

Heaven Forbid

By Kate Simon

Steve Campbell sat at the desk in his home office, going over the will of a late client. Horace Johnson was a feisty, old dude who'd retired from the bench about fifteen years ago. He was known as a tough judge who'd not been above handing an attorney his head. Ultimately, he was a fair man. Steve been surprised when Horace had asked him to handle his estate but he'd said he knew Steve's reputation. He had taken it as a high compliment.

Steve was not looking forward to telling Horace's son, Jefferson, that his father had left his entire estate to the local animal society. Jefferson was still the same bully he'd been in high school, with a reputation for hard living and shady business deals. Horace hadn't even left his son his beloved dog, Sammie. Steve looked at the small dog asleep in his sheepskin bed. He'd been overwhelmed when Horace asked if he would take Sammie when the day came. It was the ultimate testament of trust.

His thoughts were interrupted by Sammie barking at the sound of a knock at the door. He followed Sammie to the door and reached down and gave him a quick pet. "Shush. It's okay, boy. I've got this." He opened the door and smiled. It was his daughter's boyfriend, Ryan.

"Hey, Mr. Campbell," he said as shook his hand. Steve noticed Ryan's hand was a little damp.

"Come in, Ryan."

"How's the new addition fairing?" he asked as he bent down to give Sammie a pet.

"He seems to have adjusted, probably because he saw me so often at the judge's home."

"Nah, he probably knows he's wanted here."

Steve smiled. Ryan Brennan was a good guy. He'd met Steve's daughter, Kathy, in college. They'd dated for three years before moving in with each other. It made Steve very uncomfortable to think of his daughter having a love life, but she was a smart girl. He trusted her judgement. Kathy and Ryan had both just finished their PhDs and had been recruited by a local pharmaceutical company. "So, what brings you by, Ryan?"

“I’d like to talk to you.”

“Sure, let’s have a seat.” They took seats in the living room and Steve waited for Ryan to begin. He knew it was making Ryan uncomfortable, but it was a father’s prerogative.

“I would like to talk to you about Kathy.”

“What about her?”

“You know how much I...care for her...” he stuttered.

“Care?”

“Oh, God. I’m saying this badly.” He took a breath and spoke quickly. “I love Kathy, Mr. Campbell. I have since that first day in Applied Physics. Being with her is best thing that has ever happened to me. I would like your permission to ask Kathy to marry me.”

Steve sat back against the chair. He knew this day was coming. He thought he was ready for it. He wasn’t. Kathy was his little girl. It had been just the two of them since Mary died when Kathy was ten. He saw that Ryan had the beginnings of a full-on flop sweat. “Well, I take it you’ve given this a great deal of thought.”

“Yes, sir. Kathy and I have always talked about marriage but she said we couldn’t even consider it until we were both established. We are now. We both have good jobs and we’re saving for a house.”

“Did you get her a ring?”

“Yes, sir,” he smiled as he reached into his jacket pocket. He pulled a small box out of his pocket and opened it. Steve smiled. The kid hadn’t cheaped out. He took the box and looked at the small but brilliant stone. Ryan obviously knew Kelly’s taste. Something big and showy wouldn’t please her. But a single, round stone on white gold band would be perfect.

Steve smiled and nodded. “Very nice.”

“Thank you.”

Steve knew he shouldn't make Ryan wait but he was enjoying this. "Well..."

"Sir?"

"If you're going to be my son-in-law, you should call me Steve."

Ryan about melted into the chair. "Oh, thank you, sir...Steve."

"When are you going to ask her?"

"I have reservations at Le Jardien tonight."

"Le Jardien, nice."

"Would you like some advice?"

"Of course."

"Don't ask her at the restaurant. She's always been embarrassed to be the center of attention. Ask her before you go."

Ryan smiled. "You're right, of course. I should get some champagne and a bunch of roses for the apartment. I want it to be special."

Steve extended his hand. "Thank you for coming to me." He smiled. "Tell me, what would you have done if I'd said no."

Ryan smiled. "I still would have asked her."

Kayla Brennan locked up her real estate office so she could meet her son for lunch. She was surprised when he called her this morning. She and Ryan had been very close, ever since her husband had taken off when Ryan was twelve. She'd missed him when he moved in with Kathy Campbell, but she was a nice enough girl. They shared the same passion for science, so she never held him back. Now Ryan had an important job with Toma Pharmaceuticals. Kathy worked there too, which meant neither was dependent on the other for support. She walked into the deli and smiled when she saw Ryan stand to greet her. He kissed her cheek and smiled a bit too broadly.

"I grabbed us a table before the crowd hits."

"Thank you. What's going on?"

"What?"

"You're up to something."

"Why do I have to be up to something to have lunch with my mother?"

"Ryan, I've been watching you try to hide things for twenty-six years. Have you ever succeeded?"

His head dropped. "No."

"So, tell me." He took a breath and Kayla knew she wasn't going to like what was coming. He pasted on a smile.

"I'm going to propose to Kathy."

"Oh," she said as she reached for her water glass.

"Mom, we've been together for four years. You had to know this was coming."

Kayla shrugged. "Is she pushing for this?"

"What? No. Kathy's the one who's been putting me off. I would have married her years ago. She said we couldn't get married until we both finished school and were established. Why can't you be happy for me?"

“I just think you don’t know what you’re in for. Marriage changes things. I don’t see why you can’t just live together.”

Ryan reached for her hand. “Mom, I know you had a bad time of it with Dad.”

Her head snapped up. “You don’t know.”

“Yes, I do. I was there. I remember. I was just as relieved as you were when he left. Kathy and I aren’t like that. I don’t just love her, she’s my best friend.”

Kayla took a sip of her water, trying to blink back her tears. Ryan really had no idea.

Steve was setting up a lunch while he waited for Kathy and Ryan. Thank God Aldo's delivered. He put out some nice salads and had Kathy's favorite chicken salad waiting in the fridge along with a bottle of champagne.

Ryan would have proposed last night, so it was up to him to be excited for them. He knew Ryan's mother wouldn't be popping the champagne cork. There was something about Kayla Brennan. She'd seemed like a nice enough woman, what little of her he'd gotten to know. She was polite during birthday and holiday gatherings, but that was all. She wasn't rude to his daughter, just not particularly warm.

Kayla seemed to keep herself apart from the world, with the notable exception of her son. What little he knew Ryan had told him. It had been an unhappy marriage and his father had abandoned the family when he was twelve. The father had left them with nothing. Kayla had worked hard to become the leading real estate broker in town.

"Dad, we're here!" yelled Kathy. Sammie added a few barks to her greeting.

He was delighted to see the broad smile on his daughter's face. There was no doubt that Ryan made her happy. He gave her a tight hug. "Congratulations, sweetheart." He shook Ryan's hand and then pulled him into a hug.

