

A Middlebury Christmas

By

Anita Higman

“At Christmas, all roads lead home.”

Marjorie Holmes

Chapter One

With roses bundled in her arms and anxiety clouding her spirit, June Butterby hurried through the hospital hallway and then pushed open the door to room 203. “Mom?” she whispered. June stepped over to the bedside of a woman who was not only her dearest friend but her mother. “I came as soon as I heard.”

“June Bug,” her mom said, raising her head from the pillow. “I’m so glad you’re here. Oh, and you brought me red roses for Christmas.”

June quickly set the blossoms on the table and got a good look at her mom. Scratches crisscrossed her lovely face. “Mom, no. Look at you.” She cradled her mother’s face in her hands. “What happened?”

“No biggy.” Her mom picked up a fallen petal. “I fell off a ladder in the bakery. Just got a sprained foot and some bruised ribs and a cut or two. That’s all.”

“That’s all?” June gripped the bedrail. “That sounds horrible.”

“The CT Scan was clear, so I’m just grateful that I didn’t fracture my face when I hit the concrete floor.”

“What? Your face hit that rough floor? Oh, Mom.”

Her mother took her hand and gave it a kiss.

June said, “It sounds like a calamity in one of April’s gothic novels.”

Her mother chuckled. “I guess it does a little.”

June gazed around the room. Hmm. Antiseptic fumes, beeping monitor, and an IV. It wasn’t very comforting to see her mother in such a state and in such a not-so-homey place right before Christmas. She leaned closer, and her mother smoothed the curls out of her face just like she did when she was little. “You’ve got to be more careful. Promise me.” *Please, Mom. I can’t lose you too.*

“Okay. I promise.”

Funny how her mom had always thought she lived a smallish sort of life in Middlebury, but when June thought of her mother’s love, to her it seemed as big as the Texas sky.

“I do have this handy thingy on my foot. Doctor Clyburn calls it a medical boot.” Her mother pulled the sheet up, revealing a big, black boot.

“Wow, you could knock somebody out with that thing.”

Her mother laughed. “True.”

“I texted April and May. They should be here soon, unless they get stuck in Houston traffic.”

“They usually do.” Her mom ran the rose petal along her cheek and then sniffed it. “You gals will make an effort to get along, won’t you?”

“Of course we will.” June twisted a strand of hair on her already tight curls, wondering how hard it would be to keep her promise.

Then as if on cue, May arrived through the hospital door in a whirlwind of Chanel while April doused the air with her usual jaunty angst-filled comments and expressions. April liked to describe her unique approach to life as being “open to her emotions.” May just called it neurotic. Both girls gave their mother a bear hug.

“Welcome home for Christmas,” Mom said, “you two little lambs.”

“Who’ve gone astray,” May finished. “Well, Mom, this is your cleverest way yet to herd us all back home into one pen.”

Mom chuckled.

June frowned at her sister.

“Hey, chill,” May said. “It was a joke.”

April ignored them all while she sponged down the bedrail with an antibacterial wipe.

“Well, I thought it was funny.” Mom patted May’s arm.

At that moment an older man entered the room. Since he wore a white lab coat and a paternal smile June guessed he was Doctor Clyburn. After an introduction from their mother and some pleasantries all around, June said to the doctor, “I’m hoping we can take Mom home, since it’s almost Christmas. All three of us can take care of her, round the clock if necessary.”

“Well, first I’d like to know a few things,” April asked as she stared at the medical boot. “How serious are these injuries? They look ghastly.”

Doctor Clyburn walked over to the foot of Mom’s hospital bed as he studied the information on his clipboard. “Your mother has taken quite a fall today. She’s very fortunate that the injuries weren’t more severe.” After he explained the details of his report, he turned to their

mother and said, “Mrs. Butterby, I was hoping to keep you here for observation, especially since you were dehydrated and you seem to be suffering from exhaustion. However, if you think you would be more comfortable at home during your recovery, I will release you. That is, if you drink plenty of water and take it easy on that sprain. Also, keep your foot up as best you can, ice it, and get plenty of rest. I’m sure your daughters can take care of you.” He raised a stern eyebrow at them.

