



**JEFF
SOMERS**

**BLACK
HOUSE**

Black House

Chapter 41

41. The Restroom

The linking hallway, unfinished and twisting, went on far longer than the others. Marks slowly realized it was shrinking as they advanced, getting smaller and smaller. After about a hundred feet, he was on all fours, crawling along what had become an air duct, the drywall giving way to thin galvanized steel that burped and warped under them, giving every impression that they were suspended in the air over a large space.

Just when he wondered if he would be able to continue forward or if the duct was going to narrow too much for his shoulders, he came across a ventilation grate. He stopped so suddenly Dee bumped into him from behind.

“Ack,” she whispered. “Old man butt.”

He peered down through the slats of the vent. There was a space below, lit by a flickering white light that buzzed and clicked. He could see what looked like tile work.

He twisted around painfully and looked at her. “We can go down, or we can go on.”

She took a deep breath and wiped sweat from her face, leaving behind a dark blur of dirt. “No clues, huh? No more music, no more chess?”

He shook his head. “If there are, I’m missing them. It’s down, or forward.”

She nodded, then froze. “Wait—do you hear that?”

Marks shook his head. She held up a hand and they both sat frozen for a moment in the humid darkness. The roar of the maze tearing itself apart was back—muffled, although the duct shivered and shook with it, a bass line running under their hands and knees, driving them forward. Slowly, he became aware of a familiar tinkling noise, and he smiled.

“Water,” he said.

She scrambled back a foot or two as he stretched out and began kicking at the vent with the heel of one foot. He found himself struggling for breath, the duct seeming intolerable hot, and he worked as hard as he could. The fourth impact sent the vent tumbling down to the floor below, and he grinned, holding out his arms. Dee crawled forward and lowered her legs through the hole, and Marks steadied her and slowly lowered her down through it. When he had extended himself as far as possible, he took a deep, ragged breath.

“Gonna drop you!”

“Okay!”

He let go, and heard her land effortlessly on the floor below. He scrambled to follow as quickly as possible, dropping down in a rush and landing awkwardly, turning his ankle slightly, making him wince and dance for balance. His ankle and back both joined in a symphony of pain for a moment.

It was a bathroom all right, a public restroom, done in gleaming white tile. It smelled strongly of cleaning products. The lights were bright white fluorescents that buzzed and hummed ominously. They could hear water dripping, somewhere. He could feel the collapse in the floor. The lights flickered in time with the enormous noise, making it that much harder to think.

There were three white urinals against the wall to their left, a row of four sinks with bright chrome fixtures set under a large, smudged mirror to their left, and two wastepaper baskets. One of the faucets was running, filling the room with a distinctly damp sound.

There were four stalls across from the sinks, doors closed. Each stall door had a Roman Numeral written on it in what appeared to be black marker: X, V, III, C.

The whole room was painfully white, even the grout between the tiles. It hurt his eyes. The whole place looked like it had been recently scrubbed clean by a team of desperate professionals. He imagined he could eat out of the urinals, but decided not to say so.

“Marks,” Dee said.

He turned and followed her arm to a section of the mirror where someone had written several sentences in the same black marker:

I wonder at a holy mystery

I ponder the terror of ghosts

I am fonder by far of agony

the room floods and you are lost

The phrases were each in wildly different handwriting, as if written by different people.

Marks nodded. “Well, that’s goddamn disturbing. Water first,” he said, and Dee nodded back. They crossed to the sinks and opened up a second faucet. Clear water came rushing out, and they each thrust their heads into the basins to drink. For a few moments it was just the sound of water, and then Marks straightened up, shrugged off his backpack, extracted a plastic bottle and held it under the stream while Dee straightened up and wiped her mouth.

“It was getting a little dry, huh?” he asked.

“A little dry,” she said, smiling a little.

He capped the bottle, took another long drink at the faucet, and then turned to look around, water dripping from the whiskers on his chin. He reached up and scratched at them, surprised; he didn’t think they’d been inside for so long.

Dee twisted the faucet handle, but the stream of water wouldn't stop. The sink wasn't draining, either, and was rapidly filling up. She glanced at Marks and saw him having the same struggle. As she did so, the other two sinks suddenly switched on, water pouring and filling their basins.

The noise of the collapse seemed suddenly louder, and the whole room shook as if an earthquake was going on.

Marks looked at her. Then he pointed at the poem written on the mirror. "The room floods and you are lost!" he shouted. "I guess that's to be taken literally. No exit doors," he said, looking around. "And the vent's too high to get back up to!"

Dee nodded. Marks thought she was sadly calm, inured to the constant betrayals and struggle of this place, and he felt an enormous weight of blame. "How much you wanna bet that vent is closed somehow, we float up there? But we got four doors."

