

Candice
Brathwaite

CUTS
BOTH
WAYS

EXTRACT

Orion

CHAPTER TEN

It felt as if we were heading into a dungeon. If it hadn't been for Thomas's familiar laughter, which I could hear floating up to us, I would have turned and made a run for it because I had seen enough true crime to know that going down into the basement is where it all goes wrong. And I don't play that. That's why black people run first in horror films.

Soon we were nearing the bottom of the steep staircase. I quickly tried to smooth my hair with my palm and hoped to God that by now the sweat patches on my dress had faded. My mouth was dry. My hands shaky. I was panicking. What if I said something silly?

Relax! I told myself. *Breathe.*

I barely had a moment to peep at the surroundings because Thomas was already at the bottom of the stairs, looking up as if he had sensed us.

'Thank you, Samuel,' Thomas said, as if he was collecting a pizza he'd ordered.

'It's never a bother, young man.' He turned to me. 'Cynthia, it's been a pleasure.' And with that, Samuel scurried away.

I took a moment to look around the room. There was a pool table, air hockey and foosball, two enormous sofas and a huge TV mounted on the wall. This was no horror movie basement.

Cabinets and bookshelves lined the entire room, painted in a rich navy that made me feel like I was inside a cocoon. Their brass knobs and handles gave the room a luxurious feel. Expensive-looking patterned rugs were scattered around, partially covering the pale wood floors. On paper it shouldn't have all worked, but somehow the rugs tied the entire space together. The few bits of free wall space were decorated with more art, though these pieces were less abstract and more fun than the ones upstairs. There were a bunch of other kids in the room but only one face I recognised – Molly's. She gave a half-hearted smile when my eyes met hers. I didn't bother to return it. I might have been in need of new friends, but I wasn't *that* desperate. My heart sank as I realised there was no sign of Isaac.

'I'm so thrilled you could make it,' Thomas said, drawing my attention back to him. Isaac hadn't been joking when he'd told me Thomas would be wearing a suit. Well, a shirt and trousers. And a bow tie. If I hadn't known he was my age, I would have guessed he was in his twenties.

'Hiya,' I said, more shyly than I intended.

'Wow, your hair. It's so straight. So nice,' he said.

I kept an eye on his hands to make sure he wasn't going to try and touch it. If he had, my attempt to make a good impression would have gone out the window, right after his arm, because I would have karate-chopped it off.

'Thanks,' I said, once I was sure my hair was safe. I thought I heard Molly snigger. I hated that girl. I could feel her eyes on me.

'You don't look so bad yourself,' I giggled, playfully flicking

his bow tie. The way his eyes came alive made me regret it instantly. I'd hoped to piss Molly off, but I didn't want him getting the wrong idea.

'Really?' he asked, his voice low. I could tell his doubt was genuine and it made me soften towards him. For all his supposed confidence, it seemed like he had insecurities too. 'Dad always says "dress how you want to be addressed" but I'd much rather be more relaxed like Isaac is,' he admitted, roughly pulling at his bow tie.

My heart gave a little jump at the mention of Isaac's name, but I didn't want to seem too eager. 'Yeah, I can't imagine him in that,' I lied, because that's exactly what I was doing. I hid my smile at the thought of Isaac in a bow tie. 'Where is Isaac anyway?' I asked with forced casualness, hoping that I wasn't giving anything away.

'Knowing him, he'll be in his room. Parties aren't really his thing.'

'Not surprising,' said a short white boy who'd been listening to our conversation. I thought his name was Henry. 'The way his childhood was? My mum says foster kids will always be a bit strange. You can't have a bad start like that and expect them to grow up normal.'

I saw Thomas flush red. 'I think what Henry is trying to say is that Isaac and I had very different childhoods. No doubt it's created different strengths and weaknesses for us both,' he said weakly.

I was too stunned to speak, so instead I just nodded.

'Would you like a drink?' Thomas asked, clearly trying to change the subject. 'I can have someone bring something down

from the service kitchen,' he offered, reaching towards an intercom system, complete with a video feed of the hallway upstairs. That explained why he'd been at the bottom of the stairs. He must have seen us coming.

'Gosh, yes, please. A drink would be great.' Being offered a drink reminded me of how thirsty I actually was. 'Also, what's a service kitchen?'

I'd asked quietly, but obviously not quietly enough, as Molly started giggling and I could immediately tell she was laughing at me. I instantly regretted not waiting to google it later on my phone. Thomas glanced over his shoulder to see the source of the laughter and Molly quickly pretended to be chatting to one of her friends. He turned back to me.

