**Shepherds Abiding -1st Chapter**

The rain began punctually at five o'clock, though few were awake to hear it. It was a gentle rain, rather like a summer shower that had escaped the grip of time or season and wandered into Mitford several months late.
By six o'clock, when much of the population of 1,074 was leaving for work in Wesley or Holding or across the Tennessee line, the drops had grown large and heavy, as if weighted with mercury, and those running to their cars or trucks without umbrellas could feel the distinct smack of each drop.

Dashing to a truck outfitted with painter's ladders, someone on Lilac Road shouted "Yeehaw!," an act that precipitated a spree of barking among the neighborhood dogs.

Here and there, as seemingly random as the appearance of stars at twilight, lamps came on in houses throughout the village, and radio and television voices prophesied that the front passing over the East Coast would be firmly lodged there for two days.

More than a few were fortunate to lie in bed and listen to the rain drumming on the roof, relieved to have no reason to get up until they were plenty good and ready.

Others thanked God for the time that remained to lie in a warm, safe place unmolested by worldly cares, while some began at once to fret about what the day might bring.

Father Timothy Kavanagh, one of the earliest risers in Mitford, did not rise so early this morning. Instead, he lay in his bed in the yellow house on Wisteria Lane and listened to the aria of his wife's whiffling snore, mingled with the sound of rain churning through the gutters.

Had he exchanged wedding vows before the age of sixty-two, he might have taken the marriage bed for granted after these seven years. Instead, he seldom awakened next to the warm sentience of his wife without being mildly astonished by her presence, and boundlessly grateful. Cynthia was his best friend and boon companion, dropped from the very heavens into his life, which, forthwith, she had changed utterly.

He would get up soon enough and go about his day, first hying with his good dog, Barnabas, into the pouring rain, and then, while the coffee brewed, reading the Morning Office, as he'd done for more than four decades as both a working and a now-retired priest.

Feeling a light chill in the room, he scooted over to his sleeping wife and put his arm around her and held her close, comforted, as ever, by the faint and familiar scent of wisteria.

Lew Boyd, who liked to rise with the sun every morning, and who always wore his watch to bed, gazed at the luminous face of his Timex and saw that it was the first day of October.

October! He had no idea at all where the time had gone. Yesterday was July, today was October. As a matter of fact, where had his life gone?

He stared at the bedroom ceiling and pondered a question that he'd never been fond of messing with, though now seemed a good time to do it and get it over with.

One day, he'd been a green kid without a care in the world. Then, before you could say Jack Robinson, he'd looked up and found he was an old codger with a new and secret wife living way off in Tennessee with her mama, and him lying here in this cold, lonesome bed just as he'd been doing all those years as a widower.

He tried to recall what, exactly, had happened between his youth and old age, but without a cup of coffee at the very least, he was drawing a blank.

Though he'd worked hard and saved his money and honored his dead wife's memory by looking at her picture on Sunday and paying to have her grave weed-eated, he didn't know whether he'd made a go of it with the Good Lord or not.

For the few times he'd cheated somebody down at his Exxon station, he'd asked forgiveness, even though he'd cheated them only a few bucks. He'd also asked forgiveness for the times he'd bitten Juanita's head off without good reason, and for a few other things he didn't want to think about ever again.

To top that off, he'd quit smoking twelve years ago, cut out the peach brandy he'd fooled with after Juanita passed, and increased what he put in the plate on the occasional Sundays he showed up at First Baptist.

But the thing was, it seemed like all of it-good and bad, up and down, sweet and sour-had blown by him like Dale Earnhardt Jr. at Talladega.

He sighed deeply, hauled himself out of bed, and slid his cold feet into the unlaced, brown and white spectators he wore around the house. If Juanita was alive, or if Earlene was here, he'd probably turn on the furnace out of common decency. But as long as he was boss of the thermostat, he'd operate on the fact that an oil furnace was money down the drain and wait 'til the first hard freeze to make himself toasty.

Sitting on the side of the bed and covering his bare legs with the blanket, he scratched his head and yawned, then reached for the cordless and punched redial.

When his wife, living with her dying mama in a frame house on the southern edge of Knoxville, answered the phone, he said, "Good mornin', dumplin.'"

"Good mornin' yourself, baby. How're you feelin' this mornin'?"
"Great!" he said. "Just great!"

He thought for a split second he was telling a bald-faced lie, then realized he was telling the lawful truth. It was the sound of Earlene's cheerful voice that had changed him from an old man waking up in a cold bed to a young buck who just remembered he was driving to Tennessee in his new Dodge truck, tonight.

