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Opening Extract from...

The Cutting Room

Written by Jilliane Hoffman

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The Cutting Room

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1

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For the usual suspects — Rich, Monster, Amanda, mom, dad, and the writing buddies — who make everything seem possible.

And for Ed Sieban and Uncle Tommy McDermott, forever missed.

PART ONE

1

The pretty girl in the tight 'COED' T-shirt leaned all the way back against the bar, so that her chestnut hair lay strewn out behind her across the white epoxy bar top. Straddled directly over her, his Vans balanced precariously on two bar stools, stood a shirtless guy with the most cut chest Gabriella Vechio had ever seen, a shot glass clenched tightly in his flexed abs. While the crowd cheered him on, he rocked his body over the coed's, pouring the amber liquid into her open mouth. Southern Comfort splashed across her face and over her T-shirt, but the laughing girl definitely didn't care. And neither did the rambunctious crowd.

'Ho, man! Look at this guy work it!' mused the DJ as he amped up the music. 'Open your mouth wider, baby! Let's see how much you can take in!'

Gabby ran a finger along the sugared rim of her lemon-drop martini as she watched the scene play out across the restaurant. The thickening crowd was already three deep at the bar, and the indie-rock music that'd been playing when she and her friends had first sat down for appetizers was now a pulsating throb of Top 40. Beyoncé was singing/screaming so loud, the knives and forks still left on the table danced and tinked together. Even the waitress had changed — whether

it was a different blonde or just a different outfit, this one was decked out in much higher heels and a much shorter skirt than the frazzled girl who'd served up quesadillas and Buffalo wings a couple of hours earlier.

'So how long you think you're gonna stay?' Gabby's friend Hannah asked with a frown as she stood from the table, gathering her purse. She cast a disapproving look in the direction of the circus that was still happening over at the bar.

'What?' Gabby answered, gesturing to her ear. It was getting impossible to hear. Friday-night happy hours at Jezebels always started out sort of mellow, but once food stopped being served alongside the Heinekens and cosmos, the crowd really built up. One of the reasons Gabby usually hated coming to Jezzie's was because after nine the place turned into nothing more than a noisy meat market. And two days shy of her twenty-ninth birthday, Gabby was already old meat. At least in here, where she'd actually heard females over twenty-five called 'cougars' by other girls.

'I said, so how long you gonna stay?' Hannah repeated. 'We don't want to leave you all alone here. Not with this crowd . . .'

Gabby shrugged and raised her half-empty martini at Hannah and her other friend, Daisy, who sat beside her, wide-eyed and still fixed on the ab man and the coed. 'Just till I finish this, I guess. Don't worry about me; I'm parked right across the street.'

'I don't know about you all, but I'm feeling mighty thirsty right now,' Daisy announced as she, too, slowly stood to leave.

'I wish I could stay, but I promised Brandon . . .' Hannah started, hesitantly slinging her laptop bag across her shoulder.

'Don't be silly. I was gonna head home early anyway. I got a ton of shit to do tomorrow,' Gabby lied. 'You go and have fun, Han. Think of me when you do,' she added with a wink.

'Don't you worry. Brandon won't be having any fun tonight. I'm exhausted.'

'Poor Brandon,' Gabby laughed. 'You're not even married yet and he's already not getting any on a Friday night.'

'I'm easing him into July; the boy can't say he wasn't warned,' Hannah returned. She looked uneasily around the restaurant again. 'But I really hate leaving you here all alone, Gab . . .'

Daisy's eyes caught on Gabby's. 'Maybe he'll come back,' she mused with a sly smile as she wrapped a lilac cashmere scarf around her throat.

Hannah smiled as if she'd just understood a dirty joke. Gabby felt the blood rush to her cheeks and she buried her face in her drink. All three of them knew who Daisy was talking about — the quirkily handsome recent MIT grad with the ginger hair who'd plopped down uninvited at the very same table last Friday night as happy hour was coming to a close. He'd charmed all three of them before the rest of his drunk entourage finally found him and pulled him away to hit another establishment down the block. He and Gabby hadn't talked for long, but for some reason she couldn't seem to get the guy out of her head. Jeff, his name was. And while she'd tried to convince herself that Mr Still Seeking Gainful Employment as an Electrical Engineer wasn't the sole reason she'd suggested Jezzie's to the crew for tonight's girls'-night-out, she couldn't deny he was a consideration. But she hadn't expected anyone else to know that. She rolled her eyes. 'Hope not. Please. I'm not waiting on him.'

'Okay . . . then can I?' Daisy replied with a laugh, unwrapping the scarf that went perfectly with her gorgeous trench coat and trendy Alice + Olivia booties. Everything about Daisy always went together perfectly. Her cute name, her size-two wardrobe, her beautiful, butt-length, espresso curls, her tanned Spanish complexion, her seductive chocolate eyes. 'He was freaking hot! A little young, but you can still teach them things at that age, you know.' She sighed. 'And they can go for ever. Three times a night, if you're lucky.'

