



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 13

13. The Myna Bird Room

“What,” Dee said slowly, hugging herself, “is going on?”

“Poor, stupid, dumb, idiot Dee-Dee,” Agnes said, spinning lazily and breaking into a fluid sort of dance around them. “Poor, poor, imbecilic, moronic Dee. You see, my dear, your friend Mr. Marks is damaged goods, and only half-smart. So he sees some things you perhaps did not, and he distrusts the evidence of his senses, which is *bright*. Terribly, terribly bright, and yet his diminished capacity means he mistakes *cleverness* for *insight*. In short, he’s like a man in the audience who sees the sleight of hand and thinks that means he knows how the trick is done.”

Dee blinked, following Agnes as she danced around the room in a haze of peppermint. “What?”

“Oh!” Agnes exclaimed. “Darling, *dumb* Dee!”

“Dee,” Marks said, scrubbing his face. “Agnes isn’t one of us. She’s not trapped here, she’s not trying to find a way out. She’s—”

“Your *guide*,” Agnes said, stopping and entering a ballet first position.

“—the enemy. She’s here to confuse us, to stop us from figuring things out, to influence us to choose the wrong paths.” He pushed his hands into his pockets. “She’s been trying to keep us from finding our way.”

“If that were true, Mr. Marks,” Agnes said, lifting herself up *en pointe* on her toes, “you would be in a much worse place than this awful room.” She smiled beatifically at the bird in the cage. “I *despise* that creature. I’ve been trying to hide it away so deep inside this place that no one will ever find it. But it keeps finding its way back here.” Her face suddenly sobered and she looked at Dee and Marks. “Or someone keeps moving it back. I’m not alone in here, you know. I have enemies.”

Dee took a few steps closer to Marks. “So you’ve been lying to us?”

“Delightful dimwitted Dee! Not *exactly*. I never *lie*. At least, not the way you mean.” She suddenly relaxed and took three swift steps forward, clasping her hands together in supplication as Dee crowded into Marks, hugging him in sudden terror. “Please *understand*, adorable dense Dee, I am your *guide* here. I am here to help. To assist. But there are *rules*. I can’t just say, this door, then this door, then *that* door. You may not realize it, as you are clearly challenged in your thought processes, but I have been offering you clues. Hints.” Her face took on an expression of sorrow. “I wish I could be more explicit, dear, I do. But I am forced to follow the rules too, you see.”

“All that means, kid,” Marks said, “is that it’s up to you and me to find our way. She’s just going to confuse everything, if she can.” He looked at the woman. “Tell me: Who are you trying to resemble? I know I’m supposed to be affected by the way you look.”

Agnes smiled and laughed, and began dancing again, leaping and spinning around the perimeter of the room, making the bird squawk and flutter its wings in alarm. “You don’t remember? For *shame*, Mr. Marks! Ah, I hate this room I hate this room I hate this room I hate this room!”

“So,” Dee said, stepping slightly away from Marks. “So ... you, like, *work* here?”

Agnes stopped again and drew herself up, standing elegantly with one slender leg extended in front of her. She seemed to grow taller, her face more beautiful. “I am the designer and sole owner of this place, delicious dull Dee. This is my home. I offer guided tours and amusements.”

Marks snorted. “She’s being self-important,” he said. “She’s an employee. Or a prisoner. She didn’t make this place.”

“How do you know?” Dee asked.

Marks shrugged. “I’m guessing—”

Agnes barked a laugh and entered first position again.

“—but she’s been genuinely confused a few times, I think,” he continued. “A few things have been moved or changed that she wasn’t ready for. If she owned this place, that wouldn’t happen.”

“*Unless*, my dear weird uncle, you had *minions* who often played *pranks* and *practical jokes* on you.” She relaxed again and began to pace furiously. Every time she came close to the cage, the bird spread its wings and squawked. “Oh, they think they’re so *amusing*, sweet slow Mr. Marks, always shifting things an *inch* this way, a centimeter *that way*—the different systems part of the *joke* you see. They’re always leaving bits and pieces for you to stumble on, to *help* you.” She snorted. “Thankfully, usually you’re all too slow-witted to notice. I mean, the route out of this place was pretty clear from the first room, if you were paying attention. But of course, you *weren’t*.”

