



**JEFF  
SOMERS**

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**BLACK  
HOUSE**

# Black House

## Chapter 8

by Jeff Somers

### 8. The Spare Room

The box rumbled to a stop and for a moment she panicked, because it was dark and hot and there didn't seem to be any exit. She reached forward and the darkness in front of her was soft and yielding. The interior of the box had an insulated, closed-in feel, her breath sounding absorbed in her ears. She leaned forward and pushed her arm into the fabric, then screamed when something took hold of her wrist and yanked her forward.

For one horrible moment she thought she was being suffocated. The air had turned into heavy, dark fabric, crowding into her and pushing all the air aside. Then she was pulled out of it and Marks had her, holding her close, a finger to his lips.

"Quiet, okay? We got a minute to ourselves. You okay?"

She swallowed and nodded, eyes wide. He let go of her wrist and she took a deep breath. She'd been operating on a steady diet of anxiety and fear for weeks now, but this was the first time in her life, she thought, that she'd believed death to be imminent. She was shaking, but determined to keep her reaction from Marks.

She looked around. Behind her was a closet, filled with heavy fur coats, dusty and sagging. She wondered who put a tiny elevator—or whatever a dumwaiter was—in a *closet*? The rest of the room was just a simple bedroom, sparingly furnished: A bed, a night table, a lamp, and a single hardbacked chair. The bed was a simple cot with a thin, gray mattress, topped by a rough-looking red blanket, and looked slept in, mussed and sweaty. There was a book on the table, and there were four doors, all the same sort as most of the others, located in each direction, each complete with carved decorations in the upper center.

"Listen, we can't trust her," Marks said in a low voice, just above a whisper.

Dee scowled. She didn't like Agnes either but Marks had scared her and she was angry with him. "Why not? She's stuck here just like us."

"Is she?" he looked around the tiny room. "She's been pushing us pretty hard to do certain things. Stay in the library. Go through the Wolf door." He looked back at her. "And when we walked into the lounge, there was a message on the fridge. Written in those letter magnets. And she marched right over and knocked them off. She didn't want us to read it."

Dee chewed her lip. "Might have been an accident. She might have been startled when whatever ... was in it ... suddenly jumped."

Marks nodded. "Maybe. I think the message might have been from your Dad. I only saw the first word: *warning*."

Behind them, she heard the dumwaiter screech back into life, rumbling back up to the lounge. “That could have been from anybody.”

He nodded. “Sure. Either way, I think she hid it from us on purpose. Just be careful with her, okay. She’s got her own agenda.”

She nodded. “Okay, old man.” She chewed her lip again. “You really think it was a message from Dad?”

He turned and looked at her while the dumwaiter rumbled and scraped. Seconds ticked by as he studied her, and she didn’t know how to react.

“I don’t know, kid,” he said. “I kind of hope so.”

The dumwaiter stopped. There was a moment of stillness and silence, and then a loud thump and a cry.

“Goodness! Hey! *Hey!* Where is everyone?”

Marks winked at Dee. “In here,” he called out. “Just push on through. You’re in a closet.”

Agnes emerged looking slightly disheveled. “I think that route has been closed. It kind of disappeared as I arrived, spitting me out onto the *floor*.” She patted her hair and smoothed her long skirt. “Whoever designed this place is *rude*, I can say *that* much. Now what do we have ... oh. *This* is a sad little room, isn’t it?”

Marks thought *sad* was exactly right for the room they’d found themselves in. “It’s like a guest room,” Dee said, picking up the book and putting it down again. “Like that spare room you make up for people when they stay over.”

“We should search the place,” Agnes said, nodding her head. “You never know *what* might be hidden in the drawers.” She smiled, her round, pretty face lit up.

“Not a bad idea,” Marks conceded.

“Though we should be *careful*,” she added. “There’s no evidence this is a *tame* place, filled with *tame* things, after all.”

As they shifted everything, searching, Dee grimaced. “What’s the point of this place? Who would build a place like this, let people get trapped in it?”

