



SUSAN LYTTEK
KILLER FIELD

COORDINATING A SCHOOL OUTING
HAS NEVER BEEN THIS DEADLY

Trip

Killer Field Trip

Susan Lyttek

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Killer Field Trip

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Dedication

Abundant gratitude to my husband and sons for putting up with my erratic hours and patience reading my drafts. God blesses me daily through each of you.

Thanks again to Kristi Best for pre-reading my rough draft, not once, but twice. You are a dear friend.

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And, as always, thank you, Lisa, for enjoying the Talbott family almost as much as I do. Your diligent editing makes the stories shine!

Praise

Unputdownable is the best way to describe this wonderful novel from Susan Lyttek. Learning about history has never been so deadly or so interesting~ C. Revell

This book keeps your attention, is fun to read and can generate conversation with your kids trying to solve a mystery. It is a good book for the whole family. ~ V. Guthrie.

I loved this mystery that twisted its way through a cemetery, underground tunnels, and people's lives and histories. We are "homeschooled" on how we can use knowledge, our own talents, love for family and friends, and a commitment to God and following Him, to find the solutions for many problems, mysterious and otherwise.

A good read for the entire family. I'm a grandmother and I loved it. ~ K Johnson

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Soccer did it to me again. Here I was, stuck a couple hundred plus miles from home, looking down on a decidedly dead foot.

I guess it wasn't soccer directly, no more than it was last time, but it got me here all the same.

I'll explain. My name is Jeanine Talbott. My wonderful husband, all those miles away, keeping the roof over our heads is Captain James Talbott. He's a career Army officer, and I adore him. He thought it was cute when we started dating that both of our names started with "J" so we continued the trend. My eight-year-old daughter and lover of all things Nancy Drew is Josie.

"Sorry, Mom," Justin apologized for the umpteenth time.

Justin is my ten-year-old soccer fanatic. (The only other "J" would be Jelly, our slobbering bulldog. He's back at home with James.)

"It's not your fault, sweetie," I said putting my coat over his shoulders. I said this even though part of me thought it was. He didn't need to go taking the blame for listening to his teacher and trying to help. He had tried to do the right thing. I had tried to do the right thing. But now my best friend guarded a corpse, and Justin's friend Mitch was hurt.

And this was not just some random corpse. I had spoken to this person. That made it even creepier in

my book.

Through chattering teeth he'd said, "This would never have happened if I hadn't wanted to go on the field trip with G-SEFH."

G-SEFH, pronounced Gee-sef, was Justin's latest passion. It stood for Gentle Springs Educators for Home and was a homeschool co-op. The co-op began through the efforts of Elizabeth Arthur, a homeschool mom of six who had enough energy—without coffee—to power an entire city. She was also the driving force behind their history curriculum and loved early American history as much as the kids and I did. In truth, more than the kids and I. But I'm digressing.

When Justin found his soccer team in Gentle Springs, he discovered that the two other homeschoolers on said team took classes at G-SEFH. They raved about it. They bragged about the fun between classes. They exulted in the time to spend with other homeschoolers. They especially touted the organized outings and field trips.

"Mrs. Arthur arranges the coolest field trips," Mitch had told Justin. "Sure, it's history. But it's always weird history or neat history. Sometimes we go for two to three days. And we get school credit for it without working. It's fun!"

"Yeah," agreed Josh. "And because it counts as school, my mom lets me have a break in all my other studies."

That sold Justin. He's a good kid and a smart one. But "doing school" doesn't motivate him like it does Josie. Fun school to get out of "regular school"? That was almost as good as soccer, taxidermy, or video games.

"Taxidermy?" you ask. Yes, thanks to my dad,

Justin adopted the hobby. I love Dad dearly, but I do wish leaving home meant I left that smelly business behind me. Unfortunately, the lure always drew Justin to my dad's hobby shop out back whenever we visited. Justin was six when Dad helped him process his first squirrel. Twinkle, as Justin dubbed him, became an unusual security blanket. He still drags him around by the increasingly de-furred tail whenever he feels unsettled or unhappy.

I've been meandering.

