



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 2

by Jeff Somers

2. The Past

The voice on the phone had said, “Can you come out?”

The voice was distant and scratchy. Marks had gotten good at plucking sounds from the noise that might be words; the cell phone was an old one, and the plan was the cheapest he could find, one that still charged by the minute. The sound quality was always awful. The ambient sounds of Washington Square Park weren’t helping; it was a humid, sunny day and everyone in the universe had come outside, including an elderly man who’d somehow wheeled a concert piano into one of the open spaces.

Marks frowned at the pigeons waddling around his feet. “To *New Jersey*?” he asked.

“It’s not a foreign country, Mr. Marks.”

Marks did some math in his head, speculating on the cost of public transportation to the Garden State. He imagined it to be very expensive when compared to his finances. He also imagined it to be a very lengthy and involved trip, possibly requiring rations, a change of clothes due to crossing through different climates, and a passport.

“I will of course reimburse you for the expense.”

Marks still sat staring at the pigeons, thinking. He compared his poverty and need for money with his desire to not leave the city. There had been a time, he thought, when he’d left the city all the time. When he’d traveled. He couldn’t be sure, but his old apartment, when he’d had an apartment, had been filled with tiny objects, mementos, things that had the look and feel of souvenirs and keepsakes from various far-away locations. All of it gone, now.

Finally, money won out. “All right,” he said. “Give me the details.”

The voice spoke a name and address, which Marks wrote down on a small pad he’d purchased from the grocery a block away from his communal office space. Sixty-nine cents. He wrote on both sides of the paper in careful, tiny script that gave away his age. Then he closed the phone and stood up, feeling the cardboard inserts in his shoes sliding, sweaty, as he walked.

The office was populated at this time of day. He liked it when it was occupied: All younger people, busy, determined. None of them had money, but there was a difference in definition. For them, not having money meant they had roommates, it meant they went out to dive bars and ate dollar pizza and were impressed with their intestinal fortitude. For him, sloping down the other side of the divide, older, with a head full of gauze and a wobbliness in his balance he wasn’t sure was age-related, it was more literal: He was carrying around his net worth in a thick yellow envelope, one hundred and fourteen dollars and change. He paid his bills with prepaid cards bought at the pharmacy. He slept in the office

when he could, when no one was working too late. When he couldn't, he bought a coffee at the Luxe Diner and nodded off in a booth. The waitresses usually let him be for a few hours.

But in the afternoons, there was energy, all these partnerships and companies that couldn't afford real offices. The communal space gave them the semblance of offices: A reception desk, a conference room. Everyone had magnetic badges that granted access. There were a few individuals, like Marks, but for the most part they were these well-dressed kids in tight groups, sitting in front of laptops and texting, texting, texting.

Marks hadn't sprung for a private office, so he was in the bullpen. For his fifteen dollars a week he got Internet access, a beat up old desktop running an old version of everything, a hardline phone, and a chair.

His briefcase was where he'd left it. Inside the briefcase was a change of clothes: He owned two shirts, two pairs of pants, and two sets of underwear. His sports jacket was heavy. In the summer it weighed a ton and made him sweat. In the winter it was the only thing between him and the cold.

It had been like this for a while. He was beginning to think this was how he died: alone in this office, a vessel giving way, and the kids wouldn't notice until he started to stink.

At the train station, he bought a coffee for one dollar and regretted the expense. The train cost two dollars and fifty cents, but he thought he would tell the client that he'd also needed a subway, ask for five dollars in expenses. In the chill air of the new car, he tried to think of another way he could earn a living since he wasn't doing much living being Philip K. Marks.

It wasn't a fruitful rumination. As often happened, his mind wandered. Fragmented memories: A newspaper office. A glowing computer screen, green text on a black background. Sitting in bars, drinking, compelled to by something outside of himself. T-shirts with messages on them. An empty house and singing.

When he snapped back to himself, he'd gone two stops too far and had to backtrack. At least it didn't cost anything extra to transfer.

"Mrs. Wadell?"

"Mr. Marks," the handsome woman said, smiling and offering her hand. Standing in the doorway, he had an immediate impression of warmth: She was past fifty, but not by much, and looked good. Toned, tanned, healthy. Her hair was salted and her face deeply lined, but she was strong and thin and had a good grip and strong, white teeth. Her eyes were a luscious brown, and her smile was very natural and well-worn, a woman who had smiled a lot in her life. "Please, come in. Thank you so much for coming all this way."

