



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 3

by Jeff Somers

3. The Starlight Motel

The motel had a bar and restaurant, a small round space next to the office. The bar was also round, and the tables were arranged in a circle. Marks was dizzy for a moment, standing just inside the door, letting his old eyes adjust to the gloom. The smell was familiar: Sawdust, grease, stale beer. The sounds were familiar: Old radio rock, the murmur of conversation, the clink of glassware. There were six cars in the restaurant's parking lot, so Marks guessed this was where the old-timers and welfare check folks went to do their drinking. He knew exactly what kind of place it was, even though he knew he'd been sober for at least two years now, maybe longer.

He sat down at the bar. The bartender was an old man with a preposterous belly. It preceded him by at least two feet, Marks thought, somehow entering the future a second before the rest of him. Marks thought this was the situation for which anything accurately described as a *truss* had been created, and could only imagine the lower back pain the poor man lived with.

A coaster was tossed at him. "Huh?"

"A Coke," he said.

The bartender snorted through the white hairs exploding from his nose, expressing his disapproval. He placed a glass in front of Marks and filled it using the hose.

"Thanks."

This elicited another snort.

The place had seven other patrons. Five of them sat alone; in one corner there was a middle-aged couple, fat and red-faced, cackling and sitting close, drinking shots and beers. Marks thought they looked happy in their delirium, wet-mouthed and insensible but together. He had a feeling the evening would end with them screaming at each other in the parking lot, because something told him he'd seen that couple many times in his life.

Four of the others were old men, slumped in their seats, staring and silent.

The final customer was a young girl. Marks thought she looked like a kid, a teenager. She was dark-skinned, her hair a tangled mass of curls that had been pulled back in a messy, half-hearted arrangement, lopsided and whimsical on her head. She was wearing jeans and a pink halter top, and she was skinny and athletic-looking. Sitting at a booth, she was playing with her phone, a cheap older model. She stood out in the dark, sticky bar, the sort of place that people came to wait for death. She stared back at Marks for a few seconds until he looked away.

“You want a menu?”

The bartender sounded unhappy, as if asking the question somehow broke unspoken rules and treaties dating back to long before Marks had dared to enter the place. He held a menu halfway between them, and Marks reached out to take it.

“And you!” the bartender suddenly shouted, looking at the girl. “Order something or get the fuck out, yeah?”

The girl looked down at the table and bunched her jaw muscles, pretending not to hear. Marks studied her, the menu in his hand. He thought, good fortune soured if you kept it to himself. And he knew better than most that those old superstitions were usually more real than people thought.

“Hey, you want a burger?”

She looked up at him, surprised. They held each other’s gaze for a second, and then she nodded and looked away.

Marks handed the menu back. “Two burgers,” he said, pointing at the girl. “One for her.” When the bartender stood there looking back at him, menu held in one hand, Marks pulled out his wallet and laid a hundred on the bar and tapped it with his finger until the bartender’s eyes were dragged downward. There was a still moment, tense with inaction, and then the bartender snorted again, his white hairs fluffing in the breeze.

“Comin’ the fuck *up*,” he said.

Marks smiled at his back. Then he turned and offered the girl a thumb’s up. She stared back at him, something almost nearly a smile on her face, and then Marks felt silly, so he shrugged and contemplated his Coke, which offered every sign that it was flat and past its sell-by date. He kept staring at it, though, because otherwise he would stare at the bottles behind the bar, from the dusty top shelf where a single bottle of Glenlivet sat, sad and dejected, to the crowded bottom shelf, where Early Times ruled the day. He didn’t see his old brand, and for that he was at least somewhat grateful.

“Hey, old man.”

Marks paused and turned. The girl leaned against one of the old cars in the parking lot, a station wagon that had seen six-digit miles, its old wood paneling missing, scars of glue and screws left instead.

“If I’m old, what’s the guy behind the bar?”

“Dead.”

