



Talbott family nuptials
go sideways when the
wedding planner
turns up dead.

*a Wedding
to **DIE** for*

SUSAN LYTTEK

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Die For

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Dedication

To my darling hubby, Gary, for putting up with the demands of writing on my life. Love you.

Thanks to my amazing editor, Lisa McCaskill, for always making my books the best they can be.

Thanks again to Purvis Dawson for his expert advice. I told you I would find a way to use your park service knowledge!

In memory of my diligent (and forever unpaid) editor, marketer and publication events coordinator... otherwise known as Mom. I will remain grateful for everything you did to support me and nurture my writing until that glorious day that we see each other again in the presence of Jesus.

In honor of my son, Erik, and his new wife, Christina. Who would have guessed that the fictional wedding I wrote just after you started dating would have the same wedding date that you chose over a year later? May your years together be blessed!

What People are Saying

Plundered Christmas

It's Christmas and the Talbotts are all back together. Tree, carols, presents, dead body... Nothing is simple when the Talbotts go away. And Christmas is no exception to the rule. Another great story from Susan Lyttek that kept me reading way into the night. I can thoroughly recommend this to everyone.

Prologue

In recent years, the Talbott clan has had their fair share of blessings and joy—not the least of these include my father’s bride, Margo, as well as the blooming relationship between Frank and Aimee.

But in addition to the good stuff, we’ve had a more-than-usual allotment of the not-so-good. Some of it showed the worst of sin and gave my kids homeschooling lessons that I wished they’d never had. They’ve already seen the results of three violent crimes. That’s too much evil for a couple of sweet kids.

I was staring up at some of that evil right now. Yea, up. Murder victim number four that I had encountered was tied into the branches of a tree.

Before I set the stage for replaying our latest adventure, I should backpedal just enough so you know who’s talking to you. My name is Jeanine. Jeanine Talbott. I am the homeschooling mom of two of the most (usually) delightful kids. Justin just turned twelve and Josie is ten. It’s hard for me to believe that by my son’s next birthday, I will be the mother of a teenager.

My husband and the provider/sustainer of our homeschool way of life is the amazing Captain James Talbott. At one time, I would have sworn backwards

and forwards that I would never marry someone in the military, but God is both good and has a sense of humor. James is the best and only man for me. He does the Army proud, and I love him for it.

While we dated, James thought the proliferation of J's in our names was cute. (My maiden name started with a J, too—don't ask me about the J.J. grade school years.) He made me promise that we'd all be J's and we are, even down to our loyal and slobbering bulldog, Jelly.

The pooch must have known that I was thinking about him because he barked on cue.

My normally well-behaved pup strained at his leash, trying to get closer to the apparition in the tree. The victim, who I recognized even from this distance, was wrapped in rope so securely that it fastened her to a branch of the dying pine and covered most of her clothes. A spot of dark brown colored the needles below her—with what I assumed to be blood.

I heard footsteps scuffling in the gravel behind me and knew my walking companion had caught up. "Is this where Jelly dragged you..." She broke off. "Oh my."

I thought 'you can say that again,' but it sounded callous. So instead, I said, "Jelly has a nose for trouble. Especially after the mysteries in the last two years."

Josephine nodded and looked a little green. Josephine, my best friend from forever whom Josie is named after, had come in for my dad's wedding to Margo. We had decided to escape from the busy-ness and go for a walk to catch up. Her Air Force hubby and my Army man tended to pull us in opposite directions, and I hadn't seen her as much as I would have liked over the years.

So walking Jelly through these green mountains, relatively cool even in the summer heat, seemed a perfect excuse to get away.

Until this moment.

Now the idea of crowds of people felt almost comforting.

"Is that...?" she asked.

I sighed. "Yes, of course it is."

While I did not like the sight in front of us, I knew that nothing we could do would change it. She was already dead.

"I know you had told me about the crazy things that happened to you since your move to Gentle Springs, but I never expected to be a part of it." My best friend swallowed hard, possibly choking back the natural effect that unnatural death had on one. She looked a little more intently at the body in the tree. "Is it her?"

I knew what she meant and who she meant. "It appears so. But we have to contact whatever authorities are in charge here. They'll take care of all those ropes and get the body down from the tree."

