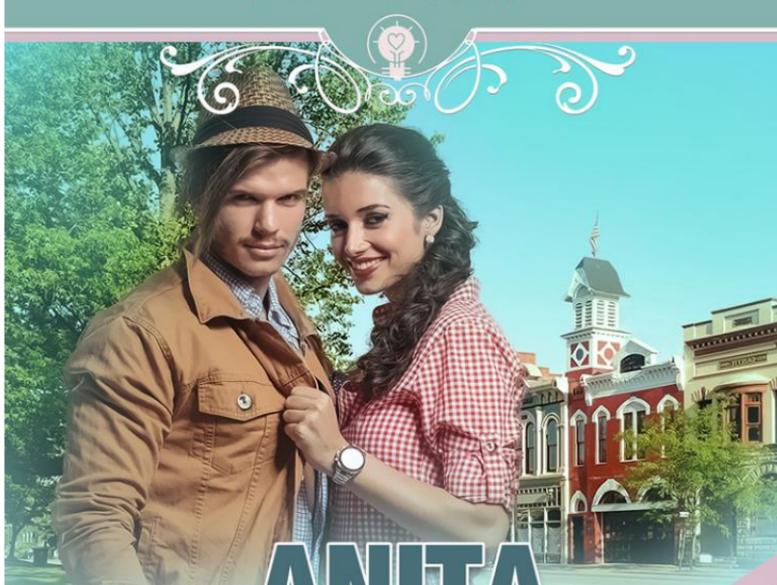


Ponder This...



ANITA KLUMPERS



*Whatever is of
Good Repute*

*Button-
holed*

Buttonholed

Anita Klumpers

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Buttonholed
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Dedication

To Daddy. A man who cherished good reputation
but cherished his Savior above all.

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1

Manderley thought she'd leeches almost every bit of Southern blood from her system. She'd quit drinking sweet tea and switched to coffee. College football was ditched in reluctant favor of the Bears, the Cubs, the Blackhawks, and the Bulls. She hadn't visited a beauty parlor in over a year and once even ventured onto Michigan Avenue without makeup. And no one north of the Mason-Dixon Line would ever know of her reign as Junior Miss Plunkett County in sixth grade.

Eliminating "Y'all" from her conversations had been the most painful. Manderley bit the inside of her cheek whenever the term slipped out. Another few months in Chicago, she kept assuring herself, and no one would guess her Tennessee roots.

Then her mother called.

"Mandy Lee, honey, it's so dreadful."

Manderley heard herself sigh, "Land's sake, Mama. Now what?" and realized that the South flowed gently just below her superficial Midwestern veneer.

Tara could match her daughter sigh for sigh. She'd been practicing for fifty-four years, ever since, instead of a newborn's lusty cry, her response to the doctor's slap was a genteelly offended gasp. "Now Mandy Lee, don't say it like that! How often do I call with dreadful news?"

It was a valid point. Last Sunday had been

unbelievable news, the Tuesday before her mother was too shocked for words, and Manderley could recall twice in the past month when Tara's calls began with "Darlin' are you sittin' down?"

"Sorry, Mama." While Manderley would never address her parents as anything except 'Mama' and 'Daddy,' she, like the rest of Plunkett County, always thought of them as Tara and Pem. She could never separate their names from their identities. "What's so dreadful?"

"Someone wants to do a documentary about *it!*"

"You mean about the—"

"Don't say it!" The ladylike squeal cut her off. "I don't even want to think about that dreadful act!"

Right. *It* was on Tara's mind every day, knitted in her inmost parts and connected with a length of ancestral memory stretching back over seven generations. Almost every action from the time of Tara Jessup's birth was governed by it.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Why honey, you need to come home! Family honor is at stake!"

Manderley knew that was coming. But she hadn't lost her Southern penchant for hanging on to a lost cause. "Mama, I can't drop everything and leave."

Tara knew better. "Of course, you can. School ended last week, and you don't teach summer classes till the second session, end of July. Plenty of time for you to come down, talk to these movie folks and enjoy some summer with your family. The 250th birthday celebration for Great-Grandpa Talbot is next week." She spoke as though she knew him personally, which in a way, she did. "Thornfield and Ruthanne are here. Wait till you see little Genny-Vive. Cuttin' her first

tooth and takin' it like a real lady."