'You're so bad,' Hannah scolded.

Gabby motioned to a seat next to her. 'Be my guest, chica.' But she didn't mean it. In fact, she secretly hoped Daisy would just go. And for thinking that, of course Gabby felt super-guilty. Hannah, Daisy and she had been instant friends since freshman year in college when fate had thrown them all together in the same cramped dorm at U Buff — the University of Buffalo. And they'd stayed close through ten years of boyfriends, break-ups, bad bosses, family bullshit, illnesses, therapy, cross-country moves, cross-country moves back, and the general drama and angst that accompanied all of the above. But it always seemed to be Daisy who enjoyed most of the boyfriends and break-ups, as well as most of the drama. Daisy's enduring popularity had never bothered her as much as it had this past year, though, when, for Gabby, just landing a stupid date had become about as challenging as picking all six lotto numbers in the same drawing.

Back in college when the three of them were cute and inseparable and the nicknames were being handed out, they were known around campus as 'Charlie's Angels'. Hannah had been branded the Smart One; Gabby was the Funny One, and Daisy, the Pretty One. Even now, almost seven years after the final note of 'Pomp and Circumstance' had ushered the Angels officially into adulthood, the labels had held fast, and being the Funny One was no longer the compliment it used to be. Gabby's hang-up, no doubt; Daisy was still the same great friend she used to be. But the fun, hard-partying *Sex and the City* lifestyle fantasy they'd all joked they were actually living was one day supposed to come to an end — with each of them landing high-powered husbands and popping out a couple of beautiful babies who would play together on the living-room floors of their fabulous homes while their mommies gossiped over lattes in the kitchen. Phase II, as Gabby called it in her head, was supposed to begin before the age of thirty. Or at least be in motion by then, which

meant a serious boyfriend and hopefully a ring on her finger. Of course, life is what happens when you're busy making other plans, as Gabby's mom liked to remind her. The Smart One had broken the mold and surprisingly landed the first fiancé. The Pretty One was still fielding multiple propositions and proposals from multiple suitors and was in no rush or need to settle down anywhere. And the Funny One . . . well, she was 'still looking', as Mrs Vechio told all her friends with a soft sigh when they asked why little Gabriella hadn't yet found herself a man. Thirty was coming at her hard and fast and Mr Wonderful was nowhere in sight. Maybe a relationship with Jeff the Wannabe Engineer or a dirty dance with Mr Unbelievable Abs was totally in her head, but the truth was, no one was gonna want to talk up the Funny Accountant when the Pretty Fashion Magazine Publicist was seated a barstool away flashing a beautiful smile and sporting an amazing body.

'Oh, I would, trust me. If I didn't have to be at work at freaking five in the morning, I would,' Daisy replied. 'But we have to set up the shoot before the sun comes up. Gotta get that "first light" or it's all for nothing, and that means working Saturday.' She looked at her watch and added, 'Eech, I'm going home at ten. That's pathetic. You know, I should just stay up all night. Sleep? Who needs sleep? Remember those days, girls?'

Hannah winced. 'I'm still trying to forget those all-nighters, Daisy. The hangovers were the only thing that stopped me from becoming a raging alcoholic.'

'That and your Born Again mother would've killed you,' added Daisy as she finished her drink.

'True.'

'You gonna stay then?' Gabby asked Daisy anxiously, twisting her pin-straight honey-blonde hair around and around her index finger. The curl collapsed as soon as she pulled her finger away. Being around Daisy lately made her so

self-conscious. It was like the girl never aged, or gained weight or had a bad hair day. At five foot four and 130 pounds, Gabby definitely wasn't fat; she just wasn't Daisy-thin. And her blonde hair and light eyes would normally attract some attention — until you sat next to a Spanish temptress who looked a lot like a young Sophia Loren. Gabriella hated herself for being so competitive, especially since Daisy obviously wasn't. She pushed aside the brewing jealousy and forced a smile. 'Should I get another round then?'

Daisy sighed. 'Nah. This is one of those moments when you have to do the right thing or pay later. I got a hot date tomorrow and I need to look fresh. He runs a hedge fund.' She fanned herself again and rubbed her fingers together. 'Lots of cash. We're talking big money, girls.'

'Which means lots of competition,' Hannah cautioned.

'Precisely. I need at least five hours or I get circles.'

'Circles probably look great on you,' Gabriella offered.

'Circles look good on zombies, Gab, but thanks for the compliment,' Daisy replied.

'All right then, guys,' Gabby said. 'I'll be heading home in a little bit myself.'

