

PLUNDERED Christmas

SUSAN LYTTEK



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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First Harbourlight Edition, 2014

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-461-9

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To two amazing young women: Marcia, whose
research gave me the idea,
and Meredith who demanded I write it.

Also for my parents, David and Natalie Johnson, who
both nurtured my love of books and raised me to
believe that women of God can do anything.

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, when an army transfer moves the Talbott family to a home next to Gentle Springs cemetery. Resisting the move, the scary goings on at the “neighbours” doesn't make the place any more homey for Jeanine.

Can't recommend this book enough. Funny, scary, and with charming kids determined to put what they've read in books to good use, this book is definitely a keeper. ~ Clare Revell

1

Summer... and Thanksgiving

I love Christmas. I adore Christmas. I start getting ready for the next Christmas right after the last one finishes. I am one of the first people you will find at the day after Christmas sales stocking up for next year. Christmas is my absolute favorite day of the year, and I wish I could make it last for a week at least.

Nevertheless, I didn't love this one. And I couldn't wait to escape it.

In the first place, it didn't feel much like Christmas. Christmas, to me, meant Dad's house with the fire roaring, a tree twinkling, and so many lights that the electric company writes him thank-you letters when he pays his bill in January. Or it meant the quieter Christmas at Mom and Dad Talbot's with carols playing softly in the background, the persistent aroma of her secret gingerbread recipe, and a tree cut fresh from their back forty.

It did not mean eighty degrees, pirate legends, and a dead body. No. It definitely did not mean any of those things.

I'm getting way ahead of myself. But I do that. It's a sign that maybe, just maybe, I've had too much coffee.

Nah. James, my sweetheart of an Army captain, says I love it too much, but honestly, I can't believe that

the words “too much coffee” could ever apply to me, Jeanine Adorabelle Talbott.

Too much mystery? Definitely.

Since James and I moved to Gentle Springs last year, mystery has plagued us. First, it was that treasure hunter killed in the cemetery next door. Then, when Justin, Josie, and I went up north for a field trip with our homeschool co-op, our tour guide became a victim of manslaughter. Now here.

That kind of track record is great for books and movies, but not for me. Speaking of track records, this is now three for three that soccer had something to do with our involvement. Maybe I should encourage Justin to find another sport. He is getting awfully good at tae kwon do. But that wouldn't be fair to the Hornets. He is the best eleven-year-old goalie in the entire county.

I'm going to take a deep breath and start at the beginning...

This Christmas actually began back in June. In honor of Justin's eleventh birthday, my dad invited Justin to accompany him and his bowling buddies to Virginia Beach for three days. James and I encouraged Justin to go because he was down in the dumps and needed a boost. His soccer team had only come in second place.

We were rejoicing about second place. They had played well and beaten some tough teams to achieve it, but since he'd come in first with his team in Georgia the year prior, he expected more of the same.

“The Hornets are way better than my last team, Mom. It doesn't make sense that we came in second. We should have won.” Justin grumbled.

“Older players, sweetie, and a different league.

You guys did great. Maybe next year you'll get the first place you want. It was close between you and the Wolverines."

"Maybe or maybe we'll get third. The Knights were really good, too."

How do you convince an almost-eleven-year-old that life is good after he tastes defeat? We didn't know. That's why we sent him to the beach with grandpa.

It seemed to work. He came back full of tales about the miniature clear crabs he dug out of the sand, and the little crab shack restaurant that Hank, Dad's oldest friend and league partner, knew of with the best and freshest food. "You ought to have seen the pile of shells we made!"

In all the rave reviews about the vacation, there was one thing Justin didn't like. His grandpa came home from the trip with a girlfriend.

"And it was all my fault, too! If I hadn't been dribbling up and down the beach while they snoozed, we never would have met her." Again, he grumbled.

Turns out, the gentle breeze off the ocean and the warm early summer sun had knocked out the bowling buddies. Dad insisted he was awake and reading, but I know his time window between reading a page and snoring can be extraordinarily short in the right circumstances. Justin, tired of just sitting in the sun, picked up his soccer ball and headed down the beach. The rule was that he had to be able to see "the guys" at all times.

Keeping one eye on his chaperones distracted my dribbling goalie. The ball hit too far back on the side of his foot and careened wildly—right into the side of a woman's head.

