

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE HOUSE IN THE CERULEAN SEA*

TJ KLUNE

UNDER
THE WHISPERING
DOOR



DEATH IS ONLY THEIR BEGINNING.

UNDER
THE
WHISPERING
DOOR



TJ KLUNE



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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For Eric.

I hope you woke up in a strange place.

Author's Note

This story explores life and love as well as loss and grief.

There are discussions of death in different forms—quiet, unexpected, and death by suicide.

Please read with care.

CHAPTER

1

Patricia was crying.

Wallace Price hated it when people cried.

Little tears, big tears, full-on body-wracking sobs, it didn't matter. Tears were pointless, and she was only delaying the inevitable.

"How did you know?" she said, her cheeks wet as she reached for the Kleenex box on his desk. She didn't see him grimacing. It was probably for the best.

"How could I not?" he said. He folded his hands on his oak desk, his Arper Aston chair squeaking as he settled in for what he was sure was going to be a case of unfortunate histrionics, all while trying to keep from grimacing at the stench of bleach and Windex. One of the night staff must have spilled something in his office, the scent thick and cloying. He made a mental note to send out a memo to remind everyone that he had a sensitive nose, and that he shouldn't be expected to work in such conditions. It was positively barbaric.

The shades on the windows to his office were pulled shut against the afternoon sun, the air-conditioning blasting harshly, keeping him alert. Three years ago, someone had asked if they could move the dial up to seventy degrees. He'd laughed. Warmth led to laziness. When one was cold, one kept moving.

Outside his office, the firm moved like a well-oiled machine, busy and self-sufficient without the need for significant input, exactly as Wallace liked. He wouldn't have made it as far as he had if he'd had to micromanage every employee. Of course, he still kept a watchful eye, those in his employ knowing they needed to be working as if their lives depended on it. Their clients were the most important people on earth. When he said

jump, he expected those within earshot to do just that without asking inconsequential questions like *how high?*

Which brought him back to Patricia. The machine had broken down, and though no one was infallible, Wallace needed to switch out the part for a new one. He'd worked too hard to let it fail now. Last year had been the most profitable in the firm's history. This year was shaping up to be even better. No matter what condition the world was in, someone always needed to be sued.

Patricia blew her nose. "I didn't think you cared."

He stared at her. "Why on earth would you think that?"

Patricia gave a watery smile. "You're not exactly the type."

He bristled. How dare she say such a thing, especially to her boss. He should've realized ten years ago when he'd interviewed her for the paralegal position that it'd come back to bite him in the ass. She'd been chipper, something Wallace had believed would lessen with time, seeing as how a law firm was no place for cheerfulness. How wrong he'd been. "Of course I—"

"It's just that things have been so *hard* lately," she said, as if he hadn't spoken at all. "I've tried to keep it bottled in, but I should have known you'd see right through it."

"Exactly," he said, trying to steer the conversation back on course. The quicker he got through this, the better off they'd both be. Patricia would realize that, eventually. "I saw right through it. Now, if you could—"

"And you *do* care," she said. "I know you do. I knew the moment you gave me a floral arrangement for my birthday last month. It was kind of you. Even though it didn't have a card or anything, I knew what you were trying to say. You appreciate me. And I so appreciate you, Mr. Price."

He didn't know what the hell she was talking about. He hadn't given her a single thing. It must have been his legal administrative assistant. He was going to have to have a word with her. There was no need for flowers. What was the point? They were pretty at first but then they died, leaves and petals curling and rotting, making a mess that could have been avoided had they not been sent in the first place. With this in mind, he picked up his ridiculously expensive Montblanc pen, jotting down a note (*IDEA FOR MEMO: PLANTS ARE TERRIBLE AND NO ONE SHOULD HAVE THEM*). Without looking up, he said, "I wasn't trying to—"

“Kyle was laid off two months ago,” she said, and it took him longer than he cared to admit to place who she was talking about. Kyle was her husband. Wallace had met him at a firm function. Kyle had been intoxicated, obviously enjoying the champagne Moore, Price, Hernandez & Worthington had provided after yet another successful year. Face flushed, Kyle had regaled the party with a detailed story Wallace couldn’t bring himself to care about, especially since Kyle apparently believed volume and embellishment were a necessity in storytelling.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said stiffly, setting his phone on the desk. “But I think we should focus on the matter at—”

“He’s having trouble finding work,” Patricia said, crumpling up her tissue before reaching for another. She wiped her eyes, her makeup smearing. “And it couldn’t come at a worse time. Our son is getting married this summer, and we’re supposed to pay for half the wedding. I don’t know how we’ll manage, but we’ll find a way. We always do. It’s a bump in the road.”