Leave it to Tara. She not only knew Manderley's schedule but would arrange everything on the assumption that her wish was her children's command. "Margy-Rita wants you to visit her new apartment. She decorated it cute as a—" there was an abrupt pause and for a second Manderley wondered if her mother almost said "button." Impossible. She was merely coming up with something comparable. "It is cute as a bug's ear." Marguerite would be thrilled by the comparison, Manderley thought drily. "I think your sister is getting tired of waiting for that Boyd Harvey to ask her to marry him. She bought a single bed!" Tara's voice was a mix of concern and relief and Manderley wanted to laugh.

"All right, Mama. But I can't leave today."

"Of course not, sugar! You need a good night's sleep to be fresh for that long drive. My lands, I can't wait to see your pretty face!"

"I'll be there tomorrow night, Mama. Don't wait dinner." That was merely a courtesy. Of course, dinner would be waiting, kept warm, with the good china gleaming on the table.

Instead of bubbling a farewell, Tara was silent on the other end of the line. Not silent exactly. She was fussing, the term her husband and children used for the rustling murmurs of ladylike distress signaling an Issue.

"What's going on, Mama?" It didn't pay to ignore the almost-inaudible bleats. Tara wouldn't hang up till she shared more bad news.

"It's Bartie. Mandy Lee, I swear you won't know him, he's changed that much."

She was home for spring break in early April.

How much could he have changed? "Is he having another growth spurt?"

The expulsion of bitter laughter made Manderley aware that this might be serious.

"Mama?" Her throat constricted. "Is Bartie sick?"

"Goodness, no! Physically he's fine. Handsome, hale, and lookin' like your papa more and more. Got his physical for sports, and he is in the pink. No drugs either. Not that I ever suspected your baby brother would do anything like that.

"No, he's doin' great in school and in sports and all. Everyone loves Barton. But he's so secretive. In his room, on his computer, makin' certain I can't see what he sees. Mandy Lee, I'm afraid that our Barton is addicted to pornography."

Manderley wasn't tempted to laugh this time. Pornography was nothing but another form of drug. "Has Daddy talked to him?"

"Only once! And he says not to worry!" Tara's tone was uncharacteristically harsh. "He's taking Bartie's word that he isn't looking at filth. But why else barricade himself in his room? When he isn't there, he's at the library, and we all know those librarians refuse to censor anything."

To Tara all librarians were represented by one— Iris Coventry, who sat well atop Mama's arch-enemy list.

"Daddy loves Bartie too. Trust him and try not to worry, Mama. Love you."

Tara was back under control. Strong Southern women did not let their emotions get the best of them. "Love you too, sugar. Keep both hands on the wheel and put on some gospel music. It'll make the miles fly."



Manderley glared at her suitcase. Hard sided, pink with burgundy trim, it gaped open waiting to consume summery clothes. She transferred the glare to her closet. The past year was unusually cold for Chicago. When she'd arrived last August to begin teaching at a sprawling Christian school in the northern suburbs, everyone commented on the unseasonable coolness of the summer. She'd begun the first semester clad daily in goose bumps. The cool summer transitioned to a chilly fall followed by a frigid winter unwilling to give way to spring. Even now, late June temperatures tried with little success to claw their way past the upper sixties. Manderley's meager clothing budget went to sensible slacks and sweaters, wildly inappropriate for the gently steaming summer of eastern Tennessee. She could barely remember what clothes she'd brought with her in August. They were relegated to the back of the closet.

The dresses were on hangers, next to the frilly, flowery tops her mother bought by the gross. Manderley's shorts, not all that short because Tara Jessup raised her girls to never, ever show too much epidermis, were stuffed in a box on a shelf in the very corner of the small closet. Manderley grabbed the closest sleeveless dress, pulled it over her head and reached back to tug on the zipper. It refused to go more than halfway up.

Manderley's first hope was that the zipper was stuck. Examination in the full-length mirror she usually avoided like the plague showed otherwise. The adorable little frock—as her mother called it—that fit so perfectly a year ago, was too tight. With decreasing

hope, she tried on one suffocating dress after another. How the shorts would fit didn't even bear thinking about.

