



**JEFF  
SOMERS**

---

**BLACK  
HOUSE**

# Black House

## Chapter 5

by Jeff Somers

### 5. City Hall

Grissom looked up over his glasses. “You look good, Philly. Old. Shit, fucking *old*, but not as wetbrained as you were. Fit, kind of.”

Marks nodded. “I feel old. And I’ve been dry for a long time.” He paused, looked at his shoes, then forced himself to look back at Grissom. “Anything ... anything I should apologize for, Gene?”

Grissom grinned. He was one of those men who came into his own when he’d grown old and gray. He was tall and thin, with a prominent nose and weak eyes that he’d compensated for with thick, black-rimmed glasses. As a kid he’d looked like a bird of some kind. As a man of sixty, he looked like a repository of wisdom. “No, Phil. Nothing personal. What can I do you for?”

Marks shifted uncomfortably. He hated missing so much of his life. He hated always groping in the dark, unsure, uncertain of the reception that awaited him.

“I have an address,” he said. “I’m just looking for anything you know about it. Anything unusual.”

Grissom smiled. “Nothing changes, huh, Phil?” He gestured around. “I’m in a cubical now, not an office. You remember my old office? I used to think it was so goddamn small. Now I’ve got half the space and no fucking ceiling, and I’m grateful for it. Local government ain’t what it used to be, huh? What’s the address?”

Marks slid a piece of notepaper over the desk. “It’s an apartment building. Low-rent, but not controlled. Seems like the landlord keeps the rents low on purpose, voluntarily, trying to attract the unemployed, the recently paroled, the desperate.”

Grissom glanced at the address. “The desperate, huh? Philly, you never change.”

“Compliment?”

Grissom laughed. “All right. I’ll dig up what I can. You sure got a way of convincing people to do what you want, huh, Philly? Always did. I’ll see what’s out there as far as tax records, all the usual stuff goes. I assume this is on the house as usual?”

Marks’ smile was faint. “I figured we’d look at it as payback for old times sake.”

Grissom’s return smile was stiff. “You look at it any way you like.”

“So what’s all this bullshit mean?”

Marks watched Dee stuff French fries into her mouth. He figured if her goal had been to grift him out of some free meals, mission accomplished. The diner was empty and silent except for the low music playing in the air, so low it was practically a hint of music, a homeopathic suggestion of music stemming from a single dissolved note.

He tapped the manila folder on the table between them. “Well, everything’s legal. The property’s owned and the taxes are paid by an LLC filed outside the country. Taxes get paid every three months. I haven’t been able to get much on the company, but that would likely take more time and money than we have. But—there isn’t supposed to be a building there.”

She cocked her head chewing. “What does that mean?”

“There’s no record of any permits being pulled on the lot. The taxes are for unimproved property. There’s every sign in the world that that address is just empty space. There *can’t* be a building there.”

“But there is.”

He nodded. “And that’s where I come in. Like I said, weird shit, it pulls me in, every time.”

She took a long swallow of soda. She was impressed. And something was swelling inside her, an emotion she couldn’t quite articulate. She’d assumed she was totally doomed; her mother was dead, her father had disappeared, she was hanging around a motel scrounging for scraps. She thought she knew how that story ended; she’d seen enough TV. And this strange man was saving her from it.

Marks thought she still looked skinny, like someone hadn’t been taking care of her. And she ate like someone who’d learned, like he had, that there was no guarantee of another meal coming in a few hours. “So what do we do?”

Marks smiled and nodded, glancing down. “I go there. See what’s what.”

“Why can’t I come?” she said, looking down into the shopping cart as she pushed. “What, I’m just gonna sit out in the parking lot, wait for you to come back?”

Marks sighed, scanning the shelves. “You can’t come because the things I do always go sideways. Always.” She thought he sounded happy. When she’d first seen him in the bar he’d been heavy, leaden, like a guy trapped under water but trying to run. Now he seemed lighter, more fluid, like he’d switched to swimming. “I once looked into a house someone was trying to sell because they couldn’t figure out what the problem was, and found a vampire trapped in the basement. I took a job following some guy’s wife once because he thought she was having an affair, and found out she was a clone, being used as ... as something else.” He grimaced. “Point is, kid, things go sideways all the time, and if the floor’s gonna drop out from under this thing, I want you somewhere else.”

She turned to study him from the side, chewing her lips. After a moment she looked back at the shopping cart. “You sure you need all this stuff?”

“Did you hear the word *vampire*? I’d rather have a folding shovel and not need it than need one and not have it. Like I said: Sideways. I don’t know what’s going to happen, but you can’t get into weird scrapes every single time like I do and then pretend it doesn’t happen.”

She nodded. The cart held the folding shovel, something she hadn't imagined existed. It also held a roll of strong nylon rope, a battery-powered lantern and a flashlight, a multi-tool, a backpack, some matches, and two bottles of water and a handful of energy bars. It looked like he was going camping.

For Marks, the act of shopping felt subversive, insane. It had been a long time since he'd been able to just purchase the things he needed. Like the small, enclosed universe of his motel room, it felt luxurious and decadent even as he weighed each purchase in his mind, going over the pros and cons, the necessity of each one.

