



**ANITA
KLUMPERS**

SOMETHING EVIL IS AT WORK.
THE CLOCK IS TICKING...

WINTER WATCH

A VINTAGE TIMEPIECE HOLDS
THE KEY TO CATCHING A KILLER.



Winter Watch

Anita Klumpers

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Winter Watch
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PROLOGUE

April, 1891

Kipton, Ohio

The sky was cloudless and the air should have been fresh. Instead it reeked with acrid smoke from a burning pile that hours earlier had been two trains. A child shrieked—a healthy shriek, which indicated more fear than pain. A dog whimpered from what used to be the baggage car. It, too, sounded more frightened than hurt.

A passenger from the No. 21 Toledo Express pointed his camera at the Kipton train depot, and the shattered glass of the front bay window. He turned to the wreckage of the two trains, and aimed where the engines should have been. The developed photo would show only fragments of the boilers and one smokestack. The photographer was careful to avoid the body parts still strewn along the tracks.

A railroad crew arrived and worked their way through the twisted debris of the fast mail train No. 14 and the No. 21 express. As they progressed, always respectful of the dead around them, they speculated on why two trains had met in a headfirst collision. No. 21 should have had plenty of time to get on the side track

and make way for the mail train. Then they found the engineer of No. 21, still standing upright, still gripping the throttle of his engine. The wrecking crew stood a moment in silence.

"Listen!" Their leader held up a hand, and each man held his breath. A familiar ticking came from the pocket of the dead engineer. Taking care not to touch the body, the leader loosened the watch along with the fob, and opened it. He glanced, glanced again, and pulled out his own watch. His men observed, puzzled, as he picked his way back to the station.

"Does anyone have a railway service watch?"

After several moments of scrambling and searching and checking among surviving railway employees, two standard railway pocket watches were found. The wrecking crew leader opened them and placed them side-by-side with the one he had pulled from the dead engineer.

It was running four minutes slow.

~*~

September, 1900

Galveston, Texas

Though the sun was shining, a stiff breeze blew off the Gulf. The man on the shore clapped his hand to his hat as a gust tried to lift it from his scraggly hair. He had no desire to go chasing it over the piles of debris that, only twenty-four hours earlier, had been homes, churches, and businesses. He was thankful for the breeze. Soon, maybe even now, the bodies buried under the far-flung, high-piled rubble would start to stink.

At the thought of passing time, he quickened his cautious pace. All along the shore, all through the city,

searchers worked, hunting for loved ones, praying to find someone alive. The man also searched, but not so altruistically. Whenever he came across a cash register, he opened and emptied it. Whenever he spotted an easily accessible body he reached in the pockets with an efficiency born of practice. He stuffed anything of value into a canvas sack growing corpulent with the spoils. Occasionally he heard groans, sometimes screams, of people—it was impossible to tell gender or age—trapped beneath the rubble that had been Galveston. He debated and discarded the idea of pulling gold teeth. He didn't have the right tools along.

He approached the only house that still stood on that stretch of beach. The entire middle portion of the structure swayed gracefully to the west, like a hula dancer whose hip seized in mid-motion. All first-story windows and doors were gone, but on the second floor, several panes of glass clung to their frames, and a small balcony held a tenacious grasp under the eaves. About two hundred feet beyond the house, he saw the body of a man, legs pinned under a handsome oak icebox.

With watery eyes, he peered along the beach but saw no living soul. He ran with clumsy steps over the rubble, dropped to his knees, and searched the man's pockets. The well-tailored suit and its fine fabric made his pulse quicken. He tried to loosen the money belt from the man's waist and was furious to discover he couldn't get at it. The inside pocket of the overcoat yielded only a calling card, but the pocket of the vest held something. He pulled out a gleaming pocket watch. That should get him a good price. The attached fob had no such beauty. He wanted only the watch and tugged at it, but the fob snagged in the lining of the

vest. He bunched his weedy muscles and pulled. The timepiece came loose from its fob with such force he almost fell backward. A flicker of movement made him glance at the man's face.

His eyes were open. "Help," the man whispered.

Leaping backwards, he crammed the watch and the calling card into his greasy jacket pocket. He caught his foot in the spokes of a bicycle, sprawled headlong into a stovepipe, and lay stunned for a second.

From behind him, the trapped man moaned.

