



**JEFF  
SOMERS**

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**BLACK  
HOUSE**

# Black House

## Chapter 21

### 21. A New Room

Marks regretted the rope. It dangled from the ladder and there was no way to retrieve it, and now that it had proved its usefulness he worried about it. There might come a room up ahead where they would wish fervently for a rope, and there would be none.

He looked around. "Seems like they're expanding," he said. "Building new rooms."

"Great," Dennis said. "That's what we need. *More* of this."

"Where are the workers?" Dee asked. "If they're building, where are they?"

Marks looked around. "Maybe if we make our way through this section, we'll find them."

This was met with silence. He looked around. "Three doorways," he said. "Who wants to pick?"

Dee pointed at a doorway in the far corner. "It's the opposite direction of the elevator shaft," she said. "So maybe it takes us away from the Waiting Room."

"I'm all for *that*," Dennis said.

Marks led the way. The doorway led to a short hallway that was also rough, new drywall and unfinished flooring. At the other end was another unfinished doorway, which led them into another room of taped, sanded drywall. This one had eight doorway openings.

"Whatever they intend this to be," Dennis said, "it's going to be huge."

Marks nodded thoughtfully. "Any guesses on the next move?"

No one said anything. After a moment he nodded and headed for the doorway directly opposite the one they'd just come through.

"It's the same."

Marks nodded, looking around at the newly-installed drywall, the thick white lines of the taped and sanded seams, the rough subfloor, the bare bulb. They'd tried four doorways so far, and all led to a similar room, with the sole difference being the number and positioning of the doorways. None of the rooms had actual doors, just openings that led to short, identically drywalled halls and then to a room that appeared to be just as recently created.

"It's a maze," Marks said resignedly. "A maze within the maze."

“How long have we been in here?” Dee asked.

“A few hours,” Marks said.

“Anyone know where the first room is any more?”

A moment of silence as they contemplated the walls and floor that looked exactly like every other room they’d been through. Marks swung the backpack around on his shoulder, reached in, took out the notebook, and turned it to a new page.

“How big can the maze be?”

Marks looked at Dennis and shrugged. “Theoretically? Infinite. But there has to be a way through.”

“Doesn’t do us any good if it takes infinity,” Dee said.

They were sprawled on the rough floor of one of the rooms, eating a desultory meal of water, donuts, and power bars. Supplies were getting low, but Marks decided not to make that a topic of conversation at that moment.

Dee yawned.

“Let’s get some sleep,” Marks said after a moment of depressed silence. “Gotta sleep some time.”

“All right,” Dennis said. “I’m done in, sure enough.”

They fell silent. Marks took off his jacket and balled it up to make a pillow, but the stacks of money he still had sewn into the lining made it the worst pillow ever made. He slid the backpack over to Dee, and she struggled similarly to make it resemble something comfortable.

For a few minutes they all tried to relax, to close their eyes. Finally, Dennis sat up.

“Anyone see a light switch?” he said, his voice ragged. “I’ll never sleep with that light in my face.”

“Part of the torture,” Dee said.

Marks climbed to his feet and walked over to the bulb hanging down. He squinted up at it, examining the fixture, then pulled the flashlight from his pocket and with one efficient tap smashed the bulb.

For a moment, there was silence. The room wasn’t entirely in darkness; light from the four doorways bled into it, giving it a twilight, spooky cast.

“Do you ... hear something?” Dee asked.

They sat and listened. Dennis lay back down again. “Try to sleep, baby.”

Marks was bent over his notebook when Dee and Dennis woke up, stiff and aching from a night on the hard floor.

“Damn, I think I’ve got splinters in my butt,” Dee said, scowling.

“I’ve got a plan,” Marks said.

They walked into the room, the same room as usual: Drywall, mudded seams, bare bulb. This one had three doorways, including the one they’d just walked through. Marks walked briskly up to the bare bulb and smashed it, then made a note in his notebook.

“How many rooms so far?” Dennis asked, stretching.

“One hundred fifty four,” Marks said.

“Jesus.”

They stood for a moment in the darkness. Both of the other doorways were lit up, meaning they hadn’t been in those rooms yet. Marks thought surely they would start encountering some repeated rooms soon.

“Marks.”

He stepped over to where Dennis was standing in the middle of the room, looking down at the floor.

“You *must* hear that!” Dee suddenly said.

Something crunched under Marks’ feet. he knelt down and picked up a shard of glass. “Sons of bitches,” he said, face reddening.

“They been replacing the bulbs,” Dennis said flatly, his voice low and spiritless. “They been followin’ us and *replacing the bulbs*. We maybe already been through half the rooms we’ve seen.”

“Can you *hear* that?!”

Ignoring Dee, Marks dropped the shard. He looked up at Dennis, whose face had taken on a tight, still look. “How? How could someone be following us and doing that and us not notice?”

“*Guys!*”

They turned to look at Dee. For a moment they stood in perfect silence. Distant, they could hear what sounded like voices, deep and random, and a sort of scraping sound, like someone was dragging something across the rough flooring. Dee backed away from the direction of the sound. After a few beats the men joined her, all three backing away.

“What does that sound like to you?” Marks asked.

“Nothing *good*.”

“Come on, come *on!*” Dee shouted, and turned to run through the opposite doorway. Dennis cursed and spun to follow. Marks hesitated for one moment, then ran after them.

They no longer looked around as they entered a room. They were all the same: Apparently newly-built, sometimes even smelling faintly of the joint compound used to seal the seams, damp and earthy.

And behind them, always seemingly closer, the voices and the incessant scraping noise. Marks thought he could feel it inside his head, like an angry insect had gotten trapped inside his skull and was chewing its way out.

They stopped, breathing hard, and he realized they'd been moving through the rooms faster and faster, almost running, without any conscious thought. The noise kept creeping closer no matter how quickly they moved, and the voices had resolved into ominous shouts and screams, the scraping noises sounding like something sharp being dragged along the walls.

But they never saw any signs of anyone else in the maze, and unless by sheer luck they were continuously advancing deeper into it instead of walking back over their own trail, which seemed much more likely, Marks couldn't understand how that was possible.

"Stop," Dennis said, breathing hard and staggering over to one wall, leaning against it. "Stop. It's been hours. I can't go any more."

Marks nodded, stopping and putting his hands on his hips and bending over, breathing in air in greedy gulps. Dennis slid down to the floor and sat desolately, his legs spread in front of him. Dee just sat on the floor, sweaty, and lay back, closing her eyes. To Marks, it felt like they'd just given up. Without a discussion of any kind, they'd simply decided to sit down and let whatever it was overtake them.

He had to admit, it felt good to stop. He wasn't certain how long—subjectively—they'd been in this place. Two days? Three? Less? More? And he had no idea how long they'd *actually* been inside. It felt like infinity, and all he knew was that after so much time spent running and thinking and deciding, he was ready to be done. And if all he'd accomplished was reuniting Dee and her father, he thought maybe that was an okay legacy. He'd fixed one thing. A lot time when he'd gotten involved in situations, investigations, he'd accomplished nothing. And sometimes, he knew, he'd only made things worse.

He stumbled over and sat down next to Dennis, and closed his eyes. He listened to the storm of sound inching closer to them, and it suddenly seemed comforting.