She held out her hand to show off her ring. "Isn't it gorgeous?"

"I thought he chose well."

"You've already seen it?" she asked as she looked at Ryan.

"He showed me yesterday when he came to ask my permission to marry you."

Kathy's eye's teared. "You asked his permission, after all this time together?"

"Well, I wanted to do things properly."

She hugged him and gave him a quick kiss. "That's so romantic."

"Come on you two. Lunch is on the table." Steve popped the cork on the champagne and poured everyone a glass.

"Champagne at lunch?" Kathy smiled. "So fancy."

“The occasion calls for it.” He held up his glass and smiled. “To the happy couple. I know you will have a wonderful lifetime together.”

“Thank you, Dad.”

“Thank you, Steve.” Kathy shot him a look. “He told me I should call him Steve.”

Steve smiled as they enjoyed their meal. “Have you thought about what kind of wedding you’d like?”

“Oh, I thought we’d keep it simple.”

“Sweetheart, you’ve always insisted on making your own way. I respect you for that. But this is your wedding and I’m the father of the bride. I want you to have the wedding of your dreams. There is to be no hemming and hawing about it.”

“Dad, that’s not necessary.”

He covered her hand with his. “Your mother would never forgive me if I didn’t give you all the...”

“Bells and whistles,” she finished, with tears in her eyes. She looked at Steve. “It was what my mom used to say. She wanted birthday parties, Christmas, to have all the bells and whistles.”

“I know she’d be very happy for you. She would have liked Ryan very much.”

“Thank you.”

Sammie broke the tense moment with a bark. “I think he needs to go out. Ryan, would you mind?”

“Sure thing.” Ryan stood and took Sammie out to the backyard.

Kathy helped clean the table as Steve loaded the dishes in the dishwasher. “So how did the mother take it?”

“I haven’t talked to her yet.”

“She’s been told, hasn’t she?” He saw her eyes tear over. “What is it?”

“He had lunch with her. It didn’t go well, although I don’t think he expected it to. She’s very anti marriage. She says it changes everything.” Kathy wiped a tear from her cheek. “I just wish she could be as happy for us as you are. It would mean so much to him.”

Steve pulled Kathy into a tight hug. “Don’t you worry, sweetheart. Your wedding is going to be perfect.” He held his girl while he decided it was long past time he and Kayla Brennan had a come to Jesus moment.

Steve didn't bother making an appointment with Kayla and decided to pop in on her during her regular business hours. He would have to take his chances she wasn't out showing a house. But first, he had a very unpleasant task to handle.

He answered the knock on his office door. His para legal, Laura, opened the door. "Mr. Jefferson is here."

"Thank you, Laura." He glanced at her and she nodded, well aware what could happen.

"Hello Jeff. Please have a seat." He could tell Jeff must have had a drink or two at lunch.

"Thanks for scheduling this so quickly. I just want to get it over with."

Steve took a seat behind his large desk. He felt he needed to keep a safe distance from him.

"So, when can I sell the house?"

"You can't."

"What?!"

"If you'll allow me to proceed?"

Jeff nodded but his face had turned red.

"Your father has arranged for what belongings and mementos you'd left in his home to be delivered to you." Steve took a breath. "Other than that, your father has left his estate, including the house, to the Griffin Pond Animal Shelter."

"What? No! He couldn't have. He was demented. I'll fight it!"

"Jeff, your father was not suffering from anything other than old age. You can spend a lot of money trying to fight it, but you'll lose. Your father was a well-known and well-respected man in this town. His friends continued to visit him up until his death. They will all testify to his soundness of mind."

Jeff pounded on his desk. "This is your doing! You stole his money."

“I did no such thing.”

“Mr. Campbell?” asked Laura as she opened the office door.

“Mr. Johnson was just leaving.”

“This isn’t over, Campbell!” Johnson shouted as he pushed past Laura and out of the office.

“Are you alright, Mr. Campbell?”

“I’m fine, but I think it’s time to call it a day. You finish up and I’ll walk you out.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to call the police?”

“No, I don’t think he’ll be any more trouble. I have another appointment have to keep. “

Kayla kicked off her shoes under her desk. It had been a long day, but a profitable one. She'd finally sold the old Victorian property on Tanner road. It had been purchased by a couple who thought they could restore the place to its former glory. She wished them luck as she took their check. She was looking forward to a night of a hot bath and a glass of wine. She'd just finished the paperwork when she heard the doorbell. She always kept the door locked when she was alone. She was surprised to see Steve Campbell. She didn't know him all that well but he seemed to be a nice enough man. Ryan never had a bad thing to say about him.

"Steve? This is a surprise. What can I do for you?"

"Can we have a seat?"

"Ah, sure." She led him to the sofa in the sitting area. She took the chair opposite him. "What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to discuss the kids and a wedding present."

"Ah, okay. What did you have in mind?"

"I know the kids have been saving for a house but I'd like to help them. I thought with my resources and your contacts we could find them a nice starter home."

"Well, that's very generous of you."

"They're good kids. They deserve it."

"I suppose I could help you with that."

"Good. Look, it's getting late and I missed lunch. Let's get some dinner. We could talk about what listings you have available."

"Oh, that's not necessary. I can send you some listings."

Steve leaned closer. "Come on, you pick the spot."

Kayla's heart raced. She didn't like men getting too close, even if she knew them. Steve had always been polite to her whenever they were together because of their kids. But the truth of the matter was Steve made her nervous. She found herself noticing his

bright blue eyes and his easy smile. She hadn't noticed a man like that since Mark left, and look where that got her. She knew men like Steve well enough to know they didn't give up until they got what they wanted. She might as well control the situation.

"Fine. How about Aldo's?"

"Good choice," he smiled.

Steve had walked into Kayla's office ready for bear. His kid was unhappy and she was the source. He'd been ready to cross examine her, but something stopped him. She'd always been standoffish around him in gatherings but today she seemed particularly strained. She insisted on driving her own car and he didn't press. He held the door for her as they walked into Aldo's. Nothing said he couldn't be a gentleman.

"This is one of my favorite places. I love their ravioli," he said.

"Yes, I order from here."

A young waitress with a tight black ponytail approached their table with menus. "Hi, Mr. Campbell."

"Hi, Nina."

"What can I start you off with?"

"Kayla?"

"Just an ice tea for me."

"I'll have the same."

"We have your favorite tonight. Lobster ravioli."

"Oh, perfect," he smiled. "Kayla, you can take your time. Nina just knows what I like."

"No, that sounds good," she said as she closed her menu and handed it back. Nina came back with their drinks and Steve caught a Kayla giving her a strange look.

"Thanks, Nina," he smiled. He looked at Kayla as she stirred sugar in her tea. "I'm Aldo's attorney."

"Oh."

"Nina is his daughter. I've known her since she was a baby."

