



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 1

by Jeff Somers

1. The Starlight Motel

Motel life was a step up. Thirty-five precious dollars a day, but he'd come into a windfall and it was wonderful to have hot water on demand and privacy again. If only for a little while. If only until the money ran out.

He was fascinated by the economy of the space. The little kitchenette was old and greasy, but in just four feet of space they'd packed everything one could need: A tiny fridge, a hot plate, a sink, some cabinets. The bathroom was enough space for one person at a time. The sitting area was by the window, a pair of old, stinking armchairs and a battered wooden table. The bed. He thought it best to not think about the bed, since he certainly wouldn't be sleeping in it.

He thought about an entire life played out in the room. Breakfast, dinner, nights in front of the ancient cathode-ray television, the digital converter on top like even more ancient rabbit ears, the slowly shrinking choices of lives in an age when everything was increments and nothing was free. He thought about the question of how small things could get—how small could your whole world be and still support your life. The room was probably three hundred square feet, he thought. It still felt big to him; he'd been stealing time in his communal office, sleeping on the floor, scraping by. Now he had a room to himself. It felt like luxury, even if the sheet on the bed gave him the heroic heebie jeebies, imagining the germ civilizations they contained.

How much smaller could it be? He tried to imagine the smallest possible space that would be livable, workable. He mentally sectioned off the room and crammed everything into it, imagining a smaller bed, no sitting area. A hundred square feet? Fifty? He thought his life was something of an experiment to discover just how little space was needed to survive in. He saw himself in a box, hunched over, compressed, squeezed down to the essentials. And then the larger question of what the word *essentials* meant, really. What was essential? He'd found that things formerly thought of as *essential* could be jettisoned and done without. The longer he lived the more he came to believe that this process could be continued infinitely, in the same way you could cut something in half infinitely, down to the quantum state, and always have something left over, no matter how tiny.

He sat in one of the ancient chairs by the window, just to experience the novelty of having someplace to sit, a place *dedicated* to sitting. He had no use for a television; it had been so long he didn't know what sort of shows were on the air these days. He thought about the little clock radio, finding some music, but didn't want to stand up. Just sitting was entertainment, the stillness, the peace and quiet. A roof over his head.

He took the shoebox from his bag and opened it to look at the currency inside, more than five thousand dollars, a fortune. It had been easy money, really; a job that had left few scars and cost him few sleepless nights for a change. Good fortune felt odd and unreal to him. He kept opening the box and checking to see if the money had dissolved, turned to dust, the ink smeared off.

He sat and considered hiding places. The problem with a rented space was there were no secrets, or if there were they weren't your secrets. He imagined cleaning crews unscrewing heating grates, flipping mattresses, moving pictures and mirrors from the walls as a matter of course every day.

In the end, the money stayed with him. He spent some studious time picking at the lining of his relatively new, if inexpensive, jacket, and slipped the money inside in discrete stacks, holding back just five hundred to keep on him at all times. Then he sewed the lining back using the tiny little kit he carried with him, doing a terrible job. But he felt better, because he would sleep in the jacket and not have to worry. He wasn't used to good fortune, not that he could remember.

He put the five hundred-dollar bills into his wallet, then pulled out a wrinkled, oft-folded old business card. It had been cheaply printed to begin with on light stock, and much of it had faded and worn away, leaving just his name, PHILIP K. MARKS, and the word PRIVATE. Everything else was just a blur of old ink. Five thousand dollars, he thought. As usual, it wasn't enough, would never be enough, not considering what he'd done to earn it.

He'd started a new ritual of remembering. Things slid so easily into the gray mass that was his past. He tried to pause once a day and remember. He paused now, and remembered how he'd gotten his five thousand dollars.