



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 38

38. The Garden

He stood in the midst of the garden, staring at the noose tied to the large oak tree, and remembered.

It came to him as a series of images, at first, disconnected, random. He saw her: Agnes. He saw her sitting in a coffee shop, a diner, sipping coffee, worried and unhappy. He saw her staring at him, studying, her hands wrapped in a paper napkin which she twisted and tore. She was both prettier and more haggard than the Agnes he'd met in the Black House.

He remembered her now: A client, long ago. Unhappy and frightened, plagued with a series of mysterious messages from her deceased husband. She'd found Marks the usual way, he realized: Asking around, desperate, until someone took her story seriously and suggested a name, a man who was known to look into the strange, the mysterious.

She'd gone missing herself, he recalled, but she'd left word for him: An address, a note saying she'd been told this was where her David was to be found. And he'd traveled there, dutiful, and he'd entered, and he'd found himself here, in the Black House. Except everything had been different. The foyer had been filled with hunting trophies. There had been no library that he recalled. And the doors had been marked with patterns of dots. But it was the same place. He listened to the approaching noise of collapse and realized it was also the approaching noise of reconstruction, the Black House unmaking itself and reconfiguring everything, choosing new puzzles, new decorations, new traps.

"I've been here before," he said out loud, hearing Dee behind him.

He remembered her, Agnes, the real Agnes, asking him for a dollar, sitting at the diner. He remembered having just three dollars to his name, but he'd given her one. She was so sad, so pretty, he couldn't resist. And she'd gone to the jukebox and played the same song, over and over again. And he'd sat there and he'd thought she was beautiful.

"Marks?"

He stared at the noose. They were in a formal garden, surrounded by an incredibly high stone wall. It was a peaceful place filled with plants, but hadn't been tended for a long while. The stone benches were overgrown with mold, as if the ground were slowly reclaiming them. The walls were engulfed in ivy, making them seem part of the landscape instead of merely a container. The fountains were dry, and the little frescoes of fish diving in and out of the water were faded and dulled, their crimson paint washed away by time. Here and there a path traced a faint way through the overgrown grass and the exotic plants that thrived with less attention.

The tree was massive and ancient. The rope was old and didn't look like it would hold anyone's weight.

There were four vine-covered wooden gates in the walls; the vegetation was so thick on them the carvings were hard to make out, and on one the carving had been deliberately destroyed, blackened and chopped away. The remaining three displayed the familiar Newt and Octopus, and a Moth.

“Marks?” Dee repeated, stepping carefully forward. “You okay?”

“I was here,” he repeated. “I forgot. I forget a lot of things. Something happened to me, and I forget a lot of things, now. I was here, though. So was she.”

Dee frowned. “Agnes?”

Marks nodded. “Just like your Dad. And I came here to find her, to rescue her. And I failed.”

He remembered her by the jukebox. Bright daylight, the diner half-full, the smell of coffee, the feeling of energy buzzing in the air. She played that same terrible, awful song four times in a row and just stood there, swaying slightly, beautiful. Sad. Terrified. And he knew he would try to help.

He remembered the phone message from her, the next day: An address, a lead, something she’d stumbled on in her husband’s effects.

Dee swallowed. “Did you find her like ... like we found Dad?”

Marks nodded again. He half-turned, and she was shocked at the look on his face: Bleak, desolate. “Yes,” he said. “Just like that. And the place has been trying to torture me with her, but my fucking *broken* brain screwed that up, and I didn’t see.” He hit himself in the temple, hard, and Dee took a step back in shock. He hit himself again, and she stepped forward.

“Mr. Marks!” she shouted. “Stop it!”

“I’m useless, kid,” he said slowly, breathing hard. “I’ve been kidding myself. I went up against something and it beat me down, it beat me down hard, and I’ve been scraping along and I thought I could survive and maybe even help someone. Help you. But I can’t even tell when I’m being tortured any more.”

He dropped the backpack into the overgrown vegetation and began pulling off his jacket. He was staring up at the noose again.

“Take this,” he said, holding the jacket back towards her without turning around. “There’s money sewn into the lining. A lot of it. Well, not so much these days, but enough for you for a while, get your bearings, figure something out. Take it.”

Dee stepped back again, wrapping her arms around herself. “No.”

