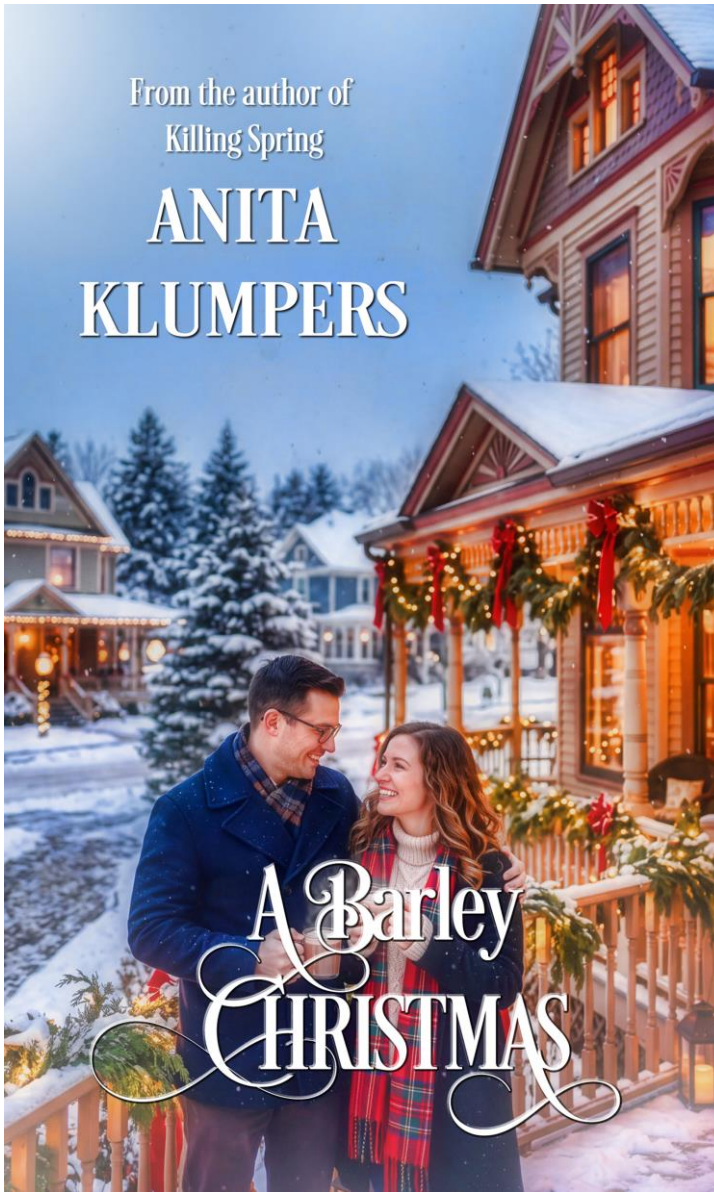

From the author of
Killing Spring
ANITA
KLUMPERS
A Barley
CHRISTMAS

A Barley Christmas

Anita Klumpers

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Chapter 1

Thanksgiving Day, November 24, 2011

"Seriously Priscilla? A foot and a half of snow on Thanksgiving Day?"

Victor toiled up the neatly shoveled stretch of sidewalk behind Priscilla Gomer. When she stopped abruptly to look over her shoulder, he almost ran into her. The appraising expression on her face made him wonder, uncomfortably, if he had possibly overdone references to snow in the last few hours.

"You're from Indiana, Victor, not Puerto Rico. You've seen snow before."

Victor Shaughnessy, unused to women challenging him, asserted himself. "Never on Thanksgiving."

Her level gaze forced him to amend the proclamation.

"Never this much."

She sighed.

That, he thought, was more like it. Women regularly sighed over Victor. One advantage to winter—the cold did marvelous things to his Irish good looks. He tossed a lock of raven-black hair that had, with a little encouragement, worked its way from under the brim of his Donegal tweed walking cap.

Priscilla missed the performance. She'd turned to the Victorian-style building looming before them. Before she reached the bottom step, the front door opened a crack. A rubber chicken peered around the corner. It uttered an anemic squawk and beckoned with the coy flap of a flaccid wing.

"That must be my brother Philip. Sixteen-going-on-eleven. I told you about him, right?" She darted up the stairs to grab the chicken. The chicken fought back.

"Philip, you idiot! What is this?" The chicken pecked her nose, and she swatted it.

"Ouch! Pris, that's my dishwashing hand!" The owner of the hand pulled it from the puppet and flexed each finger. "No harm done. More's the pity. Can we try that again and you hit a little harder?"