Marks hesitated, suddenly feeling dirty and sweaty, and loathe to ruin what appeared to be an incredibly clean and tidy foyer. Finally, the danger of being perceived as rude came up behind him and

pushed him forcefully through the door. Mrs. Wadell stepped aside to let him pass and then pulled the door shut.

“Come in!” she said cheerfully. “Follow me.”

He did, and she brought him into a cheerful, sunny living room. Wood paneling and a dark wall-to-wall carpet dated the space, but it was so clean and neat and obviously cared for he was frightened. Mrs. Wadell was, apparently, one of those incredibly competent women who took men like himself in hand and turned them out much improved, and he didn’t want to be improved. He was comfortable being broken.

He pushed a hand through his hair and resisted the urge to push his shirt tails more firmly inside his pants.

“A drink?” Mrs. Wadell asked brightly. “It’s early, of course, but I’m trying to train myself to enjoy life while I can.”

Marks shook his head. “No, thank you. I don’t drink. I don’t remember why.”

“Oh,” Mrs. Wadell said, momentarily nonplussed. She recovered very quickly. “Water, perhaps?”

“No, thank you.”

“Well,” she said, standing indecisively. Marks had the sense he’d forgotten the rules of polite society, had somehow given offense. Were you supposed to accept something when entering someone’s home? Was honor not satisfied?

Finally, she swept a hand at a comfortable-looking chair backed up to the large windows. “Please, sit. You found us okay?”

Marks nodded. “Yes, thank you.” The chair was as comfortable as it looked. Mrs. Wadell was, he thought, exactly as feared: A woman who knew how to do things like choose furniture and the precise width the curtains should be opened to allow in the optimal amount of sunlight. “You said you were concerned about your husband?”

Mrs. Wadell nodded and looked about to launch into an explanation. Marks rushed forward. “Do you mind telling me how you came across my name?”

If Mrs. Wadell was put off by his abrupt manner, she didn’t show it. She smiled. “One of my husband’s former business partners told me he had dealings with you, oh, years ago. When I ... well, Mr. Marks, I’ve been asking anyone I can think of for help with Gerald. His old pal Wayne Hutton gave me your name, but all the information in his Rolodex was outdated.” She cocked her head, seeing an opportunity to finally complete the requirement of small talk. “Did you really once work for the Times?”

Marks shrugged. “I don’t remember, honestly.” He knew that coupled with his refusal of a drink, this comment would make up her mind about him, but he preferred that to continuing the conversation. He searched his fragmented memories for the name Hutton. For a moment he thought perhaps there was something, and then it was gone.

“Well,” Mrs. Wadell said after a moment, “I told him that Gerald had been to many doctors. He’d tried everything they suggested. I don’t know what’s worse: His health continuing to deteriorate without explanation, or his *attitude*.”

“His attitude?”

“Yes, well, Gerald doesn’t seem to believe he *can* get better. Oh, he does whatever’s suggested, by me or the doctor, but he doesn’t really seem to believe in any of it. It’s as if he knows something I don’t. And Mr. Marks, that isn’t how our marriage has been. We went through plenty of rough times. Not ten years ago we weren’t sure we would ever be able to retire. I used to joke I would be working at Wal Mart when I was ninety, and we would fight not because I *meant* it, but because he would get upset about the *very idea*.” She smiled. “But no matter how bad things got, we always talked it out. Always.”

Marks looked around. The room and the house were nice enough. “Money troubles?” he asked. The concept of having enough money to be in trouble about it suddenly seemed exotic and fascinating.

She leaned forward, eyes wide. “Oh! How rude. Mr. Marks, please do not worry over your fees and expenses! This was years ago. Gerald found work. Very good work, very well-paying, and we rebuilt our savings and more.”

Marks nodded absently. Words like *savings* and *well-paying* seemed like distant concepts, symbols for things he had no direct experience with. “Mrs. Wadell, perhaps you could walk me through why you asked me here? Your husband is ill, but you obviously have the resources to care for him. Did Mr.—” he searched for the name, already fading “—Hutton tell you what I ... specialize in?”