There were a lot of ropes. The victim was strung to a bare branch of one of the mountain pines. The tree had seen better years as most of its lower third was devoid of greenery. I couldn't even see any brown needles on the empty limbs. Of course, almost anything could be hiding behind all that rope. Who would have done this? It would have taken a long time. I couldn't imagine patiently wrapping rope around a dead or dying body. It was a warm summer day, but I shivered.

It was beyond not nice and definitely evil.

"Let's head back as quickly as we can and get

someone else to handle this," I suggested. All curiosity evaporated and instead I was filled with a strong desire to escape.

"Amen," Josephine concurred.

And letting Jelly lead us, we raced down the mountain.

1

April

"I had to call you," Dad said, "once we decided."

It was in the middle of a school day, so I looked at the kids as I responded to make sure they were making progress on their work. There's nothing like a phone call, or sometimes any distraction, to make school less than appealing.

Justin was at the computer doing his math program. When he saw me with the phone on my ear, he drew a question mark in the air.

'My dad,' I mouthed in response.

At that he leapt up and lunged at the phone. "Hi, Papa! I'm doing well on Twinkle Two."

His papa had convinced him that years of handling had made the original stuffed squirrel look kind of creepy. One glass eye popped out so frequently that Justin forgot to put it back in more often than not. The tail had been caressed into oblivion. That means there wasn't a speck of fur on it. It looked as though it belonged on a rat instead of a squirrel. So Justin had obtained a new squirrel while visiting his Papa (I didn't ask how) and was proceeding to turn it into a new and improved Twinkle.

I covered up the phone with my hand. "Get back to work. Remember you still have history after this and

soccer practice at three o'clock."

My dad chuckled in my ear. "Say 'hi' to my grandson."

"Later," I sighed. "I promise."

Josie sprang into the room. How she had heard us from her spot at the kitchen table, I don't know. "Tell Papa hello. Is he still planning on coming to the Passion this weekend?"

The Sunday School group at New Hope Community Church was putting on a modified version of the Passion this weekend, and Josie had the part of Mary Magdalene.

I could hear the smile in my dad's voice. "Let her know that Margo and I wouldn't miss it for anything. We'll arrive Friday."

I relayed the message to my daughter who joyously hopped back to the table and continued working on her vocabulary lists. Justin, though, was still looking at me and hoping to get in on the conversation. Trying to mix both gentleness and forcefulness, I used my phone-free hand to steer him back to face his math problems. He groaned, but as I walked away, I heard the familiar ping of a correct answer.

"OK, Dad, what couldn't wait for this weekend?"

He sounded like an eager schoolboy. "Margo and I are going to get married on the one-year anniversary of the day we met."

Thousands of details and plans drove at warp speed through my brain. "But that's less than two months away! We can't possibly plan a wedding in that time."

Dad didn't get my complaint and appeared not to hear my second statement. "I know. Perfect, right?"

That way we can spend more of our remaining years married to each other. After all, my beloved and I aren't getting any younger."

"No, Dad. Not perfect. Do you know how many things have to be done before a wedding happens?" I decided to try to get the idea into his head again. "Two months isn't nearly enough time."

"But we've already started, right? Didn't you and Margo go dress hunting?"

I sighed loud enough so he could hear it.

In response, he clucked. I could almost feel the pat on the shoulder through the phone. If and when I ever got my father willing to video chat, I imagined that he would pat the computer whenever he thought I was acting childlike.

"Hunting, only hunting. We didn't find anything."

"Half the battle then," he crooned. "It's always harder to find what doesn't work and what you don't want. No problem. It'll all work out. We both know God's in control, right?"

He would play that trump card. "Of course, God's in control. He always is, Dad. But we still have to *do* things before you have a wedding." I emphasized the word 'do'. If I had my guess, Dad wouldn't do much more than show up the day of the festivities.

"Do? What is there to do for two old fogies like Margo and me?"

I couldn't imagine elegant Margo would appreciate it if she heard her beau calling her an old fogey. But then, since she became a Christian, she kept surprising me with how she acted and reacted. God was definitely working in her quickly.

"You do know that sometimes it takes at least two months to send out invitations and get the responses

back alone, don't you? And that's only one of the parts of planning a wedding. You're not allowing enough time."