He struggled to his feet and started to limp down the debris-clogged shore. He remembered his bag of loot and hurried back to snatch it up, avoiding the pleading eyes.

Days later, in his small rented room on the mainland, he glanced at the card, examined the watch. He'd wound it every night but had been reluctant to open the cover and look at the face. Now he released the small latch and compared the time with the clock by the bed. It ran several minutes slow.

He wanted to toss it, but the eyes of the man on the shore swam before him. He closed the watch, hid it with the card among his most secret belongings, and never wound it again.

ONE

Present day
Barley, Wisconsin

Locals reclaimed Blossom's in mid-February. They abided by the Barley calendar, which paid scant heed to the more customary December thirty-first termination. In Barley, the year ended with the Valentine's Day Snowmobile Run, final event of the tourist season. After a short hiatus, Barley would set the new calendar's inaugural date to whenever the rainbow trout started to spawn, and tourists once again wedged themselves into Blossom's Bar and Grill, the only restaurant in town. They couldn't get enough of Blossom's watered down, over-priced tap beer, and they didn't bat an eye at the outrageous prices on the lunch and dinner specials. Come February the fifteenth, however, tourists deserted Blossom's and Barley, northern Wisconsin in general and the icy waters of Lake Superior in particular. The two Barley police officers relaxed their constant vigilance. The two

Barley doctors slept through the night, and the two-dozen Barley bed-and-breakfast owners nursed their bunions and ate cold cereal every morning. And everyone once again knew everyone at Blossom's.

Finishing dinner alone at a small, flamingo-pink table, Claudia Alexander became aware she was the sole exception. Fresh from grad school with a master's degree in journalism and in the midst of the most mortifying circumstance of her twenty-four years, she surprised herself with an appetite and an interest in her surroundings. A group of men at the bar brushed aside Mardi Gras beads and sports pennants to flirt with three women perched around a carved black bear table. To Claudia's right a family leaned across their red-checkered tablecloth and chatted with the elderly couple on her left, seated under a print of a smug Buddha. Claudia scooted back in her chair to oblige the conversational flow, bumped into a dangling plastic flamingo light fixture, and sent it spinning. Waitresses dressed as cowgirls addressed everyone by name, including the man who came blowing through the entrance along with a mass of swirling snow.

"Shut that door, Ezra Prosper!" the shortest one shouted. He obliged by bracing himself and tugging at the ornate handle.

"Not my fault, Ruby. Blossom had to install this stinking oversized door. We can barely pull the beast open against the wind, and once we do, we can't close it. When Blossom does any remodeling she needs to get advice from those with superior wisdom."

He saluted the rotund woman hovering behind the bar and she snorted. "That eliminates you automatically, Ezra."

Claudia picked up the menu to check dessert

selections. A neat, hand-written card clipped inside listed daily specials. Monday's was Austrian Torte. Dark like her mood and, she reflected wryly, thick like her head.

She ordered a slice, and her graceful waitress, Rachel, according to the name lassoed on her name tag, murmured "Excellent choice" and refilled her coffee cup. The family at the farm table rose to leave. Claudia moved her chair for them to pass and again hit her head on the low-flying flamingo. She grunted in irritation. The man addressed as Ezra had greeted his way through the other customers and headed to a small booth in the corner. He must have heard the grunt. Claudia saw him glance at her. Embarrassed at drawing attention, she forced herself to concentrate on the offending flamingo.

After greeting the elderly couple, Ezra hung his coat and scarf on the hook by the bench just inside Claudia's field of vision. He studied his own handwritten card and gave his order to the blonde vision of a waitress, then looked curiously to where Claudia sat in profile to him. Several years ago she was vain enough to assume her fringe of dark eyelashes, angled comma of naturally dark eyebrow, fair skin, athletic physique and thick fair hair were holding his attention. He didn't seem to be leering, but just in case, she moved her chair casually sideways so he could see her full face. He couldn't miss the scar jaggging down her otherwise smooth cheek. Unlike most people whose eyes widened a split second before hastily turning away, this man didn't react. He nodded, smiled, and spread his napkin in his lap. Their waitress glided up with Claudia's dessert, and Ezra's dinner, and then all but floated back to the kitchen.

One of those mysterious lulls that occur among large groups of people descended on the restaurant. Seconds later it was bludgeoned by a voice that boomed, "Ezra Prosper! You in here?"

