



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 4

by Jeff Somers

4. The Starlight Motel

“So you never heard back from him?”

Dee shook her head, playing with her phone in the idle way kids did. He’d caught a glimpse of the screen earlier: A chess game, which was surprising to him for no good reason. Marks noticed that her fingernails were bitten down. That her hands were always in motion, fidgeting, wringing, tearing and folding and squeezing. That she looked at him with a surprising directness when she was sure of herself and looked at the floor when she wasn’t.

“Mom always told me he was no good, a junkie. Stole from everybody. Got in these rages, she said, would bust down doors.” Dee shrugged, tearing the cup into smaller and smaller slices. “I guess I was too young to remember. Then he went away, left town, and Mom always said we were better off without. Then, when Mom got sick, I got a letter from him.”

She didn’t say that sometimes she thought she *did* remember some of it. That sometimes she woke up terrified, and wanted to go hide in a very small, dark space she remembered and didn’t remember at the same time. She remembered how safe she felt in it, compressed and constricted, but she didn’t remember what the space had been, or where, or why she hid in it.

She glanced up. Marks sat relaxed against the soft booth, one arm outstretched along the back of the seat. If he still smoked he would have had a cigarette burning in his hand. For a fleeting second he missed it.

“An actual *letter*,” she said. “On *paper*. I was going to live with him. He’d gotten help, gotten straight, and he’d talked about it with Mom. It was all arranged. He didn’t come to the funeral because Mom’s people, my Aunts and Uncles, don’t like him. But he picked me up and drove us here and we took a room in the motel, and he went out the next day to check out this cheap apartment deal he’d heard about. And he never came back.”

She said this in a flat, matter-of-fact way that made Marks worry about her. “Was he sober? Your Dad?”

She nodded solemnly. “He showed me this little plastic disc he’d gotten. Six months.” She swallowed thickly. “I was proud of him.”

Marks nodded. “Sober’s the worst and most necessary thing a man can be,” he said.

“You sober?”

He nodded again. "I almost died. I had a thirst that wasn't ... entirely natural. And it almost killed me. Took years from me, years I still can't remember. I lived for years and they're just gone." He startled and sat forward, focusing on Dee. "You play chess, huh?"

She blinked and looked at him, suddenly shy. She looked down at the table, setting the phone down as if ashamed. "Yeah," she said. "My mother taught me. We used to play at night. She used to be really good. Chess club in school. She taught me the basics. I don't remember too many openings, though. Queen's Gambit, I always liked. Mom used to say she was a Queen, so all her openings were Queen openings.

Marks smiled. "I never played much. Could never think far enough ahead. Always fell into traps. Your Mom sounds like she was a thinker."

Dee smiled and looked back at him. "I like that. Yeah, she was a thinker."

There was a moment of odd silence. Marks cleared his throat. "You have the address your Dad went to?"

She nodded as their food arrived: Another hamburger for her, a triple-decker sandwich for him. The diner was a few hundred feet down the highway; walking there had been an adventure of cars zooming by, but Marks wanted to avoid the bar at the motel as much as possible. His dreams had been filled with images of people he didn't remember and whiskey, oceans of it cascading over ice cubes, crisp and refreshing. He had a feeling he'd originally started drinking to forget, and it sure had worked.

"You taking my case?"

Marks blinked; the burger was already half gone. She was a skinny, long-legged thing who would be a heartbreaker in a few years, he thought. For the moment she was the hungriest living thing he'd ever seen.

"I'll follow up," he said, arranging his own plate how he liked, removing the toothpick, peeling back the toasted white bread on top and dumping the cole slaw on top of his sandwich. "I'll ask a few questions. But you have to be prepared for bad news, for disappointment." He didn't say that it sounded like a normal missing persons case, without any sort of strange angle, making it outside his specialty. He also didn't say that the odds were very good her Dad had taken the rent deposit money he'd saved and thought he could have just a nip of the hard stuff, to celebrate, and had disappeared down that hole again.

He looked up, and she was nodding gravely, and he felt like an asshole. She already was prepared for disappointment, wasn't she? Had been for a long time, he thought.

They ate in silence for a while.

She felt the awkwardness but didn't understand it. What had just happened? Old people were always like that, always grimacing and saying nothing when they could solve shit just by opening their damn mouths. "What happened to *you*?" she asked. "How'd Mr. Marks end up at the Starlight Motel off of Route One?"

Marks looked out the window, through the parking lot, out to the busy highway and the ugly, chipped and ruined concrete divider between the lanes. “I’m not totally sure,” he said. “I was always interested in ... weird shit.” He caught himself and glanced at her, but the profanity didn’t bother her, and then he felt silly. “I was *attuned* to it. I stumbled across crazy things, things other people didn’t believe. So I started writing about what I found. There was an audience—not a big one—and I got a following. For a while I made a living. People would seek me out, ask me to look into things.” He looked back out the window. Dee studied him, chewing.

“At some point, I got into ... something. I can’t remember. It’s like years of my life, stolen, gone. Since then, it’s like I can’t get any purchase. The world’s made of sand. Every time I try to grab onto something –” he made a vague gesture at the window, then looked back at the girl. “So, here I am at the Starlight Motel off of Route One. It’s like a sudden rock formation in the desert, and I’m clinging.”

She took a sip of her soda. “Shit, Marks, I should maybe be helping *you*.”

He snorted. “Address?”

She dug into her pockets and produced a scrap of newspaper, which she handed to Marks after a moment of hesitation. He unfolded it and read aloud, holding the paper out from himself.

