

*The Father Tim Series*

JAN KARON

*Home to  
Holly Springs*

VIKING

## ONE



A preacher with a lead foot, driving a red Mustang convertible with the top down, could make a state patrolman pretty testy.

He checked the rearview mirror. Though he was the only car on the highway, he slowed to fifty-five.

It was nearly fourteen years since he'd been nailed for speeding, though he had, in the meantime, been given a warning. Of course, the warning had been delivered while he was still driving his primeval Buick. Not only had the decrepitude of his car inclined the officer's compassion toward clergy in general, but he'd looked pretty astounded that the vehicle could even do seventy in a fifty-five mile zone.

He glanced toward the passenger seat. His travel companion, now occasionally known as the Old Gentleman, was obviously enjoying the wind in his face.

Perhaps he should feel guilty about making this trip with his best friend instead of his wife. But hadn't she practically booted him out the door?

'Go!' she said, hobbling about in her ankle cast. 'Go, and be as the butterfly!'

He had tested her a couple of times, to make certain he could bust out of there for five or six days and remain within the loose confines of her good will.

‘What about food supplies, since you can’t drive?’

‘Darling, this is Mitford. They will swarm to bring covered dishes to the wife of their all-time favorite priest.’

‘Swarm, will they? Just to be safe, I’ll lay in victuals.’

‘Don’t, please. Just go. Go and be as—’

‘You already said that.’

‘Well, and I mean it. Butterflies have a very short life span. If they’re ever going back to Mississippi to settle certain issues of the heart, they have to hop to it. And enjoy the trip while they’re at it, of course.’

His wife was a children’s book author and illustrator and had her own way of looking at things.

‘What about the trash?’

‘Sammy or Kenny will carry it out, they’re right next door. Or even Harley will do it. I can’t even make enough trash for all those fellows to carry out.’

‘What if you get, you know, scared or something?’

‘Scared or something? Have you ever known me to be scared or something?’

He had, actually, but they’d been lost in a wild cave at the time.

She’d given him that grin of hers, and blasted him with the cornflower blue of her eyes. And here he was.

Kudzu.

Everywhere.

He didn’t remember such vast stretches of his old terrain being carpeted with the stuff.

It was seldom seen in the mountains of North Carolina. Too cold, he supposed, for the flowering perennial vine from the Orient; it was the boiling summers and mild winters of Mississippi that

worked the charm. What the government had planted in the thirties to prevent erosion had done its job, and then some.

He turned the radio on and roamed the dial, looking for a country station. This wasn't a Mozart kind of trip.

“. . . I'm goin' to Jackson, and that's a fact, yeah, we're goin' to Jackson, ain't ever comin' back . . .”

Johnny Cash and June Carter were going to Jackson, he was going to Holly Springs.

He hung a right at the first exit to his hometown, relieved that he hadn't felt it yet—the surge of sorrow or dread or even cold disinterest that he'd feared since the note arrived and he'd decided to make this journey. As they drove out of Mitford yesterday morning, he'd steeled himself for the appearance of some long-suppressed emotion that would overtake him straight out of the box. But it hadn't happened.

It might have assailed him last night in the motel room, more than five hundred miles from his wife, as he crawled, unwilling, beneath a blanket reeking of stale tobacco smoke.

There had also been a window of opportunity this morning when, downing an egg biscuit on the south side of Memphis, he'd felt suddenly panicked—ready to get behind the wheel and head back the way he'd come. But he'd caught such feelings red-handed and refused to give in to them. What he was doing had to be done, even if it produced despair, which was probable, or grief, which was likely, or anger, which was almost certain.

A few stores. Acres of kudzu.

“Brigadier General Samuel Benton,” he said, speaking to his dog. It would be a miracle if he could remember the names of all the generals buried in Hill Crest Cemetery in Holly Springs.

“Brigadier General Winfield S. Featherston, Brigadier General Christopher . . .”

Brigadier General Christopher . . .

Zero. He'd have to recall this particular surname before the long, solemn train of names could move forward as they'd done in his fifth-grade recitation of Hill Crest's illustrious dead. The recitation had won five gold stars and, to his amazement, the momentary deference of his father.

He didn't recognize this road, which was a modern translation of the old 78. But then, after an absence of thirty-eight years and four months, he hadn't expected to recognize this or any other road leading into his hometown.