Justin said she had on clothes too fancy for the

beach and had walked right out of one of the posh hotel complexes. It didn't take her long to find the sheepish looking culprit. She picked up the offending ball, marched over to Justin and demanded to see his parents.

"I'm here with my grandfather," Justin admitted, pointing to the line of reclined beach chairs.

She marched over to Dad, where she laid into him for neglecting his grandson and causing her bodily harm. Evidently, she used a lot of legalese. Dad, after nearly thirty years as a practicing lawyer understood every word. In addition, he dished it right back, telling her he could pull her in for unlawful possession of a soccer ball and some other such nonsense. Justin said he didn't pay attention to much of it. He kept noticing how much, in her face, the woman looked like Grandma.

That detail obviously didn't escape my father, because after Dad asked Justin to apologize he asked the woman out to dinner.

She accepted.

Fast forward to November. Over the summer and into the fall, Margo Banet and Dad courted, mostly via long distance phone calls. My dad, much to my surprise, even opened a social networking page to "chat" with the woman on a regular basis. Things were getting serious. Too serious.

Now if my brother, Frank, were having a conversation with me about a new woman in his life, I would cheer. He was nearly thirty, and I hadn't even

heard the faintest tinkle of wedding bells from his e-mails to me. He would tell me he went on a date and to where, but I only occasionally, maybe one out of ten times, got a name. The most recent name started with an A.

When we visited Dad for Thanksgiving, my father pulled me aside.

"I'm thinking, Jeanine, of asking Margo to marry me."

I had that feeling, but didn't want to admit it or even give it any credence. Though Mom had been dead over three years now, it seemed like yesterday. She was recent both to me and to my memories. This Margo was a usurper. "But Dad, you barely know her."

"I know her better than you think, little one. We have talked and chatted and written."

My dad obviously wasn't thinking clearly. "For what, four months?"

"Five and a half. But who's counting?" chuckled Dad.

Then he started to head out to his workshop. "I'm making her a present." He sounded like a schoolboy.

"In there?"

"She likes taxidermy. She asked me to stuff and mount the shark her nephew harpooned off their island. It's a great challenge for me. I've never done a fish before and this is a biggie." He went off giggling and humming. "Let me know when that turkey's done, Jeanine."

Josie, my nine year old, crept up behind me. "Has Papa gone off the deep end, Mom?"

I touched the side of her face and moved one finger to point to her forehead. "You've always been

the smart one.”

“What will we do if they do get married and he moves in with her?”

Call me an idiot, but I hadn’t thought that far ahead. Doesn’t the bride move in with the husband? Usually, I supposed. But this bride was wealthy with a capital W. Would she be content with Dad’s little retreat in the woods? Would she be willing to give up her wealthy lifestyle and a house with space enough for dozens of visitors?

I had never met her personally, but she had “friended” me because of my father. Moreover, I could see the circles she moved in. Somehow, I rather doubted she would become a companion to the wives of Dad’s bowling pals or join the local knitting league. She was not housewife material. More likely, Dad would be the house husband.

I wanted better for my dad than that. In truth, I guess I wanted Mom for him.

I checked the timer on the turkey. It had at least another hour. I needed some time to think. I asked my brother to call me if the timer read less than thirty minutes and I hadn’t returned. Culinary skills, he had none, but he could read a clock. And since the TV was in sight of the timer I figured he could keep tabs on the football and look over at the big clicking numbers every once in a while.

“What about James or Justin?” he complained. “They’re here, too.”

I punched his shoulder. I can only get away with that because I’m the “big” sister. He had to look up to me to keep him in line and give him guidance about the next year in school, girls, and life for all of the growing up years. Thankfully, he stills gives me a

modicum of respect for that history. Especially, since he now towers over me by a good five inches. "Call them your back-up. But you can do this much, can't you?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Take Jelly for a walk." He couldn't argue with that necessity, so he nodded, albeit reluctantly. I gave James a kiss between plays and let him know I was leaving the house. With football on, exterior awareness fades.

I grabbed Jelly's leash and hooked it up as carefully as I could, trying to get the minimum of slobber on me in the midst of his excitement. (If you don't know it, we have a very good reason for calling him 'Jelly'. He slobbers so much it tends to clump and looks like a dollop of apple jelly hanging below his jowls.) Our bulldog liked few things better than a chance to roam through the woods. He gave one eager grunt, so as not to violate the no-barking commands, and urged me forward. I steered Jelly to the path that headed downhill to the creek.