June shook her forefinger in the air. “We would never do anything else.”

When the doctor left to sign the release papers, Mom said, “I guess The Sweet Shoppe will have to close. I always try to open a half day on Christmas Eve, since Middlebury folks like to get a few last minute sweets.” Mom absently tucked a strand of her silvery hair behind her ear. “I’m not sure who I’ll get at this late date to—”

“I know who you’re going to ask,” June said. “Your three daughters. I’m sure we can take a little time off from work for a week or two. Right?”

“Of course,” May said. “I’d love to help out at the bakery.” But her voice held a hint of unease.

“I’m in.” April nodded. “I’ve never taken to baking like June, but I think I can help out as long as I don’t set my hair on fire.”

“But who’s going to watch over Mother?” May asked.

“I might need some help with meals,” Mom said, “but otherwise I should be fine by myself.”

“Good.” June slapped her hands together. “Now as soon as you’re released, let’s get you back to the cabin and snug as a bug as you like to say.”

May retrieved her mother's shoes and lowered the bedrail, moving effortlessly into a take-charge modus operandi. "Yes, we certainly wouldn't want the good doctor to spread it all over town that we're shirking our duties as your daughters."

"Hey," April said, "is that the *only* reason you want to take care of Mom?"

"Now, you girls," Mom said. "I want to see some sugar before we head home for the holidays."

"Okay." April stuck out her hand and May linked pinkies with her. They shook and then released each other with a tiny jerk.

Oh joy. June thought their attitude was cooking up just like their favorite soup—sweet and sour—only without the sweet.

A couple of hours later, May busied herself tucking Mom onto the couch with enough meringue-like pillows and wool blankets to sink a bear into hibernation. April built a toasty blaze in the living room fireplace while June made a monster batch of her mother's favorite holiday beverage—homemade cocoa with whooper dollops of whipped cream.

Soon they were sitting around the hearth and sipping their beverages. "Look at this. All of us together again." Mom's brown eyes twinkled. "Does my heart good to see it."

June licked the whipped cream mustache off her upper lip and gazed around at the homey scene. Yes, Mom and her girls. Sweet. Her mother always referred to them as her petite brown-eyed wonders. Loved that. June breathed a prayer of thanksgiving, since just for a bit, she could pretend she was as close to her sisters as the stitches on her mother's quilt.

Hoping the family joy could last a little longer, June started to sing, "Silent night." Nothing like the smell of wood smoke, the taste of cocoa, and the beauty of a sacred carol to put one in the Christmas mood.

After a moment or two, her sisters joined in the song and broke into harmony as they'd always done growing up. Then their mother smiled and sang along too.

It was indeed a blessed and rare moment June would cherish. Because when she thought of the peaceful lyrics, and then the inevitable tempest that would surely come in the morning—among three sisters who tended to fight and bicker—they would need more than a song to get them through. They would need a Christmas miracle.

Chapter Two

The next morning, June and her sisters rose early enough to put a farmer to shame. After making their mother a hearty breakfast and getting her situated so she could phone or text in an instant if they were needed at home, the three Butterby sisters headed out to The Sweet Shoppe. They were positioned at their stations and prepared for a mob of holiday customers.

But the door didn't jingle. No customers came. Not one.

They waited some more.

Still no customers.

May straightened her suit, which was always her veneer of choice, while June thought jeans and a T-shirt would suffice. But then April was always the surprise, showing up in whatever costume tickled her fancy. One day it would be steampunk. Then another day, Amazon woman. Today it was a hodgepodge of beatnik meets Downton Abbey.

May checked her iPhone for messages. Again. “I could have gone for a morning run if I’d known the shop was going to be empty. Where is everybody?”

“Maybe they’re doing their last minute shopping.” April poured herself another mug of strong brew. “I could have written another chapter on my novel.”