Mrs. Wadell grew quiet, looking down at her lap and plucking at some invisible piece of fluff. “Gerald has been to every doctor we can think of. We have the money, now, thank goodness, and we’ve been everywhere. No one can figure it out. Tests come back inconclusive. The symptoms ... shift.” She looked up, and her eyes were red. “Mr. Marks, my husband is dying and no one knows why. He himself seems to have given up.”

Marks swallowed. “This is not really my field, Mrs. Wadell. I’m sorry, but I focus on—”

“Yes, I know.” She held up a hand. “But my husband’s condition *is* strange. Please. Let me introduce you. Look into it. I will pay you for your time—in advance—even if it leads nowhere.”

Marks sighed. It would be nice to buy some new shoes, he thought. And he’d been honest with her. “Fine,” he said.

She led him down a hallway into a small bedroom, much too small for the immense bed that crowded it. No other furniture would fit. In contrast to the bright and cheerful rest of the house, the bedroom was gloomy and dark, and it took Marks a moment to realize that a human figure occupied the bed. He was an older man, dwarfed by the huge bed and sunk deeply into the soft mattress, as if the bed was swallowing him.

“Gerald, this is Mr. Marks. He’s here to ask a few questions, see if he can help us.”

Gerald turned his head slightly and peered at me with yellow eyes. He was a man greatly reduced; his hands and head were large, the rest of him wasted and drained. His skin looked thin and pale, and his hair, white as snow, had fallen out in patches.

When he spoke, Marks wished he hadn't.

"Thank you, Beatrice," he rumbled, the voice deep and impossible to ignore. It had once been a powerful boom, Marks suspected, but now it was a ruined bubbling wheeze.

"All right," she said, hesitating just a moment. "Don't strain yourself, dear."

She stepped out of the room soundlessly, closing the door behind her. Marks stood awkwardly for a moment, looking around the dim space. It smelled like cleaning supplies and something sweet and sticky, like cough syrup. There was no place to sit because there was so little floorspace left.

"Your wife is concerned about you, Mr. Wadell."

He snorted a laugh. "Mr. Marks, I don't know exactly who you are or what you do, but please don't be insulted. There is nothing for you here. You are—she is—wasting your time."

Marks nodded. This was, more or less, what he thought as well, but he'd made it all the way out there, he felt he owed it to the very nice woman to at least ask a few questions. "Your wife said it's been difficult to diagnose your affliction?"

Wadell laughed, and dissolved into harsh coughs that made the bed shake beneath him. Marks waited them out, standing still, watching.

"Get out, Mr. Marks. There's no healing me. And you would ruin everything if you could. Go out there and tell Bea that I was congenial and answered all your questions. Tell her you'll do some digging, ask around. Bill her what you want. We have the scratch." He barked another laugh. "We've got the money, Mr. Marks! That's for sure. More flooding in all the time. Go on now. Leave me to my dying."

Marks took one last look around the room. Then he stepped closer to the bed, leaning down over the shriveled old man, studying him carefully as the oversize head glared up at him. "Well, Mr. Wadell, here's the thing: You're not my client, your wife is."

He turned and walked out of the room, leaving behind an outraged sputtering that melted into another round of painful-sounding coughs.

Back in the tidy living room, Mrs. Wadell crossed from the windows where she'd been staring out at the street. "What do you think, Mr. Marks? Please don't say anything *comforting*. I've had all the comfort I can suffer."

Marks nodded. "Where does your husband keep his private records, papers and such?"

With a single email printout folded up and slid into his jacket pocket, Marks stepped out into the street and the heat settled down on his shoulders. The house had been cool and pleasant, not overly frigid, but pleasant. He'd gotten used to it. It was amazing, he thought, how it took years to get used to being hot

and sweaty, to being always uncomfortable, but mere minutes to get used to luxury. A few hours in the air conditioning and now he was miserable to be without it.

The trip back to New York yawned in front of him like infinity, an infinity spent on trains and buses, crowded, hot, unhappy. In his pocket were two crisp hundred-dollar bills, a retainer from Mrs. Wadell, more than he should have accepted but when she'd opened her wallet and the green money had bristled like a flower opening he'd lost his mind, momentarily. He told himself she would get value for the money. And now he struggled: A cab back to the city would be forty, fifty dollars. A fortune. But he had so little luxury in his life, and sitting in an air-conditioned back seat for an hour instead of the horrors of the transit system was tempting.