Priscilla laughed and motioned Victor to cross the threshold and enter the Weary Traveler Bed and Breakfast, which served as the Gomer family business and home.

"Victor, this is my brother Philip, who will try everything on God's green earth to get out of doing dishes after dinner."

"Everything on God's green earth is covered with snow." Victor said flatly, keeping a wary eye on the chicken that dangled over Philip's elbow.

"Twenty-eight." Priscilla said.

Victor frowned "Excuse me?"

"Never mind. Philip, you knew Vic was coming, right? He spent his time in Ukraine buying diamond mines while we poverty-struck foreign-exchange students hobnobbed with locals in hopes they'd buy us

coffee and pastries. He was on the flight coming back and had nowhere to go for Thanksgiving, since his parents are in Hawaii."

"Not diamonds. Manganese." Victor cast a glance at Philip. "And my parents are in Jamaica."

With an impatient wave, Priscilla consigned Jamaica and Hawaii to tropical equivalency.

"Whatever. Anyway, Mom knows he is perfectly safe, since we'd met before and know some of the same people, and Mom's college roommate took an exercise class with Vic's mother."

"Aunt."

Again, the hand wave. Victor sensed the crease between his jet black brows deepen. Seldom did he find himself needing to so consistently correct a woman. He wondered at his impulsive acceptance of her invitation. A glance at her sun-kissed face alight with health and a neat figure, divested of outer wrappings, reminded him why.

Philip tucked the chicken under his arm and stuck a hand out to Victor. "Welcome to the Weary Traveler Inn, Victor. And happy Thanksgiving."

He was regarding Victor with the same sort of evaluation his sister had demonstrated. Victor was used to it. He'd been mistaken for a handsome Celtic poet, a handsome Italian actor, and a handsome Australian rugby captain, and he honestly had to admit justification for each comparison. Which meant women couldn't get enough of him, men wanted him out of the room, and teenage boys wondered how hard they would have to work to look like him.

Philip was slender with floppy bright-brown hair and quick movements, and Victor generously hoped the boy wasn't too intimidated by his musculature. Priscilla had also let slip that the boy was homeschooled. Maybe the teen had some sort of deficiency.

For an undergrown kid, Philip had a surprisingly firm grip, and Victor loosened his hand after a few seconds, unwilling to reciprocate with a really powerful handshake.

Priscilla now grabbed her brother and shook him a little. "Philip Gomer, I have only been gone for half a year, and you go from being a little shrimpy alien-type to a reasonable facsimile of a male human! And I have to look up at you now!"

To Vic's discomfort she burst into tears, hugged her younger brother, and then abruptly pulled away.

"I've been home for at least three minutes and no one but you and the chicken have greeted me! Where is everyone?"

"Mom is resting in her room. No, not her heart. She got up at three to start the turkeys, so Dad made her lie down for a nap. Dad's over at the neighbors because their pilot light went out, and they're sure if they light it, the house will blow up."

"Mom has had a heart condition since she was little so she has to be careful," Priscilla offered over her shoulder to Victor. "Our neighbors are elderly and always sure something will blow up." She turned her attention back to Philip. "What about everyone else?"

"Beth and Sarah went back home to collect their

sprouts since everything is ready except the last-minute stuff but should be back any minute. Michael is picking up the old folks and Marcus is…I have no idea."

Victor had been quiet long enough. "So, it's you two and your parents and your sisters and brothers and some…uh…elderly people? That's a crowd. My folks and brother and I always went out to a restaurant for Thanksgiving dinner."

Philip regarded him with pity. "There is no way a restaurant meal could be as good as what you will experience today."

Priscilla hung her hat and coat by an ancient radiator near the entrance. "I thought I told you that my sisters and oldest brother all have families. I have a lot of relatives in the area."

Vic looked at Priscilla, cute-as-a-button, vivacious, sparkly Priscilla. "Priscilla. You didn't tell me anything about Thanksgiving at your home. You said it was too hard to explain, and you said your family was too hard to explain, and then you spent the entire rest of the flight and the drive here from the airport talking about the effect of the Stalin-created famine of the 1930s on the political climate of the present. Because," he added, with just-controlled sarcasm, "that is easy to explain."

"Well, I am through with Ukraine until January. I'm going to shower and change in one of the unoccupied guest rooms, so I don't bother Mom. And then I can tell you about my deliciously adorable little nieces and nephews. They'll swarm all over you and love you to pieces and want you to read books to them

and they'll want to share their dessert with you."

