



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 42

42. The Yellow Room

The tunnel was damp, dark, and hot; it went on longer than most of the hallways so far, and Marks began to fear they'd made a terrible mistake. The noise got steadily louder, the vibration under their hands got more and more powerful, and it occurred to him they might be moving *towards* the approaching destruction of the place. When the door finally swam up from the darkness, he smiled in relief and pushed it forward eagerly, and they emerged into blinding light that made them both reflexively squint and shield their eyes.

It was a small room decorated entirely in yellow.

Monstrous sunflowers towered above them in yellow ceramic vases everywhere throughout the room, all of them vibrating and walking this way and that as the whole space shook; the sound of destruction was almost too loud to be shouted over. The flowers seemed freshly-cut. The air was thick with fragrance, making him cough, but he'd never actually smelled a sunflower before. He didn't know if they were really this overpoweringly sweet, or if the scent was being pumped in somehow, which wouldn't surprise him.

Aside from the vases, the room was filled with yellow cardboard boxes, all marked with a black stencil reading PHONE BOOKS. As they stood there, a handful of bugs that had attached themselves to them wriggled free, dropping to the floor and making their way to the vases, seeking new homes. Marks wondered briefly if they'd just introduced a destructive species to the room, if the next set of victims wouldn't find it decimated, all the plants eaten, the yellow turned brown and green from rot. Assuming anything of the current maze survived.

A phone started ringing. It was distant, almost lost in the noise, but they could both just pick it out.

They both froze, looking at each other. Marks held up a hand for silence, unnecessarily, and began spinning around, trying to locate the source of the ringing. It was an old-fashioned ring, like an ancient landline. The only exit from the room seemed to be a winding staircase, disappearing into the floor and the ceiling. He stepped over to it and stood very still for a few moments, listening, but he couldn't tell where the ringing was coming from.

Just as suddenly, the ringing stopped. The noise of collapse seemed to get louder, and Marks could feel the floor shifting under his feet from the vibration. Dust sifted down from the ceiling onto them.

Dee walked over to a stack of the boxes. She noticed more stenciling on some of the boxes, reading THIS END UP. A quick survey showed that not every box had the extra instructions. She looked at Marks, and they shrugged at each other again, not needing to talk. She looked down and tore at one of

the double-stenciled boxes, ripping the flaps up and digging down into it. She reached in and pulled out a stack of checkbooks. She recognized the blue safety paper. She squinted at them; there was no address or bank information.

She tossed one to Marks and bent to one of the boxes with just one stencil. She tore it open, but inside was only foam packing peanuts—yellow. She dumped out the box to show Marks, and thought they looked like fat, the fat that got sucked out of people on medical documentaries.

The distant phone began to ring again.

“This shit,” Dee shouted tiredly. “Is gettin’ weird!”

Marks nodded, eyes roaming the painfully yellow room. “Up or down, though, at least it’s not complicated.”

She pursed her lips. “Which makes me think it *is* complicated. And that we’re never getting out of here.”

Marks shook his head. “This goddamn place. It’s *perfect*, Dee, don’t you see? One way out. The other way, shit, I don’t know—but it won’t be good. And it all comes down to *chance*. We made it this far. Let’s say—for shits and giggles!—we’ve made the right choices, we’re on the path like I said. It *doesn’t* matter, because the path brings us to a fucking *roll of the dice*.” He laughed. “There are no clues. There’s no *puzzle*. We just flip the coin, up or down.” He kicked a box, hard, sending it flying, check books scattering everywhere. “This *goddamn* place.” He dragged a hand down his face. “I need a fucking *drink*.”

Dee studied him. “Dude, don’t fall apart on me *now*.”

He barked a laugh. “Why not? This seems like the *perfect* time to fall apart.”

She stared at him. “You promised you’d get me out. *You promised*.”

“Yeah, well—”

She stamped her foot, and for some reason the tiny gesture stopped him. “Okay,” she said, “the whole place is screwing with us. Falling apart behind us, driving us forward. Herding us. Sending people who look like ... who look like ... to fool us, to mess us up. And now here we are and you know one way will trap us again and we can’t know which one. But you *promised*.”