“It’s nice to be together, though, right?” June took in a deep breath of cinnamon and other spices her mother loved to bake with around the holidays. “And the smell of Mom’s pastries...guess it brings back a lot of memories, eh?”

“Memories.” May gazed into a pocket mirror, tilting her head this way and that. “What I’d really like to know is this...where did all the time go? We used to be the twenty-something girls. Now we’re the thirty-something girls.” May tugged at her crisp white collar—the one that seemed to be strangling her.

“Don’t despair when time is gone,” April said in her stage voice, her eyes suddenly glowing with emotion, “or when love finds no light of day. For when the curtain closes, we find that life is but a play.”

May snapped the mirror shut. “Thank you, April. We can always count on you to disembowel our joy with a Greek tragedy.”

June scrubbed the counter once more—the same one that had already been cleaned and polished minutes before. She was feeling kind of small again, next to her older sisters—one a stock broker and one an author—who even though they were feisty, they were also busy fulfilling their big city dreams. And what did she have? Just a job working in someone else’s flower shop.

After watching the door a while longer, June ventured out into deeper conversational waters. “I think I know why Mom is exhausted. It’s not from the shop being busy. It’s from grief.”

“Yes, grief is an energy drain,” April said. “But beyond that, it’s like this quiet, desperate passage in our human journey.”

April’s eyes were big and expressive like their father’s had been, and sometimes her gaze tended to wander off into the stratosphere somewhere—as it did now. Perhaps April was deep in thought, placing that bit of dialogue into her manuscript.

“I know how it goes,” April went on to say, “people expect you to keep smiling no matter what. If you grieve too long, people run from you as if death is catching.”

June sighed. Maybe she could steer the discussion back to their mother. “But it’s only been nine months, and I think Mom needs—”

“I know very well how many months it’s been since Dad died.” May made woodpecker taps on the counter.

“It’s just that Mom needs us to be around more,” June said.

“I was swamped at work, okay?” May said. “I’ve heard they’re about to have a round of layoffs, and if I don’t perform with precision right now I’ll get the ax. So, please, no lectures from the pewee gallery.”

The long-suffering cord of June’s patience had just been snapped. Yes, she was indeed the youngest, but May was only one year older and April a mere two years her senior. When were they ever going to let her grow up? *Stay focused.* “As I said, since Dad died Mom needs extra love and attention. Your careers aren’t as important as our mother!”

May huffed. “Just because you’re anxious to get away from your job, don’t get all high and mighty. April and I love Mom just as much as you do. In fact—”

“I know you all think because I’m a writer that I don’t have *real* work,” April said. “And that I can take off whenever I please, but—”

“No one said that.” May removed some blueberry muffins from the case and began nibbling on one of them.

“But I can see it in your eyes.” April picked at her fingers. “And it’s an assault on my dignity.”

“Chill, okay? Don’t you *ever* get tired of being a drama queen? Talk about an energy drain.” May offered April the bottom half of her muffin.

Nose at full tilt, April accepted the half-eaten muffin and then tossed it into May’s Prada bag when she looked the other way.

May spotted the prank immediately. “What are you doing? Were you raised in a barn?” May hollered at April as she picked the muffin pieces out of her purse. “That bag cost me more than you make in a year.”

This conversation is a train wreck. June cradled her head in her hands, but what she really wanted to do was bang her head on the counter. “Listen, we used to think our sisterhood was something precious and irreplaceable. Remember those matching T-shirts we wore when we were kids? They read, ‘Don’t Mess With My Sisters.’”

“Of course I know what happened.” April mashed her forefingers against her temples. “When Dad was alive he virtually ignored you and me, because May was the queen bee with her business degree like Dad.”

May crossed her arms. “That’s a terrible thing to say.”

“I loved Dad, but we all know it’s true,” April said. “And now that Dad’s gone, well, June, you have all this stuff in common with Mom like baking and floral arranging, and well, now May and I are left out. Maybe deep down we don’t know why it’s so important to come home when we know you’ll be here several times a month.”

