

“Welcome to Blackbead House.”

Blackbead towers over us, a massive two-story mansion of bone-white stucco and coal-black shutters. A grand stone staircase leads to the front veranda, framed by columns. There’s a double garage attached at the side. The mansion’s lit from within, and there’s nothing but stillness behind the sheer curtains. Like the home’s blank eyes are staring back at me.

Nausea pulls at my stomach. I’m staying *here*?

Ora parks in the mansion’s long shadow at the bottom of the stairs, and I hop out of the car. Take everything in. All around the house, there are red-orange mangoes, spiny green soursop, and fresh limes on leafy branches. I grab my shoulder bag from the back seat. Ora yanks on my suitcase handle, but it doesn’t budge.

“Rush, you got no sense,” hails a tense voice from the front door. Two young people—a guy and a girl—hurry down the steps. The girl waves at Ora to quit pulling at my luggage. “Let Scoob get it before you hurt yourself.”

Ora kisses her teeth, tugs harder. “I can do it, Juney.”

“Not an inch of muscle on your whole body, but you can do it? Unbelievable.” Juney takes note of my presence. Crosses her arms, looks me over. The slight sneer says she isn’t impressed by what she sees. She has a soft face, box braids, and she’s a little taller than I am. “Joy, yes?” she asks.

My eyebrow twitches. Ora’s right: the name doesn’t suit me. Never thought it fit Joy either, though. “Actually,” I start. And I stop. The words came easier when I spoke to Ora. But Ora didn’t seem as scrutinizing as Juney, that’s for sure. “I mean, I prefer Carina, if that’s cool. Middle name. Joy feels a little childish, maybe.”

“I see . . . Well, nice to meet you.” There’s a sharpness to her words that makes me think that’s not the case. She’s not sure about me, I guess. Can’t blame her, can I? “I’m Simone,” she says, pointing to her name tag. “I clean with Ora during the day.”

Juney’s her pet name, then. They all probably have one. So nobody should find it weird that I want to go by a different name too.

The guy, “Scoob,” nudges Ora out of the way and dislodges my suitcase with one pull. He grins at me, proud. “Call me Josh. You can find me in the kitchen anytime before six o’clock.” He lifts the hot-pink luggage with one hand. Almost everything I care about is in there, and it’s nothing for him to toss around. Says a lot about my life. “I’m strong, sharp, cook good—might shock you,” he continues. Each word is breezy, unserious.

“If you don’t hush and carry the bag before the Halls come home,” Ora scolds.

“What? Mad I don’t flirt with you?” he asks.

Ora pulls the keys out of her pocket and drops them in Simone’s hand.

“Now Juney can park the fancy car. Why? ’Cause you a dumbass.”

Josh just smirks. “Can’t be kind, no? Will let the Blackbead duppy deal with you then.” Ora smacks his shoulder before he hauls my suitcase up the steps, and Simone climbs into the BMW for a trip to the garage. Ora fusses with her earrings. Josh gets under her skin, and she can’t hide it. She’s an open book.

I miss when I could be like that.

“Sorry,” she says. “Simone and Josh are nice, but them love to vex me.”

“They’ll keep me on my toes.”

“Don’t encourage them.” Ora heads up the stairs, and I follow. “The family will be back soon for your welcome dinner.” Thank god I have time to change out of these clothes. “For now, I’ll take you ’round. Show you the real Blackbead.”

We reach the patio, decorated with classic black and cream furniture. Ora stands to one side of the ornate double doors, each decorated with an engraving of a massive tree, its overarching branches drooping with some kind of fruit. Etched onto a tiny plaque above the doorframe, the phrase *Servitium et Honorem* shines. Ora gestures me in. “Come.”

I step over the threshold. A fever flashes across my skin. Blackbead suits its name. I imagined color flaunted across every bedspread, rug, and tablecloth, like how Mom decorated our town house. That’s the stereotype, right? That we Jamaicans aren’t afraid to dress our homes in crimson and gold, to do it up with all-out patterns and designs that demand attention. But Blackbead’s all work and no play—black and white, wood and stone, silver and crystal. The grand foyer has clean lines, a circular staircase, and a sleek chandelier that gleams. The one thing that feels familiar? The antiseptic scent of Dettol burning my nose. The staff probably used it to clean the floors.