"Oh," she replied again, this time with a slight blush.

“You thought I had something going on with her?” he chuckled. “She’s younger than Kathy.”

“Men like young women,” she said quietly.

Steve realized this was something a lot bigger than Kayla not liking his daughter. “That’s not me.” He pushed the bread basket toward her. “The garlic bread is amazing. Have some before I eat it all.”

“Thank you,” she all but whispered.

This was going to be more difficult than he imagined. He tried to move her to a more comfortable topic. “What area of town do you think would be the best to look for the kids?”

She pulled out her phone and tapped the screen a few times. She expanded a picture and showed him the phone. “I think the northeast section of town. Maybe somewhere on Patterson. I have a few listings there. It’s a transitioning neighborhood. Young couples are buying homes from retired couples. It’s only a few miles from their office.”

“How are the schools?” He saw he take a breath and he realized he’d touched a nerve.

“They have an excellent reputation.”

“You said you had some listings?”

She pulled up a picture of a cute cottage. “This one is bigger than it looks. It has three bedrooms and two- and one-half baths. It’s on a half-acre.”

Steve smiled. He could see Kathy in this house. It was tidy and well kept. He glanced at the listing price and hoped Kayla could do a little something with it. Maybe she’d give up her commission. After all it was for her son too. She showed him a few others but the first house seemed like the best choice. “They’re all very nice but I like the first one the best.”

“It is a bit higher priced because of the land.”

“Do you think they’re any room for negotiation with the seller?”

“Yes, but I’ll have to disclose I’m part of the purchase.”

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t expect you to pay for the entire purchase. I can pay my share.”

“Oh, Kayla, I didn’t mean to put this on you.”

“I didn’t think you did but a house will make things easier for them, especially if it reduces their commute time. That will reduce their stress.” Nina brought their entrees and she was right, the lobster ravioli was delicious.

Steve thought he’d pushed far enough for now. “How is the market?”

“It’s pretty brisk. I’ve been working a lot.” She managed a small smile. “This is the first night I’ve finished up before seven.”

“Well, then I shall count myself fortunate,” he smiled. He was surprised when she chuckled.

“How is your practice doing? I assume well, if you want to buy your daughter a house.”

“I’m keeping my paralegal busy. I have a general practice. I handle a lot of estate planning and some contract law. Occasionally, a drunk driving charge, but never more than once.”

“What do you mean?”

“I believe everyone deserves a second chance, but I don’t defend repeat offenders.” Steve thought he saw her smile.

“I’ve sold to quite a few attorneys. You’re not like them.”

“How do you mean?”

“They’re usually more...” she faltered.

“More what?” he smiled.

“Flashy?”

“After Mary died, I focused on Kathy and her life. I’m not the country club sort. I don’t golf.”

“Those country club types never look as fit as you do.”

Steve stifled a snicker. From her blush, it looked like Kayla didn’t mean to say that out loud. “Well, thank you. I have a workout room in my basement. It helps me relax. I don’t need to be around of bunch of twenty something gym rats all trying to outdo each other.” He tried to turn the conversation. He needed to get to know her. “What do you do for fun?”

“Fun?” she chuckled “I work most days.”

“You must do something else?”

“Well, I like to read. My place backs up on a hiking trail. Sometimes I walk there. I don’t have time for much else.”

“I understand that. Sometimes I feel like I’m drowning in paperwork. Like today, I worked through lunch.” He looked at his watch. “I do have to get home to walk Sammie. I just got him and I’m not that confident in his ability to hold it.”

“You got a puppy?”

“No. Sammie is seven. He’s a terrier mix. He belonged to a client of mine who asked me to take him when he passed.”

Kayla looked surprised. “That was very nice of you.”

Steve smiled. “Careful, Kayla. I may start to think you like me.”

She gave him a rare smile. “Heaven forbid.”

He laughed as he signaled Nina for the bill. “Why don’t you follow me to my house. We can go over the details of the house and figure out how to get Kathy and Ryan on board.” He could see hesitation mixed with fear. What the hell had happened to her? He leaned closer. “Kayla, you know me,” he said quietly.

“Of course, you’re right.”

“You can show me a better look at the houses on my computer. And you can meet Sammie.”

“Okay, I’ll follow you.”

Steve smiled at his small victory.

Kayla didn't know why she was following Steve to his house. She had no reason to be nervous around him. She'd known him for as long as Ryan had been dating his daughter. The problem was, she'd never been alone with him. She was rarely alone with men in a personal setting. As much as she didn't want to do this, she had to get past it. If Ryan married Kathy, she'd be around Steve a lot more. He seemed nice enough. Maybe she could give him a chance.

Steve's home was a nice colonial. It wasn't nearly as grand as she would have expected for a lawyer of his standing in the community. She followed him into the foyer and looked around. It was decorated in a comfortable style as if you were meant to kick off your shoes and relax. His home was well maintained and Kayla smiled at the thought if she had the listing, she could sell it in a heartbeat.

"Would you like a coffee?"

"Actually, I would. Decaf if you have it." She leaned over to pet Sammie.

"Absolutely. If I have caffeine at this hour, I'll be up all night. Cream and sugar?"

"Yes, please."

"Why don't you go into the den. I make the coffee after I take Sammie out. My computer will link to my TV so we can have a good look at the properties."

Kayla nodded and walked into his den. This was a more male environment. There were Phillies and Eagles memorabilia on the shelves and a couple of recliners in front of a big screen TV. Steve returned with the coffees and set them down on the table between the recliners.

"Have a seat and I'll get my laptop."

Kayla sat and sipped her coffee as he turned on the big screen and linked up his computer. She looked at the screensaver, a picture of Steve smiling broadly with his arms wrapped around an equally smiley Kathy. Had she and Ryan ever been that happy together?

"That's a nice picture of you two."

“I never knew what pride and joy meant until Kathy came along.”

“That’s nice,” she said quietly.

Steve handed her the laptop and she pulled up her website. She pulled up the three listings she’d shown him. They crossed off one because it was too close to the train tracks. Kayla had to agree the noise from the train was not worth the reduced price. The second they crossed off because it was in a new development and they would be facing at least two years of construction vehicles and noise. It was also too cookie cutter, according to Steve. Kathy liked homes with character, which was one of the reasons they had rented a Victorian duplex. They moved on to the first house she’d showed him on Patterson. It was a two-story colonial with old growth trees. She pulled up pictures of the interior. The style was mid-seventies but it seemed to be a solid construction. It had three bedrooms and two- and one-half baths. She pulled up a picture of the back yard.

“Oh, that’s nice,” said Steve. “That patio would be great for barbeques. That’s a great backyard. There’s enough room for a jungle gym and swings.”

Kayla tried to push away the image of being a grandmother. “It does have a number of old growth trees. It’s been well maintained but it hasn’t been updated in a number of years.”

