

Housemates with the Blackridge Heirs

Chapter 1

5 Voucher

Chapter 1

Maya

"I'm sorry, Ms. Cole," the woman at the counter repeated for the third time, like sorry could put a roof over my head. "Your dorm assignment was... displaced."

"Misplaced," the guy beside her corrected under his breath.

"Displaced," she insisted, smiling through her teeth as if smiling could file paperwork. "The point is, the room you were promised is unavailable."

"The point," I echoed, because apparently we were playing a game, "is that I'm standing here with two suitcases, a scholarship, and exactly forty-two dollars until my first stipend hits, and you're telling me I'm homeless on day one?"

Her smile widened a millimeter. "Not homeless. Call it... creative housing."

I blinked. "Is that a new major?"

Behind me, someone snorted. In front of me, the woman sighed in a way that said I was the fiftieth problem she'd handled today and the only one that persisted this long.

The thing was, I was already two weeks behind in the semester, because it cost me a tooth and a literal toenail on a site I wished never to visit again, to buy my ticket to come here.

Another delay was not what I needed right now.

The receptionist clicked across her screen, as she tapped her nails. I tried to stare at the sunlit lobby of Blackridge University's Housing Office just to distract myself while she checked.

It really was a beautiful campus and everything I ever dreamed of. And although I was transferring in my third year out of four, I was grateful that I'd have two years at my dream school.

That is, if this issue is resolved and I get a place to rest my head.

"Look," I said, lowering my voice. "I transferred late because I had some issues and my internship officially starts tomorrow. Admissions fast-tracked me, and housing was confirmed. I sold my soul to a color-

coded spreadsheet—"

"Which we appreciate," she murmured.

"—and I don't have anyone in this city. Or... at all, really." It slipped out before I could stop it. "So if you could just... 'creatively' house me in a room with four walls, that would be amazing. The janitor's closet would suffice until a student or two decides college is not their cup of tea and decide to drop out prematurely."

She snorted, but I was dead serious.

She opened her mouth to respond with another apology, I'm sure, but her obnoxious sounding telephone rang, and she grabbed it without a second thought.

I couldn't hear the conversation, but she 'yeah' and 'uh-huhed' through the entire thing while my anxiety ate me whole.

When she finally ended the call, she gave me a look of complete relief, that I was sure had nothing to do with me and everything to do with her just wanting to get rid of me.

"So, turns out, we can place you," she said finally, and my heart skipped in joy. "At Blackridge House, off-campus."

My relief and celebration was cut short. "The alumni guest house?"

Her colleague coughed. "The Alpha House."

I laughed, because the alternative was fainting.

"Right. The Alpha House. Is that some type of weird way of saying some frat house or something?"

The receptionist's colleague gave me a confused look, but she shot him a glare that seemed to communicate something that I didn't understand, because he burned bright red and ducked his head as if he realized something that I couldn't place.

"It's not a frat house," the lady said. "and it's not what you applied for, but it will do for the first semester at least, and it's free."

Now that caught my attention.

"It's a formal courtesy for the displacement," she added, sliding a carbon-copy form toward me. "Housing covers the rent, utilities, and a transport stipend for this semester, on us, because the mistake was ours."

"Free?" I echoed. "No catch? No human-sacrifice system that I don't know about?"

"Free. No catch," she said, and the smile finally looked like policy instead of pity. "We messed up your placement, so the university makes it right."

I hummed and I stared at the address on the paper she handed to me.

"Any surprises I should know about?" I asked tentatively.

Her smile seemed strained now. "It's either this," she said, printing the keycard, "or a hotel for three weeks at your expense."

Forty-two dollars, a Dominoes gift card and two fake silver earrings was not going pay for that.

I bit my cheek and took the key.

"Creative housing it is," I said.

She smiled genuinely this time as her eyes caught someone behind us.

"Elisel!" she called, waving over a girl with glossy hair, a pressed polo, and the kind of planner that could run a small country. I liked her already.