We joined G-SEFH for Justin's sake. He signed up for the Early American History class in hopes of those field trips. He also signed up for a Christian-focused martial arts class as a way to perfect his soccer kicking abilities. (He called it cross training. He said all the great athletes do it. I thought, "Who is this young man, and what did you do with my boy?")

Josie went along with the endeavor and offered to sign up for a drawing class. Evidently, Nancy Drew had some serious drawing skills that aided her investigations.

"It might come in handy, Mom," she said. "Especially if we have another case."

"Heaven forbid!" leaped out of my mouth. I watched her face fall. In spite of the fear and the danger we had experienced several months ago when we found the body of Rick Folger, she hoped for another mystery. I could understand. She enjoyed having a way to prove her skills and test her abilities. But I knew there had to be better, safer ways to do that.

"But Mom..."

"Josie," I tried to comfort her. "God did help us through all that when we moved in. He gave us grace and wisdom to deal with the situation. But He isn't

likely to do that to us again. People don't routinely encounter dead bodies."

She still signed up for the drawing class. I wish I didn't know who my kids inherited their stubborn streak from.

But rather than confusing you with more random details, let me go back to where this all started.

Co-op began on a snowy day in January. All day long it dusted and melted. It wasn't enough to close anything down, which only takes about an inch in all parts south of the Mason-Dixon Line, but enough to look pretty and make me nervous. In spite of an early assignment (before kids) with James in Germany, I'd never mastered winter driving.

"Maybe they'll postpone," I told the kids as I looked out the window.

Josie laughed. Honestly, you'd think my girl would be a bit more sympathetic. "The roads get wetter than this when it rains, Mom."

I stared at her, not sure if I needed to scold her for her tone or praise her for her wisdom. Before I could choose, my eight-year-old snuggled up to me and patted me on the shoulder.

"You'll do fine, Mom."

I couldn't let her get away with the role reversal.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I replied as sincerely as I could. I pulled her closer into a hug. I felt her relax. I quickly pinned her arms and began the tickle barrage.

"Not fair!" she gasped between giggles.

"Just reminding you..." Each word found a new

place to tickle my squirming girl. "That I'm the mom."

True enough, we made it to the first day of co-op. I crept along, hitting a maximum speed of twenty-five miles per hour and frustrating about a dozen drivers on the two-lane stretch of 125 South. I couldn't tell whether my driving speed or the double line in the middle of the road irritated them more.

One of those cars followed me into the parking lot of Gentle Springs Fellowship on church row. I hoped the driver didn't realize that I'd been at the front of the caravan.

As soon as I'd put the jalopy in park, Justin and Josie bounded out of the car to find their classrooms. I saw the other car's driver coming over to me through the rearview mirror. I stayed put. I'd rather have a car door between me and someone else if I were going to get a scolding.

I rolled down the window.

To my surprise, it was Ann Selkirk. Ann lived on the same street as I did. Her daughter, Megan, and Josie had become best friends when we moved in. Ann had also jeopardized my kids in the hunt for her family's treasure several months ago. God had helped me recognize how Ann's pain led to the desperate act, and to forgive her. She had since joined our church and was working on her community service hours to atone.

"Ann, what are you doing here?" It didn't come out as I meant it to.

She still smiled. "Aren't I allowed to be here?"

I sputtered. "That's not what I meant. You know I enjoy seeing you. It's just, what are you doing here? In this place?"

"So Megan didn't tell Josie. I bet your daughter will be surprised, too."

I opened the door to my car as I rolled up the window. "Let's get in where it's warm and you can tell me all about it."

Gentle Springs Fellowship met in a long, low building that had housed an industrial warehouse at one point. Whomever the church had hired had done well with what they had to work with. They divided the storage space into cozy rooms and used the section with the most windows as the sanctuary. Even on this snowy day, the light from the easterly facing windows landed on the polished wooden cross behind the podium, making it seem alive with warmth. On a sunny day, I imagine it sparkled.

At the rear of the sanctuary, they had carved out a small kitchen and coffee shop. Here, the moms who didn't have a class to teach congregated. One of the other moms, Nora something or other, attended the church and offered to run the coffee counter on co-op days. I paid \$2.00 for a large latte, a bargain under any circumstance, but more so since I hadn't made my usual pot of sustenance that morning, and joined Ann at a table.

"Do you ever forego coffee?" she joked.