“I think it’s worth a look. What do you think?”

“I think you’re right.”

“Now all we have to do is get the kids on board.”

“You could ask them to meet you for lunch and then drive them to the house.”

“I think that’ll work. Maybe you can show me around first, then I’ll go get the kids.”

“Before we get the kids we should talk to the owners. They’re very nice people. We should be able to work a good deal with them.”

“Excellent.” Steve took a sip of his coffee. “Kayla, the house is two hundred thousand. I can manage that on my own. I didn’t anticipate putting that kind of burden on you.”

Kayla found herself smiling. "I can manage my share. I'm a bit like you. It's been just me and Ryan for so long. All I did was work, but I've done well. I was able to pay for Ryan's education. I don't have a big lifestyle and made good investments."

Steve raised his coffee mug to her. "Well, good for you."

"You sound surprised."

"Actually, I'm not. Ryan's told me about how hard you had it when your husband left. He's really proud of you."

Kayla stopped mid sip. "What?"

"He loves you, of course, but he admires you. He says you're indomitable."

"He does?" she gasped.

"Didn't you know?"

She looked down at her mug. "No."

"How is that possible? Hasn't he ever told you how he feels about you?"

Kayla took a deep breath. This was getting too much. "He's always been a very kind boy."

Steve reached for her hand. "I have been around your son for four years. I can tell you with absolute certainty that he loves you very much."

"Thank you."

"That's why your displeasure at their engagement has caused him pain."

"What? That's ridiculous. My son is a grown man. If he wants to marry, he will, with or without my approval."

"I'm sure that's true. He loves Kathy very much. What I don't understand is if you don't approve, why would you offer to help pay for the house?"

"Having their housing taken care of will take some of the stress off them."

"Why are you so sure they're going to have problems?"

She pulled her hand away and looked down. "Marriage changes everything."

Steve thought if she could melt into the floor, she would. Her blonde hair slipped from behind her hair and partially hid her face. She made no move to correct it. "What happened, Kayla?" he asked quietly.

"You don't want to hear about my life."

"Yes, I do. I want to understand."

She sighed and sat back in her chair. "Ryan's father was nice before we married. Everything changed after."

"Was he abusive?"

She pulled her arms around herself. "Not at first. He was just never happy. Dinner was never right; the apartment wasn't clean enough. I could never do anything right."

"That's abuse, Kayla."

She looked at him, stunned. "He hadn't hit me."

"Yet."

Kayla sighed and nodded. She looked at him with tears in her eyes. "He started drinking, a lot." She shook her head. "Why am I telling you this?"

"Maybe because you need to tell someone."

"It was a long time ago."

"I'd say the wounds are very fresh. Ryan doesn't know the extent of what happened, does he? He's never said anything."

"I tried to protect him as much as I could, but he heard the yelling. I became quite good at hiding bruises. Mark left when Ryan was twelve. He walked out one day after a fight and I never saw him again."

Steve sighed. He never could understand how a man could do that. "Bruises are physical abuse but he didn't have to hit you to abuse you. Knowing you, I'm sure your dinners were fine and your home was tidy. I'm sure you were an excellent wife and mother."

"How are you so sure?"

"Because I've known you four years. You don't do anything half way. You have a solid reputation in town."

"How do you know my reputation?"

He smiled. "I hear things. Many of my clients have done business with you. You are known for getting your clients exactly what they need at a fair price."

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Not the least of your accomplishments is you've raised a fine young man on your own."

She gave him a small smile. "You really think so?"

"If I didn't think so, I wouldn't have given him my blessing when he asked to marry Kathy."

"He asked permission?"

"He did it to be respectful. He told me he would have asked her either way. But I'm not worried. If he wasn't the right man for Kathy, she'd have never said yes. I trust her judgement." Steve realized what had Kayla so frightened. "Are you afraid Ryan will turn into your ex-husband?"

"Marriage changes people."

Steve thought if he could deck Ryan's father he would. Kayla was a strong, intelligent woman, not to mention beautiful. Fourteen years later this guy was still terrifying her. He took a risk and pushed her hair back behind her ear so he could see her face. She also could see him. "Kayla, I want you to listen to me. Ryan is not a carbon copy of his father."

“He looks just like him.”

Ah, there was a big piece of the puzzle. Every time she looked at her son, she saw her abuser. The older he got, the more he would remind her. “He may look like your ex but he’s half you. He’s a good man, kind and generous. Kathy has never had a bad word to say about him,” Steve smiled, “Except he doesn’t empty the dishwasher.” He took it as a good sign that she chuckled. “I don’t believe for one minute that Ryan will become his father. He’s nothing like your ex-husband.”

She shook her head. “Not ex.”

“What?”

She wiped a tear from her cheek. “I’m still married to him.”

The look on Kayla’s face broke his heart. “Why didn’t you file? You could have at least gotten child support.”

“I was afraid he’d come back.”

Steve straightened the collar on his polo shirt. As he brushed back his hair, he made a mental note to make an appointment with his barber. He was getting a little shaggy. The kids were supposed to meet them at the house in two hours. He was going to meet Kayla at the house soon. He couldn't get their conversation out of his head. Mark Brennan's abuse hadn't ended when he'd abandoned his family. Fourteen years later she was still living in fear. The one thing he loved most about the law was seeing people getting justice. He had some well-placed connections. They could investigate where this prick had gone without revealing who was looking for him. He grabbed his keys and smiled as he headed out his front door. He would get justice for Kayla.

Thirty minutes later Kayla was introducing him to the owners, Monica and Paul Bani. "Thank you for letting us surprise our children."

"Oh, I think it's wonderful. We raised our family here but we don't need the space anymore. We like the idea of a young family living here. We're looking forward to moving to Miami," said Monica.

"No more snow," Paul smiled.

"I can get behind that," Steve laughed.

"You two look around. Paul and I are going to lunch," said Monica.

Kayla closed the door behind them. "Since this will be a cash sale, they've offered to drop the price to one hundred and eighty thousand if we do a quick close. Mr. Bani is really anxious to move south."

"That's excellent. Now we have to see if the kids like it."

"What did you tell them?"

"I said you had a showing but if they met us here, you'd be able to join us."

Kayla took him around the house and it was everything he'd hoped for from the pictures. The house could stand some more modern appliances and a design more suited to twenty somethings, but for a first home, it would perfect.

"It's a great house," said Steve.

“I had the inspection done yesterday. The roof was replaced five years ago and is in good shape. The electric and plumbing are all up to code.”

“You really picked a good one,” he said.

A look crossed her face. “I have an eye for a deal.”

He took her hand in his. “You are amazing.”

Kayla smiled and his heart skipped. “Careful, counselor. I might think you’re beginning to like me.”

“Heaven forbid,” he laughed.