“But Mom needs us *all*...not just me,” June said to April. “But you already know this.”

“Do we?” May asked. “And stop yelling at us.”

“I’m not yelling.” June’s shoulders sagged. “Well, maybe I am.”

The door jangled, and one of the local shop owners strolled in—Nelly from the Three Friend’s Tearoom. She offered a friendly wave, but then she donned a more serious demeanor.

“Merry Christmas,” June said, trying to make it as chirpy as possible and hoping Nelly hadn’t heard them arguing.

“Merry Christmas to you too.” Nelly put her hands on her hips. “But that wasn’t merry-making I heard in here.” She gave them all a sharp eye.

May stepped forward. “Oh, you know, it’s just a sister thing.”

“We get like this sometimes, but we love each other.” April flushed, and her hand rose so quickly, she accidentally batted a muffin onto the floor.

“I have plenty of sisters to wrangle with, so I get that sister thang,” Nelly said, her dark eyes glistening. “But it’s only hours away from the holy day of Christmas. I know your dear momma would want to see you all being as sweet as those macaroons in that case there, especially since she took that awful spill and is barely home from the hospital.” Nelly finally stopped and came up for air.

“Wait a minute,” April asked. “How did you know about that? None of us told anyone yet.”

Nelly wagged her head. “Listen, honey, that Middlebury grapevine is as strong as being downwind from an outhouse.”

Chapter Three

When the Butterby sisters locked up The Sweet Shoppe for Christmas Eve, they were still stinging with the friendly scolding from Nelly. In fact, June felt the three of them had been acting as humbug as Scrooge. So, in an effort to clean up their attitudes, they stopped by the nursery to pick up a Christmas tree. A cedar to be exact and the same variety their mother had always loved. Nothing like the smell of evergreen to encourage some Christmas cheer. Right?

Later at home after they'd set up the tree in a stand, May filled the basin, and then scooted out from under the tree. With all the thrashing about, her perfectly quaffed do—which was always hair-sprayed within an inch of its life—now looked like Medusa's mane of snakes.

June stared at May's electrocuted tufts of hair, trying not to laugh.

May moaned over her scratched-up arms. "I love cedar trees, but why do they always have to be so prickly?"

“I guess when we love something enough, we can put up with all sorts of *prickly* things,” April said as she tried to untangle some twinkly lights.

“I can tell you’re a writer, April, since you come up with such clever subtext dialogue,” May said with a twinge of sarcasm.

April looked up at May and gasped. “What’s the matter with your hair? Looks like you got it caught in a vacuum cleaner.” She grinned.

“Quaint.” May went over to a wall mirror and smoothed her hair.

June rolled her eyes at her sisters. Thankfully, Mom was still in the bedroom, and hadn’t heard the little jabs. She opened a box of ornaments as her mother came hobbling out of the bedroom. “Where are your crutches, Mom?”

“Oh, they were too cumbersome.” Mom stopped in front of the tree. “Thank you for putting up a tree. I didn’t have time this year. Or maybe I didn’t have the heart without your dad.” She looked at May’s arms. “Sorry you got scratched up, though.”

May gave her a hug. “It was worth it.”

“*You’re* worth it, Mom.” April added.

June chimed in, “Here, here.”

“Thanks. That means a lot to me.” Mom held up the book she’d been holding. “I want to show you all what I found in George’s closet.”

“Dad’s old Bible?” April said.

“Actually, it was the Bible we used to read together. But I hadn’t seen this letter until a few minutes ago.” She pulled out an envelope from the middle of the Bible. “Let’s sit down. I think all of you will want to hear this.”

When Mom's chicks were huddled around her, she opened the letter. "This was written by your father just before he died, and it's addressed to you girls. It reads...

