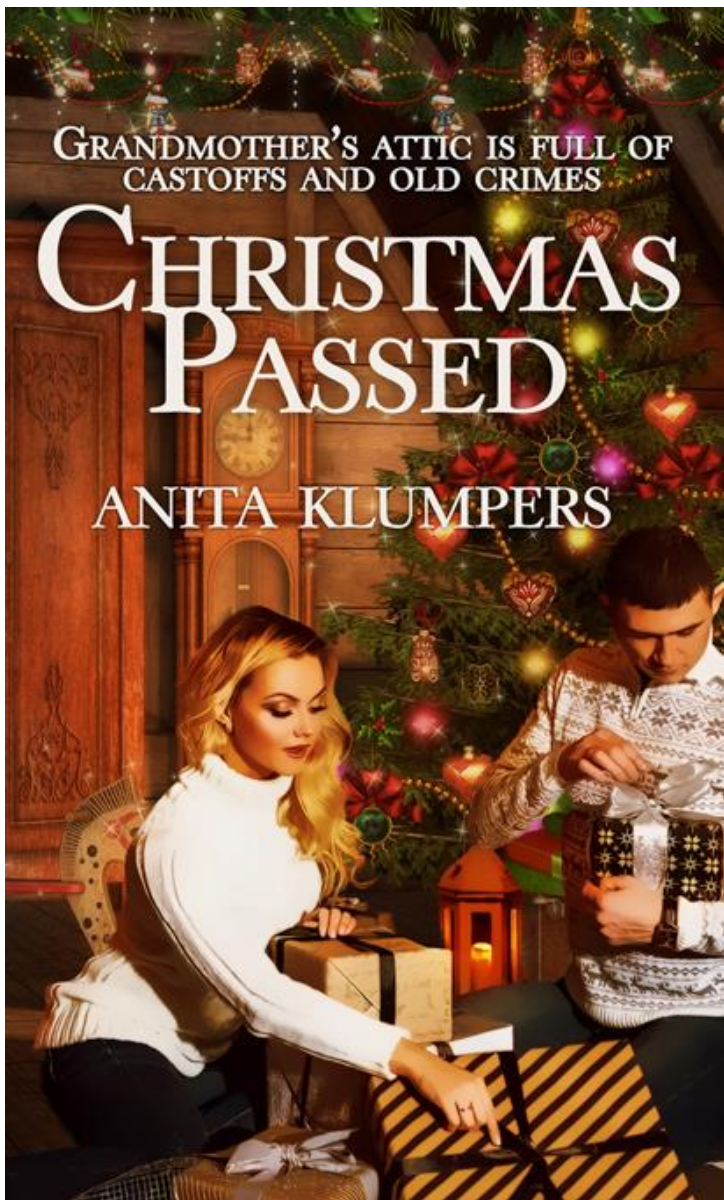


GRANDMOTHER'S ATTIC IS FULL OF
CASTOFFS AND OLD CRIMES

CHRISTMAS PASSED

ANITA KLUMBERS



Christmas Passed

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Christmas Passed

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2018

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-9811-0

Published in the United States of America

Books by Anita Klumpers

Winter Watch
Hounded

1

The Farmer's Almanac promised December would be cold and snowy. Wouldn't be the first time farmers got something wrong. Eighteen days until Christmas, and it was warm enough for a spring jacket. Still, Dinah checked the extended forecast every day and tracked the national radar maps. She read barometric pressure, sun dogs, cloud formations, and the bands on woolly bear caterpillars with increasingly waning hopes of snow.

Dinah shrugged her camera farther up her shoulder and considered the house before her. It would be so much nicer with snow heaped on the bushes. Ah, well. Milwaukee was a typically stubborn Midwest city, prone to cantankerous mood swings and contrary weather. Snow could still happen, but in the meantime, she needed outdoor photos of the stately Wagner House. Ten days 'til the first Wagner House extravaganza, but only two photos on the website. Not enough to generate curiosity.

She took traditional shots, artsy ones, and some closeups to add to the wide-angle pictures she'd snapped yesterday. The Christmas lights were already strung but wouldn't be plugged in until the sun went down, so she focused on the wreaths hanging on the door and in windows, and swags of garland wrapping the porch columns. Were such outdoor festoons common in the 1930's era? Dinah pulled the door to

enter the old home.

