

Mother of the Groom
by
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Jo had planned to spend the weekend in Dallas with friends, until Sean walked into the house early that Saturday morning completely unexpected. The guest he brought with him set off alarm signals, activating motherly instincts Jo had never experienced.

"Mom, this is Cinna." He tossed his well-used travel bag onto the sofa. Jo had bought it for him when he went away to college four years ago.

"Cinna, my mother, Jo."

Jo struggled for composure, attempting to hide her reaction.

"Hi, Mrs. Gentry." Cinna's words sounded rehearsed.

Jo's cool blue eyes met Sean's, questioningly, hesitating only long enough for him to notice, before settling on the young woman. Jo did not acknowledge the girl's greeting immediately.

Instead, she observed the dark arm entwining Sean's, the pair of leather sandals dangling from Cinna's other hand. Jo tried to overlook the bare feet, one slender foot resting atop the other. Sean's oversized football jersey stopped mid-thigh of his girlfriend's shapely tanned legs and Jo doubted there was much, if anything, underneath. Cinna's shoulders thrust slightly backward, stretching the shirt across her breasts. She definitely wore no bra. Sean nuzzled his chin into her straight raven hair and pulled her pliant body into his. She giggled girlishly. Jo focused on Cinna's dark, doll-like face. "It's nice to meet you, Cinna."

"Me, too."

"Sorry to surprise you this way, Mom, I hope we aren't interfering with anything." Sean gave his mother a brief hug with his free arm.

Dressed in a tailored mauve suit, with a creamy silk blouse underneath, her short blonde hair perfectly styled, her makeup impeccable, Jo obviously had plans. She pulled away, bracelets jingling as she transferred Sean's bag from the sofa to the foot of the stairs. Evidently, there was only the one bag between them.

"It would have been nice if you had called. I was about to leave, as a matter of fact." Jo's body, still slender and youthful at thirty-nine, stood rigid, clenched in the way of a defensive fist. She hated the uncomfortable tension in the room, yet she wanted to communicate her disapproval. She understood why Sean chose to introduce his girlfriend this way, that he relied on his mother's good manners to break the ice between the two. It was Sean's way of avoiding the questions a telephone call would have afforded Jo.

"You look nice, Mom, and I'm sorry I didn't call." Sean's eyes pleaded with her not to be angry. He looked so much like his father, who had died when Sean was three. Jo relented as usual.

"Have long have you two known each other?"

"Cinna's Charlie's cousin." Charlie had roomed with Sean the first two years at Tennessee State and was Cherokee, full blood. "We met last summer."

Jo shifted her weight from one mauve-colored pump to the other. "Cinna—that's an unusual name. What's your last name?"

"Michelle." Cinna spoke the name plainly, but with pride. In that same manner, her eyes, black as obsidian, met Jo's. "Cinnamon Michelle."

Over dinner that night, Sean solemnly announced their marriage intentions, asking for his mother's blessing. Stunned, Jo sat in stupefied silence. Cinna reached for her hand, shyly asking for Jo's acceptance, softly stating her love for Sean, but Jo pulled away.

Hurt that Sean had made this decision without so much as a phone call, Jo felt betrayed and confused. Refusing to speak, she left them sitting alone at the dinner table. The next morning they were gone.

Two months later, seventy-five guests filled the family room, congregating in relaxed clumps here and there. Bits and pieces of conversation drifted to Jo as she watched from the small alcove off to the side. She skimmed the faces, most of them familiar, some not, but in each of them, she saw only happy anticipation.

Turning, she noticed the lone figure of Jesse Michelle at the reception table, already helping himself to the champagne punch. She grimaced inwardly, scanning the room for any reaction from the other guests, humiliated by the man's lack of style or manners. *There you have it folks—the father of the bride!* Nobody seemed to notice.

Jesse's long hair, black as Cinna's and gathered into one loose braid, fell halfway down his back. His face, the color of lightly smoked glass, bore distinctive Cherokee features. He raised the drink to his thin lips, flashing a massive turquoise ring—and a matching sterling bracelet the size of a large belt buckle.

A short, almost squat man, he turned his attention to Jo's side of the room. She continued to stare. His purplish black western shirt, badly in need of pressing, stretched across his paunch, testing the pearl snap buttons. And that vest! Jo could not believe the vest. A combination of color and primitive design, it was a patchwork of Native American stitched art. The rising sun, a brilliant ochre ball shooting out rays of orange and gold arrows, decorated one side. On the other, near his heart, an eagle, heavily detailed in white and all the shades of brown, spread majestic wings. Jo could only imagine the landscape on the back of the garment.

Soon, the man would be on display, escorting the bride down the staircase to Sean. Jo knew that when Cinna was six years old, her mother abandoned her husband and child, severing all ties. Jesse raised his daughter alone. Ashamed of herself, Jo, nevertheless, found comfort in the absence on this day of other Michele relatives.

Coaxing her eyes away from the tooled leather belt with its silver and turquoise buckle the size of a salad plate, she couldn't decide whether the creaseless gabardine pants were black or purple, but they were tucked inside the tops of garish black and white cowboy boots.

Magnetized by the absurdity of the man, she raised her eyes to his face just as his black eyes pierced hers. With the slightest toss of his head, he smiled, turning his leathered face almost handsome. He raised his glass in a salute.

What does he mean by that? Jo turned away.

Through the windows, which normally offered an inviting view of the patio and pool area, Jo saw only Jesse's old green station wagon blocking the driveway. Enormous red letters on a yellow magnetic sign attached to the driver's door hawked his wares:

**Authentic Cherokee Jewelry
Hand woven Baskets
Peace Pipes and Tomahawks**

Oh my God, Sean, what have you gotten us into? Any remaining composure deserted her, and the tears came.

Over the weeks following her introduction to Cinna, a barrier had risen between mother and son. Sean's life had acquired a new dimension, a private place off limits to Jo. Now, she focused her eyes upon her son.

Silently, in her despair, she sought assurance from him, confirmation of his confidence in this life-altering decision. She stared at him, willing him from across the room to notice her. To abandon his rigid stance, his riveted anticipation, for just a minute. To turn away from the stairway his bride was about to descend. To look at his mother.

She needed to know that the special bond they had always shared would endure, could co-exist with that of his wife. *Wife!* Oddly, that revelation descended on Jo like a brilliantly concealed surprise, out of the blue. *Sean's wife!* The realization staggered her.

She noticed the music softening, and conversation subsiding. Sean seemed glazed in amber, his face chiseled in gold, as the reddish glow of the setting sun poured through the windows. His blonde hair glistened. Broad shouldered and strikingly handsome, he stood resolute. As she observed the child she had raised, her little boy, now a mature man in his wedding tuxedo, he turned. She knew he was seeking her face. Their eyes met, and with his father's endearing one-sided grin, he winked at her. The momentous message roared through her heartstrings, setting everything right again.

Then, the powerful strains of the wedding march commanded everyone's attention. Jo watched Sean relax, hands at his sides, his face transfixed on his bride as she moved toward him. Jo saw Cinna for the first time through Sean's eyes. She was exquisite, her face radiant in her adoration of him. Scarcely breathing, Jo felt the love arcing between the pair—the air between them palpitating with the essence of it.

Instantly, happiness washed over Jo. Shifting her gaze to Jesse Michelle, feeling his eyes upon her, she returned his smile, and brushed away her tears.