The patting sensation got more persistent as did the audible clucking on the other end of the line. "Don't be a Martha, o' daughter of mine. It will all work out."

My dad was hopeless. "And Margo's on board with all of this?" I kept hoping his better half would add some reason and logic to the situation.

"On board? It was her idea."

"Truly...?"

"Yep. See you Friday!"

It was confirmed. They were both nuts.

With that, he hung up. And that was that. Our family was going to have a June wedding. A wonderful and romantic notion, yes. But it was April. And the planner in me (you don't homeschool for so many years without being a bit of a planner), said it was impossible.

~*~

When James got home for dinner that night, I unloaded on him. As I was finishing up the touches on our meal of meatloaf, mashed potatoes, tossed salad and roasted asparagus, he let me rant. Finally, when I reached the end of what I had to say, my hubby looked at me. It wasn't an unkind look, but I knew what it meant.

I tried to better my defense. "They don't have anything ready yet. Dad seems to think it's just a matter of getting a wedding license and showing up."

“And it can’t be?”

“Can you see Mom Margo just showing up to anything?”

James grabbed the four plates from the cupboard and began to set the table as I took the meatloaf out of the oven to spoon the glaze over the top of it.

“Maybe not when we first met her, but between your dad and her new faith, she’s been changing. I’m not sure what she’s capable of now. She might even be able to elope with your dad.”

I grimaced. Then I smelled the bacon-roasted asparagus, (my kids’ favorite and only way to tolerate that vegetable) and the delicious aroma forced the frown off my face. “Don’t even joke about that.”

“Who’s joking? Jeanine, they’re adults. They are independent adults. They can do it as they wish, when they wish, and even where they wish. And while it was nice of your dad to tell you about their decision, he didn’t have to. Would you have felt better if they sprang it on you this weekend?”

Smelling food, the kids had wandered into earshot of our conversation. “Sprang what on Mom?” Justin asked.

“Your papa’s call this afternoon was to let your mother know that he and Grandma Margo will be getting married in June. On the one year anniversary of when they met.”

“Cool,” Justin said, grabbing a cherry tomato from the salad bowl.

I slapped at his hand. “You know the rules. Wait until after we say grace.”

He just smirked and chewed. “I’m calling it a late afternoon snack, not dinner.”

Sometimes kids were too smart for their own

good. But seeing my boy raised a thought. "Wouldn't you be upset about Papa getting married during your birthday week?"

The other territory had heard that. "Papa and Grandma Margo are getting married around Justin's birthday? That's June." Josie clapped her hands. "We're going to have a wedding!" She started twirling around chanting, "We're going to have a wedding! We're going to have a wedding!"

"Why would I be upset?" Justin looked completely confused. "We can probably have the family party with them just before the wedding. And I can have my friend birthday party anytime in June. In fact," he paused, rubbing his hands together, "this could all work out as more presents for me."

"Justin!" I scolded, horrified at the blatant greed.

James grabbed the salad bowl before Justin could reach into it again and took it to the table.

As my darling walked back to grab the next container of food, he gave me that piercing glance again. "You see, Neenie, only you are reacting like this is a bad thing. Let your dad and Margo do what they will do."

I opened my mouth to say something else, but I couldn't find the words to match the feelings. I closed it. I opened it again and my hubby popped a cherry tomato in.

I giggled as I crunched open the juicy red gem. When the words came back to me, I would figure out a way to deal with it all. In the meantime, I was hungry and dinner was on the table.

~*~

After dinner was cleaned up, I called Josephine. I figured I'd catch her before she started cooking her dinner because of the three-hour time difference. As she was my best friend since childhood and close to Dad, she would want to know about the wedding.

"Can you make it? All I know so far is the date."

"Pops does know that's less than two months from now, doesn't he?"

From nearly the first time she met him, Josephine had called my dad Pops. She loved hanging out with us. So much so that she agreed to both learning how to stuff an animal and catch a fish. She agreed with me that the stinky taxidermy stuff was only for the mildly insane, but took to fishing as though she was born to cast a line. In fact, that love of fishing introduced her to her husband at college. Christian Campus Collegiates had decided on a fishing expedition day as a get-acquainted mingler during our sophomore year.

Not only did Josephine go, she made me go. She got her man's attention by being the only woman who not only could bait a hook, but also actually seemed to enjoy it.

