



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 12

by Jeff Somers

12. The Myna Bird Room

He turned the corner and stepped through the open door at the other end. It was a simple room with plaster walls that had been painted a garish shade of red, a hardwood floor, and a caged bird in one corner. There was no other furniture, and Dee and Agnes stood uncertainly in the middle of the space.

Marks leaned back and looked back the way they'd come. The door remained open, and he could see the bed in the other room.

"*Mawk*, good to see you *awk*!"

Marks turned back, startled. The voice had been high-pitched and thin. "Was that ... was that the *bird*?"

"Yep," Agnes said, stepping over to the cage and kneeling down to peer at the creature. It was large and snowy white with a black face like a mask. It shifted on the branch it was perched on nervously, moving from side to side. "Myna Bird," she said. She turned to look over her shoulder at Marks and Dee. "They talk."

Marks looked around, counting four doors including the one they'd just entered through, which remained comfortingly there, and still open.

"*Mawk*, set me free, set me free, *awk*!"

Marks stepped over to lean down next to Agnes, smelling her peppermint scent up close.

"Sorry, fella," she said.

The cage was made of gold, with yellowed newspaper lining the bottom. A sullied water bowl looked unhealthy and stagnant. Marks watched the bird's intelligent face; the tiny black eyes flickered from him to Agnes and back again. He thought they looked knowing.

"You see us, huh little guy?"

"*Mawk*, way out, I know, set me free!"

They all froze for a moment. Marks leaned forward slightly, and found the bird looking directly at him, fluffing its feathers. He had the strangest sense that it *knew* what it was saying.

"It's not crazy, is it?" Agnes asked. "Mr. Marks, what does your expertise say about talking birds offering escape routes from a freaky soul battery maze or whatever?"

Marks shook his head. "If I had to guess, I'd say this was a trap."

Agnes stood up. "Ah, jeez, you're *killing* me, Mr. Marks. Absolutely *killing* me."

Marks pondered the peppermint scent he hadn't noticed before, and continued to stare at the bird. The bird, for its part, continued to stare back.

"Give me something, buddy," he said. "I need something more to trust you."

"*Mawk!* I know, set me free! *Awk!*"

"I *want* to," Marks whispered. "I really do. But I need a reason."

"Where would it *go*?" Dee asked. "One time we had a mangy old cat in the backyard comin' round for food and I wanted to let it in and make it our cat but Mom said it wouldn't like bein' cooped up and would be afraid, she said sometimes you do more harm than good when trying to be kind. Maybe we let that bird out it just gets lost in this place and starves."

"It doesn't know what it's saying," Agnes suggested. "Birds like that they just repeat the noises they've heard." She turned her attention to the doors. "So we can go back and choose the Viper, or we got a Tiger, a Hippo, and a ... and a whatever that is."

Marks stood up and walked over to stand next to her. "Ibex," he said.

"Ibex? Seriously?"

Marks shrugged. The contents of his memory were unpredictable. He often struggled to remember recent events, but weird facts would bubble up with a certainty and concreteness that was startling. "Ibex," he said.

"*Mawk! Ibex! Awk!*"

"Let's go back," Agnes said suddenly. "Let's try the Viper."

Marks looked at her sideways. She seemed younger, he thought. It was subtle. Had her makeup been thicker before? Were there fewer lines around her eyes? Her hair seemed darker, and he thought perhaps she stood a little taller. Had she changed her shoes? Being near her felt increasingly confusing. It made him want to be bloody-minded and contrarian just to see her reaction.

"You don't want to go through the Ibex door, do you?"

Agnes shrugged, glancing at him. "I don't want to go through *any* of these doors, Mr. Marks. I want to leave this place. So yes, *all* of these *mysterious* doors marked with some sort of *animal code* I do not wish to go through."

Marks nodded. "Okay, okay, I understand." He pushed his hands into his pockets and turned away from the doors. "Let's take a moment. We don't want to stay here longer than necessary, but we don't have to go rushing through every door. Let's take a moment, catch our breath."

Dee shook her head. "There's nothing in here except a *bird*," she said. "We can't even sit *down* on anything."

Agnes shook her head. "As Dee said, going *backwards* seems wrong. One of these doors might be the way out!"

Marks sat down on the floor. “Five minutes. That’s all I’m suggesting. Come on, sit down, let’s *think* a little.” He looked at Agnes, who suddenly seemed like a slip of a girl, eighteen, nineteen years old. A kid. Beautiful. “We’re trapped in here together and I never asked: What’s your life like? What are you trying to get back to?”

Agnes blinked. “You’re asking me what my life is like?”

He nodded, pulling one of the water bottles from the bag and holding it out towards Dee, who took it. “Sure. We’re stuck in here. We’re working together to get out. What do you do? For a living?”

Agnes rolled her eyes. “I would say you’re the weirdest guy I’ve ever met, Mr. Marks, but I guess I have to wait and see who *else* I might meet in this *lovely* place until I make final awards. I’m ... well, I’m *boring*, Mr. Marks. There’s nothing much to tell.” She sat down across from him in a cloud of mint, gracefully folding her legs under her in a way Marks found old-fashioned and charming.

“So what do you do?”

She sighed. “Things, Mr. Marks, I do *things*. As do we all, right? What do *you* do?”

“I used to write,” Marks said. “I wrote about strange stuff. Black magic, monsters, curses, genetic experiments—insane stuff. Insane stuff that *really* happened. It ... it got me into trouble. I lost ... *me*. I lost memories, I lost weeks and months.” He shrugged. “These days I investigate. I investigate insane things that *really* happen. People find me, they pay me to look into things other people think are crazy. For example, a young girl tells me her father went to an address, disappeared. An address where an old house that was never actually built stands. An old house that *can’t* be there.”

Agnes nodded. “What’re you paying him, kid? Because you might be in line for a refund, the way his investigation is going.”

“So what is it you *do*, Agnes?” Marks said, smiling. “When you’re not here.”

She looked back at him. They stared at each other for a long time. Then she stood up.

“You’re mean,” she said, striding over to the doors. “You’re a mean person, Mr. Marks. I’m going through the Tiger Door. You do what you want. Kid, you’re with a mean man and you should be careful.”

Dee shifted her weight, but Marks held up a hand and shook his head at her. Agnes stood in front of the door with the tiger carving for a moment, then whirled.

“This is really unfair,” she wailed. “I have been *nothing* but nice to you! I have *helped*! I am *scared* just like you!”

Dee’s elbow jammed into his ribs. He was suddenly and forcibly reminded of the money sewn into the lining of his coat. He wondered when it would become obviously useless to continue carrying it around.

“Mr. *Marks*,” she hissed.

Marks nodded. “You tired of playing this bullshit, or you want to go another round? Who is she?”

Agnes threw her hands up. “Who is *who*?”

“The woman you’re trying so hard to resemble.” He smiled. “It’s not your fault. You can probably see my past better than *I* can. My memory is for shit. So whoever this girl, this pretty young girl in the pencil skirt, whoever you’ve been working so hard to look like in tiny increments so we won’t notice the change, it *isn’t working* because I can’t remember her.” He waved at her. “So let’s put the bullshit aside, okay?”

Agnes looked at Dee, eyes wide, then back at Marks. Slowly, her posture relaxed, and her face sobered and seemed to harden. When she smiled, it was uneven, a smirk.

“Very well,” she said, her voice flatter. “You *are* interesting, Mr. Marks.”

“*Mawk!*” the bird chirped. “*Mister Mawk!*”