“Shit,” Ora says, “forgot to ask. What’s your number?” I rattle off the digits. “You got WhatsApp?”

“Why?”

“So I can add you to the group chat later.” Ora curls her lip, throws this “duh” look. “Just four of us—Simone, Josh, me, and Aaron. You make five. We call it the Young Birds.” She smiles with pride. “Now, let’s start the tour.”

“That won’t be necessary, Miss Williams.”

Ora and I spin around. There’s an older woman there, light skin contrasting with her black silk blouse and knee-length pencil skirt. She folds her hands in front of her, posture tall and long, like a ballerina’s. I’ve seen her photos online. There’d always be some asshole who questioned how she got her skin that color or why she refused to relax her hair. But otherwise, the comments were loaded with praise. All of it seemingly well deserved.

Turns out Ruth Hall is way more beautiful in person.

“You’re home early, Mrs. Hall,” Ora says, dipping into a curtsy despite wearing literal pum-pum shorts. I hike my messenger bag higher on my shoulder before joining Ora in a bow. I stare at my sneakers, focus on the scuffs near the toe.

“I had business to attend to at home and hoped to greet our newest guest,” Mrs. Hall replies, clear and steady. “Thank you for picking up Miss Carter on Thomas’s behalf. I will take it from here.” She holds her gaze on Ora for a second longer. “And please wear more appropriate clothes in the future, Miss Williams.”

“Yes, ma’am. Sorry, ma’am.” Ora quickly side-eyes me before scurrying through an almost invisible door that I didn’t notice before because it had been flush with the wall. Secret passageways? The surprises keep coming.

Now it’s just Mrs. Hall and me. What do I do without Ora to hold on to? I’m not ready. I haven’t gotten any serious info on the Halls from Ora yet. Haven’t had a chance to refresh my hair. Haven’t even changed out of these raggedy travel clothes like I wanted.

On stiletto heels, Mrs. Hall slowly pivots toward me. I smile, widen my eyes so I seem excited and ready to work. But it’s as if she’s already running calculations on me, whether I fit the picture she had in mind when she hired Joy. “I’ve already spoken with Mr. Green—Joshua—and had him deliver your luggage to your quarters. You’ll unpack before dinner. For now . . .” She clears her throat. “Follow me, please, Miss Carter.”

It’s like someone used Blackbeard to smash past and present together—state-of-the-art speakers in the corner of a room covered in mahogany paneling, a shiny 4K television atop an ornate embroidered rug. We pass the formal living room, decked out with glass doors open to a manicured backyard, an in-ground pool, and a view of the turquoise-blue ocean beyond the property’s cliffs. Never thought I’d get the chance to live by the water, catch the waves as they come and go.

If Joy had come, she might have slowed down for once to notice everything here.

The kitchen's bustling with folks quickly and quietly preparing for dinner. There are stainless steel appliances, and one of those big fridges with a touch screen, but they're still using cast-iron dutch pots on the stovetop. A white candle sits in the windowsill, its flame burning. At the sound of Mrs. Hall's clicking heels, everyone pauses, faces her, and bends at the waist.

"As you were," Mrs. Hall says lightly. The staff returns to their work as we drift away from the busyness. A well-oiled machine that's back on course.

I try to take in the sights of the house, but it's impossible to catch it all. So I switch to the obvious things. Like how every wall has some massive mirror or prestigious award acknowledging the Halls' contributions to the country. I even spy a stately portrait: two kids, a young man, an older couple—Mrs. Hall and her husband—each poised and proper.

A little royal family. The opposite of my own life.

My mom's an aide on a school bus. Dad's an accountant. Half my clothes are hand-me-downs from Joy. How can I fit into this? How can I *stay* in this?

If I keep it together, play it cool and polite, I'll be in the clear. Then this fresh start is mine to have, and Joy's gift to me doesn't go to waste.