Dee stepped forward, and Agnes stopped moving to lean down and smile at her.

“Is my father here?”

Agnes nodded enthusiastically. “Yes!”

Marks had turned and was studying the four doors again. The one leading back to the bedroom was still open, the still, dim hallway somehow unsettling. “Don’t trust her, Dee.”

Agnes rolled her eyes. “Go on, darling dumb Dee. Ask me! Ask me!”

Dee swallowed, staring up at her. “Can you take me to him?”

Agnes nodded. “Yes!”

“*Will* you?”

“Yes!”

Marks turned. “What?”

Agnes straightened up. “Well, *of course* I will help a poor, frightened, obviously brain-damaged child find her father, who trembled in here a week ago looking *quite* sketchy—so undesirable, I must admit, that I hid from him and was derelict in my *duties* by letting him wander almost *totally* unguided—I do apologize, my delectable dolt, but your father resembled nothing more than a *criminal element*. I did offer him some *clues* that he failed to follow almost entirely. I know precisely where he is, and I will lead you to him!”

Dee smiled. “Really?”

Agnes reached down and patted her on her head, three times, slowly. “Yes,” she said slowly, stretching the word out, nodding her head elaborately. She straightened up and flounced over to where Marks stood. She stood next to him for a moment, hands clasped behind her, taking sidelong glances at him.

“I say,” she said, “I *do* smell nice, don’t I? The perfume? The *scent*? Still not coming back to you, my miserable morbid Marks?”

“Dee,” marks said as if Agnes were not there. “We can’t *trust* her.”

“And yet, there *are* two possibilities!” Agnes said excitedly, turning to regard the doors. “Either I will lie to you, and the path I suggest will lead you to further confusion and possibly *eternal imprisonment*, or I will assume you will doubt me and tell you the *true* and *correct* path assuming you will doubt me and do *the opposite*.” She slapped her hands. “So *exciting!* I do so love this part, when I am unmasked, and you, Mr. Morbid Marks, are by *far* the fastest anyone has ever arrived at this realization. But,” she leaned over and put her head on his shoulder. “I will also tell you this: I do not *lie*. I may *deceive*, but my statements are always true. And I say this: I will lead you to him, to dear dumb Dee’s father.”

For a moment, they appeared to be a romantic pair, Agnes strikingly pretty, her head on Marks’ shoulder, the two of them standing silent, shoulder to shoulder.

“Marks?” Dee said. “If she knows where my father is?”

Marks nodded. “All right,” he said. “All right. Which way?”

Agnes animated, skipping away and clapping her hands. “Oh, lovely! *Lovely!* This is going to be ever so much fun. Mr. Marks—not *you*, dour doting Dee, but our wonderful *Mr. Marks*—you are the *most* fun. The funnest. The mostest fun person I have had here in *such* a long time!” She paused and made a face. “Do you know how many people simply *give up*? Sit down and wait? Wander aimlessly, weeping? *Kill themselves*?” She shook her head. “*Too* many, Mr. Marks. Too too many. But not you, lovely you! *You* are determined to figure everything out and escape! I *adore* you!”

Marks nodded, still not looking at her. He knew she’d purposefully resembled someone, someone she assumed would have an affect on him. A memory. Probably a tragic one, someone from his past that would affect his judgment, unbalance his emotions. Only his ruined memories, the lost years, saved him, and he didn’t want to look at her unnecessarily for fear of dredging up the memory.

“Which door, then?” he asked. “To find her father. Which way?”

Agnes stopped and turned to face him. Somberly, she gave a little half-bow, pushing her hands together. “Hippopotamus,” she said.

Marks glanced at Dee, who nodded fiercely at him. He took out his notebook and made a few scratches in it, then closed it and stuffed it back into his backpack. He took a deep breath. “All right, kid. Let’s go find your old man.”

As Agnes mimed clapping, grinning, he stepped forward and took hold of the handle of the door with the Hippo engraving. It revealed what was becoming a familiar, simple hallway. He stepped into it, followed quickly by Dee and Agnes, who continued to mime clapping as she followed them to the other end. Marks opened that door and stepped through.