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THE HOUSE ^{IN THE}
CERULEAN
SEA

TJ KLUNE



ONE



“Oh dear,” Linus Baker said, wiping the sweat from his brow. “This is most unusual.”

That was an understatement. He watched in rapt wonder as an eleven-year-old girl named Daisy levitated blocks of wood high above her head. The blocks spun in slow, concentric circles. Daisy frowned in concentration, the tip of her tongue stuck out between her teeth. It went on for a good minute before the blocks slowly lowered to the floor. Her level of control was astounding.

“I see,” Linus said, furiously scribbling on his pad of paper. They were in the master’s office, a tidy room with government-issued brown carpet and old furniture. The walls were lined with terrible paintings of lemurs in various poses. The master had showed them off proudly, telling Linus painting was her passion, and that if she hadn’t become the master of this specific orphanage, she’d be traveling with a circus as a lemur trainer or even have opened up a gallery to share her artwork with the world. Linus believed the world was better off with the paintings staying in this room, but he kept the thought to himself. He wasn’t there to engage in amateur art criticism. “And how often do you—er, you know? Make things float?”

The master of the orphanage, a squat woman with frizzy hair, stepped forward. “Oh, not often at all,” she said quickly. She

wrung her hands, eyes darting back and forth. "Perhaps once or twice . . . a year?"

Linus coughed.

"A month," the woman amended. "Silly me. I don't know why I said a year. Slip of the tongue. Yes, once or twice a *month*. You know how it is. The older the children get, the more they . . . do things."

"Is that right?" Linus asked Daisy.

"Oh yes," Daisy said. "Once or twice a month, and no more." She smiled beatifically at him, and Linus wondered if she'd been coached on her answers before his arrival. It wouldn't be the first time it'd happened, and he doubted it'd be the last.

"Of course," Linus said. They waited as his pen continued to scratch along the paper. He could feel their gazes on him, but he kept his focus on his words. Accuracy demanded attention. He was nothing but thorough, and his visit to this particular orphanage had been enlightening, to say the least. He needed to jot down as many details as he could to complete his final report once he returned to the office.

The master fussed over Daisy, pulling her unruly black hair back, fixing it in place with plastic butterfly clips. Daisy was staring forlornly at her blocks on the floor as if she wished they were levitating once more, her bushy eyebrows twitching.

"Do you have control over it?" Linus asked.

Before Daisy could open her mouth, the master said, "Of course she does. We'd never allow her to—"

Linus held up his hand. "I would appreciate, madam, if I could hear from Daisy herself. While I have no doubt you have her best interests in mind, I find that children such as Daisy here tend to be more . . . forthright."

The master looked to speak again until Linus arched an eyebrow. She sighed as she nodded, taking a step back from Daisy.

After scribbling a final note, Linus capped his pen and set it and the pad of paper back in his briefcase. He stood from his

chair and crouched down before Daisy, knees groaning in protest.

Daisy gnawed on her bottom lip, eyes wide.

"Daisy? Do you have control over it?"

She nodded slowly. "I think so? I haven't hurt anyone since I was brought here." Her mouth twisted down. "Not until Marcus. I don't like hurting people."

He could almost believe that. "No one said you did. But sometimes, we can't always control the . . . gifts we're given. And it's not necessarily the fault of those with said gifts."

That didn't seem to make her feel better. "Then whose fault is it?"

Linus blinked. "Well, I suppose there are all sorts of factors. Modern research suggests extreme emotional states can trigger instances such as yours. Sadness. Anger. Even happiness. Perhaps you were so happy, you accidentally threw a chair at your friend Marcus?" It was the reason he'd been sent here in the first place. Marcus had been seen in hospital in order to have his tail looked after. It'd been bent at an odd angle, and the hospital had reported it directly to the Department in Charge of Magical Youth as they were required to do. The report triggered an investigation, which was why Linus had been assigned to this particular orphanage.

"Yes," Daisy said. "That's exactly it. Marcus made me so happy when he stole my colored pencils that I accidentally threw a chair at him."

"I see," Linus said. "Did you apologize?"

She looked down at her blocks again, shuffling her feet. "Yes. And he said he wasn't mad. He even sharpened my pencils for me before he gave them back. He's better at it than I am."

"What a thoughtful thing to do," Linus said. He thought about reaching out and patting her on the shoulder, but it wasn't proper. "And I know you didn't mean him any harm, not really."

Perhaps in the future, we will stop and think before we let our emotions get the better of us. How does that sound?"