A massive woman wearing a rusty black coat of indeterminate age and origin lumbered between the tables and quivered to a stop at Ezra's booth. She gave a determined snuffle and dabbed a dainty pocket-handkerchief to one eye. Ezra Prosper cast a frantic glance to heaven before cowering in his seat. Heaven chose not to respond, and the man remained trapped.

"Bernice. Good to see you. How are you doing?" He covered his food with the napkin.

Claudia couldn't blame him. The fragile hankie didn't appear up to the job of damming the woman's overflowing eyes and nose.

Bernice's face collapsed into lines of misery. "My little Jezebel is missing. The Schnauzer with the ratty ear. You need to find her. She was wearing the jacket I knit her, but in this cold nothing will help. What'll I do if something happened to her? I've had more grieving than one woman can bear!"

Claudia didn't scoot back quickly enough, and Bernice sideswiped her knees before jolting back through the dining area. People shifted their chairs slightly, uneasily, to make way for her prodigious frame. As she passed Ruby she slowed and lowered one shoulder. The little waitress paused only the briefest of seconds before reaching up with a quick pat. Bernice gave a final sob and pushed out the door into the cold.

Claudia watched from the corner of her eye as Ezra crumbled his napkin in disgust. Blossom herself followed her jaw to Ezra's table. She stood over him

wagging her three chins and poking at his half-finished dinner.

"I hate to waste good food, but that woman churns my stomach too. Next time you come in tell them the meal is on the house. Add a salad for pity's sake. Your arteries have got to be clogged worse than a Chicago traffic jam. You need whole grains, lean meats and raw vegetables. That's all I eat."

He grinned up at her. "I know you do. By the truckload."

Claudia winced and waited for the woman's reaction. Blossom just chuckled.

"More of me to love, Ezra Prosper," she told him and ruffled his hair before heading back to the kitchen.

Ezra laughed, smoothed the mussed hair, and rose. He examined his scarf, shrugged into his coat, shuffled his feet, and jingled his keys on the way to Claudia's table. The shuffle slowed and Claudia, unable to ignore him, looked up. He beamed and stuck out his hand. She took it, noticing he had nothing particularly noticeable about him. Average height and weight, early or maybe mid-thirties, receding brown hair, hazel eyes crinkled at the corners. Regular features. Nice teeth. Claudia's mother told her not to judge a man by his appearance, but considered good teeth the mark of exceptional character. He wore jeans, a thick wool coat, and a plain gold wedding band. Claudia hoped that meant he wasn't going to flirt.

"Not sure you've been welcomed properly to town. I'm Ezra Prosper, Justice of the Peace."

His tone was pleasant, and if he was trying to pick her up, he had chosen an unconventional opening line. Just in case, Claudia chose to take control of the conversation.

"Thank you. Do justices of the peace usually search for lost dogs?"

"I guess you couldn't help hearing. Bernice is six foot tall, and half of that is lungs and windpipe. I'm also dogcatcher. It's sort of a hereditary position. I'm a third generation Prosper dogcatcher. We don't have a Humane Society up here, so I search out missing animals, check out possible abuse, eliminate rabid raccoons, encourage spaying..." He trailed off. "Which is why Bernice always calls on me when a dog is lost. Unfortunately, they aren't that difficult to find."

Intrigued, she couldn't keep from asking, "Why unfortunate?"

"It's an unusual story, but not one you want to hear over dessert." Ezra paused, and for a moment seemed fascinated by her half-eaten torte. Claudia began to wonder if she should offer him the rest.

"What brings you to our neck of the woods?"

"Now that," she told him, "is not a story to tell over dessert."

TWO

Ezra appeared to assume this enigmatic statement constituted an open invitation to join Claudia. He loosened his coat, pulled up a chair and smiled at her.

"I'm sort of at a disadvantage. You know my name, but it doesn't look like anyone here can formally introduce us."

"I'm Claudia Alexander, and I'm just..." What was she doing here? Not, for the time, passing through. "Visiting. What town is this again?"

Ezra tried with little success to hide his surprise. "Don't tell the Chamber of Commerce you don't know where you are. Weeping and gnashing of teeth will ensue. Welcome to Barley, Wisconsin, Miss Alexander. Since you were unaware of the name of the town, is it safe to assume you aren't staying with family or friends?"

