

THE CUTTING ROOM

(excerpt)

‘Okay, Sleepyhead, we’re here.’

Gabby opened her eyes. The passenger door was open and Reid was leaning in. There were no bright lights, no skyscrapers, no double-parked cars or beeping taxis. They were in front of a two-story house on a quiet, deserted street. Gabby wasn’t sure where she was, but it definitely wasn’t any of the boroughs of New York. At the end of the block she saw a red light, only there were no cars stopped at it. In fact, there were no cars anywhere. Though the neighborhood didn’t look completely residential, the couple of restaurants she did see were closed for the night. *What time was it?* She tried to check her watch, but couldn’t make out the dial; it was too dark and she was too drunk. She fumbled to find her heels on the floorboard, and with them in hand, stepped on to the sidewalk. The world was spinning again. It would be so embarrassing if she fell on her ass. *Where was she?* Then her stockinged feet stepped in an ice-cold, freaking puddle. Gabby looked down. The sidewalk glistened. ‘Did it rain?’ she asked.

‘Did it rain?’ he answered with a laugh. ‘It poured. Cats and dogs. You slept through the whole thing. Even the traffic jam. You might want to put your shoes on – the walk can flood sometimes.’

‘I definitely should not have had that lass’ martini,’ she said as she slipped on her pumps, holding on to his arm for support.

‘Don’t worry; I’ll warm you up when we get inside.’

‘Sounds fun ...’

His arm around her waist, Reid led her along the side of the old Victorian with the cute front porch. A broken brick path twisted through a dead winter garden toward a cement staircase that led down below the house, like a crypt. But for a light coming from the basement on the opposite side of the yard, the old house was completely dark.

‘Is this yours?’ Gabby asked.

‘Nah. I rent the apartment in the back.’

‘Downstairs?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘Iss a pretty house.’

‘Yeah, well, I hope you don’t spook easy. It’s actually a funeral home.’

Gabby stopped walking. ‘Wha?’

‘Not where I live, obviously. The main house upstairs is the business, you know, where people have wakes and stuff. I guess they do other funeral parlor things on the other side of the basement, but I’ve never heard or seen anything. Promise.’

‘You mean there are dead people in there?’

‘I don’t know about right now. Listen, it took me a while to get used to it, but you do. My friends think it’s kind of funny, actually. And I get a great rate on the rent. Come on,’ he said, pulling her along by the hand, ‘I’ll make sure the ghouls don’t get you.’

‘A funeral home ... Damn, tha’s fucked up.’ But she found herself following him anyway as he led her to the staircase. ‘Where the hell are we?’

‘Paradise,’ he returned with a smile.

At the top of the staircase she hesitated. ‘A funeral home ... I dunno, Reid ...’ Every instinct in her body told her not to go down.

He rubbed her hand and moved to kiss her on the lips. 'I'll take care of you. Promise,' he whispered, his mouth moving over her ear. 'You trust me, right? If I was a real bad guy I never would have told you about the funeral parlor. Only a stand-up guy would be honest about something like that when he's taking a girl home and trying to seduce her.'

'Or a fool,' Gabby replied with a laugh.

'Or a fool,' he conceded with a shrug. He kissed her then, a long and wet and lingering kiss. His warm tongue probed the inside of her mouth. And his hands ran over her ass.

That was enough for Gabby.

Her hand in his, he led her down the steps and into the pure darkness.

'Is there a light? Jesus, I ... I can't see a thing, Reid. These stupid heels ... I'm gonna break my damn neck ...' she whispered with a nervous giggle. She wondered why she was whispering.

'The light's broken. I keep meaning to fix it, but I always forget. Hold my hand and the railing; the stairs are real steep, Gabby. There we go. We're almost there.'

When they'd reached the bottom she heard the jingle of a key as she looked around. The moon was hidden behind thick clouds and there was no light. She wondered how he could see the lock, because she couldn't see a thing. It made her more than a little uneasy, enclosed in the darkness, encased in cement, a flight of stairs away from the rest of the world, right below a funeral home. Even putting the funeral parlor thing aside, she had never been a fan of basements. In the eighteen years she'd lived at home with her parents, she could count the number of times she'd ventured down into the root cellar. *Bad things live down there*, her sister would warn with a smug smile whenever their mom sent Gabby down to retrieve some jar of homemade pickles or canned fruit. *Bad things that don't like the living ...*

'Careful,' he said as he led her inside. 'I'll get the lights.'