At six-thirty, Hope Winchester dashed along Main Street under a red umbrella. Rain gurgled from the downspouts of the buildings she fled past and flowed along the curb in a bold and lively stream.

To the driver of a station wagon heading down the mountain, the figure hurrying past the Main Street Grill was but a splash of red on the canvas of a sullen, gray morning. Nonetheless, it was a splash that momentarily cheered the driver.

Hope dodged a billow of water from the wheels of the station wagon and clutched even tighter the pocketbook containing three envelopes whose contents could change her life forever. She would line them up on her desk in the back room of the bookstore and prayerfully examine each of these wonders again and again. Then she would put them in her purse at the end of the day and take them home and line them up on her kitchen table so she might do the same thing once more.

UPS had come hours late yesterday with the books to be used in this month's promotion, which meant she'd lost precious time finishing the front window and must get at it this morning before the bookstore opened at ten. It was, after all, October first-time for a whole new window display, and the annual Big O sale.

All titles beginning with the letter O would be twenty percent off, which would get Wesley's students and faculty hopping! Indeed, September's Big S sale had increased their bottom line by twelve percent over last year, and all because she, the usually reticent Hope Winchester, had urged the owner to give a percentage off that really "counted for something." It was a Books-A-Million, B&N, Sam's Club kind of world, Hope insisted, and a five-percent dribble here and there wouldn't work anymore, not even in Mitford, which wasn't as sleepy and innocuous as some people liked to think.

She dashed under the awning, set her streaming umbrella down, and jiggled the key in the door of Willard Porter's old pharmacy, now known as Happy Endings Books.

The lock had the cunning possessed only by a lock manufactured in 1927. Helen, the owner, had refused to replace it, insisting that a burglar couldn't possibly outwit its boundless vagaries.

Jiggling diligently, Hope realized that her feet were cold and soaking wet. She supposed that's what she deserved by wearing sandals past Labor Day, something her mother had often scolded her for doing.

Once inside, and against the heartfelt wishes of Helen, who lived in Florida and preferred to delay heating the shop until the first snow, Hope squished to the thermostat and looked at the temperature: fifty degrees. Who would read a book, much less buy one, at fifty degrees?

As Margaret Ann, the bookstore cat, wound around her ankles, Hope turned the dial to "on."

The worn hardwood floor trembled slightly, and she heard at once the great boiler in the basement give its thunderous annual greeting to autumn in Mitford.

Uncle Billy Watson lay with his eyes squeezed shut and listened to the rain pounding the roof of the Mitford town museum, the rear portion of which he and Rose called home.

He was glad it was raining, for two reasons.

One, he figured it would make the ground nice and soft to plant th' three daffodil bulbs Dora Pugh had trotted to 'is door. Th' bulbs, if they was like her seeds, wouldn't be fit to plant, but he'd give 'er one more chance to do th' honorable thing an' stand by what she sold.

When he was feelin' stronger an' the doc would let him poke around outside, he knowed right where he'd plant to make the finest show-at the bottom of th' back steps, over to th' left where the mailman wouldn't tear up jack when he made 'is deliveries.

Feeling the gooseflesh rise along his arms and legs, he pulled the covers to his chin.

Th' other good thing about the rain, if hit lasted, was when Betty Craig come to nurse 'im t'day, she'd be cookin' all manner of rations to make a man's jaws water. If they was anything better'n hearin' rain on th' roof an' smellin' good cookin' at the same time, he didn't know what hit'd be.

He lay perfectly still, listening now to the beating of his heart.

His heart wasn't floppin' around thisaway and thataway n' more, he reckoned the pills was workin'.

In a little bit, he rolled over and covered his ears to shut out the sound of his wife's snoring in the next bed.

He might've lost a good deal of eyesight an' some control of 'is bladder, don't you know, but by jing, 'is hearin' could still pick up a cricket in th' grass, thank th' Lord an' hallelujah.

"Check this out," said J. C. Hogan, editor of the Mitford Muse and longtime regular of the Main Street Grill. He thrust a copy of the Muse, hot from his pressroom above their heads, under Father Tim's nose.

"Photo staff?" asked Father Tim.
"You're lookin' at it," said J.C.
"I thought you had spellcheck."
"I do have spellcheck."
"It's not working."
"Where? What?" J.C. grabbed the newspaper.

"Meteorologist is misspelled." The former rector of the local Episcopal church had kept his mouth shut for years about the Muse editor's rotten spelling, but since the newspaper had invested in spellcheck, he figured he could criticize without getting personal.

J.C. muttered a word not often used in the rear booth.

"You ought to have a photo contest," said Father Tim, blowing on a mug of steaming coffee. "Autumn color, grand prize, second prize...like that."

