

# Epilogue to WRONG BED, RIGHT GUY

“Maybe we should wait.” Elle tried not to fidget as Gabe drove. They’d left the highway fifteen minutes ago, winding deeper into the country. Closer to her parents’ house. She caught herself twisting her dress and forced her hands still. “It’s only been a few months. We could cancel and wait for...Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving would be a great time to meet my parents.” Her mother would be running the kitchen, far too busy to interrogate Elle’s new boyfriend.

Boyfriend. Even two months later, it still felt like she was dreaming. She reached over and laced her fingers through his, just because she could.

Gabe squeezed her hand. “Babe, I’m not scared of your parents.”

“That’s only because you haven’t met them yet.” Oh, her dad was laid back and would probably really like Gabe. Her mom...not so much.

“I have to meet them sometime. Might as well be tonight.”

She took a deep breath, searching for some of the calm he seemed to have no trouble finding. He was right. Her mother had become more and more determined to meet this mystery man of Elle’s, and she wasn’t going to be put off again. Which wouldn’t be so bad if Elle could be sure how she’d react.

Before she had a chance to figure out what she was going to do, Gabe pulled into her parents’ driveway. The wheels crunched over gravel, and she couldn’t help a little smile at the memories of a childhood spent running free out here. She could swear there were whole summers that she’d spent barefoot with Ian. It was one of the few times her dad successfully vetoed her mom—he’d claimed it was an important part of growing up. Those were some of the best summers of her life.

Gabe parked and turned to face her. “It’ll be fine. We’ll have a great dinner, and then I’ll take you home and we’ll christen... What room haven’t we hit yet?”

It said something that Elle had to actually think about it. She blushed. “Um, maybe the laundry room?”

A slow grin spread over his face, making her heart speed up. “Then we’ll go home and play with the spin cycle.”

The image immediately sprang into her mind—Elle sitting on the washing machine, her legs wrapped around his waist, and him thrusting into her as the machine vibrated. “Oh lordy.”

“Just think about that whenever it seems like dinner will never end.”

“You’re evil.” She kissed him, her tongue tracing his. Would she ever get tired of this? She doubted it—the taste of Gabe always sent her entire body into overdrive. Reluctantly, she pulled back. It would be just her luck to have one of her parents come knocking on the steamed-up window. She licked her lips and tried not to sound breathy. “I think I like it.”

“You do like it.” Gabe got out of the car and walked around to open her door. She was pretty sure she’d never get tired of him doing that, either. As they walked up the stairs to the wraparound porch, he took her hand again, almost as if he knew how much she needed the grounding.

It wasn’t that she was afraid of her parents—or ashamed of Gabe. She wasn’t. It was more that she didn’t know what her mother would do or say. Filter was not a word in the woman’s vocabulary. Gabe said he didn’t care what her mom thought of him, but what if her mom went off the deep end like she’d done before? Elle had seen grown men hunch their shoulders as if they were trying to make themselves smaller targets in the face of her pointed comments. The thought of Gabe being the focus of that ire wasn’t a comfortable one.

Elle gave herself a mental shake. No. She’d made her decision. Gabe was the one she wanted. While she wanted her mother’s approval, it wasn’t as vital as she’d once thought. And if her mother thought she could scare off the man of Elle’s dreams, she had another think coming. She wasn’t going to give Gabe up. Not for anyone.

Thankfully, it was her dad who opened the door. He engulfed her in a cookie-scented bear hug. He always seemed to smell like holiday sweets, as if he’d escaped from the North Pole or something. “It’s been too long, Ellie.” After he set her back on her feet, he gave Gabe a long look. “And you’re the boyfriend we keep hearing so much about.”

“Sir.” He shook her father’s hand. “I’m Gabe Schultz.”

“Nice to meet you.” Some judgment passed through her dad’s eyes, but Elle couldn’t be sure which way it had gone. Didn’t matter, she told herself. Gabe was hers, darn it. But then, when he ushered them in, her dad paused long enough to wink at her. Relief made her stomach flutter. He liked Gabe. Though how he knew he liked Gabe after five seconds was a mystery. They’d barely exchanged five words. Shouldn’t he wait until they actually sat down and talked before he gave his approval?

She was overthinking things. She needed to cut that out.

Her dad led them into the formal dining room. Crap. She’d hoped dinner would be set up in the nook, where the family usually ate. Apparently her mom was pulling out all the stops for this one, though. Before Elle could decide if that was a good thing or a bad

thing, the woman herself swept into the room, wearing her June Cleaver outfit. Though June Cleaver had never worn an expression quite so unforgiving.

“Daughter.”

Oh good God, this was going to get ugly.

