

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

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Edited by Julie Versoi

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Kindle Edition

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Chapter 1: Free to be Me

Monday – October 30

“Why are you calling me?” I grumped at my narcissistic ex.

“I thought you'd like to know,” Kalie replied. “You were close to my family. I thought you'd care.”

“I loved your mom, but your father was an abusive asshole.” I said honestly.

“He raised me, provided for my livelihood, and sent me to college,” Kalie reminded me.

“And he beat your mother, or have you forgotten about that. Just because he's dead doesn't mean he was worth killing.”

“Please Chris, I want you to come to his funeral and so does Mom. It would mean a lot to us.”

“I'll come, but only to comfort you and Sara,” I retorted. “I certainly won't be mourning that drunken bastard.”

“Thank you. Not very many people are coming to the memorial,” Kalie sniffed.

“That's because everyone who knew him feels the same way I do. He was horrible to your mother. When's the funeral? I'll have to get someone to cover my shift at the restaurant.”

“Wednesday, at the First Baptist Church at 10:00 a.m.”

“I'm surprised the church would host a memorial for him. They should be afraid the devil will rise up from the pulpit to claim his sorry soul.”

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“I know there was bad blood between you and my Dad, but I—”

“Bad blood!” I yelled. “The fricken scum tried to molest me.”

“You broke his nose,” Kalie defended, and cut off his ear.

“I wanted to cut off his penis,” I said honestly, “but his head got in the way. Look, I’ll be there for you and Sara, but don’t ask me to speak. You wouldn’t want to hear my eulogy for him.

I ended the call, upset that Kalie was dragging me back into her dysfunctional family’s never-ending drama. I wondered if her current girlfriend would be at the funeral. Not that I care. I haven’t seen any of them since I graduated college twelve years ago. The truth is I don’t want Kalie back in my life.

I finished dressing and headed to the restaurant I owned in Bransom, Missouri. I had built it from the ground up. I know the morning manager will already be there. I silently cursed Kalie for making me late. She was already messing up my life.

Kalie had a knack of weaseling her way into one’s life and slowly destroying them. I said a quick prayer to the powers that be thanking them for giving me the strength to keep her out of my life.

“The restaurant manager and my best friend is Ginny Mills, an attractive, intelligent woman that I had met in college. She had been through a lot with me, and I loved her for her loyalty. She made certain the restaurant ran smoothly, doing everything from greeting customers to serving tables, depending on how busy we were. She and her husband Phil had two daughters and I doted on them.

Phil is our head chef, and he can whip up any meal you can name. He makes certain the kitchen runs like clockwork. Marcus and Rita are sous-chefs, with one working the evening shift and the other working the morning schedule.

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Maria is our baker and a genius with fresh bread and pastries. I am a floating chef and have the responsibility for our signature dishes and famous desserts. Phil and I usually handle the morning breakfast crowd and the lunch rush.

The restaurant has grown to the point that we are looking for one more great cook. I have visions of expanding and buying the vacant building next to ours. I have saved half the amount needed to purchase it, but I'm not in a hurry. The building has been emptied for a long time, and no one has shown any interest in it.

"Good morning," Ginny's smiling welcome always brightened my day. She tapped her wristwatch. "You're running late today. Is everything okay?"

I laughed. Ginny knew something was wrong if I was late.

"Kalie's father died. She is insisting that I attend the funeral."

"Oh Chris, I hope you told her no. That woman is pure evil."

"I know, but I am going for her mother. Sara was the only one who took me under her wing and helped me through the sorrow of losing my Mom two months before my eighteenth birthday. She kept me out of the hands of Child Protective Services, so I owe her a lot."

"When's the funeral?"

"Wednesday. I will drive down Tuesday morning and back right after the service."

"I'm glad to know you won't be staying long enough for Kalie to get her talons into you." Ginny scowled as she aptly compared my ex to a bird of prey."

I thought about how Mrs. Anderson had stood up to the authorities when they tried to take me from my home during my senior year of high school. Mom had paid off our mortgage ten years earlier when my father died in an industrial accident. The insurance settlement had left her with enough money to pay off all her debts, send me to

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college, and live comfortably, so there was no reason for me to move into some stranger's home.

Mrs. Anderson told the social worker she was my aunt and would be living with me. Since she was next door it was easy to call her to my house whenever the social worker made a surprise visit. After I turned eighteen, they left me alone. A stab of guilt hit my heart as I realized I have not been back to see her since Kalie, and I broke up. Twelve years! Where had the time gone?

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Chapter 2: Ding Dong, Dick is Dead

Tuesday – October 31

I arrived in Moscow, Kansas a little after 4:00 P.M., passing the sign that showed a population of 272. The town was still in its death spiral and dragging out the agony in typical Moscow fashion. I wondered if they would change the number to 271 now that Dick was dead. Ha, I even like the sound of that. Dick was dead. Dead Dick. *The only good Dick is a dead Dick*, my mind ran away with the joy of Dick's demise.

I checked into the only bed and breakfast in town and asked where the best restaurant was. "The Grub Grab, two blocks down," the perky teen running my credit card informed me. "You here for the football game?"

"Um no." I answered, signing my receipt, and handing it back to her. I walked outside and wondered just how awful a place named the Grub Grab could be.

I walked two blocks and entered a dingy little hole in the wall. Red and white plastic tablecloths covered the half-dozen tables and a flashing beer sign hung behind the counter. I selected a table farthest from the door. The woman running the counter yelled, "You want a menu?" as she held it out to me.

I walked to the counter and ordered a hamburger with fries because that looked like the least lethal thing on the menu. "And a Dr Pepper," I added.

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I pulled out my phone and texted Kalie that I was in town. My phone started ringing immediately. "Where are you?" She yelled in my ear.

"The Grub Grab. I didn't have breakfast and I am hungry after my drive. I will be at your mom's place as soon as I finish eating."

She hung up without a word. I looked at my watch and gave her five minutes before she charged through the door.

"He blondie," the woman behind the bar waved at me. "Your burger's ready." She slid it toward the front of the counter.

I walked to her and picked up the tray holding my food and drink. "You ain't from around here," she noted.

"Nope," I answered and walked back to my table. I wanted to eat in silence and had no desire to make small talk with anyone.

I miscalculated Kalie's arrival. She flew through the door in four minutes. "Chris, oh my God, look at you," she squealed. "You're even more gorgeous than I remember."

I didn't stand but let her hug my shoulders. "Thank you for coming. Mom insists that you eat dinner with us tonight."

She let her arms drop to her side as if she didn't know what to do with them. I motioned for her to sit down at my table.

"Want something to drink?" I asked as I bit into my surprisingly good hamburger.

"Maggie," Kalie yelled, "I'll have a Coors Light. Put it on her bill."

Maggie popped the top and placed a can of Coors and a glass on the counter.

"You must serve yourself," I whispered.

I couldn't keep my eyes off Kalie as she pranced to the bar. Her long brown hair hung down her back and swayed with her butt when she walked. She was more attractive than ever, and she knew it.

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“What are you doing in town,” Maggie asked. “I ain't seen you in ages.”

“I'm here for dad's funeral.” Kalie said sadly.

“Dick's dead!” Maggie howled. “I thought the bastard was too mean to die.”