Then, by some association of ideas that eluded Victor—already horrified by the prospect of swarming and germ-laden youngsters—she added, "I'm sure I told you about the Gomer family tradition. Women make the meal, men do dishes. Right? I'll head to the kitchen as soon as I'm clean. Philip will show you where you'll be sleeping. It's up a few levels. Hope you don't mind." Picking up the duffle bag she'd deposited by the ornate old reception counter, she disappeared up the stairs.

Victor clamped down hard on the suitcase Philip offered to carry for him, hoping his outrage was visible to any onlooker. Priscilla had never, he knew, seen fit to mention that he would be doing kitchen duty in the Gomer household.

Chapter 2

Thanksgiving Day, November 24, 2011

After twenty minutes and a meticulously-timed power nap, Victor realized Priscilla was probably not coming up to keep him company. He pulled on his Italian leather shoes and peered out his door at the large landing area he'd noticed on the way up. Shelves lined the walls and books lined the shelves and comfortable chairs clustered around a large, low table. On one of the leather armchairs sat a middle-aged man and in one of the man's hands was a pipe. Righteous anger swelled in Victor's bosom.

"Good afternoon." He nodded at the man, pleased with the tone of cold authority he'd injected in the phrase. "Of course, I can't say for certain, but I don't believe the owners would care to have one of their guests smoking. Not that it would matter, since I believe smoking is illegal in all public areas."

The man smiled and set the pipe in a smooth wooden ring on the table next to him. "Mrs. Gomer certainly wouldn't approve. I try not to light it when there are guests." He tapped the bowl and grinned. "See? Cold. Old habit, I guess, to carry it around."

The man rose and held out his hand and Victor, with dreadful certainty, knew the man he'd lectured

was Priscilla's father.

"You must be my daughter's friend, Victor. Welcome to the Weary Traveler. My children refer to this area as our landing library. Make yourself free of any of our books. I'm Bud Gomer, by the way. Do me a favor and don't tell my wife you found me up here clutching my pipe. The sweet little old neighbor ladies drive me to it. Every time I take care of their pilot light, they hover over my shoulder and beg for God's mercy."

Victor stammered a greeting and consulted his watch, proof that he was terribly busy and had to be elsewhere. He descended the stairs, his dignity further sabotaged by a hideous creak in a tread halfway down. As he hesitated by the ornate old reception desk, unsure where to find Priscilla, a small door opposite him opened. At the same time, there arose a clattering on the steps behind him and two figures hurled past him from opposite directions and into each others' arms. Priscilla, hair still damp, was enveloped by a small woman half a head shorter but unmistakably her mother. There was silence for several seconds. Then the curly-haired, bright-eyed woman pulled away and took her daughter's face between her hands.

"Sweetheart, how gorgeous you are! Welcome home, my love."

"Oh, Mom," was all Priscilla choked out, and buried her head in her mother's shoulder. This embrace lasted twice as long as Victor deemed necessary. He was about to introduce himself when Priscilla pulled free and beamed down at her mother.

"Pretty is as common in Ukraine as dirt. Nobody looks twice at pretty. The women there are drop-dead gorgeous. I had to wake up every morning deciding if I was going to work on my inner or outer beauty. I figured I'd let God take care of the inner woman while I focused on trying not to garner pity for being plain." She scratched absently at her forearm and beamed down at her mother.

"Plain? You? Never!"

Priscilla shook her head sadly. "Mom, they are all slender. And tough. They walk everywhere. I tried to explain that in Barley you walk one direction and hit a Great Lake and three other directions will put you in woods that are thick with undergrowth, ticks, and bears. But those women could probably fight off a bear with a tree trunk. They're so strong. They eat beets and rub fruit on their faces and oatmeal and eggs on their hair and they wouldn't dream of leaving the house with no makeup, much less wearing tennis shoes and sweats." She sighed. "I fear I did not uphold American womanhood in a satisfactory manner."

Victor kept his smile to himself, knowing full well he had upheld American manhood beyond all expectation. He also recognized that if he didn't assert himself, the two women may very well walk past him as if he were another piece of furniture. He moved next to Priscilla, took the smaller woman's hand and bowed slightly over it. A little old-world courtliness seemed in order.

"Mrs. Gomer? Thank you for including me in the celebration today. The inn is lovely. My name is Victor

Shaughnessy." He hoped Priscilla would note his gracious pardon for her neglect to perform introductions. But she continued beaming at her mother, holding the hand that Victor wasn't.