One advantage of a job in Chicago was its distance from southern cooking. Only constant and strenuous exercise kept Manderley trim throughout high school and most of college. She hated constant and strenuous exercise but not as much as she loved fried chicken, biscuits with sausage and gravy, shrimp with grits, corn on the cob, and peach pie. She'd thought all she needed was to live where the best tasting food wasn't yellow, and she would be fine. She hadn't reckoned with the multi-colored delights of deep-dish pizza, Chicago style hot dogs, Italian beef sandwiches, and rainbow ice cream cones. Calories infiltrated the entire color wheel.

Muttering against her fellow teachers who introduced her to the plethora of Midwestern culinary delights and with a few stern words for her own lack of self-control, Manderley pulled out a loose-fitting dress with a waist cinching belt. She ditched the belt. Her mother would raise eyebrows and not offer seconds on the cornbread, but no one would comment on her slightly expanded silhouette.

2

This made Manderley's fifth trip in ten months from Chicago to her home in Lowellton, Tennessee and the initial fascination with the vast corn fields and enormous windmills of Indiana was wearing thin. To keep her mind from turning to *it* she renewed her twenty years plus irritation at her mother's continual reconstruction of her name. Manderley Raikes Jessup was a fine name, if perhaps a bit pretentious. But her school had been filled with Wellesleys and Cordelias, Quincys and Leightons. Only a few Cassie Maes and Ida Sues, Jerry Bobs and Bobby Lukes were sprinkled throughout the county.

The problem lay with her mother's schizophrenic insistence on slurring the birth name she'd scoured countless books to find. Manderley glanced at the clock. Only three more hours before she'd cross the bridge into the Volunteer State and become Mandy Lee. It could be worse. Marguerite was Margy-Rita and Mama's first grandchild Genevieve was Genny-Vive. Yet somehow, Thornfield remained Thornfield and the worst nickname given to Barton was "Bartie."

Manderley would almost prefer to think about *it* over Bart. Truly, the baby of the family, Barton was

spoiled, easy-going, and everyone's favorite. While Tara insisted that all her children were creations of beauty, Barton truly epitomized the term. Waving golden-red hair, neon blue eyes, dimples, and built like the football wide receiver he was, everything came easily for Bart. But he was so charming, so happy, that no one could resent him. What was causing secretive behavior in this most open of boys?

Before she could assign nightmare scenarios to the situation, Manderley intentionally speculated on the documentary about—she took a deep breath. A bit of Midwestern cool headedness topped off her warm southern blood. She determined to call *it* by what *it* was. *The Duel*.

She mentally took away the capitals. It was a duel, like too many others fought in the pre-Civil War days. Manderley's many-times great-grandfather on her mother's side, Talbot Latimer, dueled with Henderson Coventry. The reason remained unknown but the bad blood between the Latimers and the Coventrys remained.

One thing Manderley knew with certainty. If the documentary-makers were from the North, they would not be able to understand almost two hundred years of a family feud. The South, or at least her corner of it, would look ridiculous. Manderley could gently mock the contradictions of her home but pricked when outsiders pointed fingers and made judgements about which they knew nothing. Already she was getting defensive. What did her mother think she could do? Two semesters in a northern state hadn't made her fully wise to northern ways.

The closer she got to the South, the more irritable Manderley found herself growing with the North. That

would never do. After announcing her decision last year to take a teaching job in Chicago, Manderley received full support from her father. Unlike Tara, he understood that her attempts to blend in with Chicagoans didn't stem from shame with her heritage. Her mother also fretted Chicago men would attempt to compromise Manderley's high moral standards, but an entire school year passed without a single male making an unwanted advance. Tara simultaneously expressed relief that her daughter had no need to fend off dishonorable attentions while resenting the absence of any masculine overtures.

The sun still remained several degrees above the horizon when she reduced her speed at the edge of Lowellton. Her windows were down, and she breathed in the pure early summer air. Lowellton gleamed, as it did whenever she called it to her mind's eye. Chicago was exciting, and she still delighted at the expanse that was Lake Michigan, but in Lowellton, there existed no soot, no noise, no thick air, no slums. No building over three stories, no litter stayed on the ground, no panhandlers huddled by skyscrapers. A contingent of poor, elderly and infirm lived in the town, but the churches took care of their own. Everyone in the town of eighteen hundred people affiliated with some church. Many of the same churchgoers also affiliated with one side of the feud or the other.

Besides Main Street, Lowellton boasted twelve cross streets, numbered sequentially, and fourteen parallel roads, named, with the exception of Main, after the first fourteen signers to the Declaration of Independence. The town fathers no doubt expected the city to expand and eventually each of the fifty-six signers would live on in Lowellton via a street bearing

his name. That was before the duel, an event that effectively froze the square little burg in the nineteenth century.

