

Chapter Thirty-two

My granddaughter, Kayla, had just turned six. She reminded me very much of her mother at that age, especially because of her precociousness. She hugged Bitsy and said, “I am so lucky to have had three grandmothers.” I smiled at Elizabeth. She grinned back, proud that her daughter hadn’t muffed her line.

We had homemade Texas chili, a real treat for Bitsy and me. After dinner, Kayla and Bitsy went into the den to watch a DVD of “*The Wizard of Oz*.” I stayed at the dinner table with Elizabeth and Gerald. I found it to be almost eerie that she resembled her mom so much. A complexion with an exotic hint of Bedouin.

I would soon be absent from their lives for a long time, perhaps forever. I couldn’t let the evening pass without letting them know. I decided to tell them most of my story.

“Elizabeth...Gerald, there’s something I’ve got to tell you.” I didn’t like the way that came out. This was not an old movie, but real life. They looked at me with a quizzical air.

Elizabeth said, “So serious, Pop. Bitsy isn’t pregnant, is she?”

When I laughed, it was hollow. “No, but every bit as dramatic I guess.”

I went on. “When your mother died, Beth, I was in a real funk. I was mad at life, angry because of the cards I had been dealt. I took out that resentment in a way that most people would classify as over the top, in the extreme.”

I didn’t leave much out. By the time Kayla clapped her hands in the next room over the melting of the Wicked Witch of the West, I was through. My daughter and son-in-law sat open-mouthed. Finally, Gerald said, “I don’t know...I mean, I guess the world

is a hell of a lot better off because of what you've done, Duncan. You make a strong case. Like you said, I guess it's a lot like being a soldier all over again. I don't know what else to say." I believe what he wasn't saying was that now I scared the hell out of him. If confession is good for the soul, it's also damned hard on your relatives.

Elizabeth began to cry. "Oh, Pop, isn't there any way out of this mess? I love you so much, it just kills me that we might never see you again."

It finally piled up on me. I had made my choice and now it tasted like bitter acid.

I said, "I don't know how it will all wind up. I hope it might have a happy ending. And if it does, there is a way for me to let you know. Beth, get a pad and pen and write this down. Tomorrow, I want you to get a new cell phone. Call me tomorrow and leave a message on my machine. The message must be a string of forty numerical digits. Beginning with the eighth numeral, put in your new number in reverse. Don't say anything else.

"When Bitsy and I settle somewhere, I will call that cell and leave a string of numbers. The four numerals beginning with the tenth one will be a latitude designation. Then skip eight numbers and beginning with ninth one after that, the next four will be the longitude. The last numbers, in reverse from the ending one, will be our phone number wherever we are. That is where you will find us."

We sat silently for a long time. Bitsy and Kayla came in, looking for ice cream. Bitsy could tell at once that I had let our secret out. She sat next to Elizabeth and put her arm around her. More sobbing. Kayla asked curiously, "Mama, what's the matter?"

Shaking her head, Elizabeth said to her daughter, "I'm sad because your Grandpa and Bitsy are going to be going away for a long time. I will miss them"

Kayla said, “Oh, Grandpa, please don’t go.”

I was too choked up to be able to answer.

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