She dropped his hand when they heard the car pull up. “They’re here.”

Steve opened the door and waved to Kathy and Ryan. “Come on in.”

“Hi, Steve. Is Mom done with her showing?”

“Hello, dear,” Kayla smiled and kissed his cheek. “Hello, Kathy.”

“Hello, Mrs. Brennan.”

“Maybe you should start calling me Kayla.”

“Ah, sure...Kayla,” said Kathy as she looked at her father.

“I was wondering if you two would take a tour. This neighborhood is seeing an influx of young couples. I’d like to get your opinion on the place.”

“Sure, Mom. It looks like a nice house,” said Ryan.

They walked through the house and smiled at the homey touches. “That’s a nice size kitchen,” said Kathy.

“I’d knock down this wall with the pass through,” said Ryan. “It would open up the space.”

“Oh, Ryan, look at this backyard,” said Kathy.

“Wow. This is really nice.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Kayla smiled and looked at Steve.

“What’s not to like?” said Ryan. “It’s a great house in a great location. I’m sure you’ll sell it fast.”

“There’s already an interested party,” said Kayla.

“Well, that’s great, Mom.”

“It’s me,” Steve smiled. “And Kayla.” He nearly laughed out loud at the look on their faces.

“Dad?”

“Mom?”

Steve looked at Kayla. “Don’t you love their expressions?”

“It is pretty funny,” she chuckled.

“Mom, what’s going on?”

“Steve and I would like to give you the house as a wedding present.”

Kathy and Ryan looked at each other and both seemed to be gasping for air. Steve put his arm around Kathy’s shoulder. “Breathe, sweetheart.”

“I don’t understand, Mom. You didn’t seem happy about our marriage.”

Kayla took Ryan’s hand. “Steve and I had a long talk. I’m sorry if I made either of you unhappy.” She glanced down. “I may have my own issues, but they aren’t your issues.” She looked at Kathy and smiled. “I’ve seen the two of you over the last four years. You really are good together. I,” she glanced at Steve, “we want the best for the both of you.”

Ryan’s eyes welled with tears. “Mom, that means so much to me, to us.”

“Does that mean you’ll accept the house?” asked Steve.

Ryan looked at Kathy and they nodded and smiled.

“Is that a yes?” Steve asked. He laughed when Kathy threw herself into his arms.

“Thank you, Daddy.”

“You’re welcome, sweetheart.”

She pulled away and looked at Ryan and Kayla hugging. “Can I get some of that?” Ryan reached for her but she walked past him to hug her future mother-in-law. “Thank you, Kayla. You’ve made us both very happy.”

Steve smiled. He was glad the kids were happy. He was even more glad to see Kayla genuinely happy for the first time.

Ed's Diner had been the place for kids to go after school since the fifties. On the weekends, it did a brisk brunch business with families. The silver trailer part of the diner still had original booths and tabletop jukeboxes. As they were escorted their booth, they passed the owners of the house.

"Hi, Kayla," said Monica. "How was the showing?"

"Very well," she smiled. "I will call you on Monday to start the paperwork."

"Wonderful," she smiled. "I take it these are your kids?"

"Mrs. Bani? It's your house?" asked Kathy.

"Kathy Campbell? Oh my God. How long has it been?" she slid out of her booth to give Kathy a hug.

"Ten years. Mrs. Bani was my AP Bio teacher in high school. She showed me the joy in science."

"Thank you, dear. She was one of my brightest students."

"She still is," said Steve. "It's Dr. Campbell now. She's a researcher at Toma Pharmaceuticals." He was so proud of his girl he couldn't help but boast.

"Oh, Kathy, that's wonderful."

"This is my fiancé, Ryan Brennan. He's a researcher at Toma too."

Ryan extended his hand to both of the Banis. It's nice to meet you. You have a great home."

"Apparently, it's going to be your home soon," said Paul.

"I guess so," he smiled and took Kathy's hand.

"That makes it even better," said Monica.

Kathy sat next to Ryan so Steve slid in next to Kayla. He tried to give her as much space as he could in the small booth. He'd never seen her this relaxed. Their waitress brought their menus and Kayla pulled out a pair of reading glasses. They had thick black frames and curved up like a cat's eye. He tried to keep his smile to himself. He'd always had a thing for girls in glasses. He finally allowed himself to admire her natural beauty. Her long blond hair was pulled into a ponytail at the base of her neck. She was dressed more casually than he'd seen in some time. The black jeans and long-sleeved black sweater looked really good on her. She was a beautiful woman. He couldn't fathom the idea of Kayla spending the last fourteen years alone.

"Dad, are you sure about the house? That's an awful lot of money."

"Sweetheart, I'm not doing this alone."

"Mom, you don't have to do this," said Ryan.

"We want to do this," said Kayla. "It's a nice house and it's only a fifteen-minute drive to your work. It will make things easier for you. Now, that's enough discussion about the house." She smiled as she looked at the menu. "I haven't had one of Ed's milk shakes in forever."

"Who are you and what have you done with my mother?"

Kayla looked at Steve and smiled. He really was beginning to like Kayla, whether or not Heaven forbids.

Kayla set up her conference room for the settlement. It was the first time she'd done this for herself since the purchase of her own home. Elaine, from the title company, arrived and she set up on the conference table. She heard the front door open Steve walked into the waiting room. He must have come from court. He was wearing a dark blue suit and tie with a light blue shirt. She found herself staring at his eyes. How had she never noticed how blue there are? That his smile was a little crooked made him adorable. What, what she thinking? What was wrong with her?

"Hi, Kayla. You ready to do this?"

"What? Yes, of course," she tried to smile. "The Banis should be here soon."

"Kathy said they were coming from work. They're in the middle of a big project but they're taking a break."

Thirty minutes later, Ryan and Kathy were the owners of their first home. The Banis handed over the keys along with hugs and tears. "I hope you'll have many happy years in your home," said Monica.

"I'm sure we will," said Kathy.

"We're going to get going," said Monica. "We're staying with our son for a few days until we leave for Florida."

After they said goodbye to the Banis and Elaine, Steve offered to take everyone out for dinner to celebrate. "Dad, we'd love to but we have to get back. I tell you what, how about you come to our house this weekend. I'll cook."

"Oh, Kathy, that's awfully soon. I wouldn't want to put you out."

"Don't worry, Kayla. The movers are coming tomorrow. We'll have a few days to unpack enough things. So long as you don't mind a few boxes, we should be fine."

"Ryan, you'll help Kayla, won't you?"

"Of course, Mom. I'm just as excited about the house as Kathy."

Kathy laughed. "His reading material has turned from science magazines to barbeque brochures."

Steve patted him on the back. "My man!"

Kathy looked at her watch. "Look at the time. I'll call you about this weekend." She threw her arms around Steve. "Thank you, Daddy."