She nodded furiously. "Oh yes. I promise to stop and think before I throw any more chairs with nothing but the power of my mind."

Linus sighed. "I don't think that's quite what I—"

A bell rang from somewhere deep in the old house.

"Biscuits," Daisy breathed before running toward the door.

"Only *one*," the master called after her. "You don't want to spoil your supper!"

"I won't!" Daisy shouted back before slamming the door behind her. Linus could hear the little pitter-patter of her footsteps as she raced down the hall toward the kitchen.

"She will," the master muttered, slumping down in her chair behind her desk. "She always does."

"I believe she's earned it," Linus said.

She rubbed a hand over her face before eyeing him warily. "Well, that's it, then. You've interviewed all the children. You've inspected the house. You've seen that Marcus is doing well. And while there was the . . . incident with the chair, Daisy obviously means no harm."

He believed she was right. Marcus had seemed more interested in having Linus sign his tail cast rather than getting Daisy into any trouble. Linus had balked, telling him it wasn't his place. Marcus was disappointed, but bounced back almost immediately. Linus marveled—as he sometimes did—how resilient they all were in the face of everything. "Quite."

"I don't suppose you'll tell me what you're going to write in your report—"

Linus bristled. "Absolutely not. You will be provided with a copy once I've filed it, as you know. The contents will be made clear to you then, and not a moment before."

"Of course," the master said hastily. "I didn't mean to suggest that you—"

"I'm glad you see it my way," Linus said. "And I know DICOMY will certainly be appreciative as well." He busied himself with his briefcase, rearranging the contents until he was satisfied. He closed it and snapped the locks in place. "Now, unless there is anything else, I'll take my leave and bid you—"

"The children like you."

"I like them," he said. "I wouldn't do what I do if I didn't."

"That's not always how it is with others like you." She cleared her throat. "Or, rather, the other caseworkers."

He looked at the door longingly. He'd been so close to making his escape. Clutching his briefcase in front of him like a shield, he turned back around.

The master rose from her chair and walked around the desk. He took a step back, mostly out of habit. She didn't come any closer, instead leaning back against her desk. "We've had . . . others," she said.

"Have you? That's to be expected, of course, but—"

"They don't see the children," she said. "Not for who they are, only for what they're capable of."

"They should be given a chance, as all children should. What hope would they have to be adopted if they're treated as something to be feared?"

The master snorted. "Adopted."

He narrowed his eyes. "Something I said?"

She shook her head. "No, forgive me. You're refreshing, in your own way. Your optimism is contagious."

"I am positively a ray of sunshine," Linus said flatly. "Now, if there's nothing else, I can show myself—"

"How is it you can do what you do?" she asked. She blanched as if she couldn't believe what she'd said.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Work for DICOMY."

Sweat trickled down the back of his neck into the collar of his shirt. It was awfully warm in the office. For the first time in

a long time, he wished he were outside in the rain. "And what's wrong with DICOMY?"

She hesitated. "I mean no offense."

"I should hope not."

"It's just that . . ." She stood from her desk, arms still folded. "Don't you wonder?"

"Never," Linus said promptly. Then, "About what?"

"What happens to a place like this after you file your final report. What becomes of the children."

"Unless I'm called to return, I expect they continue to live as bright and happy children until they become bright and happy adults."

"Who are still regulated by the government because of who they are."

Linus felt backed into a corner. He wasn't prepared for this. "I don't work for the Department in Charge of Magical Adults. If you have any concerns in that regard, I suggest you bring it up with DICOMA. I'm focused solely on the well-being of children, nothing more."

The master smiled sadly. "They never stay as children, Mr. Baker. They always grow up eventually."

"And they do so using the tools that one such as yourself provides for them should they find themselves aging out of the orphanage without having been adopted." He took another backward step toward the door. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to catch the bus. It's a rather long trip home, and I don't want to miss it. Thank you for your hospitality. And again, once the report is filed, you will be sent a copy for your own records. Do let us know if you have any questions."

"Actually, I do have another—"

"Submit it in writing," Linus called, already through the door. "I look forward to it." He shut it behind him, the latch clicking in place. He took a deep breath before exhaling slowly.

"Now you've gone and done it, old boy. She'll send you hundreds of questions."

"I can still hear you," the master said through the door.

Linus startled before hurrying down the hall.