In the end he walked the half mile to the train station. His two-hundred dollar days were few and far between, and as he paid his fare he felt virtuous.

Marks was always surprised how few spouses of either sex knew the complete financial story of their marriage. There were always blind spots. He supposed some of it was willful ignorance—no one wanted to know *everything* about their wife or husband, not really—and some of it was misplaced trust. He'd learned, somewhere along the way, that a huge proportion of mysteries involving marriages could be solved quite easily by acquiring some bank statements. The Wadell's marriage proved to be one of them. Mrs. Wadell sent him bank statements going back to their more impoverished years, and he noted several dozen entries for a company called Passus, Inc. over the years.

He went to work researching the company, and found nothing more than a single address and the most basic paperwork filed with the city. Instinct told him he'd found something at least worth looking into, and that Mrs. Wadell had been wasting her time seeking medical advice.

The address on the printout led him to an office building on Fifth Avenue that was the embodiment of unfriendliness. The moment he walked into its ice-cold lobby, the security staff was in motion, and by the time he arrived at the desk, which seemed to be several miles from the entrance in this massive, open space, they had already done a quick background check and determined there was no possible way he might have any legitimate business.

As he was being politely but firmly walked back to the door, he tried to profit as much as he could. He noted the name of the security firm on their green jackets. He noted there was no corporate logo on the walls. He noted how delightfully cold it was. He noted they knew his name, based on a single use by one of them that was almost certainly a mistake.

Back out in the humid air of the street, he took a moment to compose himself. He had no records any more, no address book or Rolodex, and often found he couldn't remember the name or contact information for someone, even though he could picture them and knew what they could provide to him. It was frustrating, but sometimes, randomly, his brain would serve up a memory that was useful and coherent. This time, it served up the face and name and phone number of Stuart MacKenzie. He couldn't precisely recall who Stuart was, but he knew something about him immediately: MacKenzie was a rich man who owed him a favor.

MacKenzie met him at a corner deli that was humid and dirty inside. Marks entered hungry and wondering what, precisely, he'd done to be owed a favor from a man who worked on Madison Avenue; his memory was spotty. His appetite became spotty as well as he smelled the heavy vegetable scent of the place and felt the thick, spongy atmosphere, imagining all sorts of pathogens and egg pods floating in the air, hair growing on everything.

His dream of MacKenzie buying him lunch died, and he sat glumly, waiting.

MacKenzie himself was a big, broad red-haired man who seemed perpetually out of breath. He entered bustling and managed to bustle while sitting, fidgeting and blowing breath out of his nose to express various emotions. He sat down with a curt nod at Marks, ordered tea, and didn't offer to get Marks anything, which under the circumstances Marks was happy about. He spent one more moment trying to remember why this man owed him a favor, and then gave up. He decided that the universe had been so hard on him for so long, it was okay to accept blind luck.

"What can I do for you, Phil?" MacKenzie said, looking at his watch. Marks noted it was a cheap model, and that MacKenzie was missing a button on his suit jacket, although it was an expensive piece of fabric. "I'm really busy."

Marks hesitated. Then he decided he had no choice but to take some chances: He had no resources, and Mrs. Wadell's two hundred dollars was weighing on him. "Mac, I need you to make an appointment at a place called *Passus, Inc.*"

MacKenzie leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest, making his suit suddenly seem tight and ill-fitting. "Okay, why would I do that?"

Marks leaned forward, figuring it was his only psychological advantage. "Because they've been sending money to my client's husband, and their building is an unmarked mystery box, and I can't pass for money."

MacKenzie blew air out his nose again. "So I make an appointment, and then what?"

"I go in as you. All I need is the credit check."

MacKenzie accepted his iced tea with ill grace, then sat staring at Marks unhappily. Then he pointed at him. "And after this we're *square*, right?"

Marks nodded. "After this we're square." He wondered if he'd made a good deal.

Whatever financial troubles MacKenzie was experiencing, he encountered no trouble making an appointment with Passus, Inc. The girl he spoke to on the phone was courteous and slotted him for the next day at three in the afternoon. MacKenzie reported they'd asked very basic biographical questions, and it hadn't struck him as anything more ominous than making a doctor's appointment.