"You're welcome, angel."

Then Kathy pulled Kayla into an even tighter hug. "Thank you, Kayla. You've made Ryan so happy," she whispered. "It's all he can talk about, not the house, about you."

"Thank you, dear," Kayla said, trying to fight back tears. She watched as Steve received a hug from Ryan and then walked out the front door. She locked the door behind them and turned to Steve. "I guess that puts an end to our celebration dinner."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why? The kids went back to work."

"We have to eat and I have reservations at Le Jardien."

"Le Jardien? I'm not dressed for that."

He reached for her hand. "You look great. Come on, Kayla. Let's have some fun."

Kayla didn't know what came over her, maybe it was his blue eyes, maybe it was that adorable, crooked smile. She said yes.

Steve found himself glad that the kids bailed on dinner. He wanted to spend time with Kayla. He greeted the maître de and explained it would just be the two of them. Steve held out Kayla's chair while the waiter removed the two other place settings.

"I'm sorry the kids couldn't join us," said Kayla.

"I'm not."

She shot him a look. "Excuse me?"

"Don't get me wrong, I love spending time with them, but I think it's important that you and I get to know each other better." He saw the hesitation in her eyes. "What I mean is that now that the kids are getting married, we'll probably see each other a lot more."

"We've seen each other since they've been together."

"Not that often and when we do, well, we don't really talk."

"I'm not that interesting." She tried to lose herself behind her menu. He reached over and pulled the menu down far enough to look in her hazel eyes.

"I think you're very interesting." He sat back and smiled. "Why don't you tell me how you got into real estate."

She shook her head and smiled. "I don't know why you want to know, but very well. I worked in a realtor's office for three years. I answered phones, prepared paperwork, very dull stuff. I went to class at night until I finally got my real estate license. When I told my boss, Henry Forrest, and asked to handle my own showings, he laughed."

"He what?"

"Laughed right in my face. He told me no one wants to buy a house from someone who looks like a cheerleader."

"What an ass. What did you do?"

"I don't know what possessed me but I quit. I turned around and walked out."

"It sounds like you did exactly the right thing."

“I was just making ends meet as it was. Ryan was only fifteen. I needed to support us.”

“What did you do?”

“I got in my car and drove to Carol Reynold’s office. I’d spoken with her a few times at closings. She was always very nice to me. When I told her I’d gotten my license but Henry laughed at me she hired me on the spot. She took me under her wing and taught me everything she knew. By the time she wanted to retire I’d gotten my broker’s license and was able to buy her out.”

“Wow. I’m very impressed.”

“It’s not like going to law school or getting a PhD.”

“You’re wrong.”

She looked stunned as the waiter brought them their drinks. Steve ordered a steak and Kayla ordered the salmon. As soon as the waiter left, she took a sip of her wine. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“About what?”

“That I was wrong.”

“About your going to school not being like me or the kids. The kids and I all had scholarships and help from our parents. You didn’t. You did it all on your own while holding down a full-time job and raising your son.” He held up his glass. “You, Kayla Brennan, are extraordinary.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He loved to see her blush. “It turned out a lot of people like buying a house from someone who looks like a cheerleader.”

Kayla laughed out loud. “That was a very long time ago.”

“You really were a cheerleader?”

“In high school.” She took a sip of her wine. “It’s how I met Ryan’s father.”

Steve didn't want to take the edge off a good day. "Well, I think you still would make an excellent cheerleader." He was relieved to see her smile and sipped his wine.

"I doubt if I could do the high kicks anymore."

His brain was suddenly filled with an image of young Kayla kicking her long legs and he lost the ability to swallow, coughing his wine.

"Are you alright?"

He reached for a water glass and took a sip. "I'm fine. It went down the wrong way."

"So why law school?" she asked as she tasted her salmon. "Oh, this is good."

"I like it here. Sometimes I bring clients."

"No dates?" she smiled.

"I haven't dated much since my wife died. You know how it is. First, you're a single parent trying to balance school events and work. Next thing you know a couple of decades are past. Then you look in the mirror and see your father looking back."

"That's not a bad thing," she smiled.

Suddenly, he didn't know what to think. Law School, she asked about law school. "Ah, you asked me about law school. My dad was a lawyer. I was always fascinated by what he did. He made a good living but he really wasn't in it for the money. He was a defense attorney. There were a lot of times he took cases pro bono."

"Why didn't you go into defense?"

"Honestly, I saw how much it broke him when he lost. He thought he'd failed his client."

"Not everyone is innocent."

"True but sometimes the innocents get caught up in the system." He saw the look on Kayla's face. He'd touched a nerve. She'd never been able to pursue the justice she deserved. He had to change the subject. "Will you be able to make it to the kid's house this weekend? Aren't they your busiest times?"

“They are but I don’t have anything pending and I can have one of my associates take anything that comes in.”

“That’s good of you.”

Kayla looked at him. “I’m trying, Steve.”

“Trying what?”

“I’m trying to be better. It’s not easy for me. I’m so used to holding myself apart from everyone, even my own son. I’ve been watching you with Kathy. I’m trying to be more like you.”

Steve reached for her hand. “Kayla, I know things have been hard for you, but who you are is just fine. If you want to be more open to family gatherings, that’s great. I know you made Ryan very happy.”

“Well, we did give them a house.”

“No, it’s not the house,” he smiled. “Well, not just the house. He can see you’re trying to put aside your past and be happy for them. I can see it too and I understand it’s not easy for you.”

Kayla smiled a real smile and Steve knew he’d do anything to help her.

Steve opened his office door to Matt Conway. Matt was an ex-Army military police. He still had an imposing presence but Steve knew him to be more teddy bear than grizzly bear. It was after hours and he didn't want Laura knowing he'd hired the private investigator for a job. She'd want to know who to bill. This one was on him. Matt was particularly good on financial forensics. If someone had a gym membership in Timbuktu, Matt would find them.

"Thanks for coming in," he said. "Coffee?"

"No, thanks."

They sat down in his office and Matt put a suspiciously thin file on Steve's desk. "What have you got?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean nothing?"

"Mark Brennan has been off the grid for fourteen years. He was an accountant for a local firm. He didn't bother to pick up his last check so they forwarded it to his wife."

"What did they say about him?"

"There are only a few people still there from Brennan's time but those who are didn't have a high opinion of him. He was known for drinking his lunch and being rude to women."

"Sounds about right. He had to pop up somewhere. Did they have any ideas?"

"None. I've checked every professional organization and private companies in five states. They all have internet pages, which means biographies and photos of employees."

"Why not government jobs?"

"He'd have to undergo a background check. If he changed his name, it wouldn't hold up."

"Now what?"

"I could check more states, but that would take a lot of time."

“Why do I get the idea you think that will be useless?”