'When you read this letter, I will be in heaven. But now, as I lay dying, I've had time to look back on my life. I realize more and more that I wasn't the father I should have been. I was absent too much on business trips, and when I was home, I never seemed to have the right words to tell you how I really felt. My hope is to make things clearer with this letter. Because of a mutual love for business, I know I spent more time with May, but please know, April and June, that this didn't mean I loved you both any less. I am proud of each of you and love you with a full heart. Sometimes I've wondered if the turmoil in our family didn't come from that failing on my part to share the sentiments I felt but couldn't seem to express. I'm so sorry. Please forgive each other for any resentment that has built up because of my shortcomings. Also know that even though I never talked of miracles, I believed in them. You each were a miracle in my life every moment of every day that I was alive. So, walk with the Lord, and I will look forward to the moment I help Him welcome you into the glories of heaven. Much love to my three darling daughters, Dad.'"

Not a dry eye could be found in the Butterby living room.

April plucked a tissue from a box on the end table and then passed the box around.

June took a few tissues and blew her nose.

Mom wiped her eyes. "I know you all loved your father, but we also know that he wasn't perfect. He had his failings. And when I saw his letter of apology and his words of love, I gasped. I really did, because I knew how important it was. I see it as a Christmas miracle, in

fact.” She slipped the letter back into the Bible. “But it’s made me wonder something else...that maybe I was guilty of doing the same thing.”

“How do you mean, Mom,” June asked.

Mom looked at April and May. “I think that without realizing it, I was playing favorites with June. I know that she and I share some of the same hobbies, and we talk about them a lot. But sometimes June and I get a little exclusive in our enthusiasm. April, I’d like to know more about your books. You stopped giving them to me to read. I don’t have your latest, *The Isle of Souls*.”

April shrugged. “I thought maybe my novels weren’t your cup of tea, and that’s okay.”

Mom gave April’s hand a squeeze. “But your novels *are* my cup of tea, and so are you.”

“Okay.” April smiled. “I have an extra copy in my suitcase.”

“Good. I can read it over Christmas.” Then Mom turned to May. “And I’d love to know more about what you do at work and how it’s going. I also want your input on the management of my bakery. I need some ideas on how to build up my business.”

“I would love to help with that...Mom,” May said.

“Excellent.” Then Mom looked down at the Bible as she ran her finger along the name, George Butterby, which was engraved on the leather cover. “I haven’t opened this Bible since your father died. That’s why I never found the letter until now.”

“What made you open it?” May asked.

“I just felt like your father would want me to. Especially since those flowers were delivered today.” She pointed to a bouquet of red roses on the dining room table. “They came from your father.”

“How is that?” June asked.

“Your father set it up and paid for them before he died,” Mom said. “The roses were to be delivered to me on Christmas Eve, since he knew how much this holiday meant to me.”

“That was a beautiful thing for Dad to do.” April rested her head on her mother’s shoulder.

Mom smiled, and it was the jubilant kind that June hadn’t seen in a long while. A peace fell over the Butterby family as they all rose and took turns hugging each other and wishing each other a merry Christmas.

Epilogue

In the wee hours of Christmas morning, June found herself unable to sleep. She'd spent part of the night pondering the stirring hand of Providence and the letter that brought forgiveness and healing to them. As June pondered these wonders, she made her way into the kitchen to prepare a full carafe of coffee, just in case her sisters and mom had suffered happily with the same wakeful night. Then when she switched on the machine, June commenced to meandering around the house as she waited for the coffee to brew.

She stopped by the piano to take in the manger scene they'd made when they were kids. The display wasn't much more than Popsicle sticks and construction paper, and yet the sight of it never failed to move her. Then June took in the fully decorated tree with its fragrant boughs covered in lights and icicles and homemade ornaments. Oh, how she loved a real tree. It had been such a good idea.

Soon, she padded to one of the front windows to see if the rumors of snow had come to pass in the night. June moved the curtain back, and there it was—a blanket of snow—lit by the

moon. April might say that the snow looked like the ermine robe of a princess or maybe the silvery veil of a bride as she made her way to the altar. June just called it beautiful.

Yes, it was a Christmas of wonder that would always be remembered—a story of forgiveness and healing, of renewed love, and the Christmas that the Butterby family came to believe in miracles again.

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