He was about to leave through the front door when he paused at a bright burst of laughter coming from the kitchen. Against his better judgment, he tiptoed toward the sound. He passed by posters nailed to the walls, the same messages that hung in all the DICOMY-sanctioned orphanages he'd been to. They showed smiling children below such legends as WE'RE HAPPIEST WHEN WE LISTEN TO THOSE IN CHARGE and A QUIET CHILD IS A HEALTHY CHILD and WHO NEEDS MAGIC WHEN YOU HAVE YOUR IMAGINATION?

He stuck his head in the kitchen doorway.

There, sitting at a large wooden table, was a group of children.

There was a boy with blue feathers growing from his arms.

There was a girl who cackled like a witch; it was fitting seeing as how that's what her file said she was.

There was an older girl who could sing so seductively, it brought ships crashing onto the shore. Linus had balked when he'd read that in her report.

There was a selkie, a young boy with a fur pelt resting on his shoulders.

And Daisy and Marcus, of course. Sitting side by side, Daisy exclaiming over his tail cast through a mouthful of biscuit. Marcus grinned at her, his face a field of rusty freckles, tail resting on the table. Linus watched as he asked her if she would draw him another picture on his cast with one of her colored pencils. She agreed immediately. "A flower," she said. "Or a bug with sharp teeth and stinger."

"Ooh," Marcus breathed. "The bug. You have to do the bug."

Linus left them be, satisfied with what he'd seen.

He made his way to the door once more. He sighed when he realized he'd forgotten his umbrella once again. "Of all the—"

He opened the door and stepped out into the rain to begin the long journey home.

TWO



"Mr. *Baker!*"

Linus groaned to himself. Today had been going so well. Somewhat. He'd gotten a spot of orange dressing on his white dress shirt from the soggy salad he'd purchased from the commissary, a persistent stain that only smudged when he'd tried to rub it away. And rain was thundering on the roof overhead, with no signs of letting up anytime soon. He'd forgotten his umbrella at home yet again.

But other than that, his day had been going well.

Mostly.

The sounds of clacking computer keys stopped around him as Ms. Jenkins approached. She was a stern woman, hair pulled back so severely that it brought her unibrow up to the middle of her forehead. He wondered every now and then if she had ever smiled in her life. He thought not. Ms. Jenkins was a dour woman with the disposition of an ornery snake.

She was also his supervisor, and Linus Baker didn't dare cross her.

He nervously pulled on the collar of his shirt as Ms. Jenkins approached, weaving her way between the desks, her heels snapping against the cold, stone floor. Her assistant, a despicable toad of a man named Gunther, followed close behind her, carrying a clipboard and an obscenely long pencil he used to keep tally of

those who appeared to be slacking on the job. The list would be totaled at the end of the day, and demerits would be added to an ongoing weekly tally. At the end of the week, those with five or more demerits would have them added to their personal files. Nobody wanted that.

Those whom Ms. Jenkins and Gunther passed by kept their heads down, pretending to work, but Linus knew better; they were listening as best they could to find out what he'd done wrong, and what his punishment would be. Possibly he'd be forced to leave early and have his pay docked. Or perhaps he'd have to stay later than normal and still have his pay docked. At worst, he'd be fired, his professional life would be over, and he wouldn't have any pay to get docked ever again.

He couldn't believe it was only Wednesday.

And it was made worse when he realized it was actually Tuesday.

He couldn't think of a single thing he'd done out of order, unless he'd gotten back a minute late from his allotted fifteen-minute lunch, or his last report had been unsatisfactory. His mind raced. Had he spent too long trying to get the dressing stain off? Or had there been a typo in his report? Surely not. It'd been pristine, unlike his shirt.

But Ms. Jenkins had a twisted look on her face, one that didn't bode well for Linus. For a room he always thought was frigid, it was now uncomfortably warm. Even though it was drafty—the miserable weather only making things worse—it did nothing to stop the sweat from trickling down the back of his neck. The green glow from the screen of his computer felt over-bright, and he struggled to keep his breathing slow and even. His doctor had told him his blood pressure was too high at his last physical, and that he needed to cut the stressors from his life.

Ms. Jenkins was a stressor.

He kept that thought to himself.

His small wooden desk was almost at the center of the room:

Row L, Desk Seven in a room comprising twenty-six rows with fourteen desks in each row. There was barely any space between the desks. A skinny person would have no trouble getting by, but one who carried a few extra pounds around the middle (few being the operative word, of course)? If they'd been allowed to have personal knickknacks on their desks, it'd probably end in disaster for someone like Linus. But seeing as how that was against the rules, he mostly ended up bumping into them with his wide hips and apologizing hastily at the glares he received. It was one of the reasons he usually waited until the room was mostly empty before he left for the day. That and the fact he'd recently turned forty, and all he had to show for it was a tiny house, a crusty cat that would probably outlive everyone, and an ever-expanding waistline his doctor had poked and prodded with a strange amount of glee while bloviating about the wonders of dieting.