“Mazel tov,” Wallace said. He didn’t even know she had children. He wasn’t one to delve into the personal lives of his employees. Children were a distraction, one he’d never warmed to. They caused their parents—his employees—to request time off for things like recitals and illness, leaving others to pick up the slack. And since Human Resources had advised him he couldn’t ask his employees to avoid starting families (“You can’t tell them to just get a *dog*, Mr. Price!”) he’d had to deal with mothers and fathers needing the afternoon off to listen to their children vomit or screech songs about shapes and clouds or other nonsense.

Patricia honked again into her tissue, a long and terribly wet noise that made his skin crawl. “And then there’s our daughter. I thought she was directionless and going to end up hoarding ferrets, but then the firm graciously provided her with a scholarship, and she finally found her way. Business school, of all things. Isn’t that wonderful?”

He squinted at her. He would have to speak to the partners. He wasn’t aware they offered scholarships. They donated to charities, yes, but the tax breaks more than made up for it. He didn’t know what sort of return they’d see on giving money away for something as ridiculous as *business school*, even if it too could be written off. The daughter would probably want to do

something as asinine as open a restaurant or start a nonprofit. “I think you and I have a different definition of wonderful.”

She nodded, but he didn’t think she was hearing him. “This job is so important to me, now more than ever. The people here are like family. We all support one another, and I don’t know how I’d have made it this far without them. And to have you sense something was wrong and ask me to come in here so that I could vent means more to me than you will ever know. I don’t care what anyone else says, Mr. Price. You’re a good man.”

What was *that* supposed to mean? “What is everyone saying about me?”

She blanched. “Oh, nothing bad. You know how it is. You started this firm. Your name is on the letterhead. It’s ... intimidating.”

Wallace relaxed. He felt better. “Yes, well, I suppose that’s—”

“I mean, *yes*, people talk about how you can be cold and calculating and if something doesn’t get done the moment you want it to, you raise your voice to frightening levels, but they don’t see you like I do. I know it’s a front for the caring man underneath the expensive suits.”

“A front,” he repeated, though he was pleased she admired his sense of style. His suits *were* luxurious. Only the best, after all. It was why part of the package welcoming those new to the firm listed in detailed bullet points what was acceptable attire. While he didn’t demand designer labels for all (especially since he could appreciate student debt), if anyone wore something obviously bought off a discount rack, they’d be given a stern talking to about having pride in their appearance.

“You’re hard on the outside, but inside you’re a marshmallow,” she said.

He’d never been more offended in his life. “Mrs. Ryan—”

“Patricia, please. I’ve told you that before many times.”

She had. “Mrs. Ryan,” he said firmly. “While I appreciate your enthusiasm, I believe we have other matters to discuss.”

“Right,” she said hastily. “Of course. I know you don’t like when people compliment you. I promise it won’t happen again. We’re not here to talk about you, after all.”

He was relieved. “Exactly.”

Her lip trembled. “We’re here to talk about me and how difficult things have become lately. That’s why you called me in after finding me crying in the supply closet.”

He thought she'd been taking inventory and the dust had affected her allergies. "I think we need to refocus—"

"Kyle won't touch me," she whispered. "It's been years since I've felt his hands on me. I told myself that it's what happens when a couple has been together for so long, but I can't help but think there's more to it."

He flinched. "I don't know if this is appropriate, especially when you—"

"I *know!*" she cried. "How inappropriate can he be? I know I've been working seventy hours a week, but is it too much to ask for my husband to perform his matrimonial duties? It was in our vows."