“His funeral is tomorrow,” Kalie informed her. “It'd mean a lot to me if you attended.”

“Naw, I never had any use for him when he was alive. I am not going to pretend to mourn him. I'm no hypocrite. How is Sara taking it? Celebrating, I bet. Dick's dead! I can't wait to tell Bill.”

Kalie returned to my table and sat down. “Isn't it a bit embarrassing to wrangle attendees to Dick's funeral,” I asked.

“Yeah, I just want to get this over with and get back to Miami.” She winked at me and took several gulps of her beer.

“Is Lucy with you?” I asked.

“Yeah, she's asleep in my room at mom's. The flight tired her.”

I nodded, stood, and walked to the cash register. Maggie held out my bill and I handed her a twenty. “Keep the change. The burger was great.”

“Thank you. I'm glad you liked it.”

“Is that your red truck with the Missouri tags, parked at the B&B?” Kalie asked as we walked toward it.

“Yep.”

“I figured you'd be driving a Mercedes or some other fancy car by now.”

“I need the truck for picking up supplies and catering. It also pulls a food concession trailer when we participate in city celebrations like the fourth of July,” I replied. “Are you staying at your mom's?”

“Yeah, no need to waste money when she has a perfectly good bedroom.”

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“How is she doing?” I asked as we stepped into my pickup.

“Relieved,” Kalie replied. “I’m sure she is glad to be out from under his rule. But I think he has left her with a lot of debt. He mortgaged the house a couple of years ago to invest in a fancy racehorse that was guaranteed to make him a millionaire.”

“Did it?”

“Nah, died of colic after its first race.” Kalie snorted.

“So where does that leave your mom?”

“A mortgaged home and a ton of debt,” Kalie shrugged. “I don’t know what she is going to do. She’ll figure it out.”

“Kalie, she has never worked. As I recall, your rat bastard father wouldn’t let her work for fear some other man would steal her from him.”

“He was insanely jealous,” Kalie agreed.

I pulled my truck into the driveway, took a deep breath, and got out.

Mrs. Anderson met me at the door. “Chris Taylor, let me look at you.” She took both my hands and pulled me into the house. “You are even more beautiful than I could have imagined. You have grown into a fine woman.”

I was shocked by the changes twelve years had made in her. She was thin and pale. Her hair had started to gray at the temples and was pulled back into a bun at the nape of her neck. The thing that made me want to cry was that the light had gone out in her beautiful grey eyes. She was a shell of the woman I once knew. She looked more like sixty-five than forty-five. Living with asshole Dick would do that to any woman. I wrapped my arms around her and hugged her—not too tightly—I was afraid I’d break her. She felt fragile in my arms.

I released her and she looked up at me and smiled. She still had the same dimples I had always loved. Only they were much shallower. Her face was gaunt. “Come in the kitchen. We can talk while I prepare dinner.”

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"I can help," I volunteered. "I'm a good cook, Mrs. Anderson."

She faced me with her hands on her hips. "I think you are old enough to call me Sara." She smiled.

"Sara," it felt strange on my tongue. "It may take me a while to get used to that, Mrs. Anderson, er, I mean, Sara."

Kalie and Lucy argued as they walked into the kitchen. "I must go back as soon as the funeral is over," Lucy declared. "I've got to be on the set at 7:00 a.m. Thursday morning."

"Go on get an airline ticket on a credit card," Kalie responded. "I must stay here for a while and help Mom get things settled."

Lucy scowled at Kalie and charged from the room. Kalie ran after her catching her in the dining room. "What is wrong with you?" She demanded.

"You know we can't afford an airline ticket. You promised we would drive back right after the funeral. I know why you're staying over," Lucy hissed. "You think you'll get a chance to shack up with your ex."

Kalie didn't argue.

"She's even more gorgeous than when you left her for me. I'm not stupid," Lucy continued.

I walked into the dining room with plates. "Lucy, just to put your mind at ease, I wouldn't touch Kalie with a ten-foot pole. Been there, done that! It won't ever happen again."

Kalie gave me a "go to hell" look and stormed from the room. I walked back into the kitchen and filled glasses with ice. "What else may I do to help?" I asked Mrs. Anderson as I lifted the lid on the pot she had simmering. "Chicken and dumplings," I exclaimed my mouth salivating.

"Your favorite," she beamed. "Just like you like them—more chicken and less dumpling."

"You're the best, Mrs. Anderson." I hugged her again.

##

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Dinner was a less than cheery affair with Lucy snarling at Kalie and Mrs. Anderson trying to keep the peace. "What are you wearing tomorrow?" I asked my hostess.

"A red dress," Mrs. Anderson laughed. "I know that sounds horrible, but for me it is more of a celebration than a time of mourning."

I suppressed my urge to laugh, making a snorting sound instead. Mrs. Anderson got tickled and we all ended up laughing.

"I know he was awful to you Mom," Kalie said, "but surely there was something you liked about him. You were married to him for thirty years."

"And I hated every minute of it," Mrs. Anderson declared. "My parents forced me to marry him because he got me pregnant at fourteen, and they made it clear I could never return home with a child in tow. I stayed married to him so you would have a roof over your head and a good education."

"It takes two to tango," Kalie smirked still defending her father.

The hurt in Mrs. Anderson's eyes was soul wrenching. Her lips moved but nothing came out. Finally, she bowed her head and said the blessing.

Everyone began eating. "Yum, this green bean casserole is incredible," I commented. "You are still the best cook in the world."

Mrs. Anderson blushed, and it was good to see a little color in her pale face.

"Yeah, Dad did love your cooking," Kalie declared. She held out her empty tea glass to her mother. "Could you refill my tea?"

"The tea pitcher is on the cabinet," I informed her. "Get up and refill your own glass. Your mother isn't your servant."

"I don't mind," Mrs. Anderson mumbled pushing her chair back.

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I grabbed her wrist. "No, she can wait on herself." I scowled.

"Fine," Kalie squawked. "What's the big deal?" She jumped up and carried her tea glass to the cabinet.

"If you don't know, I'm not wasting my breath telling you," I seethed.

It suddenly occurred to me that Kalie had enabled her father's mistreatment of her mother by going along with it. She also knew who brought the money home for things she wanted. "You're really a piece of work." I shook my head and glared at her.

Peanut, Mrs. Anderson's dog whined beside my chair. "Peanut, there you are." I picked up the little chihuahua and hugged her to me. "You were a puppy the last time I saw you."

Peanut snuggled into me keeping her eye on a small piece of chicken on my plate. "May I feed her this?" I asked Mrs. Anderson.

"Of course, but you do know she will be glued to you for the rest of your stay." She laughed, something she hadn't done since my arrival.

I beamed at her and fed Peanut the chicken. I placed the tiny dog back on the floor and she immediately ran to her owner. I noticed she limped. "She's limping. Is there something in her paw?"

Mrs. Anderson bowed her head as she picked up Peanut. She didn't look up as she said, "Dick kicked her in a rage. He broke her back leg then refused to let me take her to the vet."

My immense hatred for Dick returned full force. I was glad he was dead. If he weren't, I'm certain I'd be planning his demise right now.