After a second or two he flicked on a light and she was relieved to see they were standing in a bright, white galley kitchen, which led into what appeared to be a small studio apartment. There were no metal gurneys with bodies on them, waiting their turn to be taken upstairs. No caskets pushed up against the walls. A loveseat, coffee table and television defined a living room. A breakfast table with two chairs made for a dining area. And off in the corner, partially blocked from view by floor-to-ceiling black drapes was the bedroom. One of the drapes was pulled back a few inches and Gabby spotted a queen-sized bed.

He was behind her again. He moved quick, like a vampire. It was a little unsettling, especially given where they were. She shook the cobwebs from her head. Of course, that was the alcohol thinking.

‘Another drink?’ he asked, sliding her coat off her shoulders and tossing it on the couch in the living room. Her suit jacket followed.

‘Where are we? Long Island? Jersey?’ Despite the drunken stupor, a slight panic was beginning to set in. She ran a hand through her hair. ‘I thought you lived close to Jezzies. How am I gonna get home?’

‘Don’t worry about that; I’ll take you in the morning, or whenever you want to go. You shouldn’t be driving, anyway. Have another drink and relax.’ He put his hands on her shoulders and caressed them. His soft lips traced the back of her neck, sending shivers down her spine. ‘You smell so good,’ he murmured.

‘Damn ... You feel good,’ she whispered. Pushed up against her, she felt him now, his hard penis pressing into her buttocks. His hands moved off her shoulders and down her arms, working their way over her hips. ‘I really shouldn’t have another; I’ve had a lot to drink.’

‘It’ll help you relax.’

She shrugged. ‘Okay. Although I don’t usually drink this much, you know.’ Even while she said it, she couldn’t help but think her excuse for being three sheets to the wind in a strange guy’s house, a couple steps from his bed, was lame. ‘I want you to know,’ she started as he went to the kitchen. ‘Not that you’ll believe me, but ... well, I don’t go home with guys I jus’ met. In fact, well, besize this one guy in college who was not a stranger – I actually knew him from my Calc class – I, I don’t do this. I don’t.’ She was slurring, wasn’t she? She took a deep breath. ‘I’m not a ho’, is all I’m sayin’.’

Perhaps it was her imagination, but she thought the room had a funny odor. It smelled like one of the Glade plug-in air fresheners that she used in her apartment to cover up the smell of mildew that was growing underneath her kitchen sink from a dishwasher leak that had gone undetected for too long. But then there was an undertone of something else. Something else the air freshener was covering up. It had the faint hint of a ... medicinal smell? Like a hospital or nursing home. Or funeral parlor, maybe? Whatever the hell that smelled like ... She pushed the thought out of her head. The apartment was, for a guy’s place, really neat. And with the dramatic black curtains surrounding the bedroom, kind of sexy. *God, what was she doing here?*

He came back over and handed her a vodka and OJ, watching while she sipped it. ‘Well, I’m glad you made an exception. Let me be honest here, too – I’m not a player. I rarely take home girls, Gabby. And when I do, well, they’re special. Different. Unique. Like you. I think you’re special. You’re not like those girls in the bar. Those girls – they don’t know what they want, they don’t know who they are. But you do, Gabriella. I think you know what you want, and you’re not afraid to go for it. I may be crazy, but I felt this connection between us, even from across the bar.’ He ran his hand through her hair, tracing her chin and then down her throat to where her blouse was buttoned. His eyes moved over her. ‘And I can’t wait to see more of you.’

Maybe it was all just words, but they were certainly the ones she wanted to hear. Reid grasped the back of her neck, pulling her body to his. She could feel his heartbeat through his dress shirt. He smelled clean, like soap and a crisp, citrusy cologne. Versace, perhaps? Aqua di Gio? But as she stretched her head up to finally kiss him he leaned away and with a teasing smile, reached behind him and pulled out a long, black silk scarf. He dangled it in front of her.

‘Ooh,’ Gabby said, sucking in a breath. ‘Whass that for?’

‘Let’s find out,’ he whispered, taking her by the hand and leading her past the open curtain and into the bedroom area. Gabby’s heart began to race. Bondage with a stranger – Daisy would be so impressed. Gabby took a final long sip of her drink before he gently took it from her lips and placed it on the side table. Then, with one hand underneath her chin, he lifted her mouth to his and kissed her. His tongue was thick and warm and probing, reaching all the way to the back of her throat. Gabby could feel herself getting wet for him. It had been so long since she’d been with a man. So many thoughts tumbled through the thick fog in her brain. She wondered if he was a good lover, or if she would know what a good lover was, the state she was in. She wondered if he would think *she* was a good lover. What does someone who is into bondage expect from a girl? What other tricks might he have hiding in his closet or behind those sleek black curtains? If the scarf was any indicator, Gabby figured he would probably take his time with her. And that got her even more excited. She closed her eyes and tried to drive out the jitters and second thoughts. If she was going to be a cheap ho’ and have a one-night stand, she could only hope it would involve tantric sex with a guy who could go for hours, then wake her up and ask for more.