He shook the jacket. “If I’m right, the next chord is minor, so you take the Moth door. Then the next chord is an F, so look for the Fly again—I think it’s important you do the rooms in the right order. No shortcuts. After that I’m not sure, to be honest. The next chord would be a D minor, but we’ve been to the Dining Room already. So it has to be something different. I think it’s the end, the exit, but I can’t be certain in this fucking place.”

She shook her head again. “If you’re not sure, come with me. Or I’ll get lost. *You* know the song, I don’t. *You’ve* been here before, right? I need you.”

He shook his head. "I'm no good to anyone. I can't even remember when I get you killed."

He saw Agnes laid out on the slab, naked, with the same incisions as they'd found on Dennis. There'd been a different clue inside her; not a chess piece but a shot glass, an old school one with a stylized silhouette of a woman on it, heavy and substantial. He remembered the sense of shame, the anger. He remembered shaking with it, his hands in fists as he stood there.

Dee stepped forward slowly. ignoring the jacket held out behind him, she reached up and took one of his hands in hers. It was rough, calloused, and cold. Hers was smooth and warm.

"Marks," she said, voice shaking. "Come on. You see, right? You *were* here. That means you got out, once. That means you can get *me* out."

He continued to stare at the noose. He knew it had been put there for him. One more twisted joke, one more blade in the ribs from a place that had been playing a series of black jokes against both him and Dee, toying with them like a spider spinning its meal into a cocoon.

Dee tightened her hand on his. "If you make me go on without you, I'll die in here."

He startled. "No—"

"I *will*," she said earnestly, not raising her voice. "You left me once and I was almost lost for good. If you bail on me now, I'll be in that room with ... with my Dad."

He closed his eyes. "All right. I'll get you out."

She hesitated, willing him to say something else, to promise something more. He didn't move or open his eyes or speak, so she dragged her arm across her nose and nodded. "Okay. Show me. Why the Moth?"

He sighed heavily. As she released his hand he twisted around and put his jacket back on. He knelt down and opened the backpack, extracting his battered notebook from it. As he flipped through the pages Dee circled around him, placing herself between him and the tree, and crouched down.

"Newt heads to the maze," Marks said. "Octopus goes to that old, dusty room with all the crap in it. The other door's mark has been erased, so we don't know where it goes. The next chord in the song is a G minor, but we've already been through the Goat door—that's here. So I figure M for *minor*, which means Moth."

Dee frowned. "But we don't know where the unmarked door goes to. Maybe it's the right way, and the Moth is a trick."

Marks sighed and pushed his hand through his hair. He nodded. "Okay, that's possible. But do we take that chance? We go through an unmarked door we don't know where it sends us. Maybe back to the Waiting Room. Or someplace worse, someplace we can't get out of no matter what we do. Or the maze of unfinished rooms. Honestly, Dee, if we get lost in that maze again we might die in there. We don't have any food or water left. We need to get out of here *quick* or you're going to die of dehydration."

"We might die of dehydration."

He nodded absently.

She turned and studied the doors. “We got to *know*, Marks. We’re so close. I can feel that shit, how close we are. Like this place is pissed off that we’re on the verge, you know? We can’t do something stupid now, pass up an opportunity. The way the mood of this place feels right now, it’s *dying* for us to screw up, and it’s gonna punish us if we do.” She looked back at him. “So I’m going to go and scout ahead.”

“No,” he said sharply. “That’s—”

“Look,” she said, putting her hands up. “Tie a rope around my waist. I go in, I see what’s up, and if I can’t get back, you pull me back.”

He shook his head again. “Sometimes there’s no physical connection between the rooms—you know that. For all we know you go through and the rope cuts in half. Besides,” he said heavily. “We don’t have any rope. Lost it a long time ago, in the elevator shaft.”

“I’ll go slow. And we got rope, don’t we?”

They both turned and looked up at the noose.

Marks’ smile was faint and awful. “Right. We got rope, all right.” He nodded. “Fine. But I go in with the rope, and you promise me if I can’t make it back, you keep on, go through the Moth.”

“Don’t work. I can’t pull you back, you’re too fucking heavy, old man. *You* can pull *me*, though, so if I’m in the middle of the air or something, you can drag me back.”

Marks studied her, then slowly smiled, shaking his head. “Goddamn smart-assed kid,” he said with a laugh. “All right, you’re so skinny and light, you climb on up and get the rope down.”

She snapped off a salute. “Yessir!”