Hence the soggy salad from the commissary.

Hung high above them were dreadfully cheery signs proclaiming: YOU ARE DOING GOOD WORK and ACCOUNT FOR EVERY MINUTE OF YOUR DAY BECAUSE A MINUTE LOST IS A MINUTE WASTED. Linus hated them so.

He put his hands flat on the desk to keep from digging his fingernails into his palms. Mr. Tremblay, who sat in Row L, Desk Six, smiled darkly at him. He was a much younger man who seemed to relish his work. "In for it now," he muttered to Linus.

Ms. Jenkins reached his desk, her mouth a thin line. As was her wont, she appeared to have applied her makeup rather liberally in the dark without the benefit of a mirror. The heavy rouge on her cheeks was magenta, and her lipstick looked like blood. She wore a black pantsuit, the buttons of which were closed all the way up to just under her chin. She was as thin as a dream, made up of sharp bones covered in skin stretched too tightly.

Gunther, on the other hand, was as fresh-faced as Mr. Tremblay. Rumor had it, he was the son of Someone Important, most likely Extremely Upper Management. Though Linus didn't talk

much to his coworkers, he still heard their gossipy whispers. He'd learned early on in life that if he didn't speak, people often forgot he was there or even existed. His mother had told him once when he was a child that he blended in with the paint on the wall, only memorable when one was reminded it was there at all.

"Mr. Baker," Ms. Jenkins said again, practically snarling his name.

Gunther stood next to her, smiling down at him. It wasn't a very nice smile. His teeth were perfectly white and square, and he had dimples in his chin. He was handsome in a chilling way. The smile should have been lovely, but it didn't reach his eyes. The only times Linus could say he'd ever believe Gunther's smile were when he'd perform surprise inspections, long pencil scratching against the clipboard, marking demerit after demerit.

Maybe that was it. Maybe Linus was going to get his first demerit, something he'd miraculously been able to avoid since the arrival of Gunther and his point system. He knew they were monitored constantly. There were large cameras hanging from the ceiling recording everything. If someone was caught doing something wrong, the large speaker boxes affixed to the walls would crackle to life, and there would be shouts of demerits for Row K, Desk Two or Row Z, Desk Thirteen.

Linus had never been caught mismanaging his time. He was far too smart for that. And too fearful.

Perhaps, however, not smart or fearful enough.

He was going to get a demerit.

Or maybe he was going to get *five* demerits, and then it would go into his personal file, a mark that would sully his seventeen years of service in the Department. Maybe they'd seen the dressing stain. There was a strict policy regarding professional attire. It was listed in great detail on pages 242–246 of the *RULES AND REGULATIONS*, the employee handbook for the Department in Charge of Magical Youth. Perhaps someone had seen the stain

and reported him. That wouldn't surprise Linus in the slightest. And hadn't people been sacked for smaller things?

Linus knew they had.

"Ms. Jenkins," he said, voice barely above a whisper. "It's nice to see you today." This was a lie. It was never nice to see Ms. Jenkins. "What can I do for you?"

Gunther's smile widened. Possibly *ten* demerits, then. The dressing was orange, after all. He wouldn't need a brown box. The only things that belonged to him were the clothes on his back and the mouse pad, a faded picture of a white sandy beach and the bluest ocean in the world. Across the top was the legend
DON'T YOU WISH YOU WERE HERE?

Yes. Daily.

Ms. Jenkins didn't seem inclined to respond to Linus's greeting. "What have you done?" she demanded, eyebrows near her hairline, which should have been physically impossible.

Linus swallowed thickly. "Pardon me, but I don't think I know what you're referring to."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Oh. I'm . . . sorry?"

Gunther scratched something on his clipboard. He was probably giving Linus yet another demerit for the obvious sweat stains under his arms. He couldn't do anything about those now.

Ms. Jenkins didn't seem as if she accepted his apology. "You must have done *something*." She was very insistent.

Perhaps he should come clean about the dressing stain. It would be like ripping off a bandage. Better to do it all at once rather than drag it out. "Yes. Well, you see, I'm trying to eat healthier. A diet, of sorts."

Ms. Jenkins frowned. "A diet?"

Linus nodded jerkily. "Doctor's orders."

"Carrying a bit of extra weight, are you?" Gunther asked, sounding far too pleased at the idea.