Reid must have read her mind. As he kissed her, he raised both of her arms above her head. She felt him wrap the smooth silk scarf around and around her wrists. It was very erotic. Then he

slipped the ends through something that must have been hanging on the ceiling – a rod or ring or beam, Gabby wasn't quite sure – and he pulled tight, so that she was almost suspended from the ceiling, although her feet were still touching the floor. It hurt a little, but the loss of control over the moment was both frightening and unbelievably sexy. She wanted him more than ever.

'Oh,' she murmured, surprised.

He unbuttoned her blouse and opened it, exposing her lace see-through Victoria's Secrets bra. The lights were still on and all Gabby could think was thank God she had put on nice underwear this morning. He ran his warm palms over the lace. 'Do you like that?' he asked when her nipples got hard.

She sucked in a breath and nodded.

He pulled his own shirt over his head and tossed it on the bed. His chest was hairless and muscular. Not body-builder cut, but defined. Especially his pecs. Then he bent down and starting from her ankles, ran his hands over her legs and up her entire body, pulling her skirt up as he did, so that it rested on her hips, exposing her sheer panties. He slowly pulled down her pantyhose, leaving her panties on. 'I said, "Do you like that?"' he repeated, his voice sharper. 'I want to hear you say it, Gabriella. Tell me you like it. Tell me you want me to touch you.'

She nodded again. She couldn't believe she was doing this, but it felt so good. 'Yes,' she said aloud. 'Yes, I like that, Reid. I like it a lot. I want you to touch me.'

He kissed her again and then he pulled away. In one fast motion, he took the pantyhose and tied it around her mouth, knotting it in the back. Her tongue was trapped and she couldn't speak. Her heartbeat quickened. A feeling of fright pulsed through her body. 'That's all I wanted to hear,' he whispered.

He walked over to the wall of curtains and pulled back the first curtain. Behind it was a video camera set up on a tripod. Flanking the left side of the video camera were three computer monitors sitting on metal carts. He opened the other curtain, revealing another three monitors on the right – six computers in total. The carts looked like the audiovisual carts teachers used to wheel into classrooms in elementary school when they wanted the class to watch an educational movie. Behind the push carts and video camera was another wall of black curtains. The monitor screens were all on. On each monitor Gabby saw a different person.

‘Hello, Gabby,’ said a man on one of the screens, leaning into the camera.

‘Good evening, pretty,’ said another.

And another. ‘Hey there, Gabriella. That’s a real sexy name you have. I like your hair.’

The man on the first monitor laughed. ‘He likes naturals.’

Gabby’s eyes grew wide with fear. She tried to speak but the gag wouldn’t let her. She pulled hard on the scarf above her, but it only tightened on her wrists, twisting her hands around and around in mid-air. She tried to kick out, but there was nothing to use for leverage. She spun uselessly, her feet barely touching the floor.

Reid turned his attention away from the screens and back to her. He’d put on a tight, black mask that covered his face. Besides an opening for his mouth, the only part visible was his eyes. The flecks of gold in them that Gabby had found so intriguing a few hours ago danced excitedly.

Gabby tried to scream but couldn’t. She just twisted helplessly around and around, her suspended body jerking about. She thought of her mom and dad and sister in Bloomfield, sleeping in their beds, dreaming nice dreams. She wondered how they would react when they found out she’d been raped by a strange man she’d willingly gone home with. Her mom would break down and cry and scream and probably blame everything on the evil city of New York till

her Dad told her to stop. Her Dad, though, would secretly blame Gabby for being a slut and hooking up with someone she'd met in a bar. The tears streamed down Gabby's face. Then a cold fear stopped her heart as she looked at the excited faces on the computer monitors watching her. Gabby knew then that as sure as the sun would rise in the morning she would never again see it. And she would never see her family, or have to witness her mother scream out in pain, or feel her dad silently condemn her judgment over the next Thanksgiving dinner. Because at that moment she knew she was going to die. Off in the distance, behind the wall, she heard the whir of what sounded like a motor, but it wasn't a car engine. It was more like a blender. Or a buzz saw. Scenes from every horror movie she'd ever watched flashed through her head.

'Gabiella, baby,' Reid said, as he slowly approached her, flashing his model-perfect smile through the mask's black slit. One arm was outstretched, the other hidden behind his back. 'You're about to become so very famous. You're going to be a star, Gabby. A star. And now I'd like to introduce you to some of your biggest fans ...'