Swallowing past her suddenly dry throat, she said, “Mom. This is Gabe, my boyfriend.”

“Yes, I do remember you using that word. Odd how you acquire a boyfriend and I don’t see you for two months.”

There went the guilt trip. Elle shot a look at Gabe, but his face gave away nothing. “Ma’am, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“I truly doubt that.” Her fingers barely touched Gabe’s hand before she turned away, effectively dismissing him as unimportant without saying a single word.

Elle stared. Even during her worst days, her mother had never been so outright rude. “Mother, you—”

“Let’s get dinner on the table.” Her mother swept out of the room, somehow managing to make it an insult.

Her dad shrugged. “Sorry, Ellie. She’s been in rare form for days.”

“She’s being rude.” As soon as the words were out, it was everything she could do not to slap a hand over her mouth. She’d never verbally criticized her mom. Never.

“Why don’t we sit?” Gabe’s fingers brushed her arm, centering her. They’d get through this. It didn’t matter if her mom approved—Elle had made her choice—but her mother didn’t have to go out of her way to make everyone uncomfortable.

“So, Gabe, what does running a line of nightclubs entail?” her dad asked as he got settled into his chair. “It sounds like exciting business.”

Gabe smiled. If she hadn’t spent a really embarrassing amount of time staring at his face, she wouldn’t have noticed the tightness around his eyes. “I’d guess it’s a lot like running any other business. Managing expenses, marketing, and trying to keep everything out of the red. I spend the majority of my time in an office, so not all that exciting.”

Considering they’d just taken a trip down to Portland to iron out an issue with the assistant general manager that had ended with a screaming match between him and one of the bartenders, Gabe wasn’t being one hundred percent honest. Then again, she

didn't really want to get into it with her parents either. Elle caught his eye, and raised her brows. "Yes, Gabe. Your work is absolutely tedious."

"Very." The corners of his mouth canted up. "What about you, Mr. Walser? Elle is remarkably closemouthed when it comes to the family's business."

"That's most likely because it bores her to death." Her dad laughed, the sound containing none of the censure her mom's would have. "We own 600-odd acres out here and specialize in organic produce. There's quite the market for it these days."

This was good. Her dad could go on about the pros of organic food for hours if left unchecked. All she and Gabe would have to do is sit here and nod at the right intervals. Dinner would be cake. Elle's stomach had barely unknotted when her mom marched back into the room, carrying a platter with a roast and cooked vegetables. She literally turned up her nose at Gabe. Elle's jaw dropped. Even with Jason, her mom hadn't been so...snooty. This had to stop. Now.

"Mom—"

Gabe laid a hand on her knee and shot her a look, instantly quelling Elle's words. Apparently she was supposed to sit here and let her mom keep insulting him. Under different circumstances, Elle would have been more than happy to keep her head down. But this was Gabe her mom was trying to run off. She couldn't let that happen.

"Dinner looks wonderful, Mrs. Walser." He attempted a smile.

"Yes, well, you shouldn't get used to it. My daughter can't cook."

The tension in his hand was the only outward sign of Gabe's annoyance. To everyone else at the table, he looked pleasantly amused. "That won't be a problem, ma'am. I cook."

Her mom sank into the chair next to her dad. Glaciers were warmer than her smile. "I'm sure you do."

Silence descended over the table. Desperate, Elle groped for a subject. "I've got news. Gabe finally convinced me to show Nathan some of my paintings, and he's going to put up two of them in the gallery."

She chose not to mention that one of the paintings was of Gabe. It was by far her best work, even better than the one she'd gifted him after her tattoo. She rolled her shoulders, thankful that the weather had cooled off enough to justify a sweater. As bad as things were now, they'd be so much worse if her mom caught sight of the tattoo covering her shoulder. "It's a fabulous opportunity. Countless artists have used Nathan's gallery to launch their careers."

“That’s fantastic, honey.” Her dad smiled and speared a huge piece of roast beef.

Her mom, of course, missed nothing. Her blue eyes flicked over first Gabe and then Elle. “These are like the landscapes you gave me for my birthday?”

“Ah...” Elle ignored Gabe’s look. He knew how much she hated landscapes. It was on the tip of her tongue to lie to her mom, but she swallowed it down. If she couldn’t be honest about how she chose to pursue her dream, then what was the point? Elle cleared her throat. “These are different. Male portraits.”

“Male portraits.” Her mom sniffed. “I suppose this new boyfriend is behind the change as well.”

“Mom, he’s sitting right here.” Shock made Elle ignore Gabe squeezing her leg. “You’re being rude.”

“I’m merely making an observation.”