I loved this path. I had first explored it with Sunny, the yellow lab I had as a child. She was a good and patient dog with an eye for keeping me safe. She pulled me away from more than one rattler in her years.

When I had first come here, I was about eight and I hated the idea. I grew up outside Charleston and loved all the benefits a cultured city could give. The idea of coming out to a glorified cabin that was miles from anything, and even farther from my friends, both horrified and terrified me. But as child, I had no say in the matter and I went.

It took a couple of summers and Sunny's never-

failing companionship before I began to look forward to the quiet. It helped, too, that I discovered Josephine about a mile down the road. We became close friends and stayed that way through the teen years. I was the maid of honor at her wedding and she was the matron of honor at mine. She means so much to me that James let me choose her name for our daughter.

I looked up. I knew the stone path that wound through the evergreens. It hadn't changed much. My feet had brought me to her door after all these years. But it wasn't her door anymore. Her parents sold the place years back and lived in a nice community in Northern Florida. And it had been nearly four years since I had seen Josephine. Both of us married military men.

Unfortunately, her Air Force husband took her in different directions than my James took me. The last time we had tea together, at a quaint spot near her parents' condo, was just before they shipped off to Japan. If everything worked out according to their current orders, he'd be working at the Air Force Academy next. It might be stateside, but still way too far away.

Jelly gave the leash a slight tug, looked up at me and yipped. "You're staying too much in the past," his dark eyes seemed to say.

"You're right boy. I need to head back and tend to a turkey, anyway."

At a faster pace, I led him back to the cabin. It was only when I got within eyesight that I realized I had not spent a single solitary moment thinking about what I intended to. Nor, had I asked God's opinion on any of it. I just fretted, letting the worry tracks in my brain play on whichever one happened to be handy.

For the last part of the road, I urged Jelly into a run. Those little legs had such power and determination that our dog relished the exertion more than I did. But at least it did blow some of the cobwebs out.

I breathed a short prayer between my gasps for air. I really needed to exercise more. *God...make...things...work...how...you...want...them.*

It wasn't much, but I felt better. I couldn't control my father in any case. God knew what Dad needed and if Margo was meant for him.

I used the rag we had hanging there to wipe the majority of the slobber off of Jelly's mouth before I unclipped his leash and led him inside the house.

"Thanks, boy," I said as I patted his rump.

Thinking I wanted more, I guess, he quickly turned and licked my face before I could stand up and out of the danger zone.

Laughter came from around the corner. "You got 'Jellied,' Mom!"

I tried to find a dry spot on the rag to wipe off the worst damage to my face. "No kidding."

Justin came to my side and gave me his version of a hug, which most people would call a pat. "I didn't mean anything."

"I know, sweetie." I tried to figure where my boy was coming from to be near the back porch. "Had you been checking on the football game or the shark processing?"

"Neither. I was sent to look for you. It's getting close to turkey time." He rubbed his stomach in an exaggerated motion. "And I'm just about starving."

Since our drooling canine had already made his way into the house and couldn't damage me further, I

went inside with Justin. I would finish Thanksgiving dinner, with help from both kids, and get it on the table. Justin could open the can of cranberry sauce and heat the gravy. Josie could mash the potatoes and put the pie Mrs. Folger had made for me in the oven to heat. But first, I would head to the bathroom to wash my face.

Forty-five minutes later, all the food had been transferred to the middle of the big table and we took our places around it, Dad at one head and James at the other. Frank and I had called it the “big” table ever since Dad had found an old door at a nearby rummage sale and turned it into our formal dining table. (With just the four of us, we usually ate in the kitchen.) The big table always set the stage for holiday dinners or company coming.

As I wondered why Dad held off on blessing the food, I noticed that he had changed his clothes. When I left for my hike down memory lane with Jelly, he had been in his usual red flannel shirt and khakis—Dad’s standard uniform. Now, he wore the sweater I bought him for Christmas last year, a pair of dress slacks and his silver hair had been slicked back.

Frank beat me to the punch. “What’s up, Dad?”

Josie got up from her seat and went over to love on her grandfather. “He even smells good.”

“Dad?” I gestured to the spread. “Can we bless the food and eat?”