“Because it will. I got a feeling when I checked at his old office. Someone there knows something. It’s a woman named Susan Keller. When I mentioned Brennan’s name, she went pale. When I questioned her, she shut me down.” He opened the file and slid a note over to Steve. “Perhaps we’ll have better luck if she talks to someone who’s used to getting the truth out of witnesses.”

“And doesn’t look like they could bench press a Volvo.”

“That too,” Matt laughed. “That’s her particulars. She gets lunch at a café around the corner from her office every afternoon at noon.”

Steve smiled and pulled out his checkbook.

Steve was sipping his coffee at the café and reviewing Matt’s file. He’d attached a picture of Susan to her information. She was a bleached blonde who dressed twenty years younger than her age. He looked up at the sound of the door opening. Susan walked in on perilously high heels and took a seat at a table near him. He waited until she placed her order before he stood.

“Hello,” he smiled.

She gave him a big smile in return “Hello.”

“May I join you?”

“Well, I don’t normally...”

“Don’t worry, Susan. I don’t bite,” he said as he sat down.

“How do you know my name?”

“I know a lot of things about you, Susan. I know who you work for.”

“Are you a stalker? I’ll call the police.” She pulled out her phone. He took it from her and set it on the table.

“There’s no need for that. I just have a few questions for you.”

“About what?”

“Mark Brennan.”

“I don’t know who that is.”

“Oh now, Susan. If I already know your name and where you work, I also know you knew Mark Brennan.”

She sat back against her chair. “Fine, what do you want to know?”

“Where is he?”

“Don’t know, don’t care.”

“Which indicates at some point, you did care.”

“Fine,” she sighed. “Yes, Mark and I had a thing but it was years ago. It can’t possibly matter now.”

“Susan, let me explain why this matters. You may be one of the last people to see him before he disappeared.”

“I didn’t have anything to do with that!”

“Tell me about the last time you saw him.”

“Why should I?”

“Because you want to keep this just between you and me. Then, no one else needs to know.”

She paused as the waitress brought her order, a chef’s salad and an ice tea. Steve noticed when she took a sip of her tea, her hand was shaking. “Mark liked to drink. We’d been seeing each other for a couple of months. He’d come to my house. I came home from work one day and I pulled into my driveway. Mark’s car was already there. I went inside and found him stinking drunk. He was cursing his bitch of a wife.”

Steve tried to restrain his anger. “Go on.”

“All he did was talk about her then he expected me to have sex with him. When I said no, he slapped me. I told him to get out but he wouldn’t wait until I moved my car from behind his. He took my keys and left in my car. I never saw him or it again.”

“Why didn’t you report it?”

“I did, eventually.”

“What do you mean?”

“When he didn’t come back or show up to work for a couple of days, I dumped his car at the train station. I reported my car stolen. It was!”

“You didn’t tell the police that Brennan stole your car.”

“I didn’t want to get involved in all that mess. I wanted my insurance claim and never to see that bastard again. I got both.” She sat back against her chair and smiled. “There, that’s all I know.”

He stood and took a twenty out of his wallet. “Lunch is on me.”

“You’re not coming to my office, are you?”

“Don’t worry. You won’t see me again.”

Steve walked out of the café and pulled out his phone. “Matt, it’s Steve. I’ve got a lead for you.”

Kayla put on jeans and a light sweater to go to Kathy and Ryan's new house. Ryan said to dress casually. She wasn't used to casual in any aspect of her life. Things had changed since she started talking to Steve. She was starting to feel like she was enough, just as she was. Ryan certainly seemed happy. She looked in the mirror and ran a brush through her long hair. Maybe today she'd leave it down. Steve seemed to like it that way. She shook her head and put down the brush. She was being ridiculous. They would be in-laws. He was just being nice.

She walked up the drive carrying a bouquet of mixed flowers. The door opened before she could knock. "Mom, I'm so glad you're here."

"Of course, dear. I wouldn't miss it."

He smiled at the flowers. "For me? You shouldn't have."

"Don't be silly. They're for Kathy." Kathy walked towards them and smiled.

"Oh, Kayla, thank you. They're lovely." She kissed her cheek. "I'm going to find a vase. My dad is already out back playing with Ryan's new grill. Why don't you go on out and Ryan will get you a drink?"

Kayla was impressed with how much they'd accomplished in a few days. She smiled at the wall of pictures that included her and Steve. She studied her own picture for a moment. She looked quiet and separate from the others, especially her own son. She glanced at Ryan talking to Steve on the porch. He wasn't Mark, even though he looked like him. He was Ryan Brennan, PhD, a fine young man. She was lucky to have such a son.

"Hello, Steve" she smiled. She admired how a man his age could look so good in jeans. His t shirt revealed a defined chest and biceps. She mentally chastised herself. "Stop it," she thought. "He's family." He saw her and gave her a big smile. He stunned her when he kissed her cheek.

"Kayla, it's good to see you. Can I get you a drink?"

"A cola is fine."

“I better go see what Kathy needs help with. She says she doesn’t but I know better. If I don’t offer, I’m in the dog house,” said Ryan.

“Smart man,” said Steve. He opened the cooler and handed her a bottle. “How was your week?”

“It was good,” she smiled.

“Any good sales?”

“I sold the Reese estate on Revere Drive.”

“Wow. That place is gorgeous.”

“It’s even better on the inside. The owner took great care of it.”

Steve tapped the neck of his bottle to hers. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you. How was your week?” She didn’t understand the look on his face.

“It was okay. Lots of paperwork. Court stuff.” He looked over her shoulder to see Kathy and Ryan were still in the kitchen. “Kayla, I really enjoyed our dinner.”

“So did I,” she smiled.

“I’d like to do it again.”

“You mean like a date?”

“Yes, exactly like a date. We have a lot in common.”

“Our children are getting married.”

“Yes, they are. But you and I have a life outside of being parents. What’s to say we can’t share some of it together?”

“I don’t date. I can’t,” she whispered. Kathy and Ryan walked out with the steaks for the grill and the discussion was tabled. They enjoyed their meal and talked about the wedding. They’d originally thought they’d keep it small but Steve said his late wife wouldn’t forgive him if he didn’t give his little girl the wedding of her dreams.

The dishes were cleared and the grills cleaned when Steve asked everyone to sit down.

“What’s going on, Dad?”

“I need to tell Kayla and Ryan something. It’s about Mark Brennan.”

“My father? Ryan whispered.

“What have you done?” Kayla shouted.

“I found out what happened.”

Kayla’s heart felt like it would push out of her chest. “How could you! I trusted you!” She leapt to her feet and grabbed her purse.

“Mom, wait.”

She couldn’t hear them call after her. She had to get away.

Steve thought this would be difficult but he had no idea what a huge misstep he'd made. "Ryan, we have to find her. Where is she going?"

"Probably home."

"Come on, both of you."