It didn't budge. Must be stuck. Maybe the hinges needed oiling. One more shove on the door, and Dinah gave up. It was an excuse to push the ornate ivory doorbell button that connected to the chimes inside. They were programmed to play several notes from "Winter Wonderland," the theme of the Christmas fundraiser.

She rang the bell and pressed her ear to the door to hear the chimes.

From inside came the bellow, "Coming!" followed by a loud thump and a scream that drowned out the cheerful tune.

2

Dinah stood frozen, her ear still to the door, for only a moment. The beautifully leaded glass sidelights were plenty wide to peer through. Someone was writhing on the floor at the base of the stairs. *Ebbie!* Looping her camera strap around her neck, Dinah pulled out her phone and called 9-1-1.

If Ebbie was hurt, there was no time to waste. The stubborn old woman would try to move and do worse damage. Dinah checked the locked back door then ran to the shed. Oh, blessed day. These were unlocked. She pulled out a stepladder, dragged it to the side porch, and swarmed up and over the short railing onto the flat roof. The bedroom window overlooking this balcony had been replaced yesterday while she was here. It might be unlocked. She pulled on driving gloves that had textured palms, placed her hands flat on the lower sash, and pushed up. It took several tries, and by the time the opening was wide enough to slip through, approaching sirens sounded louder and then stopped. The slamming of vehicle doors was followed by a shout. Dinah looked over the railing. Three pistols aimed at various parts of her anatomy. She assumed the pistols' owners were in earnest when they ordered that she drop flat, on her stomach, hands behind her head. From that prone and uncomfortable position, she listened as someone climbed the ladder and approached. Cheek pressed to shingle, she had an all-

too-excellent view of polished shoes, creased navy pants, and dangling handcuffs.

Before Dinah could fully explain that she belonged there, had placed the 9-1-1 call, and that she'd planned to unlock the door from the inside, she heard the smashing of glass. "Oh, no!"

"Oh, no!" Ebbie's synchronized words floated through the open window on the second floor and the broken window on the first. Floated wasn't an accurate word. Dinah, finally allowed to sit up, searched the thesaurus in her mind. Ebbie's words were piercing the air, splintering it.

"Impaling."

"What?" The police officer, a young woman, conveyed a sort of skittish confusion at Dinah's remark.

Dinah inclined her head toward the open window. "Ebbie. Impaling the air with her"—she once again searched her mental thesaurus—"her invectives." The officer still seemed unenlightened. "The injured woman. She's cussing out the police for breaking the window downstairs. It's one of the originals from the 1930s, and I can't imagine how they'll get it replaced before the Christmas open house next week."

The girl, who in spite of her uniform and general air of competence couldn't be much over twenty, shrugged. "Procedure."

Dinah sighed. "That's why I was trying to go through the window here. I could get in, go downstairs, and open the door before you needed to break anything. If you don't let me go in and calm down Ebbie, you might have a coronary on your hands as well."

The young officer wavered, and Dinah pounced.

“Come on. Ebbie will identify me.”

A particularly loud invective, better described as an expletive, exploded. Dinah decided to take her chances with being shot. Ebbie was her friend and needed her. She jumped to her feet. “Either shoot me, arrest me, or let me go in.” She flung a leg over the windowsill in challenge. “Coming?”

The cursing grew more distinct. Officer Beulah L. Jordan, the moniker engraved on her gold nametag, remained impassive as she escorted Dinah through the bedroom, into the upper hallway and down the beautiful staircase. When Ebbie growled a particularly colorful description of her rescuers, Officer Jordan’s eyebrows shot up, and Dinah could tell she was trying not to laugh.

Any inclination to laugh along evaporated when Dinah saw the old woman. Usually vigorous and with the high color of the hyperactive, Ebbie’s skin looked like gray putty. Her ankle was heading the wrong direction. Her hand, gripping a staircase spindle, shook. At the sight of Dinah, Ebbie stopped cussing and reached out her other shaking hand, pointing at the shattered glass.

“Look what the idiots did to the leaded glass window!”

“Protocol, I’ve been told. It’s just glass, Ebbie.” They both knew this was a lie. It was original and custom made and expensive and even if funds were unlimited, which they weren’t, the window probably wouldn’t be replaced in time.

