



**JEFF  
SOMERS**

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**BLACK  
HOUSE**

# Black House

## Chapter 7

by Jeff Somers

### 7. The Queer Lounge

“Oh, *lord*,” Agnes breathed as they stepped through the door. “*This* is disappointing.”

It was like a teacher’s lounge or employee break room. An ancient, hand-cranked Victrola played a tinny, jazzy tune, all clarinets and the hiss and pop of vinyl. There were no windows and no apparent source of light, but it was almost painfully bright, making the trio squint and shield their eyes for a moment.

There was a small kitchenette with a gurgling coffee maker and a large yellow refrigerator that had been chained shut, brightly-colored letter magnets clinging to the doors, a pile of the letters, chewed up and damaged, scattered on the floor. On top of the fridge he noticed with a feeling of dread three pawns had been balanced on the edge.

*This*, he thought, *is starting to feel like a countdown*. And he suspected whatever it was counting down to would not be pleasant.

Next to the kitchen, remarkably, was a dumwaiter. A small card table (where a game had been recently abandoned, cards and plastic chips scattered everywhere) sat in the middle of the room next to a dilapidated old couch. There were ashtrays on the table with cigarettes burning in them. On the floor next to the table was a small trampoline.

Across the room was a door, similar to all the others. Next to it was a shiny metal elevator door, with a single button set in the wall.

As they stood there, looking around, the music ended. The Victrola automatically lifted the old needle and started playing it again, clarinets and cymbals, tinny and distant. Marks startled: The tune was familiar. In fact, it was the same tune that Agnes had been humming in the library, the song about making love at midnight.

Agnes walked over and nudged the trampoline with one tiny foot. “Okay,” she said. “This is ... odd.”

“Door stayed this time,” Dee said. Marks turned and studied the door they’d just come through. It appeared as solid and permanent as ever. He leaned in to inspect the carving.

“Still a Lion,” he said thoughtfully. He leaned forward and opened it, peering through. “Still the library,” he added.

Agnes stepped over to the fridge and plucked several of the letter magnets from its surface. As she did so, the appliance suddenly moved, something inside it growling and banging against the door hard enough to make it walk forward a half inch. She leaped back, crying out and tossing the magnets into

the air. Dee stepped back towards Marks as he turned back, shutting the library door behind them, and he put a hand on her shoulder.

“All right,” Marks said. “Maybe we don’t linger here too long.”

“Maybe that’s why it did that,” Dee said. “To hurry us up.”

He nodded without looking at her. “You’re smart, kid.”

Agnes spun, a cloud of her perfume slowly covering the rotten smell that permeated the air in the lounge, mating with it and producing something entirely worse. “Maybe we should pay attention? Mr. Marks, I don’t know about *you*, but I have been in this place entirely *too long* and wouldn’t mind getting to somewhere else.”

Marks pushed his hands into his pockets and walked around the table. “Someone was just here. It’s like they heard us coming, and fled.”

Agnes folded her arms over her chest and began walking as well, matching his pace as she looked around. “Maybe they work for this place? This looks like an employee lounge.”

“Somewhere we’re not supposed to be?” Dee asked, staring down at the plastic magnets.

Agnes turned and pursed her lips. “You too ... you’re kind of not worried about being here. Or not worried *enough*.”

Marks shrugged. “I’ve seen stranger things,” he said. “I’ve been to stranger places.” He looked up at the ceiling. “So far. This place has plenty of potential for getting much stranger than anything else, I’ll say that.”

Dee walked over to the Victrola and stared down at the spinning record. “I’m just here for my father,” she said. “If I can’t find him, it doesn’t matter.”

Marks glanced up and looked at Agnes, raising his eyebrows and nodding, as if to say *see what I’m dealing with?* Agnes nodded back, but didn’t say anything.

“The dumwaiter has a stag on it,” he said, fishing through his bag and removing the notebook. “One of the doors in the library had a stag.”

“Elevator has a wolf,” Agnes said. Marks and Dee walked over to it. Etched into the metal was the same wolf that had been carved on one of the doors in the library. “We saw a wolf, too.”

“How big is this place?” Dee asked, and she suddenly sounded afraid. Marks hesitated, wondering what the right answer would be. He didn’t know kids. He’d never had any—had he?—and didn’t remember being one. And he wanted to answer before Agnes did.

“Bigger than you think,” he said, pointing. “The door in the back has a bear carved on it. We haven’t seen a bear yet. That’s at least eight rooms already—in how long?”

“Forty minutes,” Dee said, pulling out her phone.

“Thirteen hours,” Agnes said.

Marks glanced at his own phone, cheap and with about five dollars in data left on it. “Three hours,” he said. He smiled. “Well, great. Time doesn’t work right in here either.”