"Not if I can help it," I admitted. "Now tell me."

She took a deep breath, preparing herself to explain whatever it was. "Megan has been having trouble in school."

"Trouble? But she's such a smart little girl."

"I know. That's what bothered me about it. The teacher tried. She worked with Meggie after hours, arranged for tutors and special testing, reassigned her to a seat in the front. But with twenty-five students, she couldn't give her as much in-class attention as she would have liked. Ever since she started third grade,

my girl kept falling farther and farther behind.”

I nodded sympathetically. I took a sip of my coffee waiting for her to finish. Oh, it was so good. Maybe I should ask for a deluxe coffee machine for my birthday. I’d been relishing the flavor while watching her face for quite some time. “And?” I prompted.

“And I’ve watched you.”

“Me?” I couldn’t imagine she saw much worth watching in me.

“Yes, you. I saw you homeschooling your kids. I’d never thought about it. Sarah did so well. Sure, she had glitches, but the teachers and schools always worked out for her. She had her friends, too. Still does. She’d disown me if I took her out of high school. But Megan never quite fit. Not until she met Josie.”

“I’m glad Josie’s her friend.” I kept her attention as I savored another mouthful of the sweet latte. Maybe it was a good thing I didn’t have one of these machines. I drank too much coffee anyway.

“But it was more than that. Josie’s definitely a bright girl. But she moved slower than the kids Meggie knew from school. She could see things, ponder things, and understand what Megan understood. I figured if secondhand homeschooling could help Megan fit in, maybe first-hand homeschooling would help her grow.”

“So you’re...”

“Yep. We took the plunge. Dan and I talked a lot about it. My service hours are almost over. If we have a conflict until then, Dan’s willing to forward his calls to home to monitor her work until I get back.”

“Or you could have her join us for an hour or two,” I offered.

Ann jumped up, ran around the table, and hugged

me. "I hoped you would say that. I didn't want to ask, but I hoped you would say that."

My friend had joined the ranks of homeschoolers.

As she sat back down, an odd smile crept over her face. "In return, maybe I could help you with something."

"You could?"

"Yep. I could homeschool you."

"Me? What do I need homeschooling for?"

She buried the smile and quipped with a straight face. "Winter driving." Then she laughed like it was the funniest thing in the world.

2

At the end of the morning, Josie bounded over to me exploding with excitement. "Megan's in my classes! My very same classes!"

At the last minute, Josie had added on a physical fitness class so that her time at co-op would match her brother's. Megan followed on her heels, an eight by eleven drawing pad under her arm.

"We learned how to see shapes today," she told her mom. "Did you know an artist sees a tree as a rectangle and a circle?" Then she opened her pad and showed her work. I could see one tree in the front with two smaller ones behind it. "The teacher said I had a real eye for perspective. What's perspective?"

"I'll tell you what she meant on the way home." Ann turned to me. "Sorry, Jeanine. I have to get going. This is Sarah's early release day, and I need to pick up a couple of things at the store."

"Coffee at my house on Friday?"

"Can't. That's my next service duty. Will you be open to watch Megan then if Dan can't?"

"Sure." I gave her a hug goodbye and promised we'd think of something to do the next time we got together. How had we talked all morning but hadn't said anything of meaning since she'd told me about her decision to homeschool? True, we had visited with the other moms some and introduced ourselves. But I had this empty feeling like I had needed to do or say

something, but I couldn't for the life of me figure out what it was.

We fell into an easy and comfortable routine. Mondays we stuck around home and covered most of the textbooks. Tuesdays and Thursdays we rushed through schoolwork because Justin had to be at soccer practice at two PM. At three on Thursdays, Josie and Megan went to an American Girl club at our church, so I felt like a shuttle service those afternoons. Fridays, after I regained my own energy by sleeping in a little later than the rest of the week, were our day to finish up whatever we had scheduled that didn't get done earlier in the week. If we managed to finish it all, we either worked ahead, went somewhere fun, or took a lazy day listening to audiobooks. Those lazy days were my favorite.