Steve drove to Kayla's, hoping she would let them in. He had to tell her. She needed to hear him out. They pulled up behind Kayla's car and got out. Steve started to knock on the door but Ryan stopped him.

"Let me." He twisted the knob. "She's locked it. I have a key. Let me go in first. If she's locked it, she's set the alarm. I have a code." He opened the door and the alarm started beeping. Ryan punched in the code and the beeping stopped. "Mom?" She didn't answer. "She's probably upstairs." Ryan led them up the stairs and knocked on the one closed door. "Mom?" He opened the door and Steve was shocked at what he saw. Kayla was curled up on the bed, pale as a ghost and clutching a teddy bear. "Mom?"

Steve touched his shoulder. "Let me. This is my fault." He walked over and sat on the edge of the bed. "Kayla, please, can you listen to me."

"He's coming back," she whispered.

"No, he's not."

Kayla sat up and wiped tears from her eyes. "What?"

"Ryan, please sit. You need to hear this too." Ryan sat down with Kathy next to him, holding his hand. "I found out what happened to Mark."

"Who asked you to?" asked Kayla.

"I couldn't see you live in fear that he might return. It was the reason you never divorced him."

"What?" asked Ryan. "You're still married?"

"She had good reason to be afraid he'd come back. He was physically abusive."

"Oh, Mom. Why didn't you say something?"

“You were just a boy,” she whispered.

“Dad, tell us what you know.”

“Kayla, you told me you had a big fight. He left and never returned. When he left, he went...to a friend’s house.”

“A girlfriend. I’m not surprised,” she said flatly.

“Yes. He was very drunk and the girlfriend kicked him out. The problem was she was parked behind him in a single driveway. He took the keys to her car and left. She never saw him again.”

“Why didn’t she report it?” asked Kathy.

“She didn’t want to be involved in a scandal. She left his car at the train station and told the police her car was stolen.”

“Where is he?” asked Ryan. “You said you knew.”

“Yes, I do. He took the car on a joy ride up Waymart mountain. He lost control and went over the side.” He took Kayla’s hand. “Mark Brennan died the day he left. It was a bad crash. Since he hadn’t been reported missing, he wasn’t identified. The police wrote it off to a drunk car thief driving too fast. He can’t hurt either of you anymore.”

“He’s dead?” Ryan whispered.

“I’m sorry, son.”

“Don’t be. He was a miserable father but...I don’t know.”

“He was still your father,” said Kathy.

“Kayla, I’m sorry, so very sorry, if I hurt you. I wanted justice for you. I didn’t want you to be afraid anymore. I thought if I could find him, discreetly, I could put your mind at ease.”

Kathy pulled Ryan to his feet. “We’re going downstairs.” Ryan followed her in silence.

Steve held her hand to his chest. "Please, Kayla. Talk to me."

"You did this for yourself. So you could clear the way."

"No, I swear to you I didn't. I did it so you could live your life without fear." She looked in his eyes and he could tell she was trying to read him. "I swear," he whispered.

"He's really gone?"

"Yes, he was buried in a public cemetery a long time ago."

"Are you certain?"

"The police kept the dental records. They were a match to his records." Kayla collapsed against him and began to sob. He knew it wasn't for the lost husband; it was for all the lost years.

He was still holding Kayla when Kathy came back into the room. "Dad, I want to get Ryan home."

"Is he okay?"

"No, but he will be."

Steve grabbed the keys out of his pocket and tossed them to her. "Take the car. I'll grab a cab later."

Kayla looked up. "Tell Ryan I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for," said Kathy

"Thank you, dear. Then tell him I'll call him later."

Kathy nodded and gave her a small smile. "We'll get through this. We're family."

Steve was left alone with Kayla and pulled her into a tight hug, teddy bear and all. "What she said," he smiled.

"Why do you care?"

"Why? Why wouldn't I? In case you hadn't guessed by now, I care about you. I want to see you be happy. I knew you never could be with this hanging over your head."

She looked at him with the slightest of smiles. "Even though I sleep with my grown son's teddy bear?"

He touched her cheek. "Does he make you feel better?"

"Yes, actually, he does."

"Then I think it's perfectly logical. He is pretty cute."

"Why are you so nice to me?"

He kissed the top of her head. "One day, you won't have to ask me that anymore."

Eight months later Steve and Kayla were standing in the back of the church with Kathy and her three bridesmaids. Kayla smiled at Kathy and kissed her cheek. "You look beautiful, dear. I know you and Ryan will be very happy together."

"Thank you, Kayla. That means the world to us."

"Well, I guess I better take my seat. I should find the usher."

"No," smiled Steve. "That would be my job." He held out his arm for her.

Kayla smiled and nodded toward Kathy. "Don't you have a job?"

He took her hand and placed it on his arm. "I can multi-task."

"Well, aren't you clever?" she chuckled.

"Thanks for noticing." They walked down the aisle until they reached the front. He kissed her cheek and whispered, "Save me a seat."

Steve walked back down the aisle and stood in front of his baby girl. She was a beautiful woman now, smart, gifted and helping the world with her work. He couldn't be prouder. He knew Mary would feel the same way.

"Dad, you have to stop looking at me like that or I'm going to ruin my makeup."

He leaned in and kissed her cheek. "I love you, baby girl. I love who you are."

Kathy smiled and wiped a tear from cheek. "I love you too, Dad." The music started and Kathy took his arm.

"Are you ready?"

"Let's do this."

Two hours later the reception was in full swing. Steve watched Kathy and Ryan had their first dance. He tried not to cry during the father daughter dance.

"It was a beautiful wedding, Dad. Thank you."

"You're welcome, sweetheart. I think your mother would have approved."

Kathy glanced over at Ryan and Kayla having their dance. "I think she would."

Steve smiled and gave her a hug. "Thank you, baby." He left Kathy and tapped Ryan on the shoulder. "May I cut in?" Steve took Kayla in his arms and began to dance. "Are you having a good time?"

"I am having the best time."

"I'm glad." He glanced down at her lacy peach gown. Her hair was pinned up, revealing her long, slender neck. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you. You look very James Bond."

"Is that a good thing?"

"You know it is," she smiled.

Steve and Kayla had been quietly dating for six months. It started when Steve helped Kayla clear up the legal matters surrounding Brennan's death. It turned out there were some assets but neither Kayla or Ryan wanted anything to do with them. Steve suggested they donate the money to the local domestic abuse shelter. Once Mark Brennan was completely out of her life, Kayla had an ease about her. She wasn't afraid anymore.

"So, when are we going to tell the kids?" he asked.

"How about right now?" She slid her hand up his neck and gave him a gentle kiss. They glanced over and saw a smile on Kathy's face and Ryan's stunned expression.

"Be careful, Kayla. People might think you like me."

She gave him a dazzling smile. "Heaven forbid."