

A CAMPER & CRIMINALS COZY MYSTERY

Motorhomes, Maps, & Murder

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ONE



“Why didn’t they teach us about this in school?” I asked Queenie French, who was standing over the conference table in the Normal Public Library, about the history of the Battle of Camp Wildcat.

She didn’t stop looking over the map of the Daniel Boone National Park where the Battle of Camp Wildcat had taken place during the Civil War.

“They oughta since it happened right here in our state.” She shook her head and a strand of short blonde hair escaped from a bobby pin. She pointed to Sheltowee Trace National Recreation Trail near the Happy Trails Campground, the campground I owned and called home.

“That there trail played a big part.” She pulled the bobby pin from her hair and pried it apart with her teeth and fingertips before she snugged the wayward hair to her head. “Colonel Theophilus T. Garrard stood right there commanding the thousands of men in his troop.” She reached down and unzipped her fanny pack, taking out a few more bobby pins and sticking them all over her head.

“You put on this reenactment every year during the spring?” I questioned the accuracy of the event since the real battle took place the morning of October 21, 1861.

At least that’s what I’d read in the Normal Gazette, the local newspaper, in the section where they’d been featuring the reenactment to help spread the word.

“Mmmhmm,” her lips pressed together as she stood up straight, pushing the orange headband up on her forehead a little more. “During the spring was when they got word of the invasion. It took all summer to gather the troops and get them in position. Our first few reenactments were in October on the actual battle day, but the weather gets so wonky here that every year it was either raining or snowing, making it hard for everyone to sit outside all day.” She laughed. “You should’ve seen old Henry the last year we had it in October.” She was talking about my handyman at Happy Trails. “It was cold as all get out. He nearly froze to a popsicle while he laid there the four hours. He was the first one dead.”

“What?” I’d never been to a reenactment, much less participated in one. All of this seemed really fascinating to me.

“What do you mean, what?” Her eyes lowered, giving me the look. “You mean to tell me you ain’t ever seen a reenactment before?”

“I have in the movie Sweet Home Alabama with Reece Witherspoon,” I shrugged and tucked a piece of my long curly hair behind my ear.

“You’re in for a treat.” A young woman I recognized as the cashier from Tough Nickel Thrift Shop strolled into the conference room. She had a map in her hands and laid it on top of the one I was looking at.

“Then you seen enough of a reenactment to know that the people from both sides who are shot have to lay there until the battle is over. It’s a real reenactment with guns and everything, Mae.” She said my name like I should’ve known better.

“This is why I said it should’ve been taught in school,” I said, turning my attention back to the script that Queenie had given to all the actors. I used the term actor very loosely, meaning

me. "I figured you'd been gone from Kentucky too long to play a good role like a nurse, so I have you watering the horses for the soldiers near their camp site." She handed me an apron that'd seen better days. "You'll put this overtop your uniform."

"Reporting that there's no signs of typhoid fever, smallpox, measles, diarrhea, pneumonia, or malaria," said the young woman as she saluted Queenie.

Queenie beamed.

"You're the best nurse in the war," Queenie said as the two embraced.

"I'm Mae West." I properly introduced myself. "I've seen you at the Tough Nickel Thrift Store."

"Yes. I have seen you come in a time or two." She smiled at me, waves of short, light brown hair framing her face. She had side swept bangs that showed off her pretty blue eyes. "I'm Julip Kaye Knox."

"She's not just a clerk at the thrift store, she's on the board of the Historical Society. She knows the ins and outs of every map," Queenie bragged. She definitely liked Julip. "I couldn't put on this reenactment without her knowledge of the layout of this battle."

"You would've done just fine." Julip patted Queenie on the back. "Excuse me while I go grab some more maps."

Queenie wasted no time getting back to my duties as horse wrangler.

