

Don't Take Any Wooden Nickels

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One

I heard the gunshots from a distance, sharp and loud in the cool November air. A few seconds later there were more gunshots, then more, then all was silent.

Quickening my pace, I rounded the corner and hurried through two large stone arches into the Glenn Oaks Cemetery, a beautiful, shady old graveyard on the outskirts of Nashville, Tennessee. I had timed this just right, since I didn't really want to get there until the funeral was finished. Now that the honor guard had fired three volleys, I knew it was almost over.

I slowed down a little, found the gravesite, and stopped a respectful distance away. The deceased had been a naval chief petty officer in his youth, and his family had wanted him to have a full honor guard at his burial. Now I could see that nearly half of the 20 or so people in attendance were wearing full military dress uniforms.

I watched as two young soldiers carefully folded the flag that had been draped over the coffin, and then they presented it to the widow. As they did so, an older soldier lifted a bugle to his lips and lightly sounded out the notes for "Taps." The simple tune, always so mournful, sounded especially sad in the middle of this Tennessee graveyard.

Ordinarily, I think, the whole scene would've brought me to tears. Even though I didn't personally know the deceased or his family, I had been widowed myself only three years before, and it still didn't take much to open those wounds. Today, however, I was distracted by other matters. I had an exciting event of my own coming up in

just a few hours, thoughts of which were keeping my mind from becoming too absorbed with what was unfolding before me.

Once the service ended, I watched as the tiny crowd dispersed. The seven soldiers I was here to see turned and walked in the opposite direction from me, somberly shouldering their rifles as they marched toward a row of cars. I tried to catch up with them, but the earth was muddy, and the heels of my Joan & David pumps sunk into the ground with the first step. Fortunately, storing away the bugle and rifles took a few moments, allowing me time to walk around the perimeter on the sidewalk and reach them just before they drove away. All of the other mourners had already gone by then, leaving only the seven men crowded into an ancient station wagon and me. I waved at the driver, and he rolled down his window and smiled.

“Can I help you, young lady?” he asked, perfect dentured teeth showing in a tan, wrinkled face. He looked to be in his late 70s, weathered but still handsome in a crisp white naval dress uniform. I guess to him I was a young lady, though I didn’t always feel young.

“I’m looking for Commander Davis,” I said. “That’s me,” he replied. He opened the door of the car and stepped out, closing it behind him as the other men peered curiously from inside.

“Callie Webber,” I said, reaching out to shake his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.”

“It’s my privilege, ma’am,” he replied, glancing down at the envelope I was holding. “Thanks aren’t necessary. It’s part of the Greater Nashville Honor Guard service. No charge, please.”

I realized he thought I was connected to the deceased and that I was here to thank him and pay him for the military send-off. I smiled. I was here to give him some money, but not for the reason he thought.

“That’s a beautiful service you provide,” I said. “Very dignified and touching.”

“It’s our opinion, ma’am, that every veteran deserves full military honors at their funeral.”

“Yes, I agree,” I said, aware that although the government will provide a burial flag and two military representatives for a veteran’s funeral, it’s up to volunteer groups like this one to flesh things out by giving a full military send-off, including the firing party and a live rendition of “Taps.” I thought their group provided a valuable community service, and I was happy to be the bearer of good news on this sunny autumn morning—despite my distracted mind-set and the grim surroundings of a cemetery.

“ ’Course,” he said, “our job is a lot easier on a gorgeous morning like this. Two days ago we were out in the pouring rain.”

I smiled, agreeing that it was, indeed, a lovely day. Unbeknownst to him, I had watched him and his little group of veterans at that rainy funeral—though at a distance and from the comfort of my rental car. In fact, I had been in town now for three days and had spent the majority of the time discreetly examining his organization. As an investigator for a charitable foundation, it was my job to scrutinize the finances and activities of selected nonprofits and award grants to them if they passed our rigorous screening process. This gentleman’s application had struck me as particularly charming, and I was glad that after a little digging around I had been able to determine that his group was a legit bunch doing good work. A grant would be a big help for them. The handing over of the money, like now, was the fun part that always came at the end of a successful investigation.

For me, however, an even more fun event awaited at the conclusion of this particular investigation. After much frustration and anticipation, I was finally going to meet—face-to-face, for the very first time—my enigmatic boss, Tom. We had known each other for two years now, spending countless hours together on the phone and over the internet. But we had never actually met in person. Today, however, we were finally going to change that with a brief get-together in the airport as our paths crossed. It wasn’t much, but it was better than nothing!

For now, I was trying to put my meeting with Tom out of my mind until I was actually on the plane flying home. As long as there were no glitches, I should be able to finish my work here and make it to

the airport in plenty of time for my flight. Guiltily, I glanced at my watch, telling myself to focus.

“I would imagine you have a lot of expenses with something like this,” I said, looking at Commander Davis.

“Well, the government provides the blanks for the M-1s,” he replied. “Other than that, it’s just your basic stuff. Transportation to the funerals, maintenance on the rifles, things like that.”

I nodded, thinking back over the information he had supplied in his grant request. I especially liked the section he had written under “Additional Needs”: I guess we could use a few bugles and some bugle lessons, the application had said, ’cause right now the only one in our group who plays the bugle is Charlie Goodall, but he wants to move to Memphis to be closer to his daughter, not to mention that his emphysema keeps acting up, and when it does he can’t really get enough breath to play good. I smiled now remembering it, thinking that Charlie had sounded a little breathless when he tooted out “Taps” today.

“I suppose I should tell you,” I said, “that I’m from the J.O.S.H.U.A. Foundation.”

“The grant people? Yes, ma’am. I sent in an application a while back.”

“Well,” I replied, “it made its way to me, and I’m happy to say we will be awarding you a small amount of money for your bugles and bugle lessons.”

I handed him the envelope, inside of which was a check for \$5000 made out to the Greater Nashville Honor Guard Society. I could see a slight disappointment flash across the man’s face, sorry that he hadn’t received the money for his primary request, which was \$11,000 for a used transport vehicle to carry their small group back and forth to all of the funerals they attended in the region.

“Well now, that’s good news. That’s very good news,” he said finally, tucking the check back inside the envelope. “We sure do appreciate that. Old Charlie, especially. Thanks.”

Old Charlie waved to me from the backseat, obviously hanging onto every word of our conversation.

“The best way you can say thanks,” I replied, repeating the little speech that always accompanied the handing out of a donation, “is to take that money and use it to further your mission as outlined in your grant proposal. The foundation believes strongly in what you’re trying to accomplish, and we just wanted to have some small part in furthering your efforts.”

“That’s real nice,” he said, reaching out to shake my hand. Similar sentiments were expressed from inside the car, which I accepted on behalf of my employer. I told them that I understood if they needed to get going, and I waited until Commander Davis got back into the car before I leaned over and spoke again.

“Oh, and on your way,” I said, “you might want to stop off at Henderson Motors.”

“Henderson Motors?” the commander asked, concern wrinkling his brow. “Do we have a flat tire or something?”

“No, sir,” I replied with a wink. “But they’ll have your brand-new Transmaster Eclipse 12-passenger van ready for you in about ten minutes.”

“What?” he asked, his eyes suddenly wide with excitement.

“It’s all yours, gentlemen, compliments of the J.O.S.H.U.A. Foundation.”

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