'Be good,' Hannah warned with a wag of her finger. 'No weirdos. And no circus freaks,' she said, motioning to the still shirtless Ab Wonder. 'Oh, and in case I don't see you, happy birthday!'

'Yes! Happy birthday!' Daisy said, blowing an air kiss at Gabby as she and Hannah slipped into the crowd. 'Call me Monday. Do anything I would do, including hot circus freaks. And text me if Ginger and his friends show up. Maybe I'll come back!'

Gabriella raised her martini in the direction of her two friends as they disappeared into the sea of writhing bodies. She saw Hannah wave and then the crowd swallowed them whole and they both were gone. The guilt pang disappeared as fast as it had come on, replaced by an exuberant feeling

of freedom. Gabby wasn't a clubber, but here she was out in a club with a couple of drinks in her already to loosen her up and no competition to hold her back. She opened another button on her blouse and sipped her martini, moving to the music as the lights dimmed and the last of the tables in the center of the restaurant were cleared out, forming a makeshift dance floor that was quickly filling with bodies. It was getting crowded. Soon enough the bouncers would stop letting anyone in.

Although it was still early by club standards, hookups were already happening. Guys and girls. Girls and girls. The dirty dancing was definitely a lot sexier than Gabby remembered it being when she used to hit the clubs. And the clothes — or lack thereof — that the girls were wearing . . . damn! She could unbutton her blouse to her belly button and it would still be modest by some standards. Everyone was either here with their BFFs or they were busy making new ones. Gabby suddenly felt as if there was a spotlight shining down on her — the Old Maid All Alone With No One. And everyone looked so freaking young . . .

A herd of short skirts and stilettos pushed by, knocking into Gabby's chair and spilling her drink a little. She blew out a controlled breath. It probably was crazy of her to think he'd come back here tonight. Even crazier to think that, if he did, he'd be looking for her. Here she was, all by herself in a club, still dressed in her lame poly-blend suit from work, sitting by herself at a table for four, surrounded by people who didn't look close to worrying about turning thirty, or having babies, or meeting Mr Right. The exhilarating feeling of freedom was quickly sinking into a panicky depression that she didn't want to feel tonight. Gabby glanced at her watch and threw back the rest of her drink. That was it. She'd lasted a half-hour. It was time to go . . .

As she grabbed her purse and stood to leave, the waitress brought over a fresh lemon-drop martini. 'Compliments of

the gentleman at the bar,' she said, motioning behind her with a toss of her blonde curls.

Gabby looked around for her ginger-haired engineer. *Had her instincts been right?* Her heart started to pound. If so, this would be one helluva story to tell the grandchildren . . .

But there were no tall, lean redheads to be found. She dipped her finger in her drink and swirled it around as her eyes canvassed the crowd.

That's when Gabby spotted the stranger with the dark, wavy hair and piercing eyes who was standing next to the bar across the dance floor, sipping a bottle of Bud and staring at her. He smiled softly and tipped his beer in her direction.

And so, with a coy smile and a quick wave, Gabriella Vechio welcomed over the stranger who would soon change her life for ever.

2

'Thanks for the drink,' Gabby began when he sat down beside her.

'How'd you know it was from me?'

'I . . . well, I just assumed,' she stuttered.

He grinned. 'You're welcome.'

'I'm Gabriella.'

'I'm Reid. Nice to meet you, Gabriella.'

'God, that sounds so formal. Only my mom and my boss call me Gabriella. My friends call me Gabby.'

'Gabby. Okay,' he replied, nodding. 'I like Gabriella, though. That's a beautiful name. So, are you from around here, Gabby?'

'I live in Forest Hills. I just came here after work.' She fidgeted with the collar of her blazer. 'In case you couldn't tell.'

'What do you do?'

'I'm out of high school, for starters,' Gabby answered with a short laugh.

'Yeah. This is a bit of a younger crowd, huh?' Reid said, looking around. 'But they have great wings.'

'Yup. And quesadillas. We — me and my friends — we've been here a couple of times before. They have a good happy hour. That crowd is a little more . . . let's say, mature. You know, with everyone getting off work and all.'

He nodded and looked around. 'Where are they? Your friends?'

'Oh. They're gone,' Gabby replied quickly. 'They left a half-hour or so ago. They had to get up in the morning. I decided to stay and finish my drink. I was gonna head out right before you sent this over.'

'Well I'm glad you stayed. And I have to say, I think I like the crowd in here.' He didn't look around when he said it — his dark chocolate brown eyes never left hers. Mesmerizing, bright flecks of amber and gold lit his pupils.