"Here." Queenie picked up a large sealed plastic bag and shoved it against my chest. "It's your outfit. In addition to the apron." She motioned to my shoulder where I'd flung the apron. "Now, don't you lose any part of it. These are real, true to life uniforms. Replicas really. But you'll find the real ones in the Daniel Boone National Park museum located in their offices."

"I'll be sure to check that out." I took the bag from my chest and held up it in the air when I noticed Hank Sharp beyond the hangers. He strolled into the room like he owned it.

Our eyes met. He smiled and it traveled all the way up his green eyes.

"Good afternoon," he said and bent down to give me a kiss.

"Hi." I crinkled my nose and lifted my hand up to rub over his black hair. "It looks like you got a haircut for your part."

"Queenie insisted I had to if I was going to be a soldier." He pulled away from me, straightened his body, clicked his heels, and saluted Queenie.

"Now if you two think that y'all are going to play kissy face during the reenactment, you're wrong. You're on opposite sides of the battle." She wiggled her finger between us. "But I do like seeing the two of you happy."

"I like making her happy." Hank winked.

"It's not hard to do." I felt like a giddy teenager.

It was a very new relationship, me and Hank. Just a few months. We didn't see each other every day, but usually did most days. And when we did, it was at my RV at Happy Trails. I'd yet to see his place, although I knew from his granny, Agnes Swift, that he lived on his parents' property in a trailer on the south side of town, even though his parents had retired and moved to Florida.

"Geez," Queenie rolled her eyes and shook her head. "I'll be right back. I have to go get your bayonet and uniform. Not everyone can handle a bayonet." She wagged her finger over her shoulder at Hank on her way out of the conference room.

I'd been in Normal for about ten months and never thought I'd find love, especially at a campground in Kentucky.

Not that I didn't love the campground. I had grown to love it. I'd grown up in Kentucky, but as soon as the clock struck midnight on my eighteenth birthday, I was on a Greyhound bus to New York City where I worked my way through flight attendant school.

That's when my life took a turn that changed everything. I'd met an older, wealthy, investment man on one of my flights, who hired me as his personal flight attendant. We fell in love, got married, and lived a life of luxury that always seemed too good to be true. Turned out it was.

Like Queenie always says, if it seems too good to be true, it is.

If only I'd known her back then. After a few years of marriage, Paul West had taken all his clients, including several in Normal, to the cleaners. This put him in jail and uprooted me from my life of luxury and into a rundown campground that he'd put in my name, which is why Happy Trails was the only thing the government didn't seize.

"Are you going over your lines?" Hank rubbed his hand down my back and looked down at the script in my hand.

"You mean my one line," I looked at the paper and continued, "Look, the troops are coming."

"You better put a little more oomph into it or Queenie will be mad." His southern drawl was like music to my ears and sent my heart soaring.

In the back of my head, I knew it was the honeymoon stage, but I was willing to see it through.

"Detective Sharp," he answered his ringing cell phone in his professional cop voice. "Mmmhmm," he hummed and stepped away from me for some privacy.

"He's gonna look so good in this," Queenie said as she walked back into the conference room and put her finger up to her mouth when she noticed Hank was on the phone. "Won't he?" she whispered and pulled up the plastic over the old uniform so I could see it better.

"He will." I laughed at the thought of seeing him in the old civil war uniform, pretending to stab and shoot someone with the bayonet. "That thing looks sharp."

"Oh, it is. I only let special people have one of these. It could poke someone's eye out." She gave a good hard nod. "I let him and Preacher Hager use them."

Preacher Hager was married to one of my and Queenie's best friends, Betts Hager.

"If you can't trust a cop and preacher, who can you trust?" I joked.

"Listen, I've got to go." Hank had walked back over to us. His face was stern, and his soft green eyes had turned back into stone like they did when he was on a case. He kissed my forehead while putting his phone back in the pocket of his black suit pants. "I'll call you later."

"What about the uniform?" Queenie called after him before he hurried out the door.

"I'll get it before the reenactment," he assured her as he called over his shoulder.