Wednesdays, the co-op day, was our out-of-the-house day. They spent the morning at co-op while I visited and drank lattes, sat in my car and paid bills, or ran a quick errand with Ann acting as my lookout. After co-op, we made our regular trip to the library, to renew and check out books under the watchful eye of Mrs. Smythe. After a brief stop at home for a lunch of PBJs or ham and cheese and a yard break for Jelly, we headed for battle at the commissary. I had each offspring trained for certain aisles and types of food so they knew the bargains almost as well as I did. We aimed for the maximum weekly groceries for the minimum weekly price. Since each child had assigned tasks for the process, we saved time as well as money. Even with our system, the round trip excursion took at

least two hours. Then we took our booty home, which always included a precooked chicken, a bag of French fries, and a salad mix, enabling a fairly healthy, quick dinner before heading to AWANAs at Mount Hope.

The plus side to Wednesdays? The kids never complained about going to bed once we got home at night. They were exhausted.

The kids took to co-op like a Southerner to sweet tea. Josie loved spending class time with Megan, even though Megan turned out to find drawing easier. After all the school problems she'd had in the first half of the year, I rejoiced that Megan found a niche of success, even at the expense of my daughter's ego. The P.E. class helped them burn off some energy, and Josie kept telling me how she had to get faster so she could earn the Presidential Award when they took an exercise test in the spring.

Justin had no problems with martial arts. His years of experience and discipline with soccer helped with that. The history class, though, challenged him. He had to study for tests and write essays—neither skill yet mastered. But he persevered, knowing that his patience would earn him a truly awesome three-day field trip.

Elizabeth Arthur, that queen of energy and organization, already had the trip planned. She scheduled it for the end of March when spring would grace us with its warmth and the schools would have off for Easter break.

"It makes it easier to get chaperones and volunteers when they've already planned time off for the older kids," she told me. "Also, it just happens to be around the same time of year George Washington would have been there."

Just happens to be. She was a history buff. I didn't

believe the coincidence for a moment. But I smiled and thanked her all the same.

Still, Justin used the calendar his Grandma Talbott sent him this past Christmas to count down the days. It was the first time I ever recalled him pulling out the annual present, other than looking at the jokes on Christmas Day. My boy was growing up.

The field trip sounded intriguing, I had to admit. Justin and his class would leave Gentle Springs early on Monday morning, drive west until they hit the Blue Ridge Parkway, and then meander north along its scenic route. Elizabeth had a couple of favorite overlooks where she'd planned for the kids to stop and take pictures. Their target was a small town in the Shenandoah region that used to belong to Lord Fairfax. There, they would begin the true journey. She had planned for them to walk in the footsteps of young George Washington.

On an earlier trip north, the ever-energetic woman had looked at some rare manuscripts and letter copies to determine where George might have indeed walked as he worked on a surveying team for Lord Fairfax. Her husband, who loved to tinker with wood, made five wooden compass replicas for the trip, similar to what young Washington might have had. The top students in the class would be allowed to use them on the trip and then be awarded them in a special ceremony after they returned.

On the Tuesday of the trip, the class would trace young George's steps and attempt to use a compass similar to the one he would have used. They would also canoe down river like George's party did. But rather than have them camp in the barn somewhere to imitate our first president's uncomfortable night, using

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a blanket that had more lice than material, they would spend two nights in heated cabins at a local campground, using their own sleeping bags.

On Wednesday, before driving back to Gentle Springs, they would tour a couple of caves, imagining what might have happened to George and company had they fallen into one.

It sounded like a lot of fun. I almost wished I could go along. But as a new co-op member, I wasn't likely to get picked as a chaperone.

The prospect of a compass, canoes, caves, and cabins convinced my son that he needed to excel in a big way. He worked hard to ensure that he would be one of the five to earn a compass and guarantee a coveted spot on the field trip. His friends Mitch and Josh also worked their tails off studying and researching for history. They came over almost every Saturday and did an hour or more of homework before descending into the world of video games. If I had known a field trip was all it took to get Justin to do schoolwork on the weekends, I would have planned one long ago.

The last Wednesday in February, Elizabeth Arthur pulled the moms of the history students aside.

"I wish I knew all of you ladies better," she said, "but I do know your children fairly well by now, and I enjoy them."

We thanked her until she silenced us with a raised hand and a slight shake of the head. "I have some news that could change co-op." She paused. "I'm pregnant."

Again, she had to subdue us, this time as we