

Home to Holly Springs – 1st Chapter

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 along the silent, moonlit street like a field hare. Something small and glowing, perhaps the tip of a lighted cigarette, arced through the air as he blew by the darkened houses. His heart hammered, but he saw no one and didn't hang back.

Two dogs barked. The flashlight he carried in the pocket of his shorts banged against his leg; he took it from his pocket and held it tight. If a dog came after him, he would knock it in the head; if he was bitten, he would cross that bridge when he came to it.

He arrived at the tank, drenched with sweat and scared out of his mind that Tommy would suddenly appear from the bushes, causing him to lose it right there.

In the light of the three-quarter moon, he saw Tommy; his face was as white as death.

'I'm scared,' said Tommy.

'Don' worry, ain't nobody gon' see us.' He was shaking so badly he dropped the flashlight, and had to fumble in the parched grass to find it.

'Look up yonder, we cain't even see th' top.'

'We got t' take it one rung at a time. Stop an' rest if we have to.'

'We stop t' rest, we'll be climbin' 'til daylight. Then th' police'll be on us.'

'If we get up a ways an' don' like it, we can come back down. Shut up bawlin'.'

'I ain't bawlin'.'

He placed his flashlight at the foot of the ladder; the moon was light enough.

'Come on, then.'

'You first,' said Tommy. 'An' don' be fallin' on m' head, neither.'

'Don' turn yellor on me.'

'I ain't turnin' yellor on nobody.'

Something like an electrical current shot through him when he touched the metal rung of the ladder. He drew back, then touched it again.

The jolt hadn't come from special wiring to keep people from climbing to the top and writing that word; it had come from an excitement like he'd never known.

He grabbed on to an upper rung with both hands. He could do this thing.

They climbed like maniacs for what seemed a long time, then stopped and leaned into the ladder, desperately exhausted, their hearts pounding.

'I'm about t' puke up m' gizzard,' said Tommy. 'Ever' time I look down, it hits me.'

'Don' look down, keep y'r eyes straight ahead.'

'Ain't nothin' t' see straight ahead.'

'It's puke or look straight ahead, take y'r pick.' Tommy puked.

'Good,' he said. 'Let's go.'

They went.

They were feeling the wind now—the higher they climbed, the stronger it blew; his shirttail billowed like a sail. What if they got sucked off this thing and somebody found them splattered like toads on Van Dorn Avenue? He hadn't counted on wind. He hadn't counted on the locked gate between the ladder and the platform, either.

'We'll have t' climb over it,' he hollered above the bluster of wind.

Tommy yelled the word that had been painted on the tank.

His hands were sweating; he wiped one hand, then the other, on his pants and grabbed hold again.

'Let's go back down!' Tommy shouted.

He was glad Tommy had said it, and not him. He thought of his mother sleeping four miles away, unknowing; of his rabbits feeding on beet tops in their hutch beneath the moon. For a moment, he couldn't believe what he was doing; he was dumbfounded to find himself up here, flapping around in a smoking-hot wind as heavy as the velvet curtains in Miz Lula's parlor.

Lord, he said to himself, trying to work up a prayer. There was only one problem with praying—since he wasn't supposed to be doing this, there was no way God was going to hear anything he had to say.

The locked gate gleamed in the moonlight.

'I'm goin' over!' he yelled. 'If I die, you can have m' marbles an' slingshot. There's five quarters in a snuff can on th' shelf under th' hutch. An' m' funny books . . .' No, not that. Even if he was dead as a doornail, he didn't want to lose his funny books; they'd just have to rot under his bed.

He hesitated for a moment, then clenched his jaw.

'Tell Miz Phillips I did m' whole readin' list for summer!'

He hooked the toe of his left high-top into the wide mesh of the gate and pulled himself up and dropped down on the other side, his weight resounding on the metal platform. Tommy dropped down after him.

They leaned against the tank, panting with exertion. The platinum moon was sailing so close he might jump up and touch it. It changed the look of everything; his shirt was silver, his hands and arms were silver, Tommy was silver.

'I can smell th' beach!' he hollered. 'All th' way from Pass Christian!' He nosed the air like a terrier, and discovered a deep vein of fragrance, something like honeysuckle and salt.

'Where's our houses at?' yelled Tommy.

He didn't want to think about their houses; he wanted to think about being free, lifted from the earth above everything he'd ever known. Already he was longing to tell somebody that they'd made it to the top, that out here beneath the moonlight

was the whole state of Mississippi and maybe even Alabama and Tennessee—but of course, they couldn't tell anybody. If their fathers found out, they'd both be dead. But he, Timmy Kavanagh, would be deader.

In his gut, he knew he wouldn't keep his word to Tommy. He would have to tell Peggy. But that was okay. Since Peggy would never, ever rat on him, telling Peggy was the same as not telling anybody . . .

A car horn blared.

Startled, he waved an apology and moved ahead in traffic.

His heart felt strangely moved by the memory of that night, and of Tommy pulling his knife from his pocket before they made the long trek down the ladder.

'We done it,' Tommy had said. 'We done what we said we was goin' t' do. Let's mix blood an' be blood brothers.' All his life, every minute, he had wanted a brother. He'd been pretty queasy when Tommy drew out the blade he kept so carefully sharpened.

Maybe the feeling in his chest—some trace of sorrow or longing, he wasn't sure which—was a precursor to what he'd been waiting for. But the feeling passed quickly.

He gave a thumbs-up to the water tank.