He touched his shirt pocket, making certain he'd remembered to bring his cell phone, and heard the sharp crackle of the envelope stuffed behind the phone. Finding the envelope in the mailbox a couple of weeks ago had literally knocked the wind out of him, like a punch in the solar plexus.

He showed it to Cynthia, along with the lined sheet of paper it contained.

She Who Loves a Mystery studied them both. She did that odd thing with her mouth that she often did when thinking, then leaned her head to one side as if listening to some inner informant.

'The handwriting appears to come from another era,' she said, giving her final verdict on the two-word epistle. 'It seems somehow . . . genteel.'

Genteel. He had always credited his wife with knowing stuff that others, himself included, couldn't know. For a couple of days, they attempted reasonable conclusions, finally deciding there were no reasonable conclusions. Ultimately, the whole thing veered down a bank into the bushes.

'It's from Peggy Cramer,' said Cynthia, 'your old girlfriend with the turquoise convertible. Perhaps her poor husband has croaked, and she'd like to see you again.'

'Or it's from Jessica Raney, the one who adored you when you raised rabbits. She never married, and because signing up with

eHarmony requires a computer, which she doesn't have and never will, she sent this note.'

'You're nuts.'

'You told me you kept her card in your sock drawer until you went away to college.'

He regretted his nauseating habit of telling his wife everything.

'And here's another distinct possibility.'

'More fodder from the deep wells of unconscious cerebration!'

'It could have come from your first movie date. You said you felt terrible that her parents had to sit across the street drinking coffee for two hours. The movie was . . . wait, don't tell me. *Flying Tigers*.'

He was amazed, and oddly pleased, that she remembered such hogwash.

'If we had nothing else to do,' she said, 'we could make a whole book out of what lies behind these two little words.'

Again and again, he examined the envelope and the careful inscription of his name and address. The postmark partially covering the stamp was blurred but readable. It was definitely Holly Springs, though it might have come from Jupiter or Mars, for all its cryptic content.

He compared the handwriting of the note with that on the envelope. The same.

In the address, the sender had used the title Reverend, so this fact of his life was known by at least someone in Holly Springs. But why had he or she chosen not to sign the note? At times, he found the absence of a signature menacing, a type of dark threat. At other times, the bare simplicity of the two words, without salutation or signature, seemed to implore him with a profound and even moving passion, as if anything more would have been too much.

The lined white sheet had been torn from a notebook pad and was the sort he used at his own desk. Nothing unusual there.

He smelled the paper, a veritable bloodhound searching for clues. Nothing unusual there, either.

He had walked around for several days, shaking his head as if to clear it.

Was there anyone left in Holly Springs whom he'd remember?

Except for his cousin Walter in New Jersey, his kin were dead and gone—to St. Peter's in Oxford, to Elmwood in Memphis, to Hill Crest in Holly Springs. As for Tommy Noles, whom he'd once called his best friend, he had no idea where he might be, or if he was still living. One weekend he'd come home from his parish in Arkansas, and heard around the square that Tommy had left Holly Springs. For good reason, he hadn't popped up the road to ask Tommy's mother and father about their son's so-called disappearance.

After years of refusing to think of his hometown, he now focused on it with increasing intensity. His wife had grown weary of his excessive noodling and passed on to more fulfilling pursuits, like making a trellis out of twigs for her clematis plants.

He went to the living room and lifted the sterling picture frame from the library table by the window, and studied the sepia photograph of his mother and himself at the age of four. He looked first into her eyes, and then into his own. What were they telling him, if anything? He caressed the worn frame with his thumbs, noting that his mother appeared sad, but beautiful. He appeared happy, if perplexed.

His gaze searched her strong gardener's hand, and the wedding band which Cynthia now wore. More vividly than he remembered the studio session, he remembered the day the large photograph arrived in the mail. He'd been enthralled with the image of the two of them, it was the first magic he'd ever witnessed.

He opened the drawer of the table which he'd taken from Whitefield after his mother's death, and looked at another sterling frame, lying face down in the drawer with an odd scramble of family

pictures. Over the years, he'd played a confessedly neurotic game—for long periods, this picture of his father would be displayed next to the one he was holding, then put away again when some random despair struck and he couldn't bear to see his father's cold, though handsome countenance. It had been lying face down for several years.

He closed the drawer and stood looking out the window.