“You’re quite observant, Mrs. Walser.” Despite the tension in the room, Gabe sounded completely calm—amused, even. Someday she was going to have to learn that trick. He started making circles on her thigh, soothing her even though he was obviously angry. “Maybe with all your observations, you’ve noticed that your daughter is brilliant at painting portraits. They’re her passion. Since you obviously care very much for your daughter, I’d think you’d want her to follow her dream.”

Her mom’s eyes flashed. “Cheeky, aren’t you? I seem to remember another of my daughter’s boyfriends who had a mouth on him. And look how that ended.”

Elle started to speak, but Gabe beat her to the punch. “The worthless cheater? I’ve heard.”

“Then you understand my reservations.”

“Mom—”

“Your reservations are based on superficial similarities.” Gabe sat back, taking the comfort of his touch with him. “It so happens that I love your daughter and I fully intend on spending the rest of my life with her.”

All the breath left Elle’s body in a rush, leaving her lightheaded and in danger of passing out. Maybe she should put her head between her legs? She blindly reached out, nearly knocking over her glass of water before her hand closed around it. She took a hurried sip as Gabe continued. “Which is why I fully intend on asking you for permission for her hand in marriage.”

She spit out the water. “What?”

Gabe shrugged, apparently unconcerned that she'd just made a fool of herself with the water. "You're it for me, babe. I'd be an idiot to let you slip through my fingers."

"But...marriage." Her entire world narrowed down to Gabe. She could hear her mom sputtering, but none of the words penetrated. "That's a big step."

He laced his fingers through hers and raised them to kiss her knuckles. "I want forever with you."

Forever. She actually took half a second to picture what her life could be like if they were married. A home. The ability to spend as much time together as they wanted without having to pick which house to go to. Kids. Gabe's kids. Forever. Oh lordy, she wanted it all so badly. Elle smiled, tears pricking her eyes. "I want forever with you, too."

"Over my dead body."

Elle jerked her hand out of Gabe's grasp. "Mother!"

Her mom pushed back her chair and stood. "I'd like to speak to you in the kitchen, daughter. Alone."

It might have been phrased as a request but only an idiot would see it as something other than an order. Her mom wanted to talk? Fine. Elle had some things she needed to say. She stood, hurrying for the kitchen before she could lose her nerve. As it was, she nearly threw caution to the wind and sprinted for the front door—probably would have if Gabe didn't have his keys.

The kitchen was the site of so many childhood lectures on how a proper lady behaves—sex in a storage closet wasn't on that list—and failed cooking lessons. As usual, her mother stood on the other side of the island, her arms crossed over her chest. She looked like the perfect housewife, her faded blond hair pulled into an effortless updo, her makeup without smudges, and her skirt and sweater completely above reproach. Not that anyone would ever have the guts to reproach Elizabeth Walser, but she made darn sure no one had a leg to stand on. And, right now, those pale pink lips were pressed together in anger.

With a sigh, Elle sank onto her customary stool. She wasn't going to be able to get a word in edgewise until her mom had her say. "Yes, Mother?"

"Elle Laurie, what is the meaning of this?"

Even though she'd prepared for it, Elle still winced at the question. "Mom, I love him."

"I thought we'd reached an understanding. Look what happened last time you picked a man for yourself. You spent months depressed and struggling to get out of bed after that

ended. Months. And you only dated him—you weren't fool enough to marry him. I refuse to go through it again."

It was an effort to keep her voice steady. While her mother had a point about Jason, Gabe was another person entirely. "He's different."

"Yes, yes. I'm sure he's a gentleman who would never break your heart, or run around on you, or beat you down as a person. Not at all." Her mom threw up her hands. "I swear, sometimes you don't have the sense God gave a child."

"Enough."

Her mom started to speak, then frowned. "Excuse me, what did you just say?"

"I said... No."

She blinked. "No?"

It was now or never. If she didn't get this out, she'd never be able to live with herself. "Mom, I love you, but you have to stop. You haven't even given him a chance and already you're acting like you have his number." Which was exactly what Elle had done when they first met. The similarity stuck in her throat. Oh God, she'd been turning into her mother. "He's never been anything but respectful to me, and he's never cornered me and tried to stick his hand up my skirt after repeatedly being turned down. Which is exactly what Sam Masterson Jr. did on our first date."

"Elle—"

"Let me finish." When her mom's mouth shut, Elle charged on. "He's kind and sweet, and he's built a business from nothing. He loves me, despite the fact that I treated him like you just did when we met." Best not to get into the exact circumstances of their meeting. "He wants forever with me, Mom. And, you know what? I'm really freaking proud of my paintings and you should be, too. If you can't support me in this—in all of it—then we have nothing more to talk about."

