

The Uninvited Guest (excerpt)

The Tribe had left the ends of the table empty. Mae sat the farthest away from Cyd and everybody shifted down a seat so that Henry could sit at her side. Once they settled back into cocktail party banter, the apple martinis helped keep the words and laughter flowing. Cyd felt her control slipping just a little and she didn't like it. Every element of the evening had been carefully thought out, from the classic jazz serenading them from her Bose to the signature cocktail, from the wattage of the lighting to the topics for dinner conversation. She didn't like Mae showing up without notice (or permission). She didn't like her bringing this exotic black man who looked like he'd been carved out of ebony wood. What was she trying to prove? She always had to make everything about her, so Cydney thought.

"Everybody, Henry and I are engaged," Mae announced, standing up at the table. Only Henry saw the exaggerated roll of Cydney's eyes and the quick glance Bobby Phillips darted in her direction. A chorus of congrats was expressed by the men and women alike with seemingly genuine sentiment. Binky was closest to Mae and grabbed her left hand, assuming there would be an engagement ring.

"Hmmm. This is different," she offered while examining the unconventional circle of metal wrapped around a rough cloudy stone.

"I know. No conflict diamonds for me, Honey."

The curious clique closed in, hovering over Mae's hand. And Cydney peered over from her end of the table.

“What do we have here?” Bobby insisted on speaking to Mae in a poor English accent. It was an inside joke from their youth when he teased her about her patriarch, the butler. He came off as a corny impersonation of Slick Rick. Back then, he had a group of sycophants that made him feel witty and hilarious. To her, he was still just corny.

“What we have here, Bobby, is socially-responsible jewelry. The platinum is recycled, the stone is white topaz.” She slipped off the ring to show a fingerprint embossed inside the band. “This fingerprint is Henry’s.”

Cydney’s gasp was audible.

“Isn’t that a beautiful gesture, Cyd?” Binky’s question pulled her back into the spotlight that had smoothly shifted onto Mae.

“Yeah, that’s just like Mae to balk at tradition. I’m actually surprised she wants to get married at all. I thought it would be too conventional for her.”

A few nervous laughs sprung up, at Cyd’s unusual show of spunk.

Bobby added to the commentary. “It is surprising for Mae to be subjugated by any man or any mere mortal.”

Henry’s soft, raspy voice cut in before Mae could push back. “I haven’t subjugated her. She’s a strong woman with a strong voice and she’s not afraid to use it. She chose me. She conquered me.”

My God, I’m in hell right now, Cydney thought, as Mae leaned into Henry’s side and slipped her arm around his waist.

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Cyd stood in the archway separating the two rooms, witnessing the exchange in disbelief. She couldn't believe her unrefined country cousin had opinions that mattered to her set. She wondered if Mae knew the privilege it was to be among the descendants of the "Firsts". Every person seated at that table was directly related to the first Black in almost every professional field in Baltimore. They represented the lineages of the first Black judge, the first Black surgeon at Johns Hopkins, the first Black congressman, the first Black mayor, the first Black architect. Everyone, except her and Mae. Cyd was the great-granddaughter of the maid and butler to the most prominent Jewish family in Baltimore, the Weinsteins. Mae was her first cousin.

"Love what you've done with the house, Cyd." Binky commented loudly or so it seemed in the lull in conversation. She'd grown-up down the block but left for Howard University and never looked back at the neighborhood. "Your grandparents are probably rolling in their graves though." She laughed.

The renovations done on her grandparents' old house opened the space and eliminated the small rooms characteristic of brownstones in Harlem Park. It had been a big expense, a risky one but it was looking more and more worth it, as Bobby pledged his loyalty and commitment to the neighborhood. Her investment had just increased in value.

She barely smiled at Binky's quip. Usually she enjoyed Binky's sense of humor but she continued to monitor her uninvited guest, as she moved onto another topic. Mae's drink consumption had increased, and her laughter now came more easily. Cyd was annoyed that she

was really enjoying herself and The Tribe seemed to enjoy her. This was supposed to be her night, not Mae's; her spotlight, not Mae's.

“Face lookin’ kinda tight over there, Cydney,” Bobby teased, poking fun because he knew of the tension between the cousins. She hated that as much as she loved him. She hated that he had so much control over her emotions. It had been that way, since she was fourteen, strutting down Calhoun Street in cut-off jean shorts and a tank top that were both too tight, trying to capture his attention.

“Check him, Cyd,” Mae returned while ignoring Bobby's glare. It was her solution to everything. “Don't be afraid to speak your mind. Bobby's only a person, no different from you or me. Truth is, he's not even good enough for you.”

Though she was two years younger than Cydney, she had always been protective of her. The collective group turned nervous faces toward Mae, as her personal address to her cousin basically dismissed them, this group of privileged Blacks who stood on the shoulders of the Firsts. Mae had always been this way.

“He's always dangling that little pedigree but it ain't worth the ego it's hanging on.”

“Not tonight Mae,” Cydney almost begged. “Let's not have a debate about the Talented Tenth vs. the Atlanta Compromise, ok? This was supposed to be a nice evening.”

“Until I messed it up, right Cyd?” Mae returned.

Bobby had forgotten about that moment, mere minutes ago, when they thought the same thing and expressed it the same way. He said, “You think you're so much smarter than everybody else in the room Mae, but you're dumb as hell. That's why you stay down there in the country on

your grandma's farm, eating vegetables and reading radical books about being Black.

Newsflash: You are already Black! Why do you have to read about it?"

"Looka here, Bobby. In your mind, you are some high-born, golden Black man, when in fact, you are not. Newsflash: You are a Black man just like the rest of them you look down on. You're in danger of being racially-profiled just like the rest of 'em, just like the cases that land on your desk."

Henry placed his hand over Mae's and she quieted down. He stood behind her chair and started kneading her shoulders. He bent and whispered something in her ear and she closed her eyes, smiling slow and lazy, content like a woman with a full belly.

"Alright, Sweetheart," she nearly purred her words to her fiancé.

"We're going to make you good people real happy in a few minutes. This little excitement is a last hoorah for me. Cyd, I'm sorry my presence still makes you so uncomfortable. I really don't mean you no harm."