Sitting in the empty shared office in the dark, craving a drink and afraid to move for fear that motion would simply result in him sitting at a bar somewhere, a hole he might never climb out of, Marks

wondered if he'd miscalculated, if they were onto him. It was too easy. Then he worried that he'd never pass for MacKenzie who, even in apparent decline, had more money on his back and on his fingers than Marks himself typically saw in a year.

The next day he woke up with the searing sun as it invaded the conference room, hot and clear like boiled water, the building's air conditioning fifteen minutes from kicking on. Sweaty and gritty, he washed up in the kitchenette, splashing water and scrubbing down. Then he inspected his suit and feebly tried to improve it, smoothing out the wrinkles and shaking it out, as if the stale humid air of the office would somehow revive it. He went into the restroom out in the hall and dressed, trying to take care and approximate success and a diet that wasn't more or less 90% junk food. He was depressed surveying the results; the man in the mirror was thin and loose-skinned and looked very much like he cut his thinning hair himself. This was the end result no matter what: Dissolution and the Slow Fade. No blaze of glory, no heroics. Just a little less of you every day until there wasn't enough left to get you out of bed in the morning.

After a moment, he reached into his pocket and extracted the cash left from his payday. Grabbing his briefcase he went and lived a normal life for three hours.

He bought himself breakfast at a diner: Eggs and toast and bacon and coffee and butter and ketchup. It was more food than he'd eaten at one time in years, and afterwards, forcing himself to finish his fourth cup of light, sweet coffee, he felt bloated and stupid.

He bought himself a haircut and a shave at an old-school barbers, a Belorussian man named Boris who kept up a professional stream of small talk and anecdotes as he hovered over Marks, snipping and shaving and measuring.

He bought himself a new dress shirt, hoping it would offset the shabbiness of his suit. The total cost of his splurges was sixty-three dollars, leaving him with a bit more than a hundred left. He felt better, and decided to continue by strolling through the park and having some lunch before heading back downtown to MacKenzie's appointment. He hoped that by larding up on food and grooming he would pass, however briefly, as normal. All he wanted was more information to go on.

When he returned to the Fifth Avenue address, he found a different team of security professionals, and instead of being run off his name was checked against a list and he was issued a visitor badge and instructed to head up to the fifth floor, where he was greeted by an efficient young man dressed in what Marks imagined the phrase "business casual" meant. He was tall and thin and scrubbed, youthful and cheerful.

"Mr. MacKenzie!" he boomed. "I am the Interviewer—we deprecate names here—and I will be conducting our interview today. Please, follow me."

Marks followed the kid through an unmanned reception desk and into a maze of cubicles beyond, ushering him into one of the identical spaces, where Marks sat just inches away from The Interviewer as he settled himself in front of a laptop. There was no decoration in the cube, and as far as Marks could tell, no one else in the office.

“Okay, Mr. MacKenzie, I reviewed your pertinent details earlier and I do believe your current financial difficulties, health, and age make you an ideal candidate!” The Interviewer twisted around awkwardly to grin at Marks. “I’m very glad you were put in touch. I just have a few questions, and then we’ll need to set up the lab appointments and get your banking details.”

Marks kept himself very still. He had not been on a job interview in a very long time, and he felt a creeping paralysis coming over him, a debilitating fear that his face wasn’t obeying his commands, that the words he heard himself saying weren’t the same that everyone else heard.

“Okay, everything looks right, Mr. MacKenzie. Don’t worry, your financial troubles will be going away presently. We’ll just need you to get through the physical exam, the labs, and you can start earning.” He looked at me, smiling. “The whole process takes about two weeks.” He studied Marks’ face and tilted his head, misinterpreting the expression he found. “Don’t worry, just hold out against those creditors a few more weeks and everything comes together!”

Marks nodded and managed a tight, off-kilter smile. He was confused; Mac was apparently not nearly as well-off as Marks had assumed, yet this was apparently exactly what *Passus* was looking for. He scrambled for a question that might get him more information without giving the game away.

“How—how does it work? Exactly.”

The Interviewer smiled. “Sure, there’ll be an orientation once you sign the NDA and the other contracts. But don’t worry: Once you sign and you’re processed, you don’t have to lift a finger, or do anything.” He shrugged. “Except suffer, of course.”

