



**JEFF  
SOMERS**

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**BLACK  
HOUSE**

# Black House

## Chapter 28

### 28. A New Room

She was always there.

Agnes had, mercifully, stopped speaking to him. But that had been replaced with a silent following. She was always just in the room, always in the doorway he'd just passed through. Always watching, a hint of a smile. Her perfume was always in the air. It didn't matter how fast or slow he walked. If he turned around just before walking through a door, she was in the other doorway. The moment he passed into the next room smelling of damp joint compound and drywall dust, she was right behind him, watching. A hint of a smile. Perfume.

Sometimes she hummed the same damn song she'd been humming, seemingly since he'd arrived.

The rooms themselves didn't appear to have changed. He found broken glass in several, and score marks on the walls, evidence of their attempts to mark their route and avoid doubling back on their own path—or evidence of *someone's* attempts to do so. He didn't know if the rooms he passed through maintained their state after he left, though they seemed to. Or if they did, how long they did, or if other people were also trapped in the Black House.

He wondered if Dee had figured this out, if she knew Dennis was her own personal Agnes, her own personal figment designed to distract her and steer her wrong. If so, she might leave Marks clues as to her route, or be on her own, trying to find her way back. He had to think like Dee. He paused for a second, contemplating the command from on high to think like a young black girl who'd lost her parents and who was now trapped in a strange, maze-like hell.

Figment. Distraction. He stopped moving. He turned to regard Agnes, who hovered in the doorway he'd just come through, a wraith smelling of Peppermint again. He wondered if her shifting scent meant anything, or if it was just more evidence of his ruined memory.

The House wanted him to move. Everything so far—aside from the Waiting Room—had been designed to keep him moving. Move, move, move—and when they'd slowed down or showed any signs of hesitation, there had been noises or events that had kept them moving. He'd *known* this and still fallen for it.

If he wanted to find Dee, he thought, his best bet was to sit down and let *her* find *him*.

He shrugged off his backpack, much lighter now than it had been, and sat down in the middle of the floor. He was tired anyway. He was hungry and thirsty and his feet ached. He was an old man, older perhaps than he realized, what with all those years missing. He closed his eyes and immediately was

aware of the buzzing, crunching noise, low and distant, but suddenly *there*. There to spook him, to make him surge up in panic and start running blind again.

He kept his eyes closed. He shifted his weight.

For a long while she left him alone. The urge to open his eyes just to see what Agnes was up was powerful, and he had to keep distracting himself, distracting himself from the distraction. He could smell her. He knew when she had wandered close, because her scent became stronger, and he knew when she moved away. He forced himself to examine his gray, murky memories, the vast wasteland of the last few years, seeking clues, bits and pieces of lost moments. He concentrated on Agnes, ironically, to *distract* himself from Agnes: Who did she resemble? Had there actually been an Agnes, a pretty brunette with a penchant for peppermint? Had he lost her? Hurt her? Had she hurt him? There was a reason the House had dressed itself as her for him. She was supposed to have had the same effect on him as Dennis had on Dee.

“Are you sleeping?”

He squeezed his eyes shut tighter. She would, he thought, try to get him up again, try to prompt him into moving, running blind.

“Meditating? Oh, goodness, tell me you’re not about to burst into tears. I cannot *bear* weeping men.”

He said nothing.

“You’re not ... *giving up*? Oh, moronic Mr. Marks, I should hope *not*. You are so close.” He could hear her creeping closer, her scent growing stronger, filling his head like a pink and white mist, somehow alluring, erotic, compelling. Then she was whispering in his ear and her breath was surprisingly hot against his ear. “*So close*. You have been indefatigable, really. Your commitment to that disappointing Dee is laudable—certainly she did nothing to deserve your affection, and let’s face it, my many-faceted Marks, you’re a doll to put so much energy into her salvation. She doesn’t deserve you, dearie.”

Her voice was silk. He felt a bead of sweat roll down his forehead.

“But you *can’t* give up now. Is she selfish? Yes. Silly? Yes. But she’s just a *girl*, Moral, Well-Meaning Marks. Just a *child*. And you sent her on her way, alone, unprotected. All you had to do was stay with her. Now she’s lost, and it is, I’m afraid, *your fault*.”

He squeezed his eyes tighter. After a moment he heard a feminine sniff of frustration, and sensed her sitting down next to him. He could imagine her skirts, which had bloomed outward over time, settling around her, like a cloud.

“People *have* died in here,” she said softly, sounding sad, pained. “I am sorry to say it. I *do* try to avoid that, I really do, though you won’t believe it. Oh, I know your opinion of me. It’s not a fair opinion, of course, although I understand why you feel that way. We all have our roles to play—yours is to protect and defend the innocent, those who lack your knowledge and experience. Mine is to protect this *place*. But I do not wish harm on anyone, truly. But it *has* happened. People give up. They sit down, they stop moving. I’ve seen it before, My Mournful Marks.”

Her attempts to get him moving were proof, he thought, that he should not do so.

Dimly, he became aware of another sound: The now-familiar sizzle of the distant grinding noise, the shouting voices. It was distant and dim, but still caused a sudden flame of anxiety bordering on fear in his belly. Something about the noise was ominous, tickling some ancient fight-or-flight instinct.

“That sounds *scary*,” Agnes cooed.

He parsed his options furiously while his primitive underbrain demanded he run, *run* immediately. Heart pounding, he forced himself to remain sitting there as the noise grew in volume, seemingly just a room or two away, some horrible thing come to devour him.

“At this point,” Agnes shouted, “you’re wondering—because you people are always wondering this at this stage of the game—if *that’s* the real danger of this place, something come to consume you in some terrible way. That maybe I’ve been trying to help you all this time, trying to keep you safe in my own way by guiding you away from *this*, this doom coming.”

With effort, he kept his eyes closed. The noise seemed to worm into his brain and massage the precise nerve endings that inspired terror and panic.

Then his eyes popped open. He caught Agnes smiling, a wide, crazy grin she immediately turned off—but he’d seen it. And he knew, or thought he did, another piece of the puzzle: This noise, this awful implied violence wasn’t there simply to keep him moving, was it? It was there to *herd* him. To keep him moving, yes, but in a specific direction. *Away* from something.

He climbed to his feet. His legs felt prickly and asleep, and he wondered how long he’d been sitting—surely not for long? Staggering on numb legs, he steered himself around Agnes, who’d adopted a tense, concerned expression, and started moving towards the noise.

“I wouldn’t—”

He ignored her and barreled through the door, dragging the backpack behind him as he crashed into the next room, the grinding, tearing noise louder, like a machine ripping down walls and crunching the plywood subfloor into mulch as it rolled. He didn’t slow down. He oriented himself as best he could and chose the doorway that appeared to lead closer to the noise, and crashed through it. Then he did it again.

In the fifth room, the noise was so loud he could feel it vibrating inside him, shifting his organs. The voices had resolved into screams of agony and horror. The room shook with the force of it, and crossing to the next doorway took physical effort, as if an invisible force was pushing against him. He pushed himself through, stumbling with his eyes half closed as he struggled against the unseen wind. He almost fell forward through into the next room, into near-silence. He crashed to his knees and knelt there for a moment, gasping for breath and staring at the floor, ears ringing, body buzzing.

He looked up and froze in shock.

“Hello again, Mr. Marks,” said The Broker.