At this, the doorbell rang and he all but leapt from his chair, nearly tripping over Josie. “She’s here!”

If I hadn’t seen him race to the door, I wouldn’t have believed it. He made it from the table through the living room, down the front hall and to the door in less than ten seconds.

I heard the door open. I could have heard a pin drop because everyone at the table kept quiet. I tried to encourage the amplification abilities of my ears.

"Hallo, darling." The woman's voice pulled it out to emphasize the word as if it had three syllables. I know, having spent the majority of my life in the South, that I have an accent. But she had a drawl. And not just any drawl. It sounded practiced and perfected. "I do hope we're not too late for your little dinner."

"No, Margo, not at all." I heard some shuffling sounds, other movement. It was all I could do to keep from leaping out of my chair and heading into the hallway to watch them. "Did you say 'we?'" Dad asked.

"But of course. My driver." She giggled like a much younger woman. "I had to get here somehow. You do have somewhere we can put him while we eat, of course."

The waiting had gotten too much for Justin. I admit it, the smells coming from the table made my stomach complain.

"Dad," he begged, "they're taking forever. Can't you pray so we can start eating?"

James looked at me in desperation. If this were his home, it would have been no problem. But he didn't want to be rude to my father or usurp his place. "Jeanine?"

"I'll ask." Taking a deep breath, I prepared myself to meet my mother's replacement. Walk purposefully, I told myself. Be dignified. I strode through the living room and started into the hall.

Unfortunately, Dad has hardwood floors in the hallway. I say unfortunately, because my dog had been sitting in the hallway waiting for us to call him for

treats. And if a dog is anticipating treats, any dog, he tends to salivate. My dog? He leaves drool puddles.

I hit a spot as slick as ice and slid about three feet towards Dad and his lady friend before my feet lost all semblance of traction, kicked up, and sent me to my backside.

It would have done the Three Stooges proud.

However, it did not seem to have that effect on Margo.

"What?" She huffed. She looked down at me over her nose.

I felt like a five-year-old back in mean Miss Anderson's kindergarten class.

To his credit, Dad hurried over to me and helped me up. "Are you OK?"

I rubbed my sore spots as lady-like as I could. I found this difficult since those bruises tended to be focused on my posterior. "Yes, I suppose so." I looked over my shoulder and pointed at the wet mark down the hallway. "I was 'Jellied.' Again. That's twice in the same day."

A chuckle burst out of Dad's mouth, but then he gathered it back with a cough and swallowed it as quickly as he could. "Well, thank you, Jeanine, for finding the hazard for us."

He went back to Margo, offered his arm and escorted her up to me. "Margo, this talented gymnast is my daughter, Jeanine Talbott."

She nodded in my direction. "A pleasure."

I had to admit, as much as I didn't want to, that her face did resemble Mom's. She had the same tiny mouth, beneath a fragile nose. Even her eyes were the same blue green. The color of the sea, Dad had always said. But her cheekbones had more of a chiseled

appearance, more refined. Mom looked softer.

Or maybe my memories had her look that way. She had been my mother after all.

"I had come out to hasten you to dinner," I admitted. "The kids are all a bit hungry and the food is getting cold." I leaned in to my father and whispered to him that he should give Margo my place setting and that I'd bring out another one.

"Well certainly," Margo said. "I do apologize." She looked up at Dad and smiled for all she was worth. "Lead the way, Robert."

Dad escorted Margo to the dining room, deftly ignoring the pre-slicked areas of the floor. I began to follow them when I heard a slight knock. As I headed to the door, it opened and a man peered around the edge. Atop his head was a traditional white driving cap with dark black trim. I assumed he was Margo's driver.

"Did you come here with Margo?"

"Yes. I drove her all the way from the coast. Wouldn't want to trouble you any, but I'm a might thirsty after all that."

The gentleman looked older than Dad did. What a difference a rank in society made! Dad, because of his years in the law profession, the money he made and the friends he helped, was Margo's beau. Yet another man, equally hardworking and helpful, drove her places and served her. It didn't set right with me.

"Come on into the kitchen, sir."

"I don't want to cause trouble." Though he hadn't moved, he seemed to pull away from me.

"No trouble at all, Mr..." I left a blank waiting for his name.

"No mister," he said. "Just call me Charlie." He