“If they’d given me one minute, I could have opened the door for them.”

That wasn’t true either. Not with that ankle. Dinah wanted to hold the old woman’s hand and offer

comfort. But the paramedics arrived and closed her from view. So Dinah settled for a third untruth. "You'll be glued together and back in no time."

No one seemed convinced, least of all Ebbie, who finally succumbed to the pain by passing in and out of consciousness. In a mercifully short time, she was loaded into an ambulance. Everyone left, and Dinah was alone in the house. She needed to stay. Anyone could crawl through the broken window. Though Ebbie referred to other women of the historical society, she never shared contact information. So Dinah swept up the glass, settled on the front porch in the spring-like air, and waited for the rest of the neighborhood historical society to arrive.

A regal woman wearing a pink coat and winter white slacks, and who held herself with perfect posture and a stately tread, came down the sidewalk and turned onto the walk toward the house. After expressing genteel dismay over Ebbie's accident and the shattered window, she and Dinah shook hands and exchanged names. Helen Konig, according to Ebbie, was around eighty but still an aristocratic beauty. She lived only a few houses down the street, she explained, then asked for more details of Ebbie's fall.

"Silly woman. She thinks she's still a girl your age." Helen sighed. "I'm forever cautioning her to slow down. If only I'd been here this morning instead of a hairdresser appointment. Now we must continue without Miriam or Ebbie."

Miriam Wagner, Helen continued, was one of her closest friends. "We all took it hard when she chose to move to an assisted living home, but it was the best possible decision. Miriam was alone too much here. She heard strange sounds and imagined items moving

and voices whispering. My husband Ralph and I worried the most when she seemed to live more in the past than the present. But since she went to Our Best Years, she's back in fettle." She explained to a bewildered Dinah, "A senior living home," she explained to a bewildered Dinah. "It used to be Golden Years or some such thing, but the current owners put a positive spin on aging." She motioned toward the French doors leading to the living room. "Excuse me, dear. I should call Ebbie's daughter."

Helen shut the doors behind her, and Dinah was alone in the hallway of a home that wasn't hers. She didn't think it would be too presumptuous to examine the fine old mirror in the foyer and was doing so when the front door opened an inch or two. It opened another few inches and finally the crack was wide enough for a face to peer in. When the same face simultaneously stared in the broken window and appeared in a wavering replication through the leaded glass of the unbroken sidelight, Dinah wondered for a wild moment if her sanity was haywire.

3

"Come in ladies." Helen glided silently out of the living room and motioned a graceful arm. The pink coat was off, revealing a soft rosy sweater. The door opened enough for one, then two, then three identical older women to slip through.

"Faye, Kaye and Mae, I'd like you to meet Dinah Braun. Rosa Braun's granddaughter."

The three heads moved in unison.

"Dinah, meet the Lister sisters. You might not believe this," she added dryly, "but they are triplets."

Gentle twittering met this, and the women offered soft limp hands to Dinah in turn.

"Ladies, there is bad news. Ebbie took a spill and is on the way to the hospital." Over the concerned clucking, Helen continued. "So, responsibility to finalize preparations for the Wagner House Winter Wonderland falls on our shoulders."

Three identical hands went to three presumably identical hearts.

Helen might appear fragile, but she spoke in the authority of a grand dame. "We will not let Ebbie down. We will not let Miriam or the Wagner family name down. We will not abandon this opportunity to raise funds for the historical society. Rosa's granddaughter"—she pointed her small neat chin at Dinah—"is here to help."

A chorus of cheerful chirrups from the Listers

greeted Dinah's baffled silence. Help do what?

A week ago, responding to a flyer from the neighborhood historical society requesting volunteer photographers, Dinah had dashed to the dark old building that served as office and museum. She'd been certain there would be dozens more qualified applicants ahead of her. Not only had she been the first to arrive, she'd been the only one.

Ebbie, on duty that day, proved delighted with a young, agile recruit who owned a real camera. When Dinah learned her first assignment would be to document the transformation of the Wagner House to a Christmas showcase from the 1930s, she'd been thrilled. The stately colonial house with its gracious symmetry, crisp white siding, and deep green shutters always seemed the epitome of elegance to her. As a child, she'd passed it on her way to school. Old Mr. and Mrs. Wagner always nodded at her, asked after her grandparents, and once gave her a tin of fresh pfeffernusse as she dragged herself home after a particularly trying day of sixth grade. Following Mr. Wagner's death, his widow continued to care for the house with help from family, including her perfectly dreadful grandson Mickey, the boy usually responsible for young Dinah's most trying days.