He nodded. “Got it.”

“Why’d you do that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I had a lucky day. I wanted to spread it.”

She nodded, chewing her lip and staring at him. “I ain’t ... I’m not gonna ... I’m not –”

He held up his hand. "Never thought you were. Just looked hungry."

"Thanks."

The next morning Marks woke up sweating, on the floor, wearing his suit and jacket, the stacks of currency like rocks in the lining. He stared up at the water stains and wondered at the noise until it resolved in his mind as pounding on the door.

He struggled to his feet, feeling like a stiff and bloated turtle, his back aching, his legs numb. He staggered to the door and opened it to find the girl, wearing the same clothes. She had two paper cups of coffee in her hands.

"Here," she said, thrusting one towards him. "It's free in the office every morning. They usually get donuts too, but those go fast."

He reached out and took one of the cups. It was painfully hot, and he turned and placed it on the table in the sitting area, cursing. When he turned back, the girl was in the room, looking around.

"By the way of thanks for dinner last night," she said. "And for not requesting a blow job in return."

He grimaced. "You get that a lot?"

"Jesus yes," she said, moving towards the little kitchenette. "The shit old fat guys think deserves a blow job range from *not raping me* to *being polite to me*. I was afraid a fucking hamburger would take me to a whole new fucking level of rapey grief."

He blinked. "Jesus." Then he blinked again, looking down at himself. "Fat?"

She peeled the lid off her coffee. "You know what's *jesus*, old man? This fucking *room*. How long you stuck here?"

He shrugged. "I don't know." He eyed her warily. Homeless teenagers haunting cheap motels made him worry over his cash. He pushed his hands into his pockets, realized he was barefoot, and felt scratchy and foul-smelling.

She looked back at him, shifting her weight and smiling a little. "Divorce? She kick your ass out, cut up your cards? Lose your job?"

He smiled back, suddenly, without planning it. "I lost everything, a long time ago. This is a high-water mark for me. This is me on the way *up*."

She nodded, her face a mask of delighted surprise. "Aw, man, that is some *sad* sad shit right there. *This* is your come up? Talk about *jesus*. You're havin' some kind of world-record *jesus* moment."

"I suppose I am. What's your name?"

She hesitated. For some reason giving out her name suddenly felt like a step, an advance into intimacy. Then she took a deep breath, deciding that her choices had narrowed down, and the bar had lowered to the point where a man who bought her a meal without creeping on her was the best thing she'd seen in days.

“Dee,” she said. “*Deandra*, but call me Dee. What are you, anyway?” She eyed him, sipping coffee, the sunlight from the open door lighting her up auburn and cocoa. “Salesman? You got a I-didn’t-make-my-quota-oh-shit-I’m-fired thing going on.”

Marks shook his head, crossing over to the table and pulling the lid off his own coffee. It was light with cream. “I’m a ... an investigator.”

“No shit? Like on TV.”

He shrugged, sipping the coffee tentatively. It was terrible, watery and bitter, but it was free. Or, he reminded himself after months and months of that silent math, not *free*, but already paid for. “Kind of, I guess, but I sort of concentrate on ... strange stuff.”

“Ghost hunters?” she said immediately, excited. “Are you a fucking *ghost hunter*?”

Marks smiled, leaning back against one of the chairs and holding the scalding hot coffee in one hand. “Sometimes. Usually it’s not that easy to explain.”

She eyed him again, sipping. “And I can see that business is a-*boomin’*, huh?”

He gestured at her with his coffee. “I got a room. *You* got a room?”

She nodded and compressed her lips, but didn’t say anything, returning her wandering attention to the room. She suppressed a surge of emotion that she knew would have her crying. She wasn’t going to cry. She wasn’t a crier.

“I had a room,” she finally said. She looked back at him. “You really an investigator?”

Marks nodded, tensing.

She looked down into her cup of coffee. “I maybe got something to investigate.”