Elise reached the counter in three crisp strides. Up close, she smelled faintly like citrus and old books.

"Please," the receptionist said, relief leaking into her tone. "Could you show Ms. Cole to Blackridge House?"

Elise's smile held, but something akin to shock flickered in her eyes before she schooled it smooth.

"Of course." She turned to me, extending a hand. "Elise Hart. Campus ambassador and chronic overachiever."

"Maya," I said, shaking it. "Same, actually" I laughed. "I mean, the overachiever part... Not the ambassador because obviously I wasn't here to be an ..." I coughed to hide my embarrassing rambling. "Nice to meet you."

"Same." Her smile seemed real, and her fingers were cool and firm. She tipped her head slightly—just a subtle lift of her nose, like she was... sniffing me?

My stomach dropped. Great. I must've smelled like a bus-station chic. I

should've bought the travel-size perfume instead of the emergency ramen.

We set off, the afternoon sun sliding warm across brick paths. Blackridge unfurled around us. It was mostly old stone halls, glass windows, and beautiful ivy climbing along the bricks.

Elise moved at a purposeful clip that said she didn't believe in being late to anything, ever.

"Quick hits," she said. "Dining hall coffee is a cry for help, the library closes at midnight but not really, and if you hear the bell tower at three a.m., you didn't."

"Didn't what?"

"Exactly." She flashed me a grin. "Your internship's in Comms & Policy, right? I'm in that program too. I'll see you in Professor Lang's seminar and at work tomorrow."

Relief loosened something in my chest. "So I'll know one person in the room who can probably perform CPR on my social awkwardness."

She laughed. "I can. Also on actual people." She glanced over, friendly and curious, that tiny nose-lift again like a reflex. "New perfume?"

"New city," I deflected, and she let it go.

We crossed a footbridge where a small stream sat, and passed a lawn where a frisbee nearly decapitated me. Elise didn't break stride, and I respected that.

"Almost there," she said, nodding ahead.

I nodded as we continued. "Are there rules?"

"Oh yes," she said without looking away from the hill. "Rule one: Don't die."

I shot Elise a look. She didn't look like she was joking.

"Half humor," she said brightly, then lowered her voice. "Some houses like their privacy."

The house appeared like it had been set down by a hand that did not accept 'good enough.' It was massive, antique, but beautiful. Its structure was like most of the University's, but there was something distinct about it that made it seem almost... homely, yet repulsive to intruders.

My feet stopped. "That's... a house."

"Mm-hmm. Welcome to Blackridge House."

"What's the cost for a night at a hotel here again?"

Elise's smile tilted. "Good luck."

I did a double-take. "You're not coming with me?"

"Oh, no." She tapped the face of her watch. "I have a lab. But I'll see you in seminar and at work tomorrow, yeah?"

"Yeah." I swallowed. "Tomorrow."

She squeezed my forearm—quick and warm—and peeled away the way she'd arrived: neat, efficient, and a little too observant.

I dragged my duffel up the front steps. Housing had promised to send my suitcases by car, which was either very kind or them laundering their guilt. The door was unlocked, which felt like either a trap or confidence. I chose confidence because I had to choose something.

The foyer was cool, quiet, the kind of put-together that whispers don't touch. Low voices threaded in from deeper inside. Male voices.

I followed them.

I turned into the living room and stopped so fast the duffel thumped my calf.

Three men looked up at me from three separate places.

One stepped out from the hallway still wet from a shower, a white towel slung low on his hips, and water sliding in clean lines over his chest.

Across the room, another stood at the entrance to what seemed like the kitchen, in an apron that definitely wasn't his, oven mitt on one hand.

And the third was kneeling on the rug with a screwdriver and the gutted belly of a robot vacuum between his knees.

Nobody spoke. Neither did I.

By the looks on their faces, they were just as surprised by the news as I was.

"Hi," I said, because my mouth was a traitor. "Creative housing?"