'It's just the kitchen we use for gatherings and parties,' he said kindly. 'The kitchen Samuel would have escorted you through is the family kitchen. That's the one we use day to day.'

'OK, got it. We only have the one kitchen,' I said loudly, trying to show that I wasn't bothered.

'Man, that sucks,' Henry piped up again. 'Sharing a kitchen with the staff must be hardcore.'

I couldn't tell if he was joking or not, but I didn't bother to explain the obvious. All of a sudden, I just wanted a moment to myself.

'The toilet, where is it?' I asked.

'Oh, let me show—' Thomas began.

'I don't need a guide, just directions,' I said, the words sharper than I'd meant them to be. If he was caught off guard by my change in attitude, he didn't show it.

‘Up the stairs, down the corridor, first left, then third door on the right.’

I was already halfway up the stairs by the time he finished speaking. ‘Thanks,’ I called over my shoulder, before jogging the rest of the way up and quickly closing the door to the games room behind me. I took a few moments to catch my breath at the top of the stairs. Perhaps Auntie Jackie was right, I should get into sports. ‘Maybe shotput,’ I muttered to myself. I’m sure I could become an Olympic champion. All I had to do was imagine that the ball was Molly’s head. I was so flustered, I was struggling to remember the directions that Thomas had given me. Down the corridor, third door on the left?

I could hear the sounds of a familiar R&B track wafting from the garden. It seemed as if the grown-up party was in full swing. The people who had been gathered in the plush white living room had taken their drinks outside and the room was empty. I felt less concerned about being caught staring now. I slowed right down and took in the majesty of the space.

The carpet looked deeper and fluffier than any cloud. The furniture didn’t match but it looked coordinated in a way that made me guess someone had been paid a lot of money to carefully choose it all. And there was a roaring fireplace that was framed by a beautiful blue-veined marble. The artwork on the walls was more modern than I’d expect, especially given that Mr Goddard had looked way older than my parents. But Dad never missed an opportunity to tell me that art was a very wise investment, so I had no doubt that these were probably expensive, even if they looked like creations from a four-year-old. I so badly wanted to pull out my phone and send a quick

snap to Jadell, but then I remembered the video feed on the intercom in the games room and thought better of it. I picked up the pace and counted three doors down on the left and hurried through.

I was expecting to meet a toilet. Instead, the first thing I saw was Isaac.

‘Cyn!’ he gasped, turning towards me and knocking some papers off the desk in front of him in the process. He quickly got to his knees to pick them up. For some reason, when he shortened my name, I didn’t mind.

‘Ah, man, I’m sorry. I was looking for the toilet,’ I half lied. I *was* looking for the toilet. But I wasn’t sorry I’d found him instead. I allowed my eyes to drink in the room. We were in a library. The decor in this room was more in alignment with what I expected from an old family home. Isaac had been sitting at a large mahogany desk not dissimilar to the one in Dad’s office. Every wall was covered with books and the one closest to me even had a ladder attached to it so that you could reach the highest shelf.

‘What is it with you and toilets?’ he joked, standing up and pushing the papers he’d collected from the floor into a leather binder on the desk.

‘Never potty-trained,’ I shot back. I couldn’t kid myself, he looked extra cute in dark jeans and a soft green shirt. Unlike his brother, Isaac actually looked younger out of his uniform. It was as if Thornton’s aged him somewhat. The deep-amber light pouring from the ceiling made him look like he was in a painting. ‘I thought you’d be in the games room. With Molly,’ I said. That part wasn’t a joke.

‘Nah, man, these things aren’t really my style,’ he admitted, waving a hand in the air as if to insinuate that the surroundings annoyed him. ‘And speaking of style, you changed your hair.’ He smiled, stepping away from the desk and walking towards me.

I instinctively tucked some behind my ear. ‘What do you think?’ I asked quietly.

‘You’re nice – I mean, *it’s* nice. Really different . . .’ He trailed off and leaned against the edge of the desk.

‘But?’ I asked, perhaps a little too harshly, sensing he had more to add.

He paused and let my question hang in the air like a bad perfume.

‘But I can’t lie, I preferred your afro. It reminded me of home.’ He shrugged.

‘Home?’ I asked.

‘Yeah, my life before all of this.’ He gestured vaguely to the room around us. ‘Before you arrived at Thornton’s, I’d almost forgotten what it’s like to be around people who look like us. Talk and act like us. You’re like . . . like a living memory.’

Damn, I thought. This boy is poetic.

‘A living memory,’ I repeated, immediately thinking of Big Mike.