What an awful wedding that must have been. They'd probably held the reception at a Holiday Inn. No. Worse. A Holiday Inn *Express*. He shuddered at the thought. He had no doubt karaoke had been involved. From what he remembered of Kyle (which was very little at all), he'd probably sung a medley of Journey and Whitesnake while chugging what he lovingly referred to as a brewski.

"But I don't mind the long hours," she continued. "It's part of the job. I knew that when you hired me."

Ah! An opening! "Speaking of hiring—"

"My daughter pierced her septum," Patricia said forlornly. "She looks like a bull. My little girl, wanting a matador to chase her down and stick things in her."

"Jesus Christ," Wallace muttered, scrubbing a hand over his face. He didn't have time for this. He had a meeting in half an hour that he needed to prepare for.

"I know!" Patricia exclaimed. "Kyle said it's part of growing up. That we need to let her spread her wings and make her own mistakes. I didn't know that meant having her put a gosh darn *ring* through her nose! And don't even get me started on my son."

"Okay," Wallace said. "I won't."

"He wants Applebee's to cater the wedding! *Applebee's*."

Wallace gaped in horror. He hadn't known awful wedding planning was genetic.

Patricia nodded furiously. "Like we could afford that. Money doesn't grow on trees! We've done our best to instill in our children a sense of financial understanding, but when you're young, you don't always have a firm grasp of it. And now that his bride-to-be is pregnant, he's looking to us

for help.” She sighed dramatically. “The only reason I can even get up in the morning is knowing I can come here and ... escape from it all.”

He felt a strange twist in his chest. He rubbed at his sternum. Most likely heartburn. He should have skipped the chili. “I’m glad we can be a refuge from your existence, but that’s not why I asked you for this meeting.”

She sniffled. “Oh?” She smiled again. It was stronger this time. “Then what is it, Mr. Price?”

He said, “You’re fired.”

She blinked.

He waited. Surely now she’d understand, and he could get back to work.

She looked around, a confused smile on her face. “Is this one of those reality shows?” She laughed, a ghost of her former exuberance he’d thought had long since been banished. “Are you filming me? Is someone going to jump out and shout *surprise*? What’s that show called? *You’re Fired, But Not Really?*”

“I highly doubt it,” Wallace said. “I haven’t given authorization to be filmed.” He looked down at her purse in her lap. “*Or* recorded.”

Her smile faded slightly. “Then I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

“I don’t know how to make it any clearer, Mrs. Ryan. As of today, you are no longer employed by Moore, Price, Hernandez & Worthington. When you leave here, security will allow you to gather up your belongings and then you’ll be escorted from the building. Human Resources will be in touch shortly regarding any final paperwork in case you need to sign up for ... oh, what was it called?” He flipped through the papers on the desk. “Ah, yes. Unemployment benefits. Because apparently, even if you’re unemployed, you can still suckle from the teat of the government in the form of my tax dollars.” He shook his head. “So, in a way, it’s like I’m still paying you. Just not as much. Or while working here. Because you don’t.”

She wasn’t smiling any longer. “I ... *what?*”

“You’re fired,” he said slowly. He didn’t know what was so difficult for her to understand.

“Why?” she demanded.

Now they were talking. The *why* of things was Wallace’s specialty. Nothing but the facts. “Because of the amicus brief in the Cortaro matter. You filed it two hours past the deadline. The only reason it was pushed through was because Judge Smith owed me a favor, and even *that* almost

didn't work. I had to remind him that I'd seen him and his babysitter-turned-mistress at the—it doesn't matter. You could've cost the firm thousands of dollars, and that doesn't even begin to cover the harm it would have caused our client. That sort of mistake won't be tolerated. I thank you for your years of dedication to Moore, Price, Hernandez & Worthington, but I'm afraid your services will no longer be required."

She stood abruptly, the chair scraping along the hardwood floors. "I didn't file it late."

"You did," Wallace said evenly. "I have the timestamp from the clerk's office here if you'd like to see it." He tapped his fingers against the folder sitting on his desk.

Her eyes narrowed. At least she wasn't crying any longer. Wallace could handle anger. On his first day in law school, he was told that lawyers, while a necessity in a functioning society, were always going to be the focal point of ire. "Even if I *did* file it late, I've never done anything like that before. It was one time."