Her mom's eyes went wide. "What's this man done to you that you'd abandon your family?"

"It's not what he's done to me. It's not what anyone's done to me. But I'm not going to have my life ruled by you or anyone else."

"I just want you to be happy," her mom whispered.

"I am happy—really, truly happy. Why can't you just be happy for me?" Pressure built in Elle's chest, until she wanted to scream with it. Instead, her voice came out remarkably subdued. "Do Gabe and I need to leave?"

Her mom seemed to gather herself. She smoothed her clothes and patted at the nonexistent hairs out of place on her head. “No, that won’t be necessary.”

Elle’s mother, backing down? She couldn’t quite believe it. “You’re going to be supportive?”

“You’ve obviously made your decision. If he truly makes you happy, then I’ll have to abide by it, no matter what I think.” Her mom sighed. It wasn’t exactly the most heartening statement, but it was better than nothing. Baby steps. They could do baby steps.

But one thing was nonnegotiable. “You have to apologize to him.”

“Daughter, I hardly think that’s necessary.”

Of course she wouldn’t. Apologizing meant acknowledging she was wrong. But if Elle backed down now, she’d run the risk of her mom trying to steamroll her at every opportunity. This entire conversation would have been for nothing. “You wouldn’t have let me get away with being rude to a guest, and Gabe’s going to be family.”

“You haven’t said yes yet.” At her glare, her mother sighed again. “Fine, I’ll apologize.”

Elle stood. “Let’s get on that, then.” If they waited too long, Gabe might reconsider that whole forever thing and take off. When they walked back into the dining room, though, he was exactly where she’d left him. Elle cleared her throat.

Her mom smoothed down her skirt again. “It’s been brought to my attention that I’ve been unforgivably rude. I’m terribly sorry.” Her tone said otherwise, but this was as good as they were going to get. She’d warm up to Gabe as time went on. Or maybe she wouldn’t. It didn’t really matter, because he was looking at Elle with such pride and love that her chest got tight. She rounded the table and sank into the chair next to him, immediately taking his hand again.

The rest of dinner wasn’t the most comfortable, but at least her mom managed to make it through without any more snide comments. Still, Elle didn’t draw a full breath until she and Gabe were back in his car and speeding through the darkness. “Oh my God, I can’t believe it.” Every bone in her body disappeared and she slumped into the seat, shaking. “I browbeat my mom into apologizing.”

Gabe slowed and pulled off the road. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, just...give me a minute.” She waved her hand, wondering that it wasn’t shaking. “That was absolutely terrible.”

“I was just going to say that I thought it’d gone well.”

“You’re crazy.” But she smiled. “You really want to marry me?”

“Babe, of course I want to marry you. After I got your father’s permission, I was planning on proposing in a few weeks when we went to pick pumpkins up at Greenbluff. It wasn’t supposed to come out like this.” He ran his hand over his face. “I, ah, lost my temper in there.”

She sat up. “I love you.”

“You aren’t disappointed? I can still whip out a decent proposal.”

“You’re the only thing that matters.” Not six months ago, she would have been disappointed that the proposal wasn’t everything she’d always dreamed. Then again, six months ago she hadn’t met Gabe and discovered how perfect non-perfect relationships were. None of it mattered but the fact they were together.

Gabe reached across the seat and opened the glove box. He pulled out a distinctive square box. “Then, Elle Walser, would you do me the honor of being my wife?”

She didn’t even give him a chance to open the box. “Yes, yes, so much yes.” Elle kissed him, trying to put all her love and the crazy spiral of beyond-happy emotions she was experiencing into it. And then his tongue stroked hers, and everything washed away but the sheer joy of knowing this man was hers. Forever.

Headlights cut across the windshield and Gabe pulled back. “If we don’t stop now, someone’s going to end up with an eyeful.” He kissed her again. “And you need to look at the ring.”

Oh, right. The ring. Elle bit her lip as he opened the box. The design was deceptively simple—a princess-cut diamond, nestled in the middle of six smaller stones on a white-gold band—but there was no mistaking the quality. That rock was freaking huge. “That is... Holy crap, Gabe.”

“Do you hate it? We can get something different.”

Tears pricked her eyes and it was suddenly really difficult to swallow. “I don’t hate it.” Elle sniffed a little as Gabe slipped the giant diamond onto her finger. It fit perfectly. “I love it. I love you.”

“I love you too, babe. Let’s get home and try out that spin cycle.”

She laughed, just like he’d obviously wanted her to, and settled back into her seat. It was only once they were moving again that Elle said, “Now all we need to do is break the news to my brother.”