Agnes studied him, walking in a slow circle around him, her heels clicking on the vinyl floor. “You’re an odd duck, Mr. Marks. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you weren’t in the least bit surprised to find yourself here, in this situation.”

He shrugged. “It happens. You poke into the margins, you’ll wind up *in* the margins, sometimes.” He looked not at Agnes, but at Dee, and smiled. He felt more comfortable and more at ease in the margins. He belonged there. “The key is to remember that nothing has really changed: You have to do the work in front of you to keep moving.” He looked at Agnes and held her eyes. “And I’d say you don’t seem so worried yourself, Miss DeLay.”

There was a moment of silence, quickly broken by another muffled noise from the fridge, which rocked on its footings from some inner violence.

“So, uh,” Dee said slowly, “which door?”

“I still say wolf, kid,” Agnes said. “We’ve seen the library. Stags are always bad ideas, right? And bears ... I dunno. Bears are savage. Don’t think they’re just bumbling about looking for honey and belly-rubs.” She pursed her lips. “Or, if we can get back to the library, I still say it might be worth spending time there. The whole history of this place might be in there. A *map* maybe. It *can’t* be just dictionaries.”

Marks looked around, making notes. “I doubt the animal symbols are that literal. And libraries in places like this are honey traps: Filled with useless knowledge. Designed to tease you with possibilities—endless cross-references that send you hunting down tomes on the top shelves, always feeling like you’re about to crack everything, find the answers, and then you realize you’ve been in there for two weeks and you’re starving to death.”

Agnes smiled. “*Places like this*, huh? Been in a lot of bizarre maze-like houses where doors disappear?”

He waved vaguely in the air. “Not *per se*, no, but I have a general experience in this kind of place. Besides, it doesn’t matter what door we choose. We don’t have enough information to make any sort of informed guess. We need to data, and to get data we have to go through some doors. Establish paths. We know we can go back and forth between the library and this queer ... lounge.” He paused, chewing his lip. He glanced at Agnes, then at Dee. “I vote for stag.”

Agnes threw her hands up. “Seriously. You want us to crawl into a *dumwaiter*. Which isn’t big enough for all of us, so we’ll have to go down one at a time. Which isn’t designed for our weight, so will probably snap and send us plummeting to our *deaths*. What did you say you did for a living, Mr. Marks? Was it by any chance getting women and children *killed*?”

Marks stood up and slung the backpack over his shoulder. “Sometimes,” he said quietly.

Dee stared at him. “What?”

“Come on.” He walked over to the dumwaiter, which was a door in the wall, about four feet off the floor, perhaps three by three. A wooden lever sprouted from the wall next to it. He pulled open the door, revealing a simple wooden box, a few feet deep. “I’m first.”

“Wait!” Dee ran over to him, grabbing onto his arm. “You’re just going to *leave* me?”

“Gee, thanks, kid,” Agnes said with a snort. “*He’s* the one just admitted he’s gotten people *killed*. I’m a nice person, really, you’ll see.”

Marks looked at Agnes and then down at Dee. “Listen, there aren’t any good choices, right?”

Dee shook her head. “Send *her*. She goes down first.”

“Gee, *thanks*, kid,” Agnes sighed. “You’re a gem, a breath of fresh air. Glad to know that after getting trapped here I’ve been saved by some conch-bearing Lord of the Flies bitch.”

“Shut up,” Marks snapped. “She’s fucking terrified.” He stood up and climbed into the dumwaiter. “Don’t worry,” he said, reaching awkwardly around to pull the lever. Immediately there was a hollow thud in the wall, and a mechanical noise like chains being rubbed together filled the room with a dull vibration. The box jerked into motion, and Marks sank slowly into the depths. Dee watched, her face blank, eyes wide.

“Come *on*, kid,” Agnes said. “I’m not going to cook you.” She waited a beat. “There’s no oven in here.”

The dumwaiter stopped. For a moment they both stared, frozen. Then, dim and muffled, they could hear Marks.

“*It’s okay! It’s just a room!*”

The dumwaiter lurched back into motion. Dee and Agnes looked at each other, both more disturbed by the silent rise of the contraption than they wanted to admit. When the empty box reappeared, Dee sprang for it.

“No, by all *means*, save yourself,” Agnes said sourly, pulling out a chair and sitting down. As Dee watched her, Agnes picked up a cigar still burning in the ashtray. “I’m sure whoever was here *moments* ago won’t be back *presently* to chop me into pieces.”

Dee just stared, leaning out to pull the lever again. The box shuddered, and started its way down. Agnes stared at her as she sank, slowly swallowed up by the square of the dumwaiter’s cabinet, darkness rushing into the box to close in around her.