



**JEFF  
SOMERS**

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**BLACK  
HOUSE**

# Black House

## Chapter 44

### 44. The Starlight Motel

Motel life had become routine. Picking up his mail at the front desk, Marks waved at Dolores, who worked days behind the front desk. She was a stupid, elderly woman who required three repetitions to answer any question and who had exactly none of the physical skills required for any sort of property management job, but he'd come to regard her with affection because she had never once attempted to lure him into an endless maze of infinite identical rooms, or toyed with him about past sins he only half-remembered.

The motel grounds had become familiar, and he was dreading the day he would have to leave them. The money sewn into his jacket, miraculously still there when he'd checked after escaping the Black House with Dee, had funded a vacation, and he'd used it to rest. To truly *rest*, to sleep late and eat well (or as well as the bar's limited menu offered) and not think about survival. He firmed up, his energy skyrocketed, and he no longer resembled a cadaver when he looked in the mirror.

He was down to his final few hundred dollars, though, and it had been months since he'd walked out of the Black House with Dee. He was finally sleeping through the night. It was time to get back to work, find a client, or a job, and re-enter the world. He was oddly at peace with this. As he sorted through his mail, he smiled, catching sight of Dee's address. She'd written him a few times after discovering to her wide-eyed horror that he didn't have a cell phone or even an email address. Her handwriting was huge and pressed deeply into the paper, as if writing things out longhand required immense effort.

He pushed his door open, reading how she was enjoying school (not very much) and life with her very distant cousins (not very much either). He could tell, though, that she was happy, or as happy as teen girls ever got, and he felt a sense of pride, and relief. There had been a moment when he feared he'd damned her, killed her—lost her. Several moments, he corrected himself, setting the mail down on the coffee table and kicking his door shut.

He didn't fool himself that he'd managed to escape with Dee because he was smart. He'd been lucky. The Black House hadn't really followed any coherent rules, but there had been just enough structure there to make some educated guesses. He wondered if it was normally much more organized, if it was his own muddled brain that had made the House muddled. Maybe people with clear memories and burning regrets experienced a much more tightly focused hell than he had. The only praise he allowed himself was that he'd simply kept at it, doggedly moving from room to room, refusing to just collapse and give up.

He'd rewarded himself by not thinking about Agnes. He hadn't investigated his own past and identified her, or placed himself missing for several days or weeks at some point in the past. He refused to think about her. However he'd failed the woman who Agnes had been modeled on, he'd let her go, because he knew chasing after her would only result in suffering.

He undressed and ran the shower, shaving and luxuriating in the hot water. For the first time in years, he didn't feel limited by his lost memories, his lost time. He felt like his brain was working again, firing on all cylinders. The Black House hadn't been a victory—they'd failed to save Dee's father, and that made two people Marks had failed to save from that place—but he hadn't lost Dee, and that was the first thing that felt like a victory in a very, very long time.

He wrapped himself in the thin, itchy cheap robe the motel provided and sat down on the bed. Extracting the last bills from the lining of his coat, he emptied his pockets and did an accounting, down to the scattered pennies. Enough, he thought, for some new clothes, and then he was in the open again, but he'd been living about a sliver above homeless for so long he knew how to work that game. And he felt optimistic. He was sober, for one, and ready to work.

He got dressed. The thin, scratchy feel of his old, worn-out clothes was depressing.

He picked up the mail and extracted Dee's letter, opening a drawer and placing it in with the others he'd saved. he wasn't sure why he was keeping them, or what he planned to do with them when he didn't have a permanent place to live or store anything. He just found he couldn't simply toss them. He hadn't read any of them more than once and Dee hadn't said anything brilliant or notable in any of them, but he liked the fact that someone else in the world knew he existed and thought about him. And he felt like he needed physical evidence of the fact, too.

He knew that very soon she would stop writing. It was inevitable. She meant well, but the letters would start to space out, would become just a few lines saying nothing at all, and would then degenerate into annuals, and finally stop coming at all. He'd made an arrangement with Dolores to have the motel hold any mail that came for him, and he would dutifully take the bus once a month or so and collect any correspondence that came for him. But the fact was Dee was already part of his past, and he of hers, and time erased everything, rubbing its thumb against every line that linked you to someone else until it was gone.

He scanned the rest of the mail, amazed at how quickly you got onto junk mail—

He froze, holding a plain white envelope. The return address read PASSUS, INC., ACCOUNTS RECEIVABLE. His hand trembled as he opened it, tearing it roughly. Inside was a standard invoice. It was blank except for a red stamp across the center of the page: OVERDUE. Attached by a single staple was a white business card:

**THE BROKER**

**PASSUS, INC.**

Marks closed his eyes and crumpled up the bill.

The Black House had invited him again.

**THE END**