Claudia heard polite curiosity in his question but had no intention of sharing the day's humiliations. The hot embarrassment she'd kept at bay during her meal flared up. She waited to respond until she could do so in a neutral tone. "No. I'm on my own. Before it gets much later I should find the nearest hotel. Do you

mind recommending one?"

While she struggled to control her voice, Ezra had kept tactful eyes off her, and his hand batted gently at the hovering flamingo. He stopped it mid-swing. "Sorry, no hotels in Barley. You can get a room at the Weary Traveler Inn. It's like a B&B. Bed-and-breakfast. And the only one in town open every day of the year. Bud and Ann Gomer run it, and they have more stamina and kids' college loans to pay off than anyone else. Go out the door, turn right, cross the street, down two blocks. It's on that corner, and you can't miss it."

Ezra urged her to finish dessert.

Deciding that chocolate cured a host of ills, she needed no convincing. While she ate, he talked about the upcoming storm and how it had been an unusually difficult winter even by Barley standards. He didn't seem to expect lengthy responses, and Claudia, grateful, nodded with what she hoped was intelligent comprehension. Whether he had sensed it or not, she'd been ill at ease eating alone. Back home in Chicago, she'd didn't mind sitting in a coffee shop or lunch counter by herself but never enjoyed dining companionless in the evening.

Rachel, their waitress, skimmed over to tell them Blossom was closing early. They rose, and Ezra helped Claudia into her coat before buttoning his.

"Will you be visiting for a while?"

Claudia grimaced. "I have no choice." Lest that sound rude, she added, "I'm sure Barley is a wonderful place to—visit. I can mull over the mystery of Bernice and Jezebel and why it may have prevented enjoyment of my Austrian Torte."

She was chattering. Too late she wondered if he would think her the type of girl angling for more time

with a man. A married one, at that. She reddened again and cursed her overactive facial capillaries.

Ezra evidently took the comment seriously. "Bernice provides great local color, if you don't mind black and gray for the colors. I happen to excel as a storyteller, and since I'm responsible for rousing your curiosity, I'd be happy to tell it to you. After all, it sounds as though you'll still be, um, visiting, tomorrow."

"Barring a miracle, yes. Could I meet you over coffee someplace to hear about it?"

"I have to look for Jezebel first thing in the morning, and some sick animals at the pound need meds every couple of hours. Would you mind coming up to my place? It's easy to find. Take Main Street north out of town, and just before you hit Lake Superior turn right, not that you have any other option. Mine is the only house on that road."

"I don't have a car," she told him.

Ezra was speechless a moment, an infrequent occurrence, Claudia guessed. "Miss Alexander," he responded, eyebrows high up his forehead, "you are a most unique visitor. We aren't exactly on a mass transit route up here."

"There's a really good reason," she hastened to add. "Maybe I can tell you tomorrow. If we figure out a way to meet."

"Just ask Bud or Ann to give you a ride." He frowned down at her, concern in the hazel eyes. "You should be careful before accepting an invitation to visit a stranger in his home by yourself. I encourage you to check me out with everyone you meet and make sure several people know where you are. Why don't we try for eleven?"

“If I can get a ride, sure.”

Ezra addressed the waitresses, Blossom, and the few remaining customers. “This young lady is Claudia Alexander who will be staying by the Weary Traveler and is going to come visit me tomorrow morning at eleven to hear stories of local color. Please assure her my intentions are honorable and my life an open book.”

Pleasant faces turned to Claudia. Flustered, she hoisted her backpack with unnecessary vigor. It whacked the flamingo, which soared in a joyous arc toward the ceiling. A second later, the chain whipped it down to land in a pink heap atop the light fixture. Before Claudia could melt in a puddle of humiliation, Blossom puffed up alongside her and yanked the flamingo from the chain.

“Always hated that bird,” she huffed on her way to the kitchen. “Good riddance.”

At the swinging door Claudia heard Blossom growl to an unseen someone. “Burn this thing where it won’t stink up the place.”

Ezra nodded with approval. “Bless you, Ms. Alexander. Locals avoid the flamingo table like the plague. You earned a good night’s sleep. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

Claudia was thankful for the attention directed at the recently departed bird. “Will that give you enough time to find the little dog?”

Ezra’s face lost its humor, and he acknowledged he’d have plenty of time. They paid their bills, exchanged goodbyes, and Claudia struggled into the snowy Barley night.