The landscape was recognizable at last; they were headed toward the town square. In the strip mall on his right, two black men in shirts and ties washed a funeral home hearse; suds sparkled on the baking asphalt.

During the trip from Mitford, he'd pondered the order of his visitations, then rearranged the order again and again.

In the end, the square was the logical place to begin, it was where everything began in Holly Springs. Nearly the whole of his early life could be read in a drive around the courthouse square. He'd be surprised if Tyson's Drugstore had made it into the twentyfirst century, and surely Booker Hardware with its oscillating nail bins would be long gone.

Maybe a bite of lunch on the square. And next, he'd drive to the cemetery. That made sense.

"Flowers," he said to his dog. He'd want to take flowers.

He also wanted to see Tate Place, and a few of the more than sixty antebellum houses of which Holly Springs had always been proud. He'd visited many of those homes; put his feet under many of those tables.

He loosened his tab collar and wiped his face with his handkerchief. Too blasted hot; he was a mountain man now.

He'd leave the church 'til last, and as they headed back to the motel, they'd drive four miles east to the homeplace.

He reflected on this plan.

"Not a good idea." He looked at his travel companion, who was currently sleeping. "Entirely too much to do in one day."

He was as tender as a greenhouse plant; he needed time to harden up before he was set out in the red dirt of his native ground. Besides, he had allowed four days to puzzle out the note—if it could be puzzled out—before heading back to Mitford.

As they reached the post office, he pulled into a parking space and cranked up the rag top. Bottom line, it didn't seem right to return to his birthplace after so many years, to circle the square in a red convertible with the top down. Definitely a tad on the cocky side.

He locked the top in place and poured water into the metal bowl and watched Barnabas drink, then took a few swigs from the jug himself. He pulled down the sun visor and squinted into the mirror and licked his salty fingertips and smoothed his wind-tossed hair. Then he took the envelope from his pocket and blew into the open end and removed the note and read the words once more.

Come home.

A truck roared past, and a few cars. He scratched his dog behind the ear and gazed, without seeing, at the post office. The clock ticked on the dashboard.

"Here goes, Lord."

He put the note in the envelope, stuck it in the glove compartment, and turned the key in the ignition as his cell phone rang in his shirt pocket.

Who could read the ID on these blasted things? New glasses soon. He'd roll the dice that it was his wife.

"Hey, sweetheart."

"Hey, yourself. Where are you?"

“Just coming to the square. Parked a minute to put the top up.”

“Are you okay?”

“I am. How’s your ankle?”

“Better by the hour. The swelling is going down.”

“Still painful?”

“Definitely, but I’m staying off it, as prescribed, so we can reschedule our Ireland trip for August. I’ll do anything to get this hideous moon boot removed.”

“Are you needing anything?”

“I’m happy as a clam. No little book to slave over, instead I’m bingeing on other people’s books. And I don’t have to turn a hand to take nourishment. Punny’s dropping by at noon with her fabulou chicken soup, and Dooley and Sammy and Kenny are coming over with pizza at six. Oh, and Timothy, you won’t believe this—the boys are all saying ‘yes, ma’am’ to me.”

“You never know what perks you might score with a fractured ankle.”

“Kenny’s so much like Dooley. And so good for Sammy. Seeing these boys together is a blessing to everyone in town. And none of it could have happened without you.”

“I miss you, Kavanagh.”

“I miss you back.”

“Thanks for letting me go.”

“I didn’t let you go, I made you go. You’ll be glad you did this, I promise. Are you really okay?”

“So far, so good. I’ll be fine.”

He was edgy, his mouth as dry as cotton.

He eased the Mustang out of the parking space and moved forward with the traffic.

“How’s Barnabas?”

There it was, straight ahead.

“Great,” he said. “We’ve both got a little sunburn, but nothing serious.”

His father’s office over the bank. The prewar metal stairs ascending the side of the building. Martin Houck had tumbled down those stairs, head over heels, as legend had it. He’d never been able to completely reconcile whether he’d actually seen Houck fall, or only heard about it so often he thought he’d been there.

“I’ll call you tonight,” he said.

Memories were pouring in now, the dam had broken.

His father’s voice had been sharp outside his bedroom door.

‘Do you realize that what he’s done carries a five-hundred-dollar fine and a six-month jail sentence?’

‘He’s a minor, Matthew. Surely not . . .’

‘Disobeying me yet again by carousing with that Noles ruffian, willfully defying the law and everything it stands for, everything I stand for. Move away from the door, Madelaine.’

‘You’ve already said enough to cause any suffering he may deserve.’

‘Stand aside.’

‘Don’t hurt him, Matthew.’

‘Don’t hurt him? What’s the good of discipline if there’s no hurt in it? Read your Baptist Bible, Madelaine.’

His father’s brutal punishment on the Sunday after he climbed the tank had taught him a fact he would remember the whole of his life: No matter where his father might be, and without regard for the time of day or night, Matthew Kavanagh had eyes and ears everywhere.

He’d later asked his grandmother how his father had known.

Nanny Howard patted his arm. “There’s no tellin’ about your daddy. You’ll learn the answer when you get to heaven. And then it won’t matter’ . . .

“There’s Father’s office,” he said to Barnabas. “It looks . . .” — he couldn’t speak for a moment—“the same. Amazing. And the bank . . .”

He pulled to the curb and saw behind the iron fence the small brick storage building where he'd hidden the things he couldn't take home. He marveled at the sight. Still there.

No, he thought, still here.

He had done what the note commanded. He was here now. He had come home to Holly Springs.