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Chapter 3: Something to Celebrate

Wednesday—November 1

Wednesday morning all of us met in the living room dressed for the funeral. Kalie and Lucy wore black slacks and jackets. I wore a dark burgundy dress that hugged my body to my waist then flared into a pleated skirt that was a few inches below my knees. I smiled when Mrs. Anderson joined us wearing a blue dress that hung on her frail frame. *No black for her.*

“Let’s take your truck,” Kalie insisted. “Our car is a mess. You know how vehicles look after a long trip.”

We got into my truck that easily accommodated four people. “I love how clean this is,” Mrs. Anderson commented. “You were always particular about your things.”

Kalie and Lucy entered the church ahead of us and I offered Mrs. Anderson my arm. She slipped her arm through mine and leaned on me. I wondered if she would miss Dick at all.

I wasn’t surprised to see very few people seated in the church pews. Two of Dick’s drinking buddies had sobered enough to attend church and the president of a local mortgage company made up the group of Dick’s mourners.

As the pastor struggled to find something nice to say about old Dick, I recalled the man I knew.

Dick was a long-haul truck driver for a company that had a terminal and administrative offices in Moscow. At 6’3” and two-hundred-fifty pounds, he was a bully that no

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one stood up to but me. Mostly, I just stayed out of his way after I broke his nose and cut off his ear. I was glad he was dead. I was sure Mrs. Anderson was too.

“Let us pray,” the preacher said, pulling my attention back to the present.

I held Mrs. Anderson's hand to let her know I was there for her. She nodded without looking at me and squeezed my hand.

The pastor ended the prayer then announced that the ladies of the church had prepared a luncheon for everyone at the Anderson home. The two drunks beat it out the door to the nearest bar and the mortgage company president mumbled his condolences to the family and left.

“At least he had the decency not to foreclose on her today,” Kalie whispered to me as Mrs. Anderson thanked the pastor for a beautiful memorial service.

“Is she seriously in danger of losing the house?” I whispered back.

“By the end of the month,” Kalie mumbled.

Mrs. Anderson walked toward us. “We have delicious food waiting for us at home. I don't know about you two, but I'm starved.”

##

“The women in our town do know how to cook,” Mrs. Anderson declared as we sat around the dining table.

“You must take me to the airport,” Lucy whined to Kalie.

“You want to ride with us?” Kalie asked me.

“No, I'm going to stay here and help your mom with the dishes.”

“Suit yourself.” Kalie shrugged following Lucy from the room.

As we loaded the dishwasher, Mrs. Anderson chatted about anything and everything but nothing important.

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Finally, my good sense lost out and I asked, "Kalie said you are losing the house."

She looked at me in horror as if it were the first she knew about it. "No, I'm not," she declared. "Dick had an insurance policy for half a million dollars through the trucking company. I can pay off all his debts, the mortgage, and still have some left over."

"Whew," I breathed easier. "I was already working on ways to help you. I guess you don't need my help."

She smiled. "Just your friendship, sweetie. I'm going to watch the news then go to bed. It's been a long day. Would you like to join me?"

I nodded, grabbed a Dr Pepper from the fridge and followed her to the den.

"Are you going to be okay all alone in this house?" I asked.

"I was always alone and welcomed it," she admitted. "Dick was not a joy to have around." She turned on the television ending our conversation. Midway through the news she fell asleep.

I studied her face. The sharp angles of her gaunt face and dark bags beneath her eyes made my heart hurt for her. I wanted to touch her and tell her everything would be all right, but the truth was, I didn't know that for certain.

Chapter 4: From Bad to Worse

Thursday—November 2

The smell of fresh coffee beckoned me into the kitchen where Mrs. Anderson and Kalie sat reading legal looking papers. “Good morning sleepy head,” Kalie flashed that smile that made me fall for her years ago, but I was immune to it now.

“Good morning, did Lucy get off okay?” I asked as I poured a cup of coffee and refilled Mrs. Anderson’s cup.

“Yes, she is already safely back in Miami and at work.”

“Chris, would you take a look at this?” Mrs. Anderson held out the papers she had been studying.

I sat down beside her and began to read Dick’s life insurance policy. I finished and stared at Kalie. “This policy names Kalie the beneficiary,” I noted. “Is there another policy?”

“Nope,” Kalie replied. “Just this one for half a mill.”

“Nothing for you?” I frowned at Mrs. Anderson. “How are you going to pay off the house?”

Mrs. Anderson smiled. “I’m certain my daughter will help me,” she replied.

“I’ll take this to Mr. Charles at the insurance company and get this claim started,” Kalie said standing and heading to the door.

We sat in silence until we heard the car leave the driveway. “I have a bad feeling about this,” Mrs. Anderson said. “Even in his grave, he will find a way to hurt me.”

I glanced at her. “Why did you marry him?”

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“I’ve always been too ashamed to tell anyone this,” she sniffed. “Dick raped me when I was fourteen. When my parents discovered I was pregnant they made him marry me or go to jail. God knows I didn’t want to marry him. I hated him with all my heart, and he knew it. I prayed that Kalie would be a boy, but the fates laughed at me and sent me a baby girl. I knew I would have to protect her from Dick, and I have. If I hadn’t tolerated his endless pawing and grunting, he would have gone after Kalie. Tears ran down her cheeks. “All I ever heard him say was, ‘A woman’s place is in the home servicing her man.’ I knew he picked up prostitutes at truck stops when he was hauling. I faked an allergic reaction to birth-control pills and convinced him to wear protection with me so we wouldn’t have another child. The truth was I feared he would bring home some horrid disease from his escapades on the road.

“He wouldn’t let me work or finish high school. The happiest moments of my life were when he was on the road, and I was home alone with Kalie. I feel like a bad person because I am so happy he is dead.”

I slipped my arm around her frail shoulders and let her cry on my breast until she had no tears left to cry. “It is going to be okay,” I promised. “You’ll see your life will only be better in the future.”

“I hope so,” she replied. “It can’t get any worse.”

I patted her back. I could only imagine the hell she had lived through. We talked until the sun began to set.

“I wonder what is keeping Kalie,” I commented. “Should I go see about her?”

“May I go with you?”

“Of course, it will be good for you to get out of the house. I grabbed her jacket from the closet and held it as she slipped her arms into it.

As we drove I tried to recall the location of the Charles Insurance Agency. I knew I’d seen it but was having trouble mapping its location as I drove.

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"It's diagonal from the Grub Grab," Mrs. Anderson reminded me.

"Yes! That is where I saw it. I pulled onto the agency parking lot as Mr. Charles was walking out the door.

"Mr. Charles, you may not remember me," I said as I approached him. "I'm Chris Taylor."

"Of course, I remember you," he held out his hand and I shook it. "It was nice of you to return for Dick's funeral."

"I wanted to support Mrs. Anderson," I explained looking around for Kalie's car. "I'm looking for Kalie. She was supposed to pay you a visit, but she hasn't returned home."

He gave me an incredulous look and shook his head. "She hung around my office all day waiting for approval from my home office to issue her a check for Dick's life insurance settlement. She left about an hour ago with the check."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"Back to Miami." He informed me. "I feel awful that Dick didn't have a policy for Sara. I'm sure he felt Kalie is better suited to help her mother and made her the sole beneficiary."

I nodded as my stomach tied itself in knots.

I returned to the car trying to find the words to tell Mrs. Anderson that her daughter had taken the money and left town.