She had no trouble finding the Weary Traveler. It stood several stories high with numerous gables,

lighted windows, and a wrap-around porch. To remove all doubt, a sign on the corner proclaimed it The Weary Traveler, and below in smaller letters, Barley's Oldest Inn.

With misgiving she mounted the steps, which, though recently shoveled, looked icy. She had never stayed at a bed-and-breakfast and was unsure what to do. Walk in? Ring the bell? What bell? She hammered the huge brass knocker that, paradoxically, sounded muffled and ineffective. With bravado she didn't feel, she hoisted her backpack, stomped the snow from her boots, opened the door, and walked in.

She was in the sort of spacious foyer often found in older homes. Her apartment could have fit inside, but only after squeezing between travel brochure racks, sideboards stacked with jam jars, and vintage cupboards with soaps and linens tucked into every corner and spilling out of drawers. In the middle of the floor sat a huge old Hoover, while an unmistakable aroma of burning rubber hung in the air. As Claudia wound past to reach an official-looking high counter, a boy wearing parka and boots burst into the foyer. He stopped abruptly when he saw her, and pausing only to catch his breath, bellowed, "Mom! Guest!"

Lighter footsteps followed. A small middle-aged woman with short graying hair hurried down a curved and carpeted staircase just beyond the counter. She grabbed the boy's arm as he headed toward the front door. "Philip! Don't even think about leaving before you change that vacuum cleaner belt. First get the monstrosity out of here!"

She turned to Claudia as her son mumbled his way down a hall towing the vacuum. "Do you have children? No? Wait 'til you do, and wait 'til you have a

youngest and you spoil him rotten and spend the rest of forever paying for it. Welcome to the Weary Traveler. I'm Ann Gomer, and I heard you were coming. Claudia Alexander, correct?"

Claudia gaped.

"Small tourist town, honey. We all take care of each other. First Ezra called and then Blossom. Ezra with your name, Blossom with your ETA. I'm surprised they didn't grab you by the arms and haul you over." She pulled out a prodigious guest book. "Do you know how many nights you'll be staying? No? More than just tonight? No problem if you don't know. We have a dozen rooms and no one scheduled 'til this weekend.

"Food allergies? No? Wonderful. Eight o'clock in the sitting room OK for breakfast? Fine. Ezra said you don't have a vehicle you need parked, so ignore the section asking for make, model, and license number. We're happy to have you, Ms. Alexander."

Claudia, overwhelmed by the swift responses to her gestures of affirmation or denial, filled out the register. She set the pen on the counter and looked expectantly at Ann, who led her up two flights of curving staircase and creaking steps.

"My husband can repair anything but the noise in the steps. The thick carpet isn't just for safety. It muffles the groans that make one think it's either in great pain or about to collapse. And here we are. We call this the yellow room. After naming six kids we got tired of coming up with creative titles." Ann told her to dial zero on the bedside phone if she needed anything and then left, her progress down the stairs marked by an occasional pained response from a step.

The walls of her room were indeed buttercream

yellow, the trim and lace curtains white, the floor some type of oak darkened by age and polishing. A fake log flickered in the gas fireplace. Not quite the ambience of a real wood fire, but none of the mess either. The room was fresh and cheerful, and she was too tired to care that she was a stranger in a strange town. It took less than a dozen minutes to change into the sweats she dug from her backpack, wash up in her tiny private bathroom, and fall into bed. She slept without dreaming.

Ten hours later she woke, refreshed, to a lively breeze and a few snowflakes cavorting outside the window. She marveled at her peaceful night, and by the time she showered and dressed back into her clothes of the previous evening, the wind was whistling while the flakes multiplied, blurring her view of what she assumed to be Lake Superior.

At the top of the staircase, in spite of all the misery of Monday, a sense of anticipation crowded out the indignation. She had slept well, her appetite demanded attention, and unknown adventure loomed. She grasped the carved handrail and made her intrepid way down the stairs. The foyer was empty, so she followed her nose along a hall and through wide-open double doors on her right. This must be the sitting room. A lovely little table sat in front of a bay window, laden with half a golden grapefruit topped by a jaunty maraschino cherry, a basket of muffins and a covered pot from which the delightful aroma seemed to originate. She peeked under the lid. A cheery Eggs Benedict sort of concoction peeked back. The bounty gave her to understand that, at least at the Weary Traveler, she wouldn't be ordering breakfast from a menu. She breathed a quick prayer of thanksgiving