The Interviewer’s smile was bright and easygoing. Marks blinked at it like it was a sun lamp. He ran the word *suffer* through a few internal algorithms and decided that questioning it would be a tactical error, so he forced a smile on his face and nodded.

“Great! I’ll take you through to our medical team. You did clear your morning, didn’t you?”

Marks walked around, feeling depleted. They’d taken a lot of blood, all very professional. The tubes they’d filled had been marked with odd, esoteric words. *Filament*. *Limnal*. *Rotundity*. They wanted urine samples, and after he’d filled a cup they plied him with water until he felt loose and unmoored, eager for more. They insisted he stand inside a circle chalked on the floor, and what he took for humming he was convinced by the end to be chanting, a specific circular invocation each of the men and women were almost constantly reciting.

Somehow, he felt as if they’d taken much more than just a little blood, a little urine, a little saliva carried from his mouth via tasteless, neutral swabbings. He felt unsettled, unbalanced, and he walked despite a leaden sense of exhaustion, carrying his jacket and briefcase like weights around himself, pulling him down. He sat down on a park bench, feeling overheated, and listened to someone playing the sousaphone very, very badly as he tried to figure what he’d gotten himself into. MacKenzie was not as rich as Marks had assumed—he realized that in his current state of financial distress anyone who wasn’t living on hot dogs and borrowed air-conditioning would seem like a socialite—yet *Passus* had

been overjoyed to sign him up. And had then exhibited zero interest in his financials, but a deep interest in his physical state and identity.

He couldn't sleep. He wandered all night, missing the window when he could slip back into the office and bunk down for the night, after the cleaning people had left but before the security guards locked everything down. He walked until he was in a trance, and then he sat down on a bench in Washington Square Park, and fell asleep.

Marks was awakened by the insistent squawking of his cheap phone. Bleary, he startled up and almost fell off the bench. For one moment he stared around blindly, uncertain of his whereabouts. Fragments of a dream clung to him, a man dressed in black pursuing him, a bartender asking him if he was all right.

Dumb, he fumbled for the vibrating piece of plastic and put it to his ear.

"Phil?"

It was MacKenzie. His voice had an element of fear and desperation to it that pinged Marks' own alarms, leaving him standing rigid, gripping the phone tightly.

"Phil, what did you *do*? What's happening?"

Marks blinked around the twilight park. A little before sunrise, he thought. "What's happening, Mac?"

"I'm *rich*, for one thing," Mac said, panting. "There's a deposit ... from Passus. It's ... substantial."

"Oh," Marks said, his brain stiff. "Oh."

"And I'm *sick*," Mac said, his voice taking on a rough edge of panic. "I went to bed and I was *fine*, Phil. *Fine*. I woke up not feeling right, and I'm sick. Like, really sick."

Marks shivered and began to pace back and forth. "What does that mean?"

"Oh, shit," Mac said, his voice suddenly going molten and phlegmy. He dissolved into coughs. "Phil, I don't know. I woke up hot and dry and bloated, and my skin is all ... wrong. What happened? What's happening?"

Marks worked his mouth but had no words.

"I gotta go, Phil. I'm heading for the hospital. Call me later, okay?"

Marks nodded, dumb. There was an awkward amount of silence, and then Mac clicked off. Marks stood for a moment, the phone still held to his ear, staring at the brightening park.

"Mr. Marks?"

Marks tried a smile, realized midway that it wasn't working, and nodded, squinting. The result was mysterious to him: He had no idea what his facial expression might be conveying.

"Mrs. Wadell," he said. "I hope you don't mind."

She was as neat and tidy and cool as Marks felt wrinkled and hot and unsettled. Her hair was pinned up perfectly, and she wore a simple skirt and blouse with effortless ease. The house behind her, however, smelled of medicine and sickness, uncirculated air that was becoming heavier with microbes and coughed-up mucous molecules, damp and sour.

“Of course not, Mr. Marks,” she said, stepping aside. “You have some news on my ... well, what’s the word? Case? Issue?”

I pushed my way past her and didn’t answer. I didn’t wait for further invitation; I kept walking. The air got denser as I approached the bedroom in the rear of the house. She didn’t start to murmur protests until I was through the door.