Now Helen took Dinah's hand. "We've no right to ask that you do more than you volunteered for. Ebbie mentioned that you're a self-employed photographer?"

The Listers looked dubious, and Dinah couldn't blame them. She imagined her brothers snorting with derision. Self-employed meant one actually received an income. Dinah made no more money at photography than at her cake-decorating hobby or jewelry making or with her Red Cross certification or interior design

training. One brother called her a jack of all trades, master of none. Dinah preferred Renaissance woman.

One Lister, Dinah doubted she would ever match a triplet to her correct name, whispered something to Helen behind a liver-spotted hand.

“No, no notes. Ebbie keeps notes in her head.” The three sisters nodded in lugubrious resignation as Helen explained to Dinah. “Kaye is referring to the final preparations. We purchased a tree, but it still stands bare.” She indicated the French doors to the living room, and Dinah took this as permission to enter. The room was glorious. From the gleaming black phone on an oak telephone stand to the Chesterfield sofa to the enormous Christmas tree between two long windows, everything could be part of a pre-World War Two movie set. “And there are other decorations found in various shops or donated to us. But we’re unsure if they, or, indeed, anything we acquired, was en vogue in 1939. We were mere children.”

Through fluttering sounds and motions, the Listers indicated their agreement, or maybe distress.

Dinah’s excitement sprang, fully-loaded, but she didn’t want to frighten the women with her fervor. “I took courses at community college on interior design and did my final project on pre-World War II trends. I’ve always loved that era and this house. When Ebbie asked me to photograph and told me you wanted the theme to be Christmas in the thirties, I already had an idea what it should look like.” Her enthusiasm didn’t seem to be making the old women too nervous. “I found a stack of magazines from the thirties at a garage sale and couldn’t resist buying them. Several were Christmas issues.”

A lesser woman might express smugness, but

Helen only shot a sideways triumphant glance at the Listers. "You seem to be saying you'll accept our challenge and lead our motley crew?"

Dinah surveyed the four elderly women. This must be how Douglas MacArthur felt as he prepared to liberate the Philippines. They would do or die. She straightened her shoulders.

"I'd love to help with decorating."

Helen beamed, and the Listers permitted a slight relaxing of the lips. "Dinah Braun is now an official member of the Rothsburgh Heights Neighborhood Historical Society."

~*~

If Dinah imagined she would immediately take the decorating reins, she soon stood corrected. The other women assigned her tasks usually reserved for the limber Ebbie. Dinah was directed to drape greenery on the stairway and mantel and haul the Lionel train boxes out of a closet and retrieve the cast iron Christmas tree stand from the same shed she'd gotten the ladder. It was absorbing work, though, and Dinah constantly reminded herself to stop for photos.

In all the years the Wagners lived in the house, Dinah never remembered it decorated for Christmas. She wondered aloud at the boxes and bags of decorations as she took pictures in the kitchen. The Lister sisters were sorting stacks of old Christmas cards. Whenever Dinah would aim the camera at one of the triplets, she would grab the closest card, hold it beneath her chin, tilt her head and smile coquettishly. Helen must have heard Dinah's remark and came in from the dining room.

"Most of this is the result of Ebbie's shopping and

scrounging and begging to find items appropriate to the time period. And stealing, I wouldn't doubt. Those cards, for example. She convinced an antiques dealer to sell them for pennies."

Dinah's fingers itched to get a better look at the cards. She tried making appropriate conversation, hoping for an invite to pull up a chair. But the Lister sisters merely bobbed heads at her and burred and went back to work. She shrugged and picked up the heavy tree stand. "Isn't the tree already set up?"

Helen took her by the arm and led her to the living room. "Come see."

The tree was one of those gloriously wide and spindly ones so prominent in old movies—perfect for displaying oversized old ornaments and garland and yards of tinsel. The discordant note was the towel-swathed plastic bucket it sat in. Dinah had missed it in her initial thrill with the room.

"Mrs. Konig—"

"Helen, please."