"She's gone, isn't she?" Mrs. Anderson sobbed once, then pulled back her shoulders and lifted her chin determined to face the world with her head held high.

##

We ate dinner in silence, each of us trying to decide what to do. "I'll go talk to the mortgage company in the morning," I volunteered. "I have a little money saved up. We will find a way to keep your house."

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I cleaned the kitchen, putting away the food and starting the dishwasher.

“Do you have the paperwork on the new loan Dick took out on the house?” I asked trying to determine her situation.

“Yes, I’ll get it,” She uttered shuffling toward the room Dick called his office.

She returned with a file that contained six months of past-due notices and a foreclosure notice. The mortgage company had already filed for possession of the property.

“You should get some sleep,” I encouraged her. Things will look brighter tomorrow.”

I didn’t sleep a wink. Her situation was bad. I dialed the number for Kalie. “Hey Chris, baby. What’s up?” She answered.

“Where the hell are you?” I growled into the phone.

“Headed home to Miami,” she replied. “I told you I was leaving today. Do you miss me?”

“Kalie, are you going to help your mother?”

A long silence told me all I needed to know. “You sorry piece of—” I got control of my temper and stopped my tirade. “They have already foreclosed on her house. She will lose it. Mr. Charles said you picked up the insurance check and took off. Are you really going to let them throw your mother into the street.”

“Look, Chris. Half a million will let me get my life back on track. She’ll be fine. Moscow has a women’s shelter.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “How can you do this?”

“If she had treated my dad nicer, he would have made us co-beneficiaries.

“Kailie, he got her pregnant at fourteen.”

“She should have said no.” Kalie declared.

“You think she had a choice. A little thing like her against a brute like Dick. I honestly don’t think they ever had consensual sex. He forced himself on her. He treated her like a whore. Have you forgotten when he beat her so badly she

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was in the hospital for a week? And you, you graduated from college and never looked back. You never helped her.”

“What do you mean she never had consensual sex?” Kalie demanded.

“I mean he raped her.” I was so mad at Kalie I could choke her.

“You mean I’m the result of rape. I am a rape baby?” Kalie wailed.

“Oh, yes, let’s make it all about you. You really are a sorry piece of shit. You went off to college and never gave her a second thought.”

I had to get away from him to live my life with you.” Kalie defended. “He hated that we were lesbians.”

“How’d that work out?” I snorted. “Oh, yeah, I caught you in our home in our bed with some bimbo you picked up in a bar. Yep, I know how important our relationship was to you. Forget about me. This is your mother we are discussing. Kalie, hello, Kalie.” She hung up on me. I redialed her number and my call went to voicemail.

##

At 6:00 a.m. I stumbled into the kitchen careful not to awaken Mrs. Anderson. The smell of coffee brewing told me she was already up. I put on my best face.

“Good morning,” I said cheerily. “Did you sleep well?”

“I did.” she smiled faking happiness as badly as I was.

I poured our coffee and placed a cup in front of Mrs. Anderson. “Kalie has taken the insurance money and returned to Miami, hasn’t she?”

“Yes ma’am,” I mumbled.

She shook her head accepting the crappy hand life had dealt her. I made one of those spur-of-the-moment, life altering decisions. “Pack the things you want to take with you,” I said. “You’re going to Missouri with me.”

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I can't do that, Chris. You're young. You don't need an old woman tied around your neck."

"Mrs. Anderson, you saved me from a fate worse than death when my Mom died. If you hadn't pretended to be my aunt they would have taken mom's property and put me in a foster home. I'm returning the favor. In the next seven hours we will figure this out. By the time we reach Bransom we will have a plan that will work."

She burst into tears. "May I take Peanut? She is potty trained."

"Of course, you can."

Chapter 5: Saving Mrs. Anderson

Friday—November 3

Peanut curled into a tiny ball in Mrs. Anderson's lap and went to sleep. She absent-mindedly stroked the little dog as she talked to me. "Chris I don't know what I will do I have no skills. I've never worked, and I can't bear the thought of being a burden to you."

"You're the best cook in the world. Believe me I can always use a great cook in the restaurant," I assured her.

"I doubt that my Kansas cooking will stand up to your clientele's expectations," she worried. "I can wash dishes. I can clean. I can do all those things for you Chris. I'll work hard to help you and earn my keep."

"Oh, you're worth much more than that, Mrs. Anderson. You are more than a charwoman. Don't worry, we will work things out to the benefit of both of us. The first thing I want you to do is get your GED®. You can do that online and I can help you. It is a certificate that you get after passing exams in 4 different subjects. The GED® is equal to a high school diploma. It shows that you have the knowledge and skills of someone who completed the twelfth grade. Who knows we might even get you a college degree."

Seriously Chris I'm 45 years old. Can I really get a college diploma?" For the first time since my arrival, I saw a glimmer of hope in her eyes. I suddenly felt better about myself and the world. She relaxed and leaned her head back against the seat. In a few minutes herself soft slumber let me know if she was sleeping.

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

As She slept I kept running ideas through my mind. she was a great cook, and I needed a good meat and potatoes person. There was a lot to do before I introduced her to my staff we needed to buy her some new clothes. She needed to get a stylish hair cut something that wasn't just hanging down her back. She was a proud woman. I wasn't sure she would sit still for my makeover, but maybe I could convince her that she was doing it for me and the restaurant, then she wouldn't feel selfish about it.

She had some beautiful features that Dick hadn't destroyed: perfect white teeth except for a small chip in a front tooth where Dick had hit her, the prettiest blue eyes I've ever seen, and thick dark hair. Yeah, with just a little makeover Mrs. Anderson could be a knockout. By the time she woke four hours later I realized that Mrs. Anderson had become my own personal project. She stretched and moaned softly as she fisted the sleep from her eyes.

“Oh my, I didn't mean to fall asleep on you. I wanted to keep you company and help you stay awake while you drove. Where are we?”

“We're halfway there. We have another four hours before we pull into Branson. Are you hungry? There is a great little mom and pop restaurant in the next town where we can stop for lunch.”

““I would like that.” She smiled. “I can't even remember the last time I ate in a restaurant, and I am starving. You know if you're tired I can help you drive. I am a very safe driver, and I am capable of following the instructions from your GPS while you sleep.”

“I know I always felt safe when you chauffeured me around taking me to dental appointments and school functions after mom died. I tried but failed to suppress the yawn that came out of my mouth. I think I'll be okay once I get out, walk around, and have some lunch but I'd be happy to talk to you while you drive. It would just give me a chance to sit in a different position.

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

##

I pulled the pickup onto the parking lot of Lazy Susan's Good Eats and found a spot in front of the door. "This is darling," Mrs. Anderson beamed as she examined the décor of the restaurant. A hostess quickly led us to a table in front of a warm fireplace, gave us menus, and announced the daily specials before leaving us to study their offerings.

Mrs. Anderson frowned as she studied the menu. "Is something wrong?" I asked.

"These prices are so high I had no idea this was so expensive."

"They're very reasonable. If you haven't eaten out in a while you just haven't been aware of how prices have gone up, but salaries have gone up too."

"May I take your drink order?" a perky young server requested. "I can bring your drinks while you're looking at the menu."

"I'll just have water," Mrs. Anderson said.