Marks stared at her and was ashamed of himself. He’d seen things like this. His own life was ruined. Dee had a chance, still. She was an orphan and if her father’s death couldn’t be pinned on him, hers could, if he left her in the Black House. If he let it claim her the way it had claimed Agnes.

He looked down at his shoes. “All right, kid. You’re right. Might as well see it all the way through.”

She smiled falteringly. “Besides, Marks, maybe it *isn’t* random. Maybe there’s a clue, like the chess pieces, or something. Maybe we just haven’t seen it.”

He nodded without looking up. “Maybe.”

She toed one of the boxes. “Like, why do some of these boxes say *this end up*? The ones that do say *phone books*, but they got *checkbooks* in ‘em instead.”

As she spoke, the phone stopped ringing again.

“I still can’t tell if that’s above us or below us,” Marks said, slowly seeming to inflate, to animate.

“Probably just Agnes calling to call us names.”

A ghostly smile flitted across his face. “Probably,” he agreed.

“Checkbooks. Check books,” Dee said, wandering around. “Check the books.” She looked up at Marks. “Where else we see books in this dump?”

“The Library,” Marks said. “Dictionaries!”

“Huh,” she said. “That bedroom, the spare room—*Lost Horizon!*”

With a ear-splitting crack, one of the walls began to split, a chasm in the stone blinking into existence and immediately spidering into a complex pattern of slowly spreading lines. The floor seemed to tilt under them, the whole room shaking violently.

Above them, the spiral staircase suddenly jerked, as if twisting free from its moorings.

“Marks!” Dee screamed over the noise, shielding her eyes from the bright reflected light that seemed to have suddenly jumped from *intense* to *blinding*. She couldn’t see him—she couldn’t see anything, everything had become a bright yellow blur, the world shaking as if someone had taken hold of the room like a child holding a toy block, shaking it violently in their pudgy fist.

She felt his hand on her arm and she allowed him to pull her in. Vaguely, as if he were a mile away instead of right next to her, she heard him shout *time to go! Up or down!*

They were just barely ahead of the collapse, he thought. A few seconds, it felt like, and the whole place was coming down around them, crushing them, leaving them in a formless void, or being crunched up as it was all broken down to atoms and rebuilt—whatever it was, it meant they wouldn’t be around any more. And the thought of somehow becoming permanently part of this place, of his atoms being ground up and mixed in with the mortar and the fabric of the rooms created for the next unlucky person to wander into the Black House—it was intolerable.

Up or down! he shouted again, pulling at her. They had seconds. Chunks of the walls and ceiling were falling, and the floor was undulating in waves as if it was made of liquid.

Up! she screamed, and he barely caught the word under the weight of the din. *We. Go. Up!*

He nodded and turned. Holding her close, he made his way to the stairs, staggering and rolling, trying to match his weight distribution to the new gravity he encountered with each step. A section of ceiling crashed into the floor directly in front of him, and he barely had time to consider how dead they would both be if he’d been moving just a little bit faster.

Kicking phone books out of the way, he pulled them up onto the stairs and began climbing.

It shook violently, trying to buck them off. After four steps upward, twisting around, the bottom of the stairs tore free from the floor, treads flying, and Marks doubled his efforts, trying to run up with just one hand to brace himself as the stairs swung this way and that. Dee threw her arms around his waist and squeezed, giving him back his second arm, and he began half-running, half-pulling himself up as the stairs dissolved behind and beneath him.

As the ceiling, ragged and pocked with missing chunks, drew near, the light began to fail.

This is it, Marks thought, sweating and breathing hard but, oddly, at peace. They'd given it their best shot, he thought. he could see the bolts holding the stairs in place jiggling and popping, and then he was up past the line of the ceiling. The stairs melted away beneath him, and with one final leap he threw himself up and to the side, praying there was a floor to land on.