



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 10

by Jeff Somers

10. The Dining Room

Marks stared at the wine glass. It was half-filled with dark red liquid, the carafe sitting on the crowded table right behind it. He'd been forced to walk on the table to get into the room, climbing into the chair facing the window. He felt trapped, his belly pushed up against the edge of the table, the room warm and filled with battling smells of food and booze, all of it somehow slightly off, as if it had just that moment tipped over from fresh to stale, on its way to rotten.

Music—softly muffled, as if being played in the next room—could be heard. It was a string quartet playing a slow, mournful tune, every note dragged out until there was almost no rhythm to it, no form. Yet he was certain, somehow, that it was the same song he'd been hearing, the same maddening cheesy pop song, just slowed down to an unrecognizable tempo.

The wine—he assumed it was wine—looked awful. Thick. Dry. The sort of wine that puckered your mouth and made you thirstier and thirstier the more you drank. He wanted to drink a glass fast, then refill it from the carafe and take his time with the second, enjoying the slow burn, the looseness, the warmth. He wanted to drink. He didn't know why.

He looked at Dee, who was staring dubiously at a carved ham, glistening with glaze. He shouldn't have allowed her to follow him. He'd known, on some level, what would happen—because it was what always happened with him. He knew things would go sideways. He *wanted* them to go sideways, to get lost. He was tired of the constant struggle, his damaged memory, his lack of funds. He was so tired. Walking into a buzzsaw was a quick and easy way to just let the hungry maw of the universe take him.

He should have told her to turn around. He should have *turned* her around. Kids don't know any better.

And now he had to keep her safe and find their way. And for that he thought he could use a drink, and a drink would be the end of him.

He looked at Agnes. She was staring at the messy, laden table with what looked like genuine horror.

"It's warm," Dee said. Marks looked at her; she was touching the baked ham with one finger. She looked at him. "Someone cooked this, like, *recently*."

Marks glanced down at his plate. The fish was bony, and looked only half-cooked. "Well, someone was eating here not too long ago," he said.

"That is *literally* the worst thing you could have told me," Agnes complained.

They sat with that for a moment in silence. The air felt hot, and Marks had an image of breathing gravy, thick and brown and hot, filling his lungs, choking him.

"If *this* disturbs you," Marks said, "wait until we find the fucking *kitchen*. Whatever you do, don't eat anything."

"Don't *worry*," Dee said emphatically. Then she sobered. "Does this mean someone else is in here with us? Maybe my father?"

Marks scanned the table, trying to figure out how the food could appear simultaneously so delicious and so horrifying. Something about the greasy way everything *shined*, he decided. "Maybe. But places like this like to tease you, get you to chase things. They leave trails, breadcrumbs, red herrings. You pick one up, and it always seems just out of reach, tantalizing."

"You," Agnes said with a bright smile, "are the most depressing man I have ever met."

Marks shrugged, thinking it certainly wasn't the first time someone had expressed that thought, or similar thoughts. There had been a time when people thought of him as interesting, as amusing. When people *had* thought of him. But he couldn't be sure; everything beyond a few days before was grainy, unreliable, corrupted.

"And anyway," she continued, leaning back in her chair, "there's only one door. The one behind us isn't there any more."

Marks didn't look, but Dee twisted around in her seat to stare back at the way they'd come, which was now unbroken plaster and chair rail.

"Makes our next move easy, don't you think? Unless you want to wait here and see if any servants arrive to clear the table and bring out the next course, which I'm *sure* will be delightful."

"No," Dee said, turning back and shaking her head. "Let's not wait."

"Snakes it is, then," Marks declared, pulling the bag into his lap and digging through it for his notebook.

"A very specific type of snake," Agnes said with a sniff. "Don't you know your snakes?"

"I hate snakes," Dee declared. "They slither and they hiss and they bite."

Agnes smiled. "Sorry, dearie, no choice: No going back, only way is through the Viper room."

Dee shook her head. "Uh, are you two blind? There's a *window*."