“A madman,” Agnes said, pushing the coats in the closet apart and checking the pockets. “Who else? Someone likes to watch us scuttle about, endlessly, infinitely, tied to a pin and spinning about.” She paused and glanced over her shoulder. “The worst sort: A sadist.”

“Yeah, but *who*? And *why*?”

Marks was lifting the thin mattress, gingerly, like he expected a swarm of bugs to emerge. “Souls,” he said.

“Um ... *what*?”

He shrugged, letting the mattress drop. “Souls. Or energy, you like that better. We all have a spark to us, right? It burns bright for a while and then it dies down, and eventually goes out, or moves on. That’s energy, however else you want to look at it. Wherever you go, kid, you leak energy, you leave it behind. When you work on something, you’re putting your energy into that, you can focus it. And when you’re gone, sometimes there’s an echo. That’s a ghost. That’s you smearing so much of yourself in one place it lingers. A place like this? It’s a machine. It’s got us spinning around, putting our energy into *it*, into the machine. The longer we spin around in here trying to get out, the more of our energy it extracts.”

Dee stopped searching the drawers of the little night stand to stare at him. “That’s *evil* shit right there,” she said. “How do you know that?”

“He doesn’t,” Agnes snapped. “He’s just trying to scare us. And sound *smart*.”

Marks looked at Dee. “You scared?”

“Yes.”

“You should be.”

They gave up searching and stood in the middle of the room, looking at the doors.

“Rabbit,” Marks said. “And newt—we’ve seen that one before.”

“Viper,” Agnes said.

“Ape,” Dee added.

Marks was scribbling in his notebook. “This place is big. We’re not seeing a lot of repetition.”

“Or there’s no meaning to any of it,” Agnes said. She gestured back at the closet. “We’ve got doors that disappear, for example.”

“Maybe the rooms move,” Dee said.

Marks paused. “Actually, maybe. But until we have some evidence of that, we can’t include it in the data.”

“He’s quite *formal*,” Agnes said. “*The data*.”

“Wait!” Marks said suddenly. “Quiet!”

They all fell silent. The quiet was immediate and seemed total, monolithic. Then, suddenly, a distant sound.

“Is that a *voice*?” Dee asked.

“Holy *shit*,” Agnes whispered. “It *is*!”

Marks waved them down. “Knowing what I know about bizarre-architecture soul batteries,” he said, “it’s *us*, from like five minutes in the future. Going to lock us in a temporal loop until we die.”

Agnes looked at him and studied him for a moment, pursing her lips. “Well, we can’t stay *here*,” Agnes said, looking around in distaste. “The library had books—not that you were interested in *learning*

anything, and the lounge might have had something to *eat*. This place has a copy of *Lost Horizon* and a bed you couldn't pay me to sleep on. And we're *not* sleeping on it together."

"And fur coats," Dee said, "even though it's hot as hell in here."

"Shut up!" Marks hissed.

They stood for a moment. The voice was muffled.

"Anyone make it out?" Marks asked in a whisper.

"Which door is coming from?" Agnes whispered back.

They couldn't tell. Dee went and pressed her ear against each door, but shook her head in dismay.

"Well, we can't go back, so it's one of these four," Marks said.

"Newt," Agnes said. "We've seen it twice, so maybe the place is trying to tell us something."

"That's a reason to *not* go newt," Dee complained.

"What do you think, kid?" Marks asked.

Agnes scowled, her pretty face turning dark. "So I don't get a vote?"

Marks didn't look at her. "You can go anywhere you want. We're sticking together. Come along, or go your own way."

Dee stomped her foot on the ground. "Stop it! We're all stuck here. She comes with us, old man. Or you can go off on your own."

He frowned, but after a moment he nodded, looking down at his worn, thin shoes. "All right, boss. All right." He sighed. "I vote ape. I like apes."

Agnes and Marks looked at each other. Agnes smiled and turned away. "Apes it is."