"All right. Helen, I don't think we'll be able to get the tree in the stand. It's a bit unwieldy."

"You are such a tactful girl. You mean the sisters and I are too old. No! Don't apologize! A nice strong man promised to come later, and he'll take care of it."

The phone rang, and they both started.

"Gracious, I'm not used to hearing it ring!" Helen moved to the stand and picked up the smooth black receiver. She spoke briefly, listened for a moment, and murmured something before placing the handset back in the cradle.

"Ebbie's daughter. Ebbie's ankle is shattered, and she's still in surgery. But that stubborn woman. She came around long enough to tell her daughter that

Miriam thought there was a box of Christmas ornaments in the attic. Which comes as a surprise to us all, since the Wagners never went in for holidays. But there it is. Official permission to go into the attic and find them, and I'm afraid that means you, dear."

In the face of Helen's rueful apologies, Dinah thought it would be unseemly to jump up and down for joy. Some women dream of tropical islands and some of Rodeo Drive shopping trips and some of sitting on the fifty-yard line at the Super Bowl. Dinah dreamed of rummaging through old attics.

She might appear overeager if she bounded to the attic immediately. Prudence dictated she use a buffer of polite conversation. "The society has done a wonderful job. If these furnishings are reproductions, they're excellent."

Helen smiled. "Much of what is here is original. The Wagners lived lightly and cared for everything. We moved anything more contemporary upstairs. The Christmas tree will be our finishing touch. There are lights—genuinely old and, according to the dealer, never used. First my husband will check over every inch. He was born understanding the mystery of electricity. But we can't hang ornaments until the lights are strung. I'm curious about the ones in the attic. Do you mind going to search for them now?"

Mind? She couldn't wait. Dinah bounded halfway up the stairs when a roar stopped her in her tracks. A hand waved in the broken window joined by an irate face.

"What on earth has been going on here?"

4

Dinah waited. Helen and the Lister sisters were no match for a madman. They might need someone with fourteen weeks training in Brazilian *jiu jitsu* to protect them.

"Come in, Michael." Helen appeared unperturbed, but still Dinah waited.

The man shot through the front door and gesticulated wildly at the glassless window opening. "Helen, was there a break-in?"

"You might say that."

Dinah heard shuffling in the hallway and assumed it was the Listers, arrived en masse, to observe and make non-verbal comments.

"Ebbie took a bad fall and whoever got here first broke the window since the door was locked. Who got here first, Dinah? Paramedics or police?"

The man's gaze traveled up the staircase and landed on Dinah. He moved to the bottom step and peered up at her.

"Dinah? Dinah Brown?"

"Braun." She started down to meet him. Something seemed familiar. "Mickey?"

There he was, as big as life. Mrs. Wagner's grandson, the bane of her childhood. He'd heard the song "Someone's in the Kitchen with Dinah" and invented rude and cutting alternate verses to make her

life miserable. She'd been gangly with unmanageable hair, untamable eyebrows, buck teeth, and a full lower lip that she always tried to suck in because she thought it too big. Now she'd beaten her hair into submission and discovered the joys of eyebrow tweezers. Braces took care of her teeth and her full lower lip was right in style. She'd even filled out in the places she'd always hoped to fill out. Mickey Wagner, on the other hand, was gorgeous as a rotten kid and was gorgeous as an irate adult.

"You look different." He didn't inject a lot of admiration into the statement.

"You don't." The conversation would have died there, but she couldn't tamp down her curiosity. "What brings you here, Mickey?"

"Mick. It hasn't been Mickey since sixth grade. And I own the house. More accurately, I'll inherit it. What brings you here, Dinah?"

"I'm here to photograph the transformation for the Wagner House Winter Wonderland open houses. And now, I'll help with the decorating since Ebbie is injured."

"Oh. Well, thank you." He said it grudgingly. "I bet you're doing it gratis. And if I sounded heartless earlier, I love my grandmother, and I'm not ready to take ownership of the place yet. My responsibility is to make sure the plans for this holiday shindig proceed in a proper manner." He flung an arm at the broken window. "A hole in the window doesn't say 'Welcome, Christmas.' More like 'come in and take what you want.'"

"Careful. Some shards might be sticking out. If you call Ye Olde Homestead in Chicago, they can probably find a match for it. There's no website listed,