Her home stood in old splendor on the corner of 4th Street and S. Adams Road. Manderley loved its symmetry and simplicity, she loved the creamy almost-yellow heart-of-pine siding, painted the same color every decade since 1847. She loved the clean lines of the home, its whiter-than-white trim and shutters, the neat hedge lining the front walk and the tulip poplars shading the yard. They welcomed her like a hug. Her mother flew out the front door and Manderley flipped the car into park and leapt into her annoying, controlling, hyperbolic, and perfectly wonderful mother's arms.

The embrace reminded Manderley of an urgent need. "I need the ladies' room, Mama." She turned to head around the corner to the side entrance that led to the kitchen, which led to the powder room. But Tara kept a firm grip on her daughter's arm. "Nonsense. You are the guest of honor. You'll come in the front door."

From the front entrance, so seldom used by family that she wasn't certain if the welcome mat was new or had been there since her birth, Manderley trotted toward the stairs and up to the bathroom she and Marguerite shared in their childhood. A glimpse at the table in the dining room to the right of the foyer showed the massive table set for what seemed like a state dinner.

While upstairs, she spent a few extra minutes washing her face and swiping some lipstick on her mouth, grateful she'd piled her hair on her head before leaving this morning. Tara would realize immediately

that she'd been trimming it herself all year. In her bedroom, she risked a peek in the old floor mirror and gasped. She'd forgotten that the dress—the one whose belt she'd abandoned because it cinched too tightly even on the last hole—had belt loops on either side. She ran back to the bathroom and scabbled in the drawers to find a manicure scissors. There were at least six in every restroom of the house and Manderley sawed away at the loops before yanking them in desperation at the sound of her mother yoo-hooing up the stairs. With horror, she heard the fabric tear.

“Down in a minute Mama! Still freshening up!” Freshening up, in Tara's world, could take upward of twenty minutes, so she was safe. In her dresser, she found a long chiffon scarf and knotted it around her waist. Another glance in the mirror showed that, while the coral color didn't quite match the apricot swirls in the dress, it covered the ripped fabric and provided the illusion of a trimmer waistline than Manderley currently possessed.

She could tell by the narrowing of her mother's eyes that she wasn't fooled, but she only gave Manderley another hug and pulled her through a set of double doors into the seldom-used room she insisted be called a parlor. Immediately family swamped her, welcoming her back into the fold she'd visited only two months prior. Her father, Pem Jessup, came first, enfolding her in strong arms. She breathed in the woodsy aftershave, pipe tobacco, and smell of old books that surrounded her father since she could remember. Marguerite, pretty, fresh, and trim, gave her a squeeze and a peck on the cheek. Thornfield grinned and kissed her forehead, his tiny wife, Ruthanne, stood on tiptoe for a one-armed hug while

the other jiggled baby Genevieve. After Manderley held her niece and admired and kissed and cooed over her for an appropriate length of time, she looked for Bart. He stood at the edge of the group, grinning, and her heart went at ease.

“Get over here, baby brother, and give me some sugar.”

He laughed and waited till she’d handed off Gen before planting a kiss on top of her head and squeezing her. “Don’t tell me they say that in Chicago.”

“Only when they want it in their coffee. Oh, Bartie. It’s good to see you! Behaving yourself?”

She couldn’t see his face but felt him stiffen slightly and her worry antennae vibrated. Still, he laughed easily and answered, “Behave myself? Never. Now, if that’s enough sugar, I believe dinner is ready, right Mama?”

Tara pretended she hadn’t been keeping a watchful eye on their interchange and shook a manicured finger at Barton. “Where are your manners? Mandy Lee hasn’t met our guest yet.”

The tightness in her tone might be left over from her scrutiny of Bart. There was nothing unsettling in the features of the unknown young man who came to stand next to Tara. In fact, he was rather attractive. Reddish-blond hair, a shade or two lighter than Bart’s, topped a cheerful freckled face, a wide smile and what appeared to be genuinely green eyes, the kind of eyes one read about but seldom actually encountered. He stepped forward. Tara seemed to have lost her voice, so her father took over.