For a moment, everything was silent. Marks pushed the notebook back into the backpack and struggled up out of his chair and onto the table, knocking a gravy boat over and almost slipping and falling from the greasy deluge. He staggered over to the window, knocking plates and cutlery aside, and regarded the yellow drapes.

"They've got an animal printed on them," he said. "Stags."

"Stags are majestic animals," Agnes said. "Stags—wait, we've *seen* a Stag carving."

"The weird little bedroom," Dee said. "With the closet full of coats."

Marks knelt down, his pants getting soaked in a variety of sauces, and pushed the drapes aside, revealing a wide but normal-looking window. “The panes are smoked,” he said. “I can't see through them.”

“There wasn't a window in that room,” Dee said. “And Windows lead *outside*. It might be the way out.”

Marks grunted doubtfully. Shrugging the backpack into a more comfortable position, he put the heels of his hands against the top of the sash and pushed. At first it refused to move, then slowly, groaningly it rose upward, screeching in protest. A bright, white light burst into the room, making them all cover their eyes and look away.

“Can't see a thing,” Marks said, squinting.

“That other room wasn't so bright,” Dee said excitedly. “Maybe it leads somewhere else? Or outside! Maybe we're wrong about the animal codes.”

“Maybe,” Marks said, still ducking and squinting. “One way to find out.”

“What if we can't get back?”

Marks hesitated, then turned to look at them. “Listen, there's one other thing I haven't mentioned about places like this, these mazes.”

“Oh, *dear*,” Agnes said. “The Unmentionables. No one likes the Unmentionables.”

“There's almost always a Trap Room.”

Dee's eyes were wide. He hated scaring her, hated piling on even more for the kid to worry about, but he felt he had a duty. If he was going to be leading her into each room, choosing their path, he had to be honest.

For her part, she hated being scared, and so her reaction seemed almost like anger. “What,” she said slowly, “is a *trap room*?”

His back didn't like him crouching there on the table, and the smell of the rich food was making him sick. “It's room you can't get out of. A room without an exit. No doors, no windows. Or, no doors or windows that will *open*.”

“Jeez,” Agnes complained, climbing out of her seat. “How does *that* knowledge help in *any* way, Mr. Marks?”

He shrugged. “Just full disclosure. I'm pretty sure the internal mechanics will be straight—if there's an animal code for the rooms, it will be consistent. But I *might* be wrong. And if I'm wrong, I just thought —”

“You thought you'd make sure we couldn't say you hadn't warned us,” Agnes muttered. “Real goddamn heroic, Marks. You're a true gem.”

“Anyway. There's a door, too. Snake, or Stag?”

“Viper,” Agnes said.

“Window,” Dee said. “Stag, whatever. Just in case. We got to try, in case that leads outside.”

Marks nodded. “Sure, okay, but ... that's not *sunlight*.”

“Stag,” she repeated.

He nodded. “Let's go. Agnes first.”

He turned and waddled over to the window, and waited for her to walk over to him. He held out his hand. “Watch out, it's slippery.”

“Because you made a mess,” she said crossly, then brightened. “But a gentleman!” She took his hand and let him help her swing a leg over the sill. She sat there for a moment, looking at him. “Let me do some scouting,” she said, and leaned out into the space beyond. A moment later she seemed to fall forward, disappearing into the light.

“Did she fall?” Dee asked. “Was she *grabbed*?”

Marks leaned forward. “Agnes!” he shouted. “Hey, Agnes! You okay?”

There was no response. It seemed to him that his voice didn't echo or reverberate the way it should have; it was like it died in the room with them. He looked at Dee. “All for one and one for all, huh? We can't leave her in there alone.”

Dee hesitated, remembering Marks' words about the relative trustworthiness of Agnes and all the Agneses of the world, then nodded. She stood on the table and walked over, and he helped her swing herself over the sill. Instead of sitting she hung on the sill with both hands, looking at him. He realized she was terrified.

“Listen, Mister—”

She dropped, as if she'd lost her grip ... or been snatched by something on the other side.

Awkwardly, hands getting slick with gravy, he levered one leg through the opening and then pulled himself through.