"And you can rest easy knowing you won't do anything like it again," Wallace said. "Because you no longer work here."

"But ... but my *husband*. And my *son*. And my *daughter*!"

"Right," Wallace said. "I'm glad you brought that up. Obviously, if your daughter was receiving any sort of scholarship from us, it's now rescinded." He pressed a button on his desk phone. "Shirley? Can you please make a note for HR that Mrs. Ryan's daughter no longer has a scholarship through us? I don't know what it entails, but I'm sure they have some form they have to fill out that I need to sign. See to it immediately."

His assistant's voice crackled through the speaker. "Yes, Mr. Price."

He looked up at his former paralegal. "There. See? All taken care of. Now, before you go, I'd ask that you remember we're professionals. There's no need for screaming or throwing things or making threats that will undoubtedly be considered a felony. And, if you could, please make sure when you clear out your desk that you don't take anything that belongs to the firm. Your replacement will be starting on Monday, and I'd hate to think what it would be like for her if she was missing a stapler or tape dispenser. Whatever knickknacks you have accumulated are yours, of course." He picked up the stress ball on his desk with the firm's logo on it. "These are wonderful, aren't they? I seem to remember you getting one to

celebrate seven years at the firm. Take it, with my blessing. I have a feeling it will come in handy.”

“You’re serious,” she whispered.

“As a heart attack,” he said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to—”

“You ... you ... you *monster!*” she shouted. “I demand an apology!”

Of course she would. “An apology would imply I’ve done something wrong. I haven’t. If anything, you should be apologizing to me.”

Her answering screech did not contain an apology.

Wallace kept his cool as he pressed the button on his phone again. “Shirley? Has security arrived?”

“Yes, Mr. Price.”

“Good. Send them in before something gets thrown at my head.”

The last Wallace Price saw of Patricia Ryan was when a large man named Geraldo dragged her away, kicking and screaming, apparently ignoring Wallace’s warning about felonious threats. He was begrudgingly impressed with Mrs. Ryan’s dedication to wanting to stick what she referred to as a *hot fire poker* down his throat until it—in her words—pierced his nether regions and caused extreme agony. “You’ll land on your feet!” he called from the doorway to his office, knowing the entire floor was listening. He wanted to make sure they knew he cared. “A door closes, a window opens and all that.”

The elevator doors slid shut, cutting off her outrage.

“Ah,” Wallace said. “That’s more like it. Back to work, everyone. Just because it’s Friday doesn’t mean you get to slack off.”

Everyone began moving immediately.

Perfect. The machine ran smoothly once again.

He went back into his office, closing the door behind him.

He thought of Patricia only once more that afternoon, when he received an email from the head of Human Resources telling him that she would take care of the scholarship. That twinge in his chest returned, but it was all right. He’d stop for a bottle of Tums on his way home. He didn’t give it—or Patricia Ryan—another thought. Ever forward, he told himself as he moved the email to a folder marked EMPLOYEE GRIEVANCES.

Ever forward.

He felt better. At least it was quiet now.

Next week, his new paralegal would start, and he'd make sure she knew he wouldn't tolerate mistakes. It was better to strike fear early rather than deal with incompetency down the road.

★ ★ ★

He never got the chance.

Instead, two days later, Wallace Price died.

CHAPTER

2

His funeral was sparsely attended. Wallace wasn't pleased. He couldn't even be quite sure how he'd gotten here. One moment, he'd been staring down at his body. And then he'd blinked and somehow found himself standing in front of a church, the doors open, bells ringing. It certainly hadn't helped when he saw the prominent sign sitting out front. A CELEBRATION OF THE LIFE OF WALLACE PRICE, it read. He didn't like that sign, if he was being honest with himself. No, he didn't like it one bit. Perhaps someone inside could tell him what the hell was going on.

He'd taken a seat on a pew toward the rear. The church itself was everything he hated: ostentatious, with grand stained-glass windows and several versions of Jesus in various poses of pain and suffering, hands nailed to a cross that appeared to be made of stone. Wallace was dismayed at how no one seemed to mind that the prominent figure displayed throughout the church was depicted in the throes of death. He would never understand religion.