Did people still park around the square and spend Saturday in the stores?

Did the cavernous train station still cast its shadow over a network of rusting tracks, or had it been demolished, or rehabbed for some other use? And what about the old compress where he'd gone with Louis on the final run of his father's cotton trucks? He'd been tempted more than once to Google the town name and find answers, but he'd never followed through.

In the end, what he really wondered about was the house and the land at Whitefield, where he'd grown up. His mother had died there, just five years after his father's death, both of them too young, everyone said, for dying. He'd driven from Arkansas, from the small country parish he was serving as curate, to be with her in her last days.

Later, after her estate was settled, and her good rugs sold along with the tall case clock and the walnut wardrobe in which she'd hidden her secret Christmas gifts—after all that was gone, and even the smell of her driven out by Clorox and Bon Ami, he determined never to come back. What could possibly be left to come back to?

He geared down to second, gawking.

Strung along the crest of the hill to his right were the immense Gothic buildings of Mississippi Industrial, apparently abandoned years before and left standing in ruin. He was shaken by the sight of their brooding silhouette, and the legions of windows with broken panes that stared blankly at Rust College across the street.

He looked left to the replica of Independence Hall, the centerpiece of the college, and its impressive clock tower. The memory of

the ravaging fire that destroyed the original hall was vivid still; Peggy, who had been like a second mother, had held him as they watched it burn.

He remembered feeling trapped by the heavy clothes he wore against the frigid cold, and Peggy's arms, which were squeezing the liver out of him.

'Let me *down!*'

'You cain't git down, baby, I ain't losin' you in this crowd.' Peggy's nose was running, the tears wet on her face.

'I ain't a baby, I'm five!' He'd been furious at being held in her arms like an infant. But his heart was moved by her tears; he loved their Peggy. He had stopped kicking and patted her face.

'Why you cryin?'

'My mama wanted to go to that school, she say it were th' hope of th' coloreds.'

When he was older, he was told how the multitudes collected almost instantly to watch the inferno, arriving by wagons, pickups, dilapidated cars. Black children and white were dismissed from school, presumably to see what they would never see again, and to watch history unfold in flames that blew mullions from windows and collapsed five stories into rubble. He remembered his father saying that the smoke had been seen forty miles away. Others spoke of how the fire had smoldered for weeks; the scarlet glow along the rim of the hilltop appeared to be the setting of a January sun.

Brigadier General Christopher *Mott!* That was it. Christopher H. Mott, to be precise. Yours truly may have turned seventy day before yesterday, but his brain wasn't fried yet, hallelujah.

He saw it then, looming above the horizon like an enormous onion. It was definitely more impressive than the great icon of his childhood, though lacking the nuance and character of the original.

He and Tommy had plotted the fiendish thing for two years.

Living in the country, as they both did, they couldn't just pop to town whenever the notion hit. Two things had to happen. They

had to have a better than good reason to be in town for a whole night. And since any connection with Tommy was forbidden, they'd be forced to get there by separate means.

It had all come together pretty quickly.

He found Tommy's note in the rabbit hutch on Thursday. On Friday, Tommy would be taken to town by his father, to spend the night with his aunt and uncle and mow their grass on Saturday. Scarcely ten minutes after he found Tommy's note, his mother asked if he'd like to spend Friday and Saturday nights with his grandmother, and they'd all go to church at First Baptist on Sunday.

Trembling with excitement, raw with fear, he met Tommy at the hutch at feed-up time on Friday morning. "We can't tell *nobody*," he said.

"Deal."

They did their secret handshake: right thumbs meeting twice, pinkies hooked together two beats, palms flat and slapped together two times, right fists touching twice.

In unison, they said the secret word.

There was no turning back . . .

Unlike some donkey brains, he hadn't wanted to write anything up there, like CLASS OF whatever or GO TIGERS, and for darn sure not the word that somebody had painted on all four sides of the tank one Saturday night, to greet the frozen stares of churchgoers on Sunday morning.

He just wanted to be up there. With the stars above, and the lights of the town below.

He hadn't counted on being terrified.

The fear set into his gut the minute he climbed out Nanny Howard's window on Salem Street; as his feet hit the ground, he broke into a cold sweat. He stood behind the holly bushes a moment, queasy and stupefied.

Then he slipped across the yard and down the bank, and raced