Please bring coffee for both of us," I ordered. "We still have four hours left on our trip. We need to stay awake and alert."

The server returned with steaming coffee and took our order. "I'm going to wash my hands," Mrs. Anderson said. "I'll be right back."

"I'll go with you," I replied. "I need to take advantage of all the ladies room has to offer."

Mrs. Anderson laughed. Something she is doing more often. "I love the sweet way you put things," she said.

We talked as we walked to the ladies room and Mrs. Anderson declared, "This is a whole new world for me."

I smiled at her. "For me too."

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

Chapter 6: We're Not in Kansas

Saturday—November 4

I jerked awake and stared into the darkness trying to figure out where we were. "I'm not a very good copilot," I admitted. "I didn't realize I was so tired. I'm sorry I left you on your own."

"I'm not sure where we are, but we're not in Kansa anymore," Mrs. Anderson informed me.

I couldn't keep from laughing at her reference to *The Wizard of Oz*. Glancing at the GPS I ascertained we were an hour from home. "I can't wait for you to meet Ginny and Phil," I said. "They have two precious daughters. You will fall in love with them. They practically run the restaurant while I handle new menu items, the accounting, advertising, and ordering."

"How did you find them?" she asked.

"I met Ginny in college. They married right after graduation. I was very frugal during college and had enough money left over from Mom and Dad's insurance to put a down payment on a building. I talked a banker into lending me the money to remodel and update it. Then shared my dream with Ginny and Phil and they loved the idea. The rest is history as they say."

"Did Kalie help you?"

"No, she was trying to get her own dream off the ground."

Mrs. Anderson nodded her head and stared out the window. "Hey, why so quiet?"

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

"I was just thinking about my daughter and how badly she treated you. How she gave no thought to me and my situation. For both our sakes I hope she never enters our lives again."

"I doubt we will ever see her again. We have nothing to offer her. She is a narcissist you know."

"I know," she sighed.

The lights of Bransom lit up the horizon. "Almost home," I said.

She began nervously toying with the tail of her blouse. "There's nothing to be nervous about," I assured her. "Everyone will love you."

"Would it upset you if I meet them in the morning. I'd like to put my best foot forward. You know shower and wash my hair. Put on a pair of slacks instead of jeans and I have a lovely blouse I've been saving for a special occasion."

"Of course, we can wait until tomorrow to meet everyone. I live above the restaurant, but we can enter without anyone knowing we're home. I do need to run down and let them know I'm back safely. You can go ahead and settle into your room."

"Are you sure you have room for me?"

"Yes, I have a guest bedroom with private bath and the apartment is large. I think you will like it."

"I'm certain I will." She smiled and ceased fidgeting with the hem of her blouse. I caught her hand in mine and gently squeezed it. "Don't worry. I'll be right beside you."

"Turn right at the next light," the GPS instructed. Mrs. Anderson steered the pickup onto the street and drove past the remodeled antebellum mansion that housed my restaurant.

"Um, you passed the restaurant," I said.

She pulled the car to the curb and glared at me. "You own Taylor's Homestyle Cooking?"

I nodded.

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

"I had no idea." She grinned. "Kansas people love your restaurant. They post it on their Facebook pages."

"Really," I puffed out my chest a bit. "That is good to know."

"They take pictures of their food and the décor inside and post it on their page. Even the postman tells me about eating at Taylor's. Chris I am so proud of you. You truly are a success."

"Not really," I replied. "We still have a long way to go."

"This is beautiful," she exclaimed putting the pickup into reverse and backing up to sit in front of the restaurant. "Where should I park?"

I gestured toward the huge sign marked entrance that welcomed diners to Taylor's and pointed toward the back of the house. The double wide drive led to a huge parking lot behind the establishment and the ornate door that opened into Taylor's.

"This is incredible," Mrs. Anderson declared excitedly. as I directed her toward a parking place in front of the door leading upstairs to my apartment.

"The digital lock code is 1812#," I informed her. "Why don't you unlock the door and I'll grab our bags."

She hurried to the door, and had it open by the time I reached it. "I can carry my bag," she insisted.

"It's light as a feather," I noted. "If you will go ahead and open the door at the top of the landing, we will be home."

She skipped up the stairs like a teenager and held the door open for me. I tossed my luggage into my room then carried hers to the guestroom.

She waltzed around the bedroom. "This is lovely. So light and cheerful. Oh, Chris, I love it." Her happiness was contagious. I couldn't wipe the grin off my face as she checked out the apartment.

"Oh my God," she declared when she entered the kitchen. "I've seen kitchens like this in *Southern Living*, but I didn't believe such beauty existed." She sat on a stool at

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

the counter that divided the kitchen from the living room.
“This is just incredible.”

“Why don't you shower while I run downstairs and let Ginny know I'm back. I'll grab us a couple of plates. What would you like?”

“Everyone raves about Taylor's Chicken Cordon bleu. Would it be possible to have that?”

“Certainly, what vegetables do you want?”

“You choose for me.” She laughed, hugging herself.

“Decaf tea okay?”

“Perfect,” she replied.

##

Ginny greeted me with a hug and Phil waved his spatula at me. “I was beginning to worry about you,” she said as she released me. “How was the funeral?”

“Not so great, but I'm glad I went. Everything running smoothly here?”

“Like silk,” Ginny quipped as she looked around me.

“What are you looking at?”

“I thought I saw someone go upstairs with you,” she sighed. “Please tell me you didn't bring Kalie home with you?”

“I did not bring Kalie home with me,” I assured her. “But I did bring her mother.”

Ginny's mouth dropped open and she was speechless. “Make me a fresh cup of coffee and I'll tell you all about it.” I bargained as I sat down at the table nearest the kitchen.

Ginny returned with two cups of coffee and the vanilla cream she knew I loved. She silently sipped her coffee as I told her my story about the past two days and how Mrs. Anderson had taken care of me when my mother died.

“Wow! Why didn't you introduce her to us? she asked.

“She was exhausted and wanted to shower and go to bed.”

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

"Poor thing, you should take her something to eat," Ginny volunteered.

"I'm thinking a couple of Chicken Cordon bleu with broccoli and our squash casserole."

"Let me get that going and refill our coffee while you wait." She disappeared into the kitchen then returned with the coffee carafe.

"What are you going to do with Mrs. Anderson?"

"She is an awesome cook," I praised my friend. "I think she will make a great addition to our staff. She is a little shy but very smart and catches on quickly so we should have her fully trained in time for the Thanksgiving rush."

"We will need her," Ginny agreed. "We are booked solid for Thanksgiving. I couldn't squeeze in the president. Our takeout orders are at an all-time high. If the holidays continue as they are now, you should be able to make a sizeable down payment on that house next door."

"I hope so. We have outgrown this place."

As we finished our coffee, Phil placed a fancy takeout carrier in front of me. "Chicken Cordon bleu for me lady," he faked an English accent that made the three of us laugh out loud. "I added two dishes of our famous bread pudding."

"I don't know what I'd do without you two," I said sincerely. "I will see you in the morning."

"Sleep in boss, things will be slow on Sunday until church lets out, and you look tired," Phil said as he picked up our coffee cups and the carafe.

"I may do that," I agreed as I lifted the carrier from the table.