Simple. Easy.

Mrs. Hall escorts us into a sitting room, a darkened space illuminated by the remaining sunrays and some warm lamplight. She lowers herself into a plush armchair, and I sit on the velvet sofa across from her. It's firm, like it's never been used. Probably hasn't been. Rich people seem to love useless, decorative furniture. I rest my bag on the floor. It topples in an awkward, loud clatter as my stuff shifts inside. My breath catches, holds. Clumsy. I feel clumsy compared to Mrs. Hall.

A young woman hurries in, balancing a silver tea tray. It's Juney—Simone. She skillfully pours two teacups—doesn't ask how I like my tea—and passes one to Mrs. Hall and the other to me. I keep the cup and saucer on my lap so nobody hears how badly I'm shaking.

I can do this. I can have a conversation. I can have a totally normal conversation without spooking this woman.

"Thank you, Simone," says Mrs. Hall. Simone curtsies, deadass gives me the stink eye, and exits as quickly as she entered. Damn. She is really not feeling me.

Mrs. Hall exhales, like she can finally relax. "Now that we're alone, we can truly talk. One-on-one. Tell me: Do you prefer Miss Carter or Joy?"

I swallow. “My middle name is fine, ma’am. I usually go by . . . Carina.”

“Really.” It’s not a question. “Thomas didn’t mention a name preference on your paperwork.”

“Probably just an oversight, ma’am.” Whether I’m suggesting it’s an oversight of mine or Thomas’s, I don’t say. But Mrs. Hall doesn’t say anything more either.

Pretty sure she hates me. Or doesn’t believe me. I should have let her call me whatever she wants. But it’ll be easier if I’m responding to my real name and not *just* the pretend one. I have to make this easier for me to pull off. I press my thumb against the rim of the saucer. Stay grounded.

Finally, Mrs. Hall offers a small grin. “Well, we don’t generally use nicknames, but you will be like family, and we want you to feel comfortable. So Carina it is.” That’s more grace than I expected. And that kicks my anxiety into overdrive. Understanding is foreign to me. I grip the teacup handle and force myself to take a sip. Not enough sugar. No milk. I hide my wince. “We’re happy to have you in our beautiful home for the next few weeks. My husband and I will be busy with election responsibilities, but we don’t want our children feeling neglected while we wait for our more permanent caretaker to arrive in late August. That’s where you come in.”

“Of course, Mrs. Hall.”

“Monday through Saturday, you will care for our two youngest children, Luis and Jada.” I set down my cup, try to subtly wipe my clammy palm on my sweatpants. My grungy, nondesigner sweatpants. Christ. “Between the hours of seven a.m. and eight p.m., we ask for your full attention—this means maintaining routines, overseeing productive play sessions, some light housekeeping.” Better that I’m here than Joy, then. The word *routine* would make her break into hives. “We will provide for all your needs, and as our au pair, you may freely enjoy most areas on the property. Sundays will usually be your own, but exact days off will depend on the scheduling of special events that may require your participation. Oh, and you will receive your salary every Friday.”

I don’t care about the schedule. I don’t even care about the money. I’ve got my foot in the door, and that’s enough.

“There’s more,” Mrs. Hall continues, “but you’ll learn all about Blackbead standards in due time. Enough of that. Please, tell me a bit more about yourself. I admit, I’m quite curious.” She puts down her teacup, peers at me with an eager, open face. “Your Cultural CareScapes profile said you were familiar with our . . . lifestyle. Is that right?”

*Careful.*

I hesitate, slow my words before I misspeak. “Yes, ma’am. My parents are blessed to be . . . comfortable.” Joy’s preferred response when I’d joke about her insane collection of luxury wristwatches she never wore. “And I was lucky to be raised in such favorable conditions. So I definitely understand.” I glance around the sitting room, and I hope my expression comes across as awe and respect rather than uncontrolled queasiness. “But I admit you and your husband have built something truly spectacular. Never seen anything like Blackbeard. I’ll have to send my mother your decor tips.”