He nodded. ‘Being here . . . there’s a lot I’ve forgotten. And some things I wish I could,’ he added.

‘I feel you on that,’ I said, pushing away the memory of Mike’s final voicemail.

Very briefly, I saw a frown flash across his face but by the time I blinked it had gone. I felt my phone buzzing in my

pocket. It must be Jadell. She was long overdue an update. But if there was ever a moment in which I felt that I could get Isaac to say more, it was now. I would have to wait. I pulled the phone out, switched the vibrate mode off and walked over to him, putting my phone face down on the desk. I mirrored his stance, leaning on the desk next to him, facing the room. Our arms were inches apart.

‘This party. This *place*.’ I sighed in awe, looking around.

‘Try living in it,’ he responded, turning to face me slightly.

‘I mean, on one hand it must be nice, but on the other it’s so . . .’ I trailed off, not wanting to risk causing offence. ‘Can you believe Molly laughed at me for not knowing what a service kitchen is?’ I asked, kissing my teeth.

‘Now, actually that, I can believe,’ he said with a laugh. ‘Don’t let Molly stress you, man. She’s just jealous.’

If it had been Jadell, I knew she would have batted her eyelashes and asked if Molly had anything to be jealous about. But I wasn’t bold enough. Instead, I nudged him in the ribs. ‘A service kitchen. Is that you, yeah?’ I giggled.

‘All me, babe, all me,’ he joked back, playfully slapping me on the back. He let his hand sit there for a moment, and when I didn’t say anything, he moved it towards my shoulder. It felt like my legs were turning to jelly and there was a volcano in my tummy. I was starting to sweat again.

‘You know what?’ he whispered.

Suddenly it was like the party had been put on mute because all I could hear was our breathing. I shook my head in response. I didn’t know. But I wanted to. I moved my face a little closer to his. He didn’t pull back. I could see each of

his perfect eyelashes.

‘I like you, Cynthia Adegoke,’ he said, so quietly that if our faces hadn’t been inches away from each other, I wouldn’t have heard him. ‘And not just as a friend,’ he hastily added, not breaking eye contact.

I gripped the desk more tightly, so that even if my ankles wanted to fail me I had back-up.

‘I like you too,’ I whispered back. ‘Not just as a friend,’ I added with a smile, feeling ten times lighter once that truth had left me.

‘But it’s complicated—’ he began.

The rest of his sentence was stopped in its tracks by my lips moving towards his. I didn’t want to hear that word. Ever since Mike’s murder, ‘complicated’ seemed to be the buzzword. Life is complicated. The case is complicated. Grief is complicated. It wasn’t the way I expected my first kiss to happen, but I wasn’t mad at it. It beat playing tongue wars in the bushes at the rec any day.

To begin with, he was so still that I panicked. But then there was pressure from his lips, matching the pressure from mine. His mouth was so soft, so much softer than I’d imagined it would be. He took control, leading the kiss in a way that let me know this wasn’t his first time. But that didn’t bother me. I liked that one of us knew what we were doing. The hand that was on my shoulder had now made its way through my hair and on to the back of my neck. I placed my hand on the centre of his chest, wanting to feel more of him, but he immediately backed away, his hands falling back by his sides.

‘Cyn.’ He sighed my name, looking dazed.

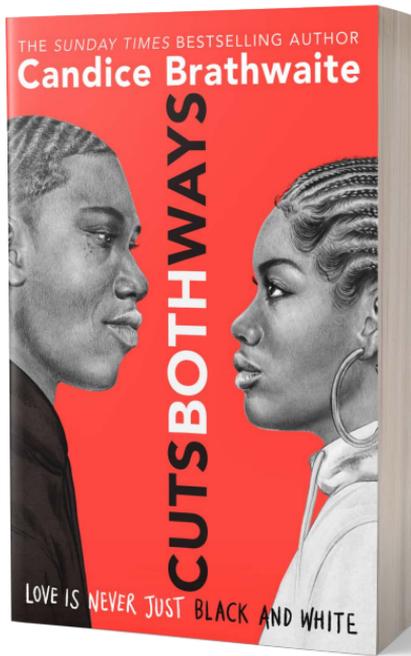
'Isaac,' I smiled, looking down, suddenly self-conscious. My hair fell forwards, covering my face like a screen. He gently reached out and put my hair back behind my ear.

'That's better.' He smiled. 'Although your 'fro would never flop you like that,' he chuckled.

And then, from the other side of the door came a voice, making us both jump.

'ISAAC?! Are you in here?'

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