Ann turned a smiling face to him. "Welcome Victor. Call me Ann, please. And thank you so much for delivering our daughter to us. It's difficult to spare anyone to drive all the way to the Duluth airport." She directed the smile at Priscilla, who was once again scratching up her sleeve. "Wool sweater bothering you?"

"Mosquito bite. On the plane. We think he smuggled himself on board when we had one of our interminable layovers. But I got him good. A mighty whack that almost dislocated my elbow. His bloated self will never nibble another innocent traveler." She smiled at Victor. "And Victor let me use his handkerchief to clean up the bloody remains."

Victor's explanation on the pedigree of the Irish linen handkerchief—now in the airplane's trash—was cut short by a throng of a half-dozen, assorted-size youngsters who spilled from the nether regions of the inn. He plastered himself against the wall as the mass of miniature humanity tumbled past. A wrathful woman pushed through the same swinging door, waving a dish towel at their backsides. She had Priscilla's small, straight nose, wide-set eyes and cleft chin, and Ann's crop of curls.

"You know why the witch with the gingerbread house baked children? They are always underfoot! Go outside and don't come back until you're called. First,

hug Aunt Pris!"

In remarkably short order the urchins hugged their aunt, some fiercely, some dutifully, and clambered out the front door. The towel-wielding woman grabbed Priscilla. "Oh, Pris! Welcome back! Gosh, I wish I had time to do more than just hug you! Can't wait to catch up. Video chat is good, real chat is best. I saved the vegetable casseroles for you, by the way. All the tough stuff is finished."

"Bless you, big sister. I wasn't looking forward to peeling my weight in potatoes. Sarah, this is Vic. You can get acquainted after dinner." She released Sarah, who dashed back to the kitchen, Ann keeping pace. Priscilla and Victor were alone. A parlor opened off the foyer—a parlor devoid of extraneous Gomers and warm from a crackling fire. He moved toward it, motioning Priscilla, but she had other ideas.

"Is your room OK?" She didn't wait for an answer. He knew she assumed his room would be OK. Every room at the inn, from what she'd told him, surpassed OK by several degrees. "Come in and keep me company while I assemble vegetable casseroles. I promise you needn't work. It would be in violation of the Code of the Gomers. If you do any cooking, you don't need to do the washing."

Still chattering, she pulled him into the kitchen. He stopped dead and stared. The inn murmured, "Tasteful.' The kitchen screamed 'Tacky!' The wall color, reminiscent of overripe citrus fruit, was partially and mercifully obscured by shelves packed with baskets and jars and boxes. There wasn't a bank of

cabinets to be seen. A hideous table was made more attractive only by the company it kept—a gaggle of ghastly chairs he wouldn't have used to prop his feet on, much less his backside.

It seemed full of women, but actually, with Priscilla, there were only six. The previously-met-Sarah. Ann. Another who looked like Bud Gomer, tall, with quiet eyes and long flaxen hair pulled back from a serene forehead. He wasn't sure about the other younger woman and, since she looked to be at least thirty, was not particularly curious. As was his wont, he started to overlook the elderly woman. But, tall and lean, she was not a woman one overlooked. She had to be almost six-feet tall, without the hint of a stoop or dowager's hump. Her hair reminded him of a tabby cat he had once caught by the tail. Orange tips, white at the roots, and standing straight up. He shuddered slightly as he remembered the specifics of the cat's revenge.

Priscilla had been introducing him after she'd embraced each lady, and he'd kept track of names in case this relationship with Priscilla went further. But he missed the tabby's because his eyes met hers with an almost fatalistic knowledge that they would be yellow-green and tilted up at the sides. If her pupils had been vertical slits, he would have run screaming from the house.

Cat Woman stuck her face up close to him for a moment. Neither of them bothered to hold out their hands. Then she looked over his left shoulder at Priscilla, flared her nostrils slightly, and turned her

back on him while Priscilla said something about what the woman did or had done and Victor wondered if she had retractable fingernails.

Priscilla finished in a lowered tone. "I'm looking forward to getting into a bang-up argument with Aunt Lou over dessert about the legacy of Ukrainian nationalists who fought with Nazis in WWII."

Victor didn't care what the tabby did, as long as it didn't involve him. "Priscilla, I feel like I'm in the way." He waited for a contradiction.

"Oh, that's all right. We're used to lots of bodies in here. Park yourself in the corner behind the table. On the chair that looks like Betsy Ross made it. We can chat."

Victor inserted himself cautiously onto the red, white, and blue easy chair, worn shiny by, he had no doubt, generations of Gomer hindquarters. Priscilla thrust a few newspapers at him and called over his shoulder to the room in general.