Marks nodded, dropping the bottle back into the backpack. He considered the niceness of the trap: They'd been thirsty, in fact dying of thirst, and now they had water—too much of it.

He strolled towards the stalls. He walked up to each and put his hand on them, palm flat, and then dropped down to look under the doors. He paused; each stall was horrifying in a different way. X was blood-splattered, gore dripping down the interior walls; the floor in V was covered in a thick pelt of ash, ghostly bones peeking through; III's floor undulated, a million insectoid bodies crawling over each other; C looked clean, but a foul smell drifted under the door, rot and char and something else that burned his nose.

He sat back. "Huh," he said out loud.

"Marks."

Dee was standing over one of the wastepaper baskets. He stood up and joined her. Sitting at the bottom of the basket was a single sheet of paper, with text written on it in the same marker.

ALERT

YOU ONLY

GET TO

OPEN

ONE

"Well," Dee said, sounding tired. "That's fucking ominous."

Marks nodded. He knew how she felt, he thought; it was numbing, the endlessness of the Black House. Every room seemed so promising, every revelation, every new door. And then you found yourself once again pondering a riddle and wondering if you weren't really just spinning wheels. It was entirely possible, he reminded himself, that all of these tantalizing clues that seemed to indicate a route, a purpose, might have been part of the trap, part of the torture.

As he thought the word *torture*, water began overspilling the sinks and running onto the floor. The room shook again, a distant explosion spiking the noise level.

He looked at the stalls and considered what he'd seen through the gaps. He nodded. "I believe it," he said, imagining Agnes sweeping through here and tearing the sign down in anger, another prank by her "minions," and tossing it into the garbage. "I actually think if we open the wrong one, we're in for a world of pain."

Dee stepped over to stand next to him, crossing her arms and wearily studying the stall doors.

"Ten, five, three, and ... what's 'C' stand for?"

"Hundred," Marks said.

"Ten, five, three, hundred. Mean shit to you?"

Marks shook his head. "Not right off. Can't spell anything with them. Why Roman numerals? Why numbers at all?" He turned and leaned down for a drink, the water pooling in a shallow layer on the floor.

Dee bent down and retrieved the paper from the wastepaper basket, smoothing it out and studying it. "I keep thinking there's a hint here, right? Look how it's written, like a poem." She stared down at the page. "Maybe there's something about the letters. Letters on the doors, letters in the note ... there are no Cs, Is, Vs or Xs."

Marks straightened up, wiping his chin and staring at the mirror. "You know what? No Xs or Vs in the poem, either." He leaned forward and squinted. "No Cs, either."

Dee turned and looked. "Three Is, though."

They both turned to look at the stalls.

"Seems too easy," Dee said.

"Who says it has to be hard? Takes brains to make a good puzzle. Not everyone has brains."

"We got brains?"

"Definitely fucking *not*," Marks said, "considering we got trapped in *here*." He walked over to the stall with the numeral III on it. He put his hand on it and closed his eyes. "Had to be bugs. *Had* to be, huh?"

"You don't like bugs?"

Marks nodded. "I was in a shithole apartment. This was a few years ago, still sliding, still a part of the world. Not yet at bottom. At night I could hear some critter in the walls—a rat, a squirrel, who knows. Scratch scratch scratch, all night. Drove me crazy. Then one day, no more scratching, I won the lottery. I got really lit that night, celebrating. And then the flies came. The fucking *flies*. A few at first, barely noticed them. Then more, and more. One morning I woke up, the room was thick with flies, a black wave of them. The damn animal had died in my wall." He swallowed. "I had nowhere else to go. So I stayed. I stayed until the flies finally died off."

"Jesus, Marks," Dee said. "That's *awful*."

He nodded. “Just one of the many merry stops I made on my way to the bottom.” He turned. “Look at those lines,” he said. “I think *that’s* our clue. Three Is. Roman numeral three. Bugs.”

She nodded again, and he felt it again: That weariness, that defeat. The girl had been abandoned, left to fend for herself, then lost inside this insanity engine. And she’d chased after her father only to be tortured with his death, finding him carved up and used as a prop—for what?

“All right,” she said, and they walked forward together, sloshing through a surprisingly deep pool of water; Marks suspected more was being pumped in from hidden places. Marks took a deep breath and angled his body to shield Dee as he pulled the stall door open.

The whole tiny space was crawling with insects, but they were all harmless. Revolting, perhaps, but nothing that stung or bit or infested the body—just thousands of legs and squirming, shiny bodies, gleaming dumb eyes. Instead of a toilet, there was a tunnel. It looked like it had been torn out of the wall, the edges rough and wriggling with bugs. He could see a rough-hewn tunnel heading into the wall for a few feet, then making what he now regarded as the usual right-hand turn that prevented him from seeing anything else.

“Gross,” Dee said emphatically, and Marks smiled.

“Come on,” he said. “Before we drown.”