“Apartments for rent. Very affordable. Special consideration given to those in need, those recovering from tragedy, those rebuilding their lives, and those who have nowhere else to turn. Rents commiserate with ability to pay. Please apply in person at 119 Mulland Street,” he glanced up at her, aware, suddenly, of his scruffy cheeks and stiff hair, the money sewn into his jacket lining making him feel heavy and graceless. “This was in the paper? You know which one?”

She pushed her empty plate away, and Marks glanced down and stared at it in amazement. “Didn’t even know there *was* papers,” she said. “But Dad was old, like you, so.”

Marks smiled, folding the scrap up and pushing it into his pocket. She stared at his sandwich until he grunted and slid it across to her. She picked up half and took an enormous bite and made a face.

“Nasty,” she said, and took another huge bite.

Marks counted his loose money in the bathroom, sweating, but left the rest of it in his jacket. He had four-hundred and fifteen dollars left not counting the bills in his jacket lining, which he was pretending didn’t exist. Thirty-five was due at the front office in the morning for rent. That left three-eighty, which he figured was plenty of walk-around money. He stuffed it back into his pocket.

“You can stay here,” he said, walking back into the room. Dee was on the bed, playing chess on her phone again. “Just don’t answer the door, and don’t burn the place down.”

She didn’t look away from the screen. She was contemplating her next move while a tiny hourglass counted down thirty seconds. “Where are you going?”

“Personal business,” Marks said. “I was going to lay low here, take a vacation. If I’m going to work for my newest client, I’ll need to lay some groundwork.”

She frowned at the chess game. Her mind raced through possibilities. He was ditching her, he'd never come back. He was somehow screwing her over, though she had nothing to steal. He'd have a heart attack or something and die out there, and she'd be in his fucking *room* and everyone would think ... things.

She said, "When will you be back?"

"Couple of hours."

She resigned her game but kept staring at the screen until he'd left the room.

The trip required two bus rides with a transfer and a bracing walk of about a mile. The storage facility was in a dessicated part of town, empty sidewalks with weeds cracking them open, dusty wind, old warehouse space that had been converted into artist's lofts and rough retail spaces. The storage place was new and shiny, air-conditioned and camera-monitored, and staffed by one bored and disinterested young man who glanced up from his seat behind the desk just long enough to confirm that Marks knew where he was going and didn't need assistance.

He'd rented the unit years before, long ago when everything had been different. His office had been crowded, he remembered, files everywhere. Pre-digital, he'd packed everything into cardboard boxes—photos, reports, notes, directions, letters, invoices, expense reports. He'd even paid for a service that picked up the boxes and took them to his storage unit for him.

He remembered these things the way he remembered a lot of useless trivia from his past life: Isolated facts, unconnected until he put in the mental effort of comparing them, rubbing them up against each other.

The unit was loosely filled with boxes, some of which had been overturned, their paper contents vomited onto the floor, or on top of other boxes. Some of the boxes were clearly marked and well-organized, others had vague, coded labels that made no sense to him. For a moment he stood, feeling cold and exposed in the harsh crank air of the place, defeated already. Then he stepped inside, stooped down, and scooped up a pile of paper, sitting down on top of a box to start paging through it all.

Although his life was a vague soup in his mind, he was certain of one thing: He'd always relied on the random connections of the universe. Everything was spiderwebbed together in complex, quantum ways that were hard if not impossible to comprehend. He'd often pursued problems and cases by sitting and smoking a cigarette, a shot of whiskey in front of him, just staring at the world outside, letting particles collide as they passed through his brain.

Three hours in, there was a collision. He stared down at a single scrap of paper, thin and cheap, the sort of recycled stuff they sold in pads, made from old newspapers and other trash. On it was written an address: 119 Mulland Street. A thrill went through him, and then quickly faded as he realized it was a scrap of paper that had escaped its connections and links, leaving him with the rest of the files to sort through, looking for the case it linked back to.

When he emerged from the storage facility, the sun was low in the sky and the day felt depleted, empty. His back ached as he walked back to the bus stop, uncertain when the next bus was due to arrive. He

carried a thin manila folder, clutched tightly in one hand. On the ride home the bus became crowded; earlier he'd missed rush hour and it had been empty, sloshing through its route drunkenly. Now it had ballast, and Marks was pinned into the rear corner, over the engine, hot and fumey. He flipped through the pages but couldn't concentrate. He was unsure of his stop and kept peering owlishly out the grimy window.

When he pressed the buzzer for a stop, it took him so long to fight his way to the door the bus had started moving, and only a chorus of helpful shouts from his fellow citizens saved him another four blocks of walking.

"What's that?"

Dee was on the bed in the same pose; if not for the damp towels and the open food containers he would have believed that she hadn't moved all day.

He tossed the file onto the table. He wanted to remove his jacket more than he wanted oxygen, but still hesitated. He doubted the girl knew about the money, but it still bothered him, letting four thousand-plus dollars out of his hands. He crossed his arms uncomfortably and leaned against the TV stand, affecting relaxation and comfort. "The address? That your Dad saw in that advertisement? I've come across it before."

She sat up, muting the television. "What? Seriously?"

He nodded. "It's not much. An old story someone contacted me about. A missing person, just like your Dad."

She stared at him. "And?"

He shrugged. "I'm ... I'm not sure, to be honest." He gestured at his head. "I don't remember things well. There's a folder, which means I took the case and did something with it. But there's not much in there. In fact, it looks like I tossed a lot of stuff out into the trash, because there's cross-references to folders that I don't have any more." He sighed. "I *know* I looked into this, once. But it's gone."

She stared at the folder. "So, like, how does that help us, then?"

"It doesn't, really. But it does mean it might be more up my alley than I thought."