"I guess I can give it to you." She held the uniform bag in one hand and the bayonet in the other.

"No, thank you." If she thought I was going to be responsible for his uniform and bayonet and get in trouble if something happened to it, she had another thing coming. "I'll have enough of a hard time keeping up with mine."

"Mae West," she asked. "Don't you be going and making me regret putting you in the reenactment. There's been citizens who grew up here that've applied for parts and I didn't let them participate." She looked at me from underneath her brows. "You get what I'm saying?"

"I'm honored." I wasn't about to let the sixty year old widow down - she'd seen enough trouble in her life. "But I don't want that thing in my possession." I pointed to the bayonet.

The doors of the conference room opened, and all the reenactment actors filed in, ready to get all of their equipment for tomorrow morning's big performance.

"One line!" Queenie used her hands to gesture like there was an airplane runway in front of her. "Give me your name and I'll check it off."

Julip came back in with a bunch of maps. Queenie ended up having me check off each person's name on the list as she handed them their uniform and Julip gave them a map and a script.

During my ten months in Normal, I'd made it my mission to undo all the wrong Paul West had done now that he couldn't do it since he'd been murdered. Another story for another time. But it felt good that I could stand here and help hand out the important uniforms that this community was built upon.

"Did you see Lester Hager come in here?" Queenie bit her lip and looked back towards the door after the last actor has left. There was one outfit with a bayonet left, and Preacher Hager's name was the only one not marked off the list.

"I didn't." Julip shrugged.

"I didn't see him either. Or Betts." My brows furrowed, realizing it was odd that Betts hadn't shown up, even though she didn't have a part. She usually attended all community events, being a successful businesswoman and the preacher's wife and all.

"I parked by the Laundry Club if you'd like me to take it to Betts," I suggested since I'd figured Betts was there doing the books for the laundromat since it was close to tax season, something she'd been complaining about.

"She's not there." Abby Fawn, the librarian, was picking up little Styrofoam cups and stray napkins from around the room. "She called. She and Lester have all them bible-thumping women from the church at the jail, trying to get them prisoners some religion." She threw the trash away and walked over to get the sealed plastic bag and bayonet.

"Alrighty. I guess I'll give it to him in the morning at the reenactment. Something that I never do, but since it's Lester, I'll make an exception." Queenie hung the uniform on the back of one of the conference chairs and leaned the bayonet up against the table.

She removed all the bobby pins from around her head and ran her fingers through her short hair, fluffing up the top. She put the bobby pins in her fanny pack and adjusted it around her waist while she glanced over the list of actors.

"I think the reenactment committee did a real good job of coordinating everything. This went much smoother than last year," Julip mentioned while Abby nodded in agreement. "I'm sure everything will go perfectly tomorrow."

Abby took her phone out and started typing away. She was so good at social media and used that phone to spread the word about everything going on in Normal.

"I hear we're expecting a few thousand people. The biggest turnout we've ever had." Queenie nudged me. "This is why we have it during the spring. It honors the time and commitment both sides put into the battle. Plus, the weather is nice, which means a great turnout and more donations to the Camp Wildcat Preservation Foundation, who can use the money to teach more youth about our great state.

"Hashtag great state, hashtag Kentucky, hashtag Camp Wildcat reenactment, hashtag tomorrow, hashtag nine a.m.," Abby talked out loud as she typed her latest tweet to attract more tourists to our little hiking tow. "Need a place to stay in hashtag Normal? Hashtag Happy Trails Campground."

"Thanks for the shout out," I said to Abby.

Abby had been instrumental in my decision to stay and get the campground back up and running. Between my ability to talk with people and invest in our community and Abby's great marketing and social media skills, Normal's economy was thriving.

Minus the hiccups of a few murders, but that was all behind us now.

I was just hoping and praying that everything went as smoothly tomorrow at the reenactment as Queenie expected. If history repeated itself like it had over the last few months, there was going to be a hiccup.