Mrs. Hall smiles demurely. “You flatter me, dear. Now, could you remind me of your experience with children?”

This is where my past can actually shine for once. Joy never had much experience. She applied for this position because she thought being a fill-in au pair for a couple months sounded fun. And her parents seemingly had no intention of taking her to Jamaica on their own; they never found it as enticing of a vacation spot as Aspen or Rome. Make that make sense.

But Joy knew the only person who wanted to visit Jamaica more than her was me.

“Well,” I say, “I’ve worked with children for years, babysitting privately. I also spent a year and a half monitoring kids at the local gym nursery.”

It’s not a sparkling résumé, but it’s something. And it’s the truth: easier to remember.

Mrs. Hall hums. “Our eldest son, Dante, is also dedicated to his mission. Right now, he’s deeply involved in his father’s reelection campaign, acting as our community outreach representative.” She gestures to a framed photo on the table beside her, a spotless picture of a straight-faced young man—the son in question, I guess. She rests her hand on top of the frame, as if patting the crown of Dante’s head. “He’s already preparing to follow in his father’s footsteps by connecting with the people of our parish so we can better serve them. It’s important work.”

“I can only imagine.”

“We want all of our children to use their time and abilities wisely. So it’s interesting,” she goes on, “that your parents would allow you to perform such . . . challenging labor. After all, you seem just as bright as my Dante.”

Damn. Does she think I’m lying about having money? Because I’ve had jobs before?

Time for the power of bullshit.

“That’s kind of you to say,” I reply. “I just . . . adore children. It’s not about the money, obviously, or how difficult the work might be. It’s about shaping and supporting young

minds. That's just so fulfilling and . . . and gratifying. And I really give my all to that. It's so important to me."

Bullshit so strong I can smell it.

Mrs. Hall places her teacup on the side table. "And we look forward to seeing that passion in action, Carina."

Dodged that speed bump. Let's avoid another, okay?

"I know these discussions can feel tedious," she says, "but it's important that I personally speak with everyone who works closely with us. Especially our caretakers."

"Of course, Mrs. Hall. You'd want to protect your children most of all."

"It's hard to know the intentions of others when one is . . . of a certain status. I couldn't tell you how many nannies we've had to report and let go because Dante discovered their misbehavior, their stealing, their lying." Mrs. Hall chuckles to herself. "What am I saying? You know how these things go."

Sure I do.

Wish I knew what happened to the last nanny, though. Did she get cut for the stealing or for the lying? Doesn't matter. I keep my hands on my lap, where Mrs. Hall can see them.

Mrs. Hall rises from her seat, a queen vacating her throne. "Follow me, please. I'll show you more of Blackbead House and bring you to your quarters. Oh, and leave your cup; Simone will handle it."

She leads me back through the long corridors of the mansion. In one glimpse, a gorgeous glass coffee table that's probably worth more than everything I own, closed doors to offices belonging to people more important than me. In another, a shady corner filled with paint cans, a balled-up tarp, and stacks of old newspapers featuring grayscale photos of Mr. Hall orating.

Blackbead is beautiful and midtransformation. Glamorous yet faded. Joy would hate it. Not enough bling, even with the chandelier. Not enough noise.

Mrs. Hall calls my name. "As discussed, you have free rein of most of Blackbead—the jerk pit in the backyard, for example, or the gym and theater in the basement." I'm sorry, a *movie theater*? "However, some areas are reserved for family use only. That includes the offices on this floor, the reading room, as well as my husband's and my bedroom. I also apologize for the mess. Renovations have been slow going." Explains the paint and tarp. "Blackbead will be lovely again once everything is brand new, but this has taken some time."

Unfortunately, we were unable to complete the basement au pair suite before your arrival. We've sectioned off our best guest suite upstairs for you in the meantime."

Upstairs? So I don't have to hole up in the basement? I'd gush but I don't think Joy would gush about something like this. Upgrades in life were always expected. "You're too kind, Mrs. Hall, thank you."

"We give the best we can and we expect the best in return," she replies.