##

Mrs. Anderson was in the kitchen making tea as I entered the apartment. "Oh, my goodness whatever you are carrying smells delicious," she exclaimed.

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

I was placing the dinners on the breakfast table when she carried the tea pitcher and two glasses of ice to the table. "I hope you don't mind. I had to borrow one of your t-shirts and a pair of pajama bottoms to sleep in."

I turned to look at her and smiled. "I don't mind at all." She looked like a little girl dressed for a slumber party. At five feet five inches she was three inches shorter than me and had rolled up the bottom of the pajamas. My t-shirt hung loosely on her shoulders. She was cute as heck.

Chapter 7: Homestyle Cooking

Sunday—November 5

Mrs. Anderson was still sleeping when I slipped from the apartment and joined my staff in the kitchen.

“We have everything under control,” Phil assured me as I manned the fry station.

“I know, I miss the kitchen when I’m gone. I do love this business.”

“Here come the Baptist,” Phil announced as Ginny and three waitresses swished through the swinging double doors of the kitchen and pinned orders on the correct cooking stations.

The dining room sounds rose to a low roar as customers placed their orders and chatted with one another. “Sounds like you do need me.” I grinned.

Our lunch business slowed down significantly as customers headed home to watch Sunday football. At 3:00 p.m. I went upstairs to check on Mrs. Anderson. She was sitting on the sofa watching TV.

“Chris, I didn’t know if I should come down to the restaurant or wait for you, so I just waited.” She finished her sentence in an apologetic tone hanging her head.

“That is just perfect,” I said. “I brought dinner so we can dine and watch the football game. Um, do you like football?”

“Oh, yes,” she beamed. “I especially love the Cowboys.”

“Then you are in luck, they play the Kansas City Chiefs today.”

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

“Would I be an awful person if I cheer against my home state team?”

“I won't tell, if you won't.” I winked at her, and she giggled like a teenager. It was nice to see her relaxing. “You probably know this, but the Kansas City Chiefs are also the official football team of Missouri,” I informed her.

“I did not know that.” She frowned. “Why?”

“We don't have a franchise and the Chiefs have contributed millions to our economy, so the state legislature named them the official football team of Missouri.”

My cellphone dinged and I checked my notices from my Monday calendar. “I have a beauty shop appointment tomorrow,” I informed her. “I've got to get a hair cut and color. Why don't you go with me?”

“I'd like that,” she agreed. “I get lonely when you leave me alone. I don't know what to do with myself. I'm used to being busy.”

“Great.” I sent a text to Ginny reminding her I would be out of the restaurant on Monday.

We ate dinner in front of the TV and cheered for the Cowboys. Unfortunately, the Chiefs beat them like a drum.

“If you will make some of your fantastic coffee, I'll nuke the bread pudding,” I said as we stood from the sofa. “There is a good series on Amazon Prime we can watch if you want to.”

She looked at me questioningly. “Amazon Prime?”

It occurred to me that Dick would never pay for TV so her only source of entertainment had been whatever the local channels carried. “It's subscription television,” I explained pulling the dessert from the fridge. “You can select from a kagillion movies, series, sports or news broadcasts.”

I put the bread pudding into the microwave and set the timer, then retrieved two coffee mugs from the cabinet and placed them on the kitchen island.

The Keurig finished brewing as I located the vanilla creamer in the fridge and placed it beside her cup.

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

“Thank you.” She smiled. “Everything is so easy with you.”

“I’m glad you think so,” I replied. “It is nice to have someone to share things with.”

We ate our dessert, started a new TV series, and fell asleep on the sofa. I awoke after midnight to find Mrs. Anderson snuggled against me and peanut curled into her stomach. I pulled a throw over us and went back to sleep.

Chapter 8: Meet Mrs. Anderson

Monday—November 6

When she slipped from my arms the next morning, I pretended to sleep through it because I knew she would be embarrassed. While she showered, I called my hair stylist Mirtha Owens and begged her to slip in Mrs. Anderson. “She needs a stylish haircut and lots of blonde highlights—the amber kind—nothing grey. She is extremely shy so make a big deal over her.”

I walked to the kitchen where Mrs. Anderson had already brewed fresh coffee. I poured a cup and carried it to my en suite. I could hear her humming as she showered and hurried to wash my hair and get ready. I didn't dry my hair since I was going straight to the hair stylist.

Mrs. Anderson had dried her hair and pulled it back into her usual bun at the nape of her neck. She wore a pair of skinny jeans and a turquoise V-neck sweater. I couldn't help noticing how much she looked like her daughter. Both were shapely and well-endowed—only Mrs. Anderson was sane.

“Ta-da,” I crowed as I jumped from my bedroom to the living room pretending to make a grand entrance.

She laughed and gave me a wicked wink. “You are the cutest thing, Chris Taylor. You make me happy.”

Mission Accomplished, I thought. “You ready to go get beautiful?”

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

"Oh, I'm not going to...I'm just keeping you company."

"Nonsense," I argued. "As long as you are there you should get a cut and style too."

"We will see," she said begrudgingly.

When we walked into the salon, Mirtha began endearing herself to Mrs. Anderson. "I can't wait to get my hands in your hair," she exclaimed. "It is so thick, yet fine. I love working with hair like yours."

Mrs. Anderson was so overwhelmed with Mirtha she didn't even make a sound as the beautician led her to a chair in front of a full-length mirror. Mirtha released the hair from the pins and ran her fingers through it. "So soft," she noted. "Tell me what you want me to do with it."

"Just a trim," Mrs. Anderson muttered.

I'd located a picture in the stylist books Mirtha had scattered around the shop and held it in front of Mrs. Anderson. "What about this?"

"Oh, no!" She scoffed. "People will think I'm trying to look younger and laugh at me. That hair cut is wonderful but not for me."

"It is perfect for you," Mirtha agreed with me. "Some blonde highlights and we will have to beat the men off you with a stick."

Mrs. Anderson stiffened at the mention of men. I took her hand and said, "and women. Everyone will be after you but have no fear I have a big stick."

She laughed. "It looks like I am outnumbered. I'm going to trust you on this, Chris."

"Have I ever led you astray?" I held out my hands palms up. She slapped them.

"Not in the last three days," she pointed out that I didn't have a very long track record to judge.

"You'll like it," I assured her.

"I'm going to do Mrs. Anderson's color first," Mirtha informed me. "It will take longer than yours."

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

I kept up a constant chatter trying to keep her mind off the first color job she had ever had. We teased back and forth until Mirtha announced she was ready to move her new client to another chair and handed her a magazine to read.

I sat quietly as Mirtha streaked my brown hair with glorious highlights that left me more blonde than brown. "Now trade places with Mrs. Anderson," she instructed me.

I watched everything she did, thrilled at the way Mirtha was changing my little caterpillar into a butterfly. She removed the highlighting hair foil from Mrs. Anderson hair and thoroughly rinsed her long locks.

"Now for the fun part." Mirth grinned. "How much hair do you want cut off?"

"Please, not a lot," Mrs. Anderson pleaded.

I nodded. "I do like it long. Maybe a little down her back but much shorter than it is now. She shouldn't look like a sister wife."

Mirtha layered the thick hair and then began to blow dry it. The highlights were a work of art and brought out the blue of Mrs. Anderson's eyes.

"What about her eyebrows?" Mirtha asked.