Mr. Wadell hadn’t moved or changed in any perceptible way. He was still just a lump on the bed that was slightly heavier than the sheets and blankets. His eyes, though, yellow and swollen, leaped to Marks the moment he entered the room, alive and clear.

Marks stopped, feeling sweaty and vague. He took a deep breath.

“I think I just killed a man.”

Wadell gave no overt reaction. “You stupid bastard,” he hissed, his overlarge hands gripping the top of the blanket. “What did you do?”

Marks shifted his weight. “I signed up under an assumed name.”

“Fucking *hell*, the name’s all that matters,” Wadell hissed. The moment of anger seemed to exhaust him, and he sank even more deeply into the bed that was slowly consuming him. “It’s all right,” he said, weak and soft, as Mrs. Wadell entered the room in a state of constrained, restrained alarm. “Mr. Marks and I just have something to discuss.”

She looked at Marks, indecisive, then smiled, patting her chest. “Very well.”

“Is this what you do, Mr. Marks? Wander the world making trouble for people? Barging into *voluntary* and *private* situations and make a mess of things?”

Marks shrugged. He felt like he had no way of answering the question. “What can I do? Will he die?”

Wadell didn’t answer right away. “No. But depending on what he’s taking away from the client, it’s going to be ugly. It’s a painful way to live, Mr. Marks. You’re sick. All the time. Worse some days. It takes a toll, I won’t pretend it doesn’t. Carrying someone else’s cancer, someone else’s cirrhosis, someone else’s Parkinson’s. It wears you down. They switch you out before you die, but ... sometimes I wish they didn’t.”

Marks closed his eyes. “The ultimate health care plan.”

“Fuck you. The compensation’s fair.”

“Is it?”

“Fuck you again. I made my choices. Whoever you just fucked over didn’t.”

Marks turned to go, then hesitated. Without looking back, he said “And your wife? She’s okay with your choices?”

Wadell didn’t respond right away. When he did his voice was soft and weak. “She’s cashing the checks, ain’t she?”

Once again, Marks had washed up, brushed his jacket, and wore his new shirt, which hadn’t been laundered but was still in better condition than anything else he owned. He stepped into the office quickly, and ignored the extended hand of the bland, handsome man behind the desk.

“Thank you for seeing me, Mr—” Marks said.

“You can simply call me The Broker—we do not like to use names here.” Bland Man said in a booming, hollow voice. “Of course. Our freelancers are our lifeblood. What can I do for you, Mr. MacKenzie?”

Marks looked around. The office was large but generic. The furniture wasn’t special or custom: Just a metal desk and a standard chair, a lamp and a mid-range computer. No phone, no credenza or wet bar or decoration. It smelled neutral. It was as if The Broker and the whole organization was making an effort to leave no mark. Although he assumed the young Interviewer and The Broker could not be the sole employees, the whole floor was quiet and felt still and unused.

“My name’s not MacKenzie. In fact, I went through your whole process under an assumed name, and now a man is suffering without knowing why.”

The Broker’s smile fell away. His face flushed, and for a second Marks felt his adrenaline dumping, as if he could sense or smell a fight in the air, somehow. “That is ... disappointing. What is your name, then?”

Marks couldn’t resist a smile. “I don’t like to use names, either.”

The Broker sat very still and silent for a moment. Then he leaned back and propped his chin up on one finger. “We must set this right. Your Mr. MacKenzie must be in some distress.”

Marks nodded. “He seemed to be, yes.”

The Broker leaned forward. “Our clients pay us to remove from them pain and suffering. To deliver to them health and happiness. It is impossible—*impossible*—to reverse these actions. The solution is simple: You must take his contract. This deception is your responsibility.”

Marks stiffened. He’d known this. He’d told himself this as recently as moments ago, when he was riding the elevators up, accompanied by two security guards who remained suspicious that The Broker would wish to see him despite Marks’ insistence and the confirming phone call from the desk, the two of them eager to toss him back out on the street like their comrades had.

But he dreaded the idea. Cold and viscous, the dread filled him as the idea was verbalized. He swallowed. “What ... what will I —”

“The term is twenty years,” The Broker said. “The afflictions will vary.”

