



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 34

34. The Mousehole

“So,” Dee said after a long period of silence, “why does she—Agnes—keep asking you if you remember her?”

Marks didn’t answer right away. They were ... he wasn’t sure where they were. It felt different from everything else they’d encountered, less defined somehow. They’d stepped into the dark maw of the mousehole, he’d fished his flashlight from the backpack, and they’d started walking. At first they’d been in a tunnel, rough-hewn, like something had chewed it into existence. He’d been aware of the ceiling and walls of the tunnel.

Slowly, though, the space had widened out, and now he had a sense of being in an immense cavern, pitch black. The path was illuminated for a few feet in front of them and few feet behind, but the light of the flashlight, which turned into a small lantern when slid into the open position, didn’t reach very far. The path might be just a narrow lane elevated over a bottomless chasm.

The moment he thought it, he was convinced that was exactly what was happening.

“Stay in the center,” he said quietly. “Don’t wander to the edge.”

“Gee, *that’s* encouraging,” Dee said.

Their voices echoed distantly, and the air, which had been almost unbearably hot in the pantry, had turned cold.

“So,” Dee said. “Agnes?”

Marks nodded. “She’s like your Dad—this place made her in the image of someone I used to know.”

“Who?”

He shook his head. “I can’t remember. I can tell it’s someone ... important. Someone that should be messing with me, making me really sad and upset. But I can’t quite see her.”

“And you ain’t trying too hard, huh?”

He smiled thinly in the darkness. “No. I’m not sure I see the upside of remembering her. Not while I’m in here.”

They walked on in silence. Somewhere, very far away, there was a screeching cry, like a bird of prey’s call. But incredibly distant. They both stopped and looked up and around. But the light of the flashlight was too feeble; all they could see was darkness.

“Water’s gone,” Marks said.

They’d rested, sitting in the dim glow of the small lantern, feasting on the crumbs and dregs left in his bag. Around them the sound of wind was hollow and constant, a soft reminder of the huge space all around them. He looked around at the darkness and considered tossing the empty plastic bottle into it to see if there were any audible clues as to what might be found out there, but reconsidered, thinking that they might come across another water supply and want the bottle.

They’d been walking for a long time, though he wasn’t sure how long. Dee’s phone battery had died, and he didn’t have a watch. They were stuck in a formless, timeless void, shrunk down to—what? Atomic scale? Quantum? Were they getting smaller and smaller with each step? All of those possibilities seemed perfectly valid.

“It’s *cold*,” Dee complained, hugging herself.

Marks shrugged off his jacket and held it out to her. The girl hesitated, then nodded, taking it and pulling it on. He thought briefly of the money sewn into the lining, and then dismissed it. He wasn’t sure money would ever matter again.

“Come on,” he said. “We should get moving before the batteries in the flashlight start to go.”

“Jesus hell,” Dee said, getting to her feet. “Don’t say *that*.”

They walked.

They made a shelter of sorts; Mark unfolded the shovel and jammed the blade into the soft dirt of the path, and they hung his jacket on the handle, stretched it out and anchored it on the other end with the backpack. It wasn’t much, but it felt better than sleeping out in the open, surrounded by darkness. When they were settled, Marks turned off the flashlight.

The darkness was immediate and complete. The world, small as it had become, vanished completely. Marks clutched the flashlight tightly and pushed it deep into his pocket. There would be no morning, no sunrise, no other light source. If they lost the flashlight, they were doomed.

He closed his eyes and opened them and there was no difference.

“Marks?” Dee said softly. “You there? You still there?”

“I’m here.”

There was at least the sound of the wind, some kind of proof that the world still existed, that there was something out there. Marks lay quietly, trying to feign sleep for Dee’s sake, trying to project a calm acceptance, a confidence maybe that there would be light again, that this was just temporary. Dee had grown quiet, plodding along without any of the chatter or energy he’d grown used to. He was worried they wouldn’t get through this fast enough to save her.

He lay there and listened to the black wind.

“Mr. Marks.”

He nodded. “Might as well call me Phil,” he said. “Seems kind of silly to call me *mister* like I’m your teacher.”

“Never gonna happen.”

“All right. What?”

They walked a few more steps before she responded. “What if we never get out of here? What if this is a Trap Room?”

He nodded again. The thought had occurred to him. They’d camped out twice now, the rest of their lives just walking in the tiny pool of light afforded by the flashlight. He didn’t know how long they’d slept, or how long they’d walked. He decided to call it two days.

“Then we die here, kid.”

They walked.

“There’s no bishop,” Dee said after a while. “If we’re on the right path, there should be a bishop.”

Marks nodded. He thought the flashlight was dimmer. It definitely was. When they’d started their trek in the total pitch blackness it had been bright enough to see a few feet ahead of them. Now it was barely more than a foot, just enough to take a step. He thought it wouldn’t be long before it faded completely, leaving them alone in the most intense blackness he’d ever experienced. He realized it had never even occurred to him to buy extra batteries.

“I don’t think we’re in a room, technically,” he said. “I think we’re ... *in-between* rooms. In-between all the actual spaces. I think when we shrunk down, we kept shrinking, and we’re in the wall. Like, literally, in the wall.”

“Well, it ain’t crazier than anything else that’s happened,” Dee said. There were a few moments of silence. “But we’ve been here a *long* time.”

And it’s getting dark, he thought.

“Tell me about your Dad,” he said, wanting to distract them both. “What he’s *really* like.”