"Unless th' rain lets up, there'll be nothing worth enterin' in a contest. Besides, I'd have to shell out a couple hundred bucks to make that deal work."

"Where's Mule?" asked Father Tim. The erstwhile town realtor had been meeting them in the rear booth for two decades, seldom missing their eight a.m. breakfast tryst.

"Down with th' Mitford Crud. Prob'ly comes from that hot, dry spell changin' into a cold, wet spell."

Velma Mosely skidded up in a pair of silver Nikes. "Looks like th' Turkey Club's missin' a gobbler this mornin'. What're y'all havin'?"

This was Percy and Velma Mosely's final year as proprietors of the Grill. After forty years, they were hanging it up at the end of December, and not renewing the lease.

In the spring, they would take a bus to Washington and see the cherry blossoms. Then they planned to settle into retirement in Mitford, where Percy would put in a vegetable garden for the first time in years and Velma would adopt a shorthaired cat from the shelter.

Father Tim nodded to J.C. "You order first."

"Three eggs scrambled, with grits, bacon, and a couple of biscuits! And give me plenty of butter with that!"

The Muse editor looked at Velma, expectant.

"Your wife said don't let you have grits and bacon, much less biscuits an' plenty of butter." J.C.'s wife, Adele, was Mitford's first and, so far, only policewoman.

"My wife?"

"That's right. Adele dropped in on her way to the station this mornin'. She said Doc Harper told you all that stuff is totally off-limits, startin' today."

"Since when is it th' business of this place to meddle in what people order?"

"Take it or leave it," said Velma. She was sick and tired of J. C. Hogan bossing her around and biting her head off for the last hundred years.

J.C.'s mouth dropped open.

"I'll order while he's rethinking," said Father Tim. "Bring me the usual."

Velma glared at the editor. "If you'd order like th' Father here, you'd live longer." She felt ten feet tall telling this grouchy so-and-so what was what, she should have done it years ago.

"I wouldn't eat a poached egg if somebody paid me cash money. Give me three eggs, scrambled, with grits, bacon..." J.C. repeated his order loud and clear, as if Velma had suddenly gone deaf. "...an' two dadgum biscuits. "

Father Tim thought his boothmate's face was a readout of his blood pressure rating-roughly 300 over 190.

"If you want to drop dead on th' street, that's your business," said Velma, "but I won't be party to it. Get you some yogurt and fresh fruit with a side of dry toast."

"This is dadblame illegal! You can't tell me what to order."

"Suit yourself. I promised Adele, and I'm stickin' to it."

J.C. looked at Father Tim to confirm whether he was hearing right. Father Tim looked at Velma. Maybe this was a joke....

But Velma was a brick wall, an Army tank. End of discussion.

J.C. drew himself up and played his trump card. "Do I need to remind you that this is a democracy?"

Velma glared at the editor over her half-glasses; heads turned in their direction. "Where's Percy this mornin'?" demanded J.C. He would call in the troops and nip this nonsense in the bud once and for all.

"Down with th' Mitford Crud!" snapped Velma.

The young man at the grill turned his back on the whole caboodle, lest he be drawn into the altercation.

There was a long moment of silence, the sort that Father Tim never enjoyed.

"Then I'll just take my business down th' street!"

J.C. grabbed his briefcase and blew out of the rear booth like a cannon shot. Father Tim's coffee sloshed in its mug.

Roaring past the counter, the Muse editor peppered the air with language not fit to print and, arriving at the front door, yanked it open, turned around, and shouted, "Which, you may be happy to know, is where I intend to keep it!"

The cold rain blew in, the door slammed, the bell jangled.

"Good riddance!" said Velma, meaning it.

At the counter, Coot Hendrick dumped sugar into his coffee and stirred. "I didn't know there was anyplace down th' street to take 'is business to."

"I suppose he meant the tea shop," said Luke Taylor, who hadn't looked up from his newspaper.

Guffaws. Hoots. General hilarity among the regulars. In Mitford, the Chelsea Tea Shop was definitely the province, indeed the stronghold, of the fair sex. Hardly a male had ever set foot in the place, except for a few unsuspecting tourists.

Father Tim cleared his throat. "I do think it's illegal," he said to Velma, "to refuse to...you know..."

Velma adjusted her glasses and glared at him from on high. "Since when is it illegal to save somebody's life?"

Clearly, Velma Mosely was ready for retirement.

It was one of those rare days when he sensed that all the world lay before him, that it was indeed his oyster.