I raised my brows questioningly to give Mrs. Anderson the opportunity to make the decision. She laughed. "Why not? It seems I'm a pet project for you two."

"Yes!" Mirtha fisted the air. "You are going to be one beautiful woman when I'm through with you. I wish I had taken some before and after photos."

"Let's get your color off," Mirtha instructed me. "Suzy is going to rinse for me while I finish Mrs. Anderson's hair.

I leaned back into the rinse bowl and closed my eyes as Suzy removed the foil and began rinsing. When I stood up Mrs. Anderson was gone. "Where is she?"

"She is with the esthetician, getting the *works*," Mirtha said. "I'll cut and style your hair so the two of you should be ready at the same time."

"Awesome," I quipped. "I am starving."

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

I gave Mirtha my credit card and signed the slip.

##

“What do you think?” Mirtha spun my chair around. I thought she wanted me to look at myself in the mirror, but she stopped the chair when I was face-to-face with Mrs. Anderson.

I caught my breath and my mouth fell open feeling like all the moisture had been sucked from it. My stomach did a somersault, and I licked my lips. “You...you’re beautiful,” I stammered.

She blushed and lowered her eyes, and I knew I’d embarrassed her. “Please, I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. It’s just that you are movie star gorgeous. I had no idea.” *Shut up*, I thought, *you are only making it worse*.

She smiled and a twinkle danced in her eyes. “Neither did I,” she murmured. “Mirtha, you are a magician.”

“It helps when I have a lovely lady to work my magic on,” Mirth assured her.

I gathered her purse and our jackets and headed for the door. “I need to pay someone,” Mrs. Anderson declared.

“The first visit is free,” Mirtha informed her. “I’m assuming I have a new client for life.”

“Yes, you certainly do. Thank you so much. You are very kind.”

“Don’t forget your beauty products.” Mirtha held out a large bag of makeup and facial items. “Follow the instructions the esthetician gave you and you will look younger every day.”

I wanted to hug Mirtha. I hadn’t thought that it might embarrass Mrs. Anderson if I paid her bill. Obviously, I need lessons in interacting with other people.

We got into the car, and I suddenly found myself tongue tied in front of her. I wanted to touch her face with my

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

fingertips but knew that wasn't the thing to do. Instead, I croaked. "Hungry."

"Starving," she beamed. "Is there any chance we can dine in that place—what's the name—Oh, Taylor's Homestyle Cooking?"

"Yes, ma'am." I grinned like a kid with its first ice cream cone. "I will be honored to take you anywhere."

I pulled the car into my parking place behind the restaurant and turned to look at her. "You are one fine looking woman, Sara Anderson," I complimented.

"You aren't so bad yourself," she chided me.

"Are you ready to meet my work family?" I asked.

She nodded and unbuckled her seatbelt. I was at her door before she opened it. I looped my arm through hers and led her to the entrance. "Be prepared to be amazed," I promised.

It was early for the dinner crowd so there were several places to sit. She looked around the dining room. "This is lovely. It is exactly what I expected from you. May we sit there?" She gestured toward a booth for two receding into a private alcove. Can that be our place?"

"Forever," I promised.

Ginny entered from the kitchen. "I thought you said Kalie didn't—" She stopped as she realized that my guest was Mrs. Anderson, not my ex.

"Ginny Mills, I'd like you to meet Sara Anderson." I watched as Ginny pulled Mrs. Anderson into a hug.

"I have heard so many nice things about you," Mrs. Anderson said as Ginny released her and held her at arm's length.

"Chris has told me so much about you too, but she failed to mention that you are absolutely stunning."

I beamed and Mrs. Anderson blushed. Ginny always knew the right words to say.

"Do you like surf and turf?" Ginny asked. "Our special tonight is an eight-ounce filet mignon and large pink gulf

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

shrimp topped with peppercorn and lobster sauce served with roasted new potatoes, baby carrots and salad.”

“Sounds delicious,” Mrs. Anderson replied as she walked toward *our* table. “I’m not certain I can eat all that food. May we share an order?”

“Certainly,” Ginny replied. “Chris likes her steaks medium well. How do you want yours cooked?”

“The same,” Mrs. Anderson replied.

We settled into our niche, and I exclaimed, “It is funny you chose this table. This is where I always sit. It is private and I can people watch without them knowing I’m studying them. This is where I sit when I’m here alone putting together a new menu or designing a promotion for the restaurant.”

“Wine to celebrate your first meal at Taylor’s,” Ginny said as she uncorked one of our finest wines and poured a couple of ounces into Mrs. Anderson’s glass.

“Taste it and see if you like it,” I encouraged her.

“Um, yes. This must be the nectar of the Gods,” she declared. “I’ve never tasted anything so delightful.”

I don’t know who had the widest grin on their face, Ginny, or me. There was something about Mrs. Anderson that made one want to please her.

##

Our meal was exceptional with the staff stopping by to check on us and to meet Mrs. Anderson. As the tables filled, our regular diners walked over to speak to me and I introduced them to our newest chef, Mrs. Anderson.

“I feel like a poser,” she whispered to me. “I’m not really a chef. I’m just a cook.”

“Maybe you could go to a culinary school and get your degree,” I suggested. “We have two excellent schools right here in Bransom.”

She nodded and took a bite of shrimp. “I’d like that.”

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

“More wine?” our server asked.

“No, but we will take the bottle to go,” I said. “We’ve had a long day so we’re going to relax and watch some television.”

##

I’m going to change into my jammies,” I said. “Why don’t you get comfortable, and I’ll pour the wine?”

When I returned to the living room she was sitting cross-legged on the sofa with the wine and two glasses on the coffee table. “Thank you for the best day of my life.” She smiled, filled our wine glasses, and handed one to me. “A toast,” she clinked her glass against mine. “May we always be as happy as we are right now.”

“Yes,” I sighed. “I can’t think of a time I’ve been any happier.”

Chapter 9: Cornbread Dressing

Tuesday, November 7

“Chris says you make a cornbread dressing to die for,” Ginny greeted us as we walked into the kitchen.

“I do have my great grandmother’s recipe,” Mrs. Anderson replied. “I like it.”

“Could you make a couple of pans full so we can give our diners a taste tonight?” Ginny continued. “Dressing has never been our strong suit.”

“I would love to,” Mrs. Anderson replied. “I love to cook and have recipes handed down from generation to generation. I’ll run upstairs and grab my recipe box.”

We watched her walk back to the door. She wore jeans and a white t-shirt. Her glorious hair swayed as she walked. “She is very attractive,” Ginny noted. “She’s much prettier than her daughter.”

“Um,” I grunted not wanting to get drawn into a conversation about Kalie. “Anything new on the menu today?”

“I thought you might want to put together a *Thanksgiving all Month* menu,” Ginny replied. “Let’s taste her dressing and go from there.”

“Why don’t we have her cook a few of her favorite Thanksgiving dishes and see if we want to add any of them to our menu this month?”

“Great idea,” Ginny agreed handing me a fresh cup of coffee.

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

I pulled on a white apron, took my place at my cooking station, and began cooking our customers breakfast orders.