Marks closed his eyes. *Afflictions* was a terrible word. It was generic, and when it came to endless suffering, generic was terrible. It was wide-open. He had no choice in the short-term: To allow MacKenzie to suffer was impossible. He had to start by having the contract transferred, and then he would be able to figure out what to do next.

He looked at The Broker. “How do we do this?”

The Broker brightened, opening a drawer. “I have the paperwork here.”

“Jesus.”

MacKenzie didn’t look at Marks. He was wrapped in a plush-looking terrycloth robe, but was sweaty and gaunt, unshaven and hollow-eyed.

“It’s faded a bit,” he said as Marks stepped into his apartment. “I’m feeling better.”

Marks didn’t say anything. He thought Mac looked awful.

The apartment wasn’t what he expected, until he remembered that Mac had passed the initial screening at Passus because he wasn’t nearly as rich as Marks remembered. The place was nice enough, and felt luxurious to Marks, but was another generic space: Builder’s beige, the smell of fresh paint, fluorescent lighting. They stood awkwardly in the tiny foyer, but Mac made no move to lead Marks further in. In the next room, Marks could see boxes piled up on a card table.

“Listen, Mac, I did something. I didn’t mean to, and I’m here to make it right.”

Mac nodded, then exploded into a coughing fit, hunching over, red-faced and swollen. He held up one hand to forestall intervention. Marks startled, then settled back on his heels, watching anxiously. When the fit passed, MacKenzie spent a few moments doubled over, gasping, then finally straightened up.

“All right, Phil,” he said, his voice wet and ragged. “Tell me.”

Marks told him. MacKenzie listened, stone-faced, occasionally biting back more coughing.

“So rich assholes pay me to take their diseases,” he finally said, wonderingly. “That’s fucking brilliant, in a way.”

Marks wrung his hands, shifting his weight. “I’m sorry, Mac. If I’d known—”

Mac laughed, a barking, harsh noise that cut Marks off.

Marks sobered. He reached into his jacket and extracted the papers the Broker had given him. He swallowed. “I’m prepared to make this right, Mac. These are transfer papers. I’ll take on your account. Your afflictions.” He wondered what it would be like. He appreciated the twist: He would finally have money, but he would suffer for it. But hadn’t he been suffering for nothing for a long time already?

Mac stared at the papers, then looked at Marks. “Jesus Christ, Phil, no.”

“No?”

Mac swallowed more coughs. “Did you see the zeros? The money? I ride this for a year or two, I’ll be set. All of it, set right.”

Marks thought of Mr. Wadell, faded and shrunken. “Mac, I don’t think—”

“You want it?” Mac said, peering owlishly at Marks. “Huh? You saw the zeros, you regret not taking the slot. Jesus, Phil I know you’re broke. I know you’re basically on the street. Get your own contract.”

Marks stared. “Mac, I don’t think you understand—”

Mac gestured at the door, weaving on his feet and looking faint. “I gotta lie down, Phil,” he said, sounding distant. “Get out. Take your fucking papers. Get your own contract.”

Marks hesitated, uncertain. Mac’s face took on a bloated red expression of meanness.

“Fine. A payoff, right? You fucking slug. You fucking *grifter*. You realize you fucked up, and here you are trying to stick your head under my skin. Fine, you want a payday.”

Mac stormed off, his breath loud and damp, leaving Marks standing awkwardly in his foyer. A moment later, he returned with a shoebox in his hand. He handed it to Marks.

“Take it,” he snarled. “My emergency fund, which I was just about to tap into. All I had left. Five grand. Take it and call it a fee or whatever, and go get your own contract, if that isn’t enough.”

Marks remembered weighing the box in his hands, then lifting the lid and peering inside, stunned at the bills. Real money. *Actual* money. He remembered looking at MacKenzie, who stood there flushed with fever, eyes reddened and weeping, breathing shallowly, mouth open. He looked awful, and after a moment Marks turned and slowly walked to the door. Opening it, he listened to Mac’s labored breathing and thought about how the apartment already smelled like disease, like something invisible burning, being depleted.

He turned in time for the door to slam in his face. He stood for a moment, listening to the low, subconscious buzz of ambient noise. Then he became aware of his own body: The lack of pain, the ease of his breathing, the steady beat of his heart. He took a deep breath and turned away from the door, smiling. Five thousand dollars. He remembered thinking he would go sleep indoors for a few days, see what happened.