So, yeah, her relationship with my dad went back almost as far as my own.

"He knows. He and Margo want to have it on the one year anniversary of when they met."

Josephine sighed dramatically. "Isn't that romantic?" She paused. "And?" She knew me well enough to hear a story behind the tone.

"He says that he and his bride aren't getting any younger, that I worry too much and that it will all work out."

She laughed. "That does sound like Pops. So what

are you going to do about it?"

I groaned. "I have no idea. They're coming in this weekend for Easter and to see Josie's performance, so I'm hoping I can either firm up more details or talk some sense into them."

"Good luck with that second idea." She continued. "But if you do firm up the details, let me know and I'll see what kind of airfare I can find from California. I'm sure Keith can handle our son for a few days on his own."

After that we talked about kids, husbands, chores, obligations, joys, and surprises. In other words, we shared life. The conversation ended all too soon, and I promised to make her one of the first to get a real invitation.

Though nothing had changed, I felt better when I got off the phone. I felt so much better that I offered to help Josie with her costume dilemma. If I could have, I would have offered instead to coach her with her lines. But of course my little word-meister already had them memorized.

After spending an hour or so looking through the closets and at online examples of Biblical women's costumes, we ended up agreeing on a burlap sleeveless dress as the base. (I think it had actually been part of a wise man costume for Justin at one time.) To that, we added a colorful shawl and a head scarf that wasn't exactly the same pattern but its colors went well with shawl. It worked and Josie was pleased. So was I. Both because we didn't need to go out and buy anything, but also because I didn't have to sew. I can do it in a pinch, but I'd really rather not.

With Josie satisfied that I'd fulfilled my mommy requirements and Justin down in his smelly workshop

creating Twinkle reborn, I dropped onto the couch next to James. We snuggled and watched a random home improvement show.

I almost forgot about the drama with my dad. Almost.

If only all life could be solved in half hour snippets!

2

The rest of the week was pretty normal as things go. The kids' co-op group did have an Easter party combined with the most complicated egg hunt I had ever seen. It was a combination of charades, murder mystery game, and a scavenger hunt. I'm not sure anyone understood the rules other than the game's creator, the estimable and seemingly limitless Elizabeth Arthur—G-SEFH (our homeschool co-op) chair and now mom of seven—but all the participants seemed to have fun.

On Friday, James took off half a day. Justin's travel soccer team, while observing Easter and avoiding scheduling anything on that day, scheduled a critical match on Good Friday. James promised to drive Justin (and a couple of his friends) so that I could finish getting the house ready and then welcome our special guests.

It was easy to prep for Dad. Since the kids were small, he would always bunk with Justin when he came to visit. It meant that Justin didn't sleep enough on those nights, but I figured his amazing relationship with his Papa made it worth it. They traded stories, swapped taxidermy hints and techniques, and basically laughed until both of them collapsed into slumber. A married Papa wouldn't be sharing a room

with Justin so I'd have to wrangle ways to isolate those two after Margo became an official member of the Jensen clan.

My new mom had to be set up in the living room because it was our only other sleeping surface. The futon there folded out to a queen-sized bed, so it would work for visiting grandparents in the future. But for the present, I liked putting in a bit of extra effort to make Margo comfortable. We had a small privacy screen that James had picked up on a TDY (the Army's version of an extended business trip) to the Far East, which could make the area around the bed feel like a room for one. Still, I primped the zone, making it the cleanest in the entire house and totally (well almost totally) devoid of Jelly fur. Was it because she was raised in luxury and elegance? Maybe that played a part. But I liked to think that it was mostly because I wanted her to feel special.

In the storage area of the footstool, I put a set of clean sheets, a light blanket, and then two towels, a hand towel and a washcloth that I had purchased just for Margo in the after-Christmas sales. When I saw a set of the most expensive towels on sale for ninety percent off—probably because of their unusual grayish shade of pink—I snatched them up immediately. I hoped she would notice the extra effort on her behalf and visit often. It seemed to work, but as she never mentioned the towels themselves, I didn't know if her monthly visits were because she actually liked us or because she recognized in the towels that we actually liked her.

I also included in the footstool's cubby a fresh bar of soap, a small body lotion, and a sachet at the bottom to make everything smell nice. I hoped that by working