He waited for more people to filter in. The sign out front said his funeral was supposed to start promptly at nine. It was now five till according to the decorative clock on the wall (another Jesus, his arms the hands of the clock, apparently a reminder that God's only son was a contortionist) and there were only six people in the church.

He knew five of them.

The first was his ex-wife. Their divorce had been a bitter thing, filled with baseless accusations on both sides, their lawyers barely able to keep them from screaming at each other across the table. She would've had to fly in, given that she'd moved to the opposite end of the country to get away from him. He didn't blame her.

Mostly.

She wasn't crying. He was annoyed for reasons he couldn't quite explain. Shouldn't she be sobbing?

The second, third, and fourth people he knew were the partners at the law firm Moore, Price, Hernandez & Worthington. He waited for others from the firm to join them, given MPH&W had been started in a garage twenty years before and had grown to be one of the most powerful firms in the state. At the very least, he expected his assistant, Shirley, to be there, her makeup streaked, a handkerchief clutched in her hands as she wailed that she didn't know how she'd go on without him.

She wasn't in attendance. He focused as hard as he could, willing her to pop into existence, wailing that it wasn't fair, that she *needed* a boss like Wallace to keep her on the straight and narrow. He frowned when nothing happened, a curl of unease fluttering in the back of his mind.

The partners gathered at the back of the church, near Wallace's pew, speaking in low tones. Wallace had given up trying to let them know he was still here, sitting right in front of them. They couldn't see him. They couldn't hear him.

"Sad day," Moore said.

"So sad," Hernandez agreed.

"Just the worst," Worthington said. "Poor Shirley, finding his body like that."

The partners paused, looking out toward the front of the church, bowing their heads respectfully when Naomi glanced back at them. She sneered at them before turning around toward the front.

Then:

"Makes you think," Moore said.

"It really does," Hernandez agreed.

"Absolutely," Worthington said. "Makes you think about a lot of things."

"You've never had an original thought in your life," Wallace told him.

They were quiet for a moment, and Wallace was sure they were lost in their favorite memories of him. In a moment, they'd start to fondly reminisce, each of them in turn giving a little story about the man they'd known for half their lives and the effect he'd had upon them.

Maybe they'd even shed a tear or two. He hoped so.

"He was an asshole," Moore said finally.

"Such an asshole," Hernandez agreed.

“The biggest,” Worthington said.

They all laughed, though they tried to smother it to keep it from echoing. Wallace was shocked by two specific things. First, he wasn’t aware one was allowed to laugh in church, especially when one was attending a funeral. He thought it had to be illegal, somehow. It was true that he hadn’t been inside a church in decades, so it was possible the rules had changed. Second, where did they get off calling him an asshole? He was disappointed when they weren’t immediately struck down by lightning. “Smite them!” he yelled, glaring up at the ceiling. “Smite them right ... now...” He stopped. Why wasn’t his voice echoing?

Moore, apparently having decided his grief had passed, said, “Did you guys catch the game last night? Man, Rodriguez was in rare form. Can’t believe they called that play.”

And then they were off, talking about sports as if their former partner wasn’t lying in a seven-thousand-dollar solid red cherrywood casket at the front of the church, arms folded across his chest, skin pale, eyes closed.

Wallace turned resolutely forward, jaw clenched. They’d gone to law school together, had decided to start their own firm right after graduation, much to the horror of their parents. He and the partners had started out as friends, each young and idealistic. But as the years had gone by, they’d become something *more* than friends: they’d become colleagues, which, to Wallace, was far more important. He didn’t have time for friends. He didn’t need them. He’d had his job on the thirtieth floor of the biggest skyscraper in the city, his imported office furniture, and a too-big apartment that he rarely spent any time in. He’d had it all, and now ...

Well.

At least his casket was expensive, though he’d been avoiding looking at it since he arrived.