"Should I use the whole green beans? Or the French cut? Or the other kind of cut? The fat ones?"

One of the women responded. "Sweetie, you better use the French cut. They're skinnier and it is getting mighty close to dinner time."

Priscilla glanced at the clock and squealed. Victor, a testosterone island battered by the current of estrogen, rose, stiff-spined, from the garish chair. He laid the newspapers on the seat. "I'm evidently not needed here. I'll head up to my room and read for a bit."

He repeated this twice before Priscilla heard him.

At least he thought she did. She threw a nod in his direction over an armload of home-canned beans. While he hadn't expected to be begged to stay and keep her company, Victor was put out by her complete lack of interest in that company. Victor did something he had never done before. He hesitated at the door, giving her a chance to reconsider. When the bag of almonds she examined seemed to elicit more allure than he did, Victor trailed from the room and up the stairs to wonder at the Shaughnessy-resistant gene Gomer women appeared to possess.

Chapter 3

Thanksgiving Day, November 24, 2011

Forty-five minutes later, Victor woke from his second nap, this one wholly unplanned, to a quick hard rapping on his door. Priscilla's voice called, "Dinner!"

He arranged a forgiving look on his face before opening the door. Priscilla was already gone. He could hear her humming down the steps, and when she hit the squeaking step, it responded with cheerful dissonance to her tune.

The situation called for drastic action. He refused to follow her commands like a trained pup. Victor finished the chapter he had been reading, washed his face, adjusted the locks of hair to artless obedience, and changed his shirt. He descended the stairs in a languid manner and rounded the corner into the dining room, where he stopped dead. Eighteen heads swiveled in his direction and thirty-six eyes focused on him. Four of those eyes bored into his soul.

Two belonged to Priscilla. "Victor! I called you fifteen minutes ago! We're all waiting!"

Victor wanted to tell her he knew quite well it was only eleven minutes but was saved the need to correct her by Ann, who put out a restraining hand and

shushed her daughter.

"Victor, ignore her. We just took the rolls out of the oven and no civilized Thanksgiving dinner can begin until the rolls are done."

He smiled benevolently. Priscilla's gaze shifted to her plate, but one set of eyes remained fixed on him. They belonged to a small girl of about four, sitting on a booster seat and drumming short fingers rhythmically on the table. Although her nose still had the unformed and nondescript shape of the very young, the wide-set eyes and cleft chin marked her as a Gomer. Those eyes currently narrowed with irritation and the cleft chin jutted dangerously.

"It's about stinking time," she announced. One of the women from the kitchen, who, Victor assumed was the child's mother, shushed her, much as Ann had shushed Priscilla. The child lapsed into silence but didn't take glinting eyes off him and didn't retract the jutting chin, even during Bud's prayer. Victor knew, because, through slitted eyes, he saw her frowning at him. She pointed at his eyes and squeezed her own piously shut.

Victor was disconcerted to be seated between the two women who seemed least enamored of him—Aunt Lou the tabby and the disapproving child. For a moment he wished he were with his parents at a nice, uncomplicated restaurant in Jamaica, but then his gaze fell on the feast before him. All thoughts of a Caribbean paradise fled, and he set himself to charm his dining neighbors and fully embrace a Gomer Thanksgiving.

An hour later Jamaica once again set to romance

him. The meal had lived up to its promise. Juicy turkey, rich gravy, fragrant stuffing, airy rolls, dense sweet potatoes, tart cranberry sauce, and Priscilla's vegetable side dishes. All turned to ash under the constant scrutiny of his small dinner companion. He would attempt fascinating conversation with Priscilla, seated across from him. But her family, who hadn't seen her for months, refused to share. She was kept busy answering questions and regaling everyone with hilarious or touching stories of her time in Ukraine, all of which he was irritatingly certain they had heard already. She'd told him that between regular video chats, they called each week, and she wrote home every few days.

The tabby turned to him once, to ask why he was in Ukraine. Encouraged by the interest, he delivered a short but impactful explanation of his family's lithium battery company and their interest in gaining rights to mine for manganese. With self-deprecating chuckles, he described meetings with senior executives and their promising feedback on his future. He finished with his crowning humility—"Ukrainian businessmen impressed me with a quite current grasp of global economics"—and waited for questions or compliments.

"I thought you might be studying political science."

This, Victor crowed inwardly, was perfect. His business acumen firmly established, he could now demonstrate his wit. "Never!" He pulled out a joke he'd thought particularly droll in his undergrad days.