Upon leaving the Grill, he stood beneath the green awning, scarcely knowing which way to turn. Though the chilling rain continued to fall and the uproar between Velma and J.C. had definitely been unpleasant, he felt light; his feet barely touched the ground. How could someone his age feel so expectant and complete? How indeed? It was the grace of God.

"Lord, make me a blessing to someone today!"

He uttered aloud his grandmother's prayer, raised his umbrella, and, beneath the sound of rain thudding onto black nylon, turned left and headed to Lord's Chapel to borrow a volume of Jonathan Edwards from the church library.

"Father!"

Andrew Gregory's head poked from the door of the Oxford Antique Shop. "Stop in for a hot cocoa."

Hot cocoa!

He hadn't tasted the delights of hot cocoa since the Boer War. In truth, the phrase was seldom heard on anyone's lips-the going thing today was an oversweet and synthetic chocolate powder having nothing to do with the real thing.

"Bless my soul!" said Father Tim. He always felt a tad more eighteenth century when he visited the Oxford. He shunted his umbrella into an iron stand that stood ready at the door and strode into one of his favorite places in all of Mitford.

"Excuse the disarray," said Andrew, who, though possibly suffering some jet lag, never looked in disarray himself. In truth, Andrew's signature cashmere jacket appeared freshly pressed if not altogether brand-new.

"The shipment from my previous trip arrived yesterday, on the heels of my own arrival. It all looks like a jumble sale at the moment, but we'll put it right, won't we, Fred?"

Fred Addison looked up from his examination of a walnut chest and grinned. "Yessir, we always do. Good mornin', Father. Wet enough for you?"

"I don't mind the rain, but my roses do. This year, we exchanged Japanese beetles for powdery mildew. How was your garden this year?" Fred Addison's annual vegetable garden was legendary for its large size and admirable tomatoes; Father Tim had feasted from that fertile patch on several occasions.

"Had to plow it under," said Fred, looking mournful.

"Let's look for a better go of things next year."

"Yessir, that's th' ticket."

Andrew led the way to the back room, where the Oxford hot plate and coffeepot resided with such amenities as the occasional parcel of fresh scones fetched from London.

"Careful where you step," said Andrew. "I'm just unpacking a crèche I found in Stow-on-the-Wold; a bit on the derelict side. Some really odious painting of the figures and some knocking about of the plaster here and there..."

Father Tim peered at a motley assortment of sheep spilling from a box, an angel with a mere stub for a wing, an orange camel, and, lying in a manger of bubble wrap, a lorn Babe ...

"Twenty-odd pieces, all in plaster, and possibly French. Someone assembled the scene from at least two, maybe three different crèches." "Aha."

Andrew poured hot milk from a pot into a mug. "Not the sort of thing I'd usually ship across the pond, yet it spoke to me somehow."

"Yes, well...it has a certain charm."

"I thought someone might be willing to have a go at bringing it 'round." Andrew handed him the mug. "There you are! Made with scalded milk and guaranteed to carry you forth with good cheer and optimism."

Coffee and cocoa, all within the span of a couple of hours. Father Tim reckoned that his caffeinated adrenaline would be pumping 'til Christmas; he felt as reckless as a sailor on leave.

Mitford's capable mayor, restaurateur, and antiques dealer beamed one of his much-lauded smiles. "Come, Father, I'll show you a few of the new arrivals-and perhaps you'll catch me up on the latest scandals in Mitford?"

"That shouldn't take long," said Father Tim.

He felt the warmth of the mug in his hands and saw the rain slanting in sheets against the display windows. Everywhere in this large room that smelled of lemon oil and beeswax was something to be admired-the patina of old walnut and mahogany, a tapestry side chair bathed in the glow of lamplight, and, over there, a stack of leather-bound books just uncrated.

He had a moment of deepest gratitude, and the odd and beguiling sense that he was on the brink of something....

But what?

Something...different. Yes, that was it.

EXPECT A SPECTACLE
As Mitford's mayor, Andrew Gregory, doesn't return until after press time from a buying trip to England, the Muse called on former mayor Esther Cunningham to make the Muse's official annual prediction about our fall leaf display.

"Color out the kazoo!" stated Ms. Cunningham.

Meterologists across western North Carolina agree. They say that color this fall will be "the best in years," due to a hot, dry mountain summer followed by heavy rains, which began September 7 and have continued with some frequency.

So load your cameras and wait for Mitford's famed sugar maples, planted from First Baptist all the way to Little Mitford Creek, to strut their stuff. Color should be at its height October 10-15.

Use ASA 100 film and don't shoot into the sun. Best morning photo op: from the steps of First Baptist, pointing south. Best afternoon op: from the sidewalk in front of the church, pointing east. This advice courtesy the Muse photo staff.