You mean that,” she whispered.

“I do,” he said. “I could use all the help I can get, but if this is something you can’t do, I understand. I will continue on as I have been. Might take a little longer, but I’ll get there.”

She did not leave.

★ ★ ★

It took them the better part of a year to bring the house back up to code. If all went as he’d hoped, there would be inspections of every little detail, and he knew if even *one* thing was amiss, it’d be held against him.

One day, Zoe told him to stop.

“What?” he asked, looking up from the last bit of paint he was putting on the wall in the kitchen. It wasn’t exactly needed, but he’d noticed the paint had dried with tiny bubbles in one section—small, about two inches wide and four inches tall—and that wouldn’t do. It had to be perfect.

“Come with me,” Zoe said.

He shook his head. “I can’t. We’re busier than ever. We have a mulch delivery tomorrow, and don’t even get me started on the gazebo. I found a loose

nail in one of the floorboards, and that means I need to go through and check every single nail in the entire house to make sure—”

“Arthur, the work is finished,” Zoe said. “It’s *been* finished for close to a month. You know it. I know it.” She stared at him for a long moment. Then, “Go to your office. You know what needs to be done.” She turned to leave, but stopped in the entryway to the kitchen. Without looking back, she said, “The island used to be bigger. Did you know that?”

She left him standing in the kitchen, staring after her.

★ ★ ★

He did as he was told, and found a typewriter sitting on top of an old desk. A blank piece of white paper had already been fed into the typewriter with more sitting on the desk next to it. The top page had spikey writing on it. Zoe had left him a note.

It’s time to bring them home.

Z

He laughed. He cried. “I’m frightened,” he whispered. “More than I’ve ever been in my life.”

He began to type. He did not stop until he finished.

To whom it may concern at the Department in Charge of Magical Youth,

My name is Arthur Parnassus. I write to you with a proposal. I have assumed ownership of a particular house on Marsyas Island. For the last year, I—along with some associates—have renovated the property to make it not only livable, but suitable to serve, once again, as a home for orphaned magical children. Enclosed, you will find photographs documenting the work...

★ ★ ★

He did then what the ten-year-old version of himself could not: he mailed a letter. As he dropped it in the public mailbox in the village, he caught sight of something he’d never noticed before, and his blood ran cold. There, hanging in the window of the post office, a poster of a family. A boy and a girl, both towheads with bright smiles. On either side of them, figures who appeared to be their parents, holding their hands as they walked through a sun-drenched field of wildflowers. Below them, in stark block lettering, words that Arthur read over and over again in disbelief.

PROTECTING YOUR FAMILY BEGINS WITH YOU! SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING!

And below that: SPONSORED BY THE DEPARTMENTS IN CHARGE OF
MAGICAL YOUTH AND MAGICAL ADULTS.

He turned and hurried back to the ferry.

★ ★ ★

A month passed. Then two. Then three and four and five. He did not despair. He knew it was only a matter of time before they got a response.

Then on a cool autumn day, the doorbell chimed.

A man stood on the porch, suitcase in one hand, the other holding a briefcase. He was younger than Arthur expected—thirty or thereabouts, and handsome, too, his wavy dark hair slightly mussed from the trip over on the ferry. His black suit was tailored to his thin frame, his tie a furious shade of red, his dress shoes coated in dust from the road.

He said, “Greetings! I’m looking for a Mr. Arthur Parnassus.”

Arthur held out his hand. A minor test. “You’ve found him.”

The man only hesitated briefly before shaking the proffered hand. His grip was solid, skin warm. When they let go, he smiled. “Ah! How wonderful. I come as a representative on behalf of Extremely Upper Management for the Department in Charge of Magical Youth. My name is Charles Werner. I’m here to discuss your proposal, and we have a proposal of our own. It’s a bit ... unorthodox, but I think it’s something you’ll be interested in.”

Bait on a hook. Arthur knew that. And yet, he did the only thing he could: he stepped aside and invited Charles Werner in.

★ ★ ★

Later, Arthur Parnassus stood on the dock as the ferry approached. On board, a child. The first, but not the last. The sun lowered toward the sea, turning the waves into small, rushing mountains of fire.

Next to him, Zoe asked, “Are you afraid?”

“Ah,” he said. “I suppose I am, of many things. But this? No. Never this. I have no reason to be afraid.”

And in his head, a seductive whisper: *They’re the ones who should be afraid.*

He banished the voice to the depths of his mind, and as the ferry grew closer, Arthur Parnassus began to sing quietly under his breath. “Somewhere ... beyond the sea ... somewhere, waiting for me...”

*My lover stands on golden sands
and watches the ships that go sailin'.*

SOMEWHERE BEYOND THE SEA

TJ KLUNE