She didn’t respond right away. When she did, she spoke in a low, dense voice. “He’s really like he was *here*, actually. Kind of serious all the time. Restless. Always moving. He’s got this sadness in him, like he knows he’s wasted time, made mistakes, and can’t ever forget it. But he’s silly sometimes. Has this really, *really* lame sense of humor.” She sighed, and Marks thought it was the most relaxed sound she’d made since arriving at the Black House. “A *lot* of fart jokes.”

“I think I’d like him.”

“You *will*,” she said pointedly. “Hey, Marks—how’d you get into all this shit, anyway? All this weird stuff?”

He squinted in the dimming light, which was going much faster than he’d expected. Was there some faint outline ahead? Something resolving out of the darkness? It might be an artifact, a trick of the light.

“You know what? I remember this. I never forgot it. Or I *did*, but only for a really short time. Maybe it’s because it was so far in the past, it was burned in better. Or maybe it’s because it’s so fundamental to who I became.”

As he spoke, the light grew steadily weaker, the path in front of them harder to make out.

“It was an email. Or a bunch of emails. There was a kid in school, high school, who died. Some bizarre disease, something super rare. He was sixteen and he just died, and it was a shock. All of us in school went to his funeral. We didn’t know how to dress, how to act. And the worst part was, the kid? Who died? Total asshole. Everyone fucking hated him.”

“Why?”

Marks grimaced. There *was* something up ahead, but he couldn’t make it out. He decided not to call attention to it until he knew what it was.

“He was one of those guys who was just mean. Nothing nice to say to or about anyone. Everyone was dumb. Everyone was lame. He’d heard your music before, long ago when it was still fresh and exciting. He’d read all the books and heard all the jokes and anything you did was just tired and boring. And he had money.”

Dee snorted. “*Money*. Marks, you coulda just said *that*.”

“So he dies, and everyone pretends to be broken up about it, but we’re all just kind of okay with this guy being dead. And then my friend calls me one day and says he saw him. At the mall. Eating a cheeseburger in the food court by himself. He says he looked right at him, and the dead kid winked and got up and walked away.”

A few more steps, a little darker. “So?” Dee finally asked. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. I never found out. *That’s* what drove me to this. I never did the legwork, I never investigated, and to this day I don’t know if my friend was crazy, or if that kid didn’t die, or if it was a ghost. And it bothered me. Still does. And I slowly became incapable of letting anything like that slide.”

“Marks, that’s a real crap origin story. You ever get famous, I advise you to dirty that up a little.” He could see her, dimly, turn to look back at him. “We’re going dark, ain’t we?”

“Afraid so.”

“Shit.”

“There’s something up ahead, though,” he said, slowly, hesitant. “I can’t exactly make it out. Might be a door.”

“*Might* be?”

He shrugged. He could barely make out the faint outlines of the path, much less something looming up a few dozen feet ahead of them. “All right, it’s absolutely a door. Feel better?”

“*No*.”

The flashlight went out.

It was a slow, majestic fade, a sudden decline from bare illumination into total blackness. Marks froze where he was. He widened his eyes.

“Dee?”

“Here.”

“Don't move for a moment.”

“You think you gotta *tell* me that?”

“Let's see if our eyes adjust at all. Maybe there's a *tiny* amount of light that might help.”

“Okay.”

He stood. He could hear the faint whine and wheeze of the wind, he could hear Dee breathing and swallowing. He could hear himself doing the same. But there was nothing visual. After a few minutes, he held his hand up near his face. Touched his nose. And couldn't see it at all.

“Not working,” Dee said, her voice shaky.

He shut his eyes. “Then we walk.”

“But we can't *see*. We might wander off course. Fall off an edge. Be lost—”

“Listen,” he said, kneeling down and sweeping his hand around. He found a small pebble and picked it up. He stood, took a deep breath, and threw the pebble as hard as he could in the direction he was still fairly certain was in front of them. There was a distinct *plink* of impact.

“That's the door,” he said. He saw no reason to be careful in his language. If it wasn't a door there would be plenty of time for them to come to terms with the fact later. “We take a few steps, we throw a rock, we orient. It's like Sonar.”

“Okay,” Dee said. She sounded doubtful. He knelt and found another pebble. “Listen for it, then walk towards the sound. Just take a few steps. The fewer steps you take, the more likely you won't get off track. I'm right behind you.”

He threw the stone. He took three steps and heard Dee doing the same. He wasn't going to let something like twenty feet be the end of them. Not now.

They repeated the process nine or ten times, and then Dee grunted. “Just walked into a wall.”

Marks stepped forward until he bumped into it as well. “All right,” he said. “If it's a door it's not very wide. Don't move to your left or right. *Lean*, but don't *step*, yes? Try to find the door handle. Or anything. But don't move your feet.”

They searched. The sound of their hands against the stone in the perfect pitch blackness was horrifying, a dry, itchy sound accented by their desperate, unhappy breathing.

“*Found it!*” Dee shouted. Before he could react, he heard the click of a latch, and then light, white and blinding, flooded into the space. He stumbled back to let her open the door all the way, shielding his

tender eyes. The doorway framed the usual drywalled hallway, with the usual bend after a few dozen feet. The familiarity of it was so welcome he almost laughed.

She stepped into it without hesitation, turning to smile back at him. "Come on!" she said, looking dirty and thin. "Things are gonna start going our way now. I can feel it."

He nodded, following her. He stepped into the hallway, eyes stinging from the light, and then turned to look behind them. The path, as he'd suspected, was just wide enough for two people, and dropped off to a deadly edge, nothing but blackness on either side. He paused for a moment, contemplating, and then turned to follow, pulling the door shut behind him.