He pushed his hands into his pockets, contemplating largess, and smiling without realizing it.

"So, I just sit around the parking lot and wait?"

Marks dropped the bags on the table and took the backpack out, began filling it with his purchases. The walk from the bus stop with the bags had been longer than he remembered, and he was tired and grimy and sweaty. "Look, I might be back in a few hours. It might turn out to be a paperwork mistake. I might just find leads that send us somewhere else. I don't know."

She nodded. When he'd zipped up the backpack, he glanced up. She was standing in the kitchenette with her arms wrapped around herself, staring moodily at the floor. He sighed, and dug into his pocket, pulling out the remaining cash and counting it. He dropped it on the table.

"Hand me a knife."

She didn't move for a moment, then turned and opened one of the drawers, pulling out a butter knife and handing it to him. He sat down and worked the loose stitches of the lining with the knife until he was able to pull a slim pile of banknotes from within. He added it to the pile.

"That's about a grand," he said, standing up and peeling a few bills from the top. "I'm going to pre-pay a week's rent. The rest you can use for food or whatever. Stay here and wait for me, you'll be fine."

He slung the backpack over his shoulder. He hesitated. She looked unhappy and alone, too-skinny and wearing the same clothes she'd had on when he met her. He didn't know what else to do; he could either stay there and try to help her directly or he could look for her father. There wasn't another choice. He didn't have any experience of the sort of relationships that could be brought to bear on this. He didn't have *any* relationships, just old grudges and debts he could occasionally parlay into assistance.

"If I'm not back in a week," he said, slowly, pausing to actually contemplate the possibility. The *strong* possibility, he corrected himself. "Take whatever's left and go back to your people. An aunt, an uncle. Anyone."

She looked up suddenly, horrified. She scanned memories of heavyset women in floral dresses, heavyset men in loose-fitting suits, all of them at the hospital and the funeral, strangers. All of them somehow conveying the fact that she was somehow infected by her parents, a worrisome artifact of their shared genetic code. The idea of putting herself in their power was *terrible*. "My people?"

He shrugged. "Just a precaution."

She seemed on the verge of tears. “You’re gonna leave me here alone.”

He swallowed. “You can’t come. Look, I’ll check things out. I’ll probably be back tomorrow, give you the full report. But you can’t come, even so. You see that, right? Look, I’m not sure what being the adult means. I don’t feel old, or wise. But I know on some instinctual level that part of it means you can’t come.” He shrugged the back over one shoulder and picked up his jacket. “So you stay here. Eat three meals a day. Don’t let anyone in. And I’ll be back to let you know what’s inside that house.”

She nodded, her eyes shining, her arms wrapped around herself. He hesitated, then turned and marched out the door. He felt like he was failing, somehow, like he was leaving her to certain doom. But he was the one heading into the unknown. She would spend a few hours eating pizza and watching TV, he told himself. Or he’d come back to a note that boiled down to *thanks for the seven hundred bucks, asshole* and that would be that.

Buses were running on late night schedules, so he waited a long time for one to arrive. He felt dirty as he rode, the backpack occupying the seat next to him, but city buses were the great camouflage of the world. No one noticed him, a middle-aged man with a scum of beard, wearing a suit that hadn’t been fresh in a very long time, his face pale and bloated and shadowed from poor nutritional choices and lack of sleep, carrying a bulging backpack. He was just one particle of desperation in a quantum system of desperation, indistinguishable.

It looked like a two-story, detached house that hadn’t been renovated in a long time. The old siding was dark green and looked mossy, moldy. The roof line was complex, with a lot of dormers and crazy angles. The yard was a jungle of tall, overgrown weeds, and it was surrounded by a low stone wall. It sat on the corner next to an empty lot, and seemed perfectly normal. A prominent FOR RENT sign had been affixed to the wall. It was dark and looked like no one was home, had been home for a long time, had ever been home.

Pushing through the wild growth that obscured the pavers leading from the sidewalk to the front door, Marks heard a scrape and turned to find Dee right behind him. He stared at her in surprise for a moment and then smiled. She smiled back.

“You ain’t the only one can ride a bus, Marks.”

“All right,” he said. Marks found his reaction impossible to describe, even to himself using his own peculiar inner language, but it landed positive. He was relieved, he thought, to have her there, because part of him had worried about her on her own, and even if she truly wasn’t safer with him, he’d grown used to having someone to talk to, a presence by his side. Selfish, he thought, but that’s how he felt. And there was no chance of getting rid of her now, anyway.

They walked up onto the sagging, rotten porch. It was peeling gray paint and a spongy give that seemed threatening, as if its bounce was a threat, subtle and grim. He looked at Dee and nodded.

“Remember: Sideways.”

She nodded back.

He examined the door. It was weathered and aged like the rest of the house, except for the fittings: The knob and knocker and hinges were bright, polished brass, as if they'd been installed the day before. He reached for the knocker, then frowned, leaning in. After a second's delay, Dee stepped up and pushed the door inward. It slid silently on its hinges, darkness beckoning.