“Manderley, this is Jameson Scott. Mr. Scott is researching the duel between your great-granddaddy and Henderson Coventry. We said we’d be happy to

help, but we haven't been able to spare him much time so far. We thought you might enjoy meeting him and sharing some information."

Almost everything her father said was a boldfaced lie. But like a true southerner, she didn't bat an eye. Manderley shook hands with the researcher and regarded him with polite interest. The doorbell rang, and Marguerite jumped.

"That's Boyd, late as usual. I'll get it. Y'all get movin' into the dining room. Mama and I didn't spend the day cooking to let everything get cold and leathery."

Tara maintained meaningful eye contact with Manderley. Her expression now might convey "Didn't I tell you she's gettin' tired of Boyd?" or "What did I tell you?" about Barton. Or possibly it indicated dour triumph. The documentary, as she'd predicted, would be dreadful indeed.

Like all Tara Jessup's meals, dinner was a triumph. Chicken-fried steak, squash casserole, cornbread, and wax beans, all washed down with gallons of sweet tea. Manderley was relieved that she still enjoyed this elixir of the South even though she'd grown to appreciate dark, strong coffee. True to Manderley's prophesy, her mother did not offer her seconds, on the pretext that she save room for dessert.

Over the rich banana pudding and coffee so weak Manderley could have wrestled it into submission with her pinkie, the conversation veered, ever so slowly, to the duel. Manderley gave Mr. Scott credit. He was smooth and tactful. How he knew the duel to be a touchy subject was anyone's guess. Although, from the bright smile plastered on Mama's face, maybe it wasn't so hard to decipher.

He began by asking if both Tara and Pem were from the area. Pem explained he was a West Virginia boy. Tara failed to be as brief as her husband. Her family—led by the doughty Lowell Latimer, she explained—were among the first to settle in this plateau west of the Cumberland Mountains. It happened soon after the War for Independence. She grew more animated, even sending Barton to grab the box containing, among other Latimer treasures, the family Bible. Mr. Scott admired the lengthy family tree inside. Tara even hauled out the stamp with the Latimer family crest. The young man squinted at it, holding it to the light.

“Old, isn’t it?”

Tara beamed. Old was wonderful, unless mentioned in conjunction with a lady’s age.

“Is that a sheep’s head in the center?”

She immediately switched to low beam. “It’s a ram,” she told him coolly. “Symbol for leadership and determination.”

The atmosphere verged on glacial till Jameson showed proper astonishment when Manderley hurriedly pointed out the original land deed given Lowell Latimer in honor of his service in the Revolutionary War.

“So your family has been in the area for over two hundred years? They must be the town founders, correct?” From the gleam in Jameson’s eye Manderley could tell he knew he wasn’t right. Mr. Scott enjoyed this stirring up of the waters a bit too much.

Tara was silent for a few beats too long. She closed the Bible with a force not beneficial for an ancient book and said stiffly, “No. Another group of settlers was here first.”

“Ah, of course.” Jameson Scott leaned back and took a sip of the beige coffee. “The Coventrys.”

Manderley couldn't decide which was more amusing, Mr. Scott's attempts to pry more information from Tara or her dithering maneuvers to sidestep him.

She fluttered her fingers before affecting great surprise at the time on her delicate wristwatch. “Heavens! So late! Barton, you can help me with the dishes. Ruthanne, isn't it our baby girl's nummies time?” Tara would never, under pain of death, refer to a baby as “nursing.” She bustled to her feet. “No, Margy-Rita, you and Boyd play Kentucky Rook with Thornfield and your daddy. If I recall they beat you soundly last time.”

Manderley watched with interest. It seemed that her mother, while directing the activities of the rest of the family, had no assignment for her youngest daughter.

“Mandy Lee, Thornfield and Ruthanne and the baby are stayin' overnight. We'll eat a big breakfast, and all go to church together tomorrow before they head home.” With chill civility she explained, somewhere over Jameson Scott's head, “Mr. Scott, my son and his family live in Bowlin' Green. Thornfield is a professor there. But I'm sure you knew that.” She warmed her smile by about fifty degrees and swiveled it to Manderley. “Honey, maybe you can answer some of Mr. Scott's questions.”

Of course. Manderley's task in the family fold was to deflect any potential blots to Latimer honor. Over Tara's protests, Manderley and Jameson helped clear the table. With what sounded like genuine sincerity, the young man thanked her for a fabulous meal and then turned his attention to Manderley.