Gabriella blushed. He was handsome — Reid. Not in an obvious way, like Ab Man. He had a bit of a big chin, but a nice smile that took over his whole face when he flashed it, and that's what she really noticed. His teeth were straight and super white, like a toothpaste model's. No gums in sight. Some girls were attracted to abs or curly hair or eyes or big muscles, but Gabby went for the smile every time. She used to think she'd marry a dentist until she realized a lot of them actually had terrible teeth. What was that proverb? Physician heal thyself? Dentist fix thy overbite. As Gabby studied Reid's rugged, fair face, set against the backdrop of a raucous Spring Break-aged crowd, she thought perhaps his very best feature right now was the fact that he *wasn't* twenty-one. She guessed late twenties, but didn't want to ask, because she didn't want to be asked that very same question and then watch for the disappointment on his face. Demi Moore might've broken ground with Ashton Kutcher, but for most female earthlings who didn't have movie-star looks and a celebrity-sized bank book, it wasn't so easy to bridge even a small age gap with a handsome guy. And definitely not in a place like this. Most men heard 'twenty-eight', swore the woman said 'thirty', and pictured the thought-bubble above her smiling, anxious head that read, 'Looking for marriage, a house and a baby!' That's when they excused themselves to use the bathroom and you never saw them again. Maybe she was being silly and down

on herself, but tonight she didn't want to take any risks with having fun. She just wanted to have it. 'I'm an accountant with Morgan and Tipley,' Gabby replied. 'It's a really small firm in Midtown. Lex and Forty-third. You've never heard of it, trust me. I've been there a couple of years now. I like it.'

'Accounting . . . ooh. Sooo not what I pegged you for and sooo not my strong suit. I'm good with my money — not so sure I'd be good handling other people's. I might get jealous.'

'You don't actually get to touch it, which takes away some of the temptation.' Gabby sipped her drink. 'Interesting. What did you peg me for?'

'Oh, I don't know . . . an astronaut? A rocket scientist? A nuclear physicist?'

'Do I look that smart? It's the suit, I tell ya.'

'Nah. I really thought that you might be a lawyer or a paralegal. Something with the law. Maybe an FBI agent or a cop or maybe a spy. Just a wild guess. You look too fun to be an accountant.'

'Accountants can be a lively bunch. The life of the party. Especially on April sixteenth.'

'Really? Mine's named Sy, he works for H&R Block, and I don't think he's been to a party in a few decades. So tell me, what do you like about it, Gabby? Accounting?'

'Hmmm . . . good question. Let me think. Well, for starters it's not subjective, like a lot of careers are. My friend's a writer and I could never do what she does, because she never knows if it's good. I mean, there's always someone telling her what she wrote sucked, even if a hundred other people tell her she's the bomb. It makes no sense. She ends up banging her head against the wall. Same for my friend who's a publicist. Someone always second-guesses what she did. Claims they could have done it better. And that they would've had a better result: more people at a premiere, a better photo from a better model, whatever. But accounting, you know, is predictable. It always works out, if you do it right. And if you *really* do it right,

you can make people very happy. Numbers don't lie and they don't care what other people think of them.'

'Interesting . . .'

Gabby had never had to explain why she liked accounting to a guy before. She wondered if she'd given the 'right' answer. No matter how you phrased it, accounting never sounded thrilling. 'What do you do, Reid?' she asked.

'I'm a filmmaker.'

Gabby's heartbeat sped up a bit. Filmmaker was up there with surgeon in both the excitement and good-catch departments. 'That's really cool,' she said.

'Well, I'm working at it. It's not an easy profession to crack. Lots of competition. You have to be real original to stand out.'

'What kind of films do you make?'

'Okay, now don't get too excited, because you're not talking up the next James Cameron. I, well . . . I make documentaries.'

'I still think that's exciting.'

He smiled. 'I do, too. I think real life is much more interesting than make-believe, actually. Real people having real reactions, expressing real emotions. It's capturing those moments on film that can be difficult. But . . . well, it doesn't bring in much money, unless your name's Michael Moore.'

'I still think it's exciting. Money isn't everything, you know.'

'Hmmm . . . didn't you say you were an accountant?'

Gabby laughed. 'I've done taxes for a lot of people that make a lot of money, but their lives are still a mess and they're not happy. No, money isn't everything.'

'I agree. There's a lot more to life.'

Gabby gestured to her ear. It was getting really loud.

Reid leaned in closer, placed his hand firmly on her back and whispered in her ear. She felt his warm breath on her neck and it gave her a shiver, as his strong hand massaged her lower spine. 'So tell me more about yourself, Gabriella. I wanna know more about you.'

She smiled coquettishly. To think she had almost walked out and gone home all alone again to her cat and a bad movie on Lifetime. Her luck was definitely changing; she could feel it. And so over two lemon-drop martinis, as he stroked her back and played with the ends of her hair, she told him everything he wanted to know.