The fifth person in the church was someone he didn’t recognize. She was a young woman with messy black hair cut short. Her eyes were dark above a thin, upturned nose and the pale slash of her lips. She had her ears pierced, little studs that glittered in the sunlight filtering in through the windows. She was dressed in a smart pinstriped black suit, her tie bright red. A power tie if ever there was one. Wallace approved. All of his own ties were power ties. No, he wasn’t exactly wearing a power tie at this moment. Apparently when you died, you continued to wear the last thing

you had on before you croaked. It was unfortunate, really, given that he'd apparently died in his office on a Sunday. He'd come in to prepare for the upcoming week, and had thrown on sweats, an old Rolling Stones shirt, and flip-flops, knowing the office would be empty.

Which is what he found himself wearing now, much to his dismay.

The woman glanced in his direction, as if she'd heard him. He didn't know her, but he assumed he'd touched her life at some point if she was here. Perhaps she'd been a grateful client of his at one point. They all began to run together after a time, so that could be it too. He'd probably sued a large company on her behalf for hot coffee or harassment or *something*, and she'd gotten a massive settlement out of it. Of course she'd be grateful. Who wouldn't be?

Moore, Hernandez, and Worthington seemed to graciously decide their wild sporting-event conversation could be put on hold, walking past Wallace without so much as a glance in his direction and moving toward the front of the church, each of them with a solemn look on his face. They ignored the young woman in the suit, instead stopping near Naomi, leaning over one by one to offer their condolences. She nodded. Wallace waited for the tears, sure it was a dam ready to burst.

The partners each took a moment to stand in front of the casket, their heads bowed low. That sense of unease that had filled Wallace since he'd blinked in front of the church grew stronger, discordant and awful. Here he was, sitting in the back of the church, staring at himself in the *front* of the church, lying in a casket. Wallace was under no impression he was a handsome man. He was too tall, too gangly, his cheekbones wicked sharp, leaving his pale face in a state of perpetual gauntness. Once, at a company Halloween party, a group of children had been delighted by his costume, one bold tween saying that he made an excellent Grim Reaper.

He hadn't been wearing a costume.

He studied himself from his seat, catching glimpses of his body as the partners shuffled around him, the terrible feeling that something was off threatening to overtake him. The body had been dressed in one of his nicer suits, a Tom Ford sharkskin wool two-piece. It fit his thin frame well and made his green eyes pop. To be fair, it wasn't exactly flattering now, given that his eyes were closed and his cheeks were covered with enough rouge to make him look as if he'd been a courtesan instead of a high-profile attorney.

His forehead was strangely pale, his short dark hair slicked back and glistening wetly in the overhead lights.

Eventually, the partners sat in the pew opposite Naomi, their faces dry.

A door opened, and Wallace turned to see a priest (someone else he didn't recognize, and he felt that discordance again like a weight on his chest, something off, something *wrong*) walk through the narthex, wearing robes as ridiculous as the church around them. The priest blinked a couple of times, as if he couldn't believe how empty the church was. He pulled back the sleeve of his robe to look at his watch and shook his head before fixing a quiet smile on his face. He walked right by Wallace without acknowledging him. "That's fine," Wallace called after him. "I'm sure you think you're important. It's no wonder organized religion is in the shape it's in."

The priest stopped next to Naomi, taking her hand in his, speaking in soft platitudes, telling her how sorry he was for her loss, that the Lord worked in mysterious ways, and while we may not always understand his plan, rest assured there was one, and this was part of it.

Naomi said, "Oh, I don't doubt that, Father. But let's skip all the mumbo-jumbo and get this show on the road. He's supposed to be buried in two hours, and I have a flight to catch this afternoon."

Wallace rolled his eyes. "Christ, Naomi. How about showing a little respect? You're in a *church*." *And I'm dead*, he wanted to add, but didn't, because that made it real, and none of this could be real. It couldn't.

The priest nodded. "Of course." He patted the back of her hand before moving to the opposite pews where the partners sat. "I'm sorry for your loss. The Lord works in mysterious—"

"Of course he does," Moore said.

"So mysterious," Hernandez agreed.

"Big man upstairs with his plans," Worthington said.

The woman—the stranger he didn't recognize—snorted, shaking her head.

Wallace glared at her.

The priest moved on, stopping in front of the casket, head bowed.

Before, there'd been pain in Wallace's arm, a burning sensation in his chest, a savage little twist of nausea in his stomach. For a moment, he'd almost convinced himself that it'd been the leftover chili he'd eaten the