I noticed that Ginny had set up a new cooking station next to me. I was certain it was for Mrs. Anderson. Our breakfast rush kept me busy. I smiled at Mrs. Anderson when she returned. Ginny led her to the station beside me and showed her where everything was, then gave her the tour of our walk-in freezer where we stored all of our dry goods in airtight glass containers.

A rush of customers hit us for breakfast, and I didn't get to raise my head except to yell, "Order up." The line operator would grab the plate, garnish it with something colorful like an orange slice and put it on the delivery bar for the waiter.

Things slowed down around 11:00 a.m. giving us time to switch our stations from breakfast preparations to lunch orders. At 3:00 p.m. the dining room was empty except for a half dozen people. We took an hour break in shifts as the new serving staff clocked in for the dinner shift.

"You break with me," I called to Mrs. Anderson as she shoved two casserole dishes of cornbread dressing into her oven.

I grabbed two Dr Peppers and plated two Salisbury steak dinners with brown gravy and veggies and carried them to our alcove. Mrs. Anderson joined me five minutes later.

"Wow, what a thrill," She exclaimed as she slid into the booth beside me. "Chris, this is so exciting."

"Some people think it is a bit too much, but I love all the hustle and bustle that keeps things moving," I said. "Ginny's management style is perfect for us. She has everything running like clockwork."

"I never dreamed such organization was required for a smooth-running kitchen." Mrs. Anderson leaned her shoulder against mine. "I love it."

"Is everything going okay for you?"

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

“Perfectly. I just put two large casserole dishes of dressing into the oven. It should be ready when we finish eating.” She placed a timer on the table.

We finished eating as the timer sounded. “Gotta’ run,” she muttered grabbing the timer and sliding from our booth. I followed her, anxious to taste her dressing.

Everyone gathered around waiting to taste the cornbread dressing. Mrs. Anderson turned up the temperature under the saucepan containing giblet gravy and pulled the dressing from the oven. She placed the dressing on everyone’s plate then covered it with gravy. “Let it cool,” she warned, “it will burn you. Mix the gravy in with the dressing.”

We all did as we were instructed then took a bite of the dressing. I looked around at my friends to see if they were having the same incredible taste experience as I. They were. We looked like a tribe of aliens who had just tasted something wonderful. Who knew Southern cornbread dressing could make a gathering of cooks swoon.

I beamed with pride at Mrs. Anderson. “So good,” I praised stuffing another spoonful of the dressing into my mouth.

“Is there enough for seconds?” Phil asked showing his empty plate.

“Well, honey, did you lick your plate clean?” Ginny chided him. She looked around and realized that after sharing with all the employees there was no dressing left. “I guess we will introduce this to our customers tomorrow evening.” She laughed delighted that Mrs. Anderson’s cornbread dressing was such a hit.

##

At 11:00 p.m. we dragged our tired bodies up the stairs to the apartment. “Are you exhausted?” I asked.

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

“Yes.” she smiled. “But it is a good tired. You know the way you feel when you know you’ve contributed to the team?”

“You definitely did that,” I complimented her. “I hope you like it here.”

“Oh, I do, hon. You and the staff already feel like family.”

“I’m going to shower then fall into bed,” I said. “I have a feeling the rest of the week is going to be this busy.”

“I’m doing the same. I’ll see you in the morning.” She stopped in the hallway outside her door. “Thank you, Chris. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. Afraid I’d tell her she filled my heart with happiness and another feeling that I wasn’t sure about.

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

Chapter 10: The Tour of Bransom

Wednesday, November 8-11

I got up early, dressed, and was in the kitchen when Ginny entered. "You're up early." She smiled as she hung her coat in the employee breakroom.

"I wanted to discuss Mrs. Anderson with you."

She raised her brows as she poured us two cups of coffee and headed to the alcove. "I hope she isn't leaving. Everyone has fallen in love with her."

"Oh no, she said we made her feel like family."

"Because we are," Ginny pointed out. "At least that is the way I feel."

"Me to," I admitted. "She does want to work for us so I thought we should work out the schedule, since we now have more cooks in the kitchen."

"What are your thoughts?"

"I'd like to be scheduled off at the same time as Mrs. Anderson. I'd like to show her around Bransom. She has never been outside of Moscow, Kansas. Also, I thought you and Phil might like to have the same days off."

"That's it? You don't want to make any other changes?"

"No, you do a great job of scheduling our employees and keeping everything running smoothly. I certainly don't want to mess that up."

She laughed. "Phil and I would certainly love having the same days off. Do you have a preference?"

"If you don't mind I'd like Monday and Tuesday off. The shows and amusements aren't so crowded on those days."

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

“Perfect. Phil and I will take off Wednesday and Thursday. That will put all of us in the kitchen on our busiest days, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.”

“Great!” I lifted my empty coffee cup to toast Ginny.

“You two are in a good mood this morning,” Mrs. Anderson entered the dining room carrying a coffee cup and a carafe of coffee. “May I join you?”

“Always.” I smiled and scooted over to make room for her beside me. “We were just going over the work schedule. I’ve requested Monday and Tuesday as the off days for you and me. I hope that is okay with you.”

“I’d love that,” Mrs. Anderson said as she refilled my cup.

“I want to show you around Bransom before the holidays get too hectic,” I explained. “There are so many wonderful shows and amusements I want to share with you.”

“Sounds fantastic.” She beamed.

“Do you think we can put turkey and dressing on as a special today,” Ginny asked Mrs. Anderson.

“That would be splendid,” Mrs. Anderson responded picking up her cup and the carafe. “Come on lazy bones we need to get cracking.” She bumped her shoulder against mine.

“You look nice,” I complimented noting she had used the make up Mirtha had given her.

She ducked her head and slushed. “Thank you.”

##

The rest of the week flew by as we all settled in with our new cook. Mrs. Anderson’s turkey and dressing was a huge hit. She would mix the ingredients and I would keep them cooking to perfection.

Sunday evenings we closed at eight. Everyone picked up their paychecks and headed home for much needed rest.

Here's to You Mrs. Anderson
by Erin Wade

Mrs. Anderson was like a child with a toy. "I've never had a paycheck before," she announced to everyone. "This is so special for me. Thank you so much but the truth is I would work with all of you for free. You are such a joy to be around.

##

"I am so proud of you," I bragged on Mrs. Anderson as we climbed the stairs to our apartment. "You are so unique. It's as if you have always been a part of our team."

"If only life had been that kind to me," she shrugged.

"I'm sorry I didn't come for you as soon as I got settled," I said sincerely. "I was too young to know. I am so sorry."

"I'm not your responsibility, hon," she caught my hand as I unlocked the door. "You have your life to live and thanks to you I now have a wonderful life to live. Dick and his vileness are a vague memory."

Peanut squealed as we entered the apartment. Mrs. Anderson leaned down and scooped her up as the tiny dog whined and snuggled into her neck burying her little face in the long, glorious hair. I found myself envying Peanut.

"May we go shopping tomorrow? I'd like to buy a pair of comfortable shoes and a couple of new blouses.

"Of course, we will spend the entire day doing whatever you want."

The sweetest expression crossed her face and she looked at me as if I was the special one instead of her. "Group hug," she said as she pulled me into her arms with Peanut between us. I wrapped my arms around her bending down to kiss Peanut on top of the head. The little dog managed to wag its tail and wiggle its body in delight.

I know how you feel, Peanut, I thought.