



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 32

32. The Kitchen

“Someone’s been busy here,” Agnes said.

It was a big room, filled with rows and rows of shelves, several large stoves, and a large wooden country-style table. It looked like a food-fight had been fought recently; egg yolks dripped off the walls, bags of flour had burst open and been scattered all over the place, all the blenders were running, and the table was covered with chopped vegetables, various liquids, pots, pans and other instruments of culinary delight. The floor was blue and white tile, and was covered in flour, milk, and, apparently, chocolate syrup.

Marks noted that along one wall was a rack of knives, some of which looked just a little too....long to have any use in the kitchen. Several had wickedly curved blades that were serrated.

“Something’s gone pretty damn rotten in here,” Dee said, making a face. Behind her. Dennis, now taller than he’d originally been, his skin stretched taut over his face as if it hadn’t kept pace with the rest of him, made the same face.

Marks also thought it was very warm, owing to the ovens, which were uniformly turned to about 400 degrees. There was a coat rack along the back wall that offered a selection of chef’s hats, including one that resembled nothing more than the pointed headgear of a Catholic bishop. Next to that was a narrow door marked PANTRY. There were three other doors he could see: a swinging in/out door next to the pantry featuring the octopus he knew led to the Old Room, a wooden door with the familiar carving of a stag, and a window.

Marks froze, suddenly realizing he was looking at a window. Outside, it looked like a beautiful day, tree limbs swaying in sunshine. He stared at it, suddenly excited and nervous. Could it be? Was it possible that it was that simple, just open the window and climb down a tree, hitch a ride home? He crossed to the window as if in a dream, knowing it was impossible that escape would be so simple, so straightforward, but unable to let go of the possibility.

When he was close, however, he saw it: one pane of glass, thicker at the bottom than the top from age, had been etched with a portrait of a wolf, similar to the carving on the elevator doors that had brought them to the Waiting Room trap. The glass vibrated slightly as the crashing, crunching noise of the maze collapsing around them continued to buzz, a little louder, he thought, than before.

Deflated, he turned and looked around the kitchen again.

“All I see are places we’ve been,” Dee said. “Wolf, Stag, Octopus. It’s a dead end.”

“Look for a ... what’s next? If you’re setting a chessboard?”

“A rook,” Dee said. “A castle. But—”

“If it’s here, we’re on the right track,” Marks said. “Let’s start there.”

“Or we’re wrong about the chess pieces,” Dee said, looking around.

They searched. Everything in the kitchen was rancid, rotten, and well past its sell date, making the search a disgusting adventure. Dee attempted to keep herself relatively clean, picking through ingredients and utensils carefully, sometimes picking up a wooden spoon or other implement to help her shift the mess around. Marks didn’t let such niceties slow him down; he rolled up his sleeves and swept his hands through the gooey, room-temperature stuff, shoving mounds of flour and sugar and puddles of gravy aside energetically, eager to get on with it.

The activity seemed to crank up the stench of food gone over, choking the warm air with the damp smell of rot and decay. Dee breathed through her mouth. Marks pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and held it up to his face, filtering the foul air.

Dennis and Agnes stood together, bored, their arms wrapped around themselves as they watched with barely-concealed disdain.

Finally, Dee and Marks, sweating and covered, despite Dee’s efforts, in nearly equal amounts of food, stood and contemplated the ovens.

“It makes perfect sense,” Marks said, wiping his face. “This place loves to torture you in big ways and small.”

He reached forward and touched the handle on the door of one oven, then snatched his hand back, hissing through his teeth. For a moment he was seized with an incoherent fury, angry that every single step along the way was made as difficult as possible, each subsequent room worse in small ways than the ones before, and now the pressure to keep moving, to be quick, to not think and just run as the whole tiny little universe destroyed itself in order to reset for the next guests who would arrive, confused, to be tortured and tricked, their lives sucked away from them.

He’d been through a lot, and seen incredible—and horrible—things, much of which was lost to him. But he resented this place more than any other. He resented everything about it, and for one moment he allowed all of that rage to fill him.

Then he took a deep breath, wrapped his handkerchief around his hand, and opened the ovens, one by one, moving quickly. The rook was in the third one, apparently made of some sort of dough and baked to a shiny, buttery shellac-like finish.

“All right,” Dee said. “So we might still be on the right track, but we still have just three choices that all lead places we’ve been and *don’t* want to go back to.”

Marks nodded, looking around.

“I used to love to cook,” Agnes said suddenly. “Do you remember, Phil?”

Phil. Marks froze again. She’d never called him by his first name before. It was always *Muddled Marks* or *Myopic Marks*. Something about her voice, the sound of his name, filled him with ice and horror.

“Do you remember me yet, Phil?”

Did he want to? He could feel her on the tip of his brain, just beyond the places where his memory illuminated things, just beyond his reach. Like a dark curtain between him and everything that had gone before. But he also had a sense that if he put effort into it, real effort, he might be able to reach through the curtain, just a little bit, a tiny bit, and pull her through into the light.

But he didn't want to. As much as his lost memory frustrated him, he knew one thing about it: Most of it should stay lost.

Agnes began to hum again. The same song, the same melody, somehow pegged to the rhythm of the distant noise of destruction and chaos, the rumbling churning noise of the place collapsing onto itself. The notes stabbed into Marks and he knew the song, Agnes, they were linked with him. Behind that distant curtain, they waited for him, and he was terrified.

He tore his eyes away from her. She'd become almost inhuman, her features and the lines of her body and face longer and more graceful than was possible. It hurt to look at her. She was like some example of human evolution from centuries in the future. He looked around the room desperately, from the eggs hardening on the walls to the globs of curdled cream on the floor. And he realized, with a flood of relieved excitement, that there was a *fourth* door.

“The pantry,” he said, his voice a croak.

Dee frowned, turning to look at the door. “The damn pantry, now? This place makes no damn sense.” She walked over to the small wooden door and examined it. “No carving,” she said. “No animal.”

Marks stepped close to the door, eyes dancing over its surface. Between Agnes' humming and the distant noise, he wanted to just move, just get out in front of everything and stay in motion. But she was right. Every door so far had been marked. The animal carvings had served as guideposts, and the only reason he had any sense of where they'd been or where they might be going, the only reason his hand-drawn map made any sense, was because of those signposts. He wanted to just crash through the door and keep *moving*, but he knew she was right to be dubious. They might easily find themselves in another Trap Room.

“Come on,” he said, his voice tight, taking hold of the pantry door handle. He turned to look back at Dee. Behind her, Agnes and Dennis stepped forward together, their faces eager with anticipation, as if they were excited to see what happened next. He focused on Dee.

“This is part of it. The trick. This place, it establishes rules and patterns, then breaks them. Just to increase your sense of disorientation. So that the obvious route lies open for you but you *hesitate*, because it doesn't match the pattern exactly.”

“Or,” Agnes said softly, “it really *is* a trick.”

He shook his head. “It can't be.” He let go of the handle and knelt down before her. “Listen, kid, I'm responsible for you. I've got to get you out of this place, and we're running out of time. Come on and trust me.”

She didn't seem persuaded, but after a moment she shrugged. “I don't have any better ideas.”

He nodded, taking hold of the handle again. He'd take it.