Light From Heaven---1st Chapter

A Winter Eden

The first flake landed on a blackberry bush in the creek bottom of Meadowgate Farm.

In the frozen hour before dawn, others found their mark on the mossy roof of the smokehouse; in a grove of laurel by the northwest pasture; on the handle of a hoe left propped against the garden fence.

Close by the pond in the sheep paddock, a buck, a doe, and two fawns stood motionless as an owl pushed off from the upper branches of a pine tree and sailed, silent and intent, to the ridge of the barn roof.

The owl hooted once, then twice.

As if summoned by its velveteen cry, the platinum moon broke suddenly from the clouds above the pond, transforming the water's surface into a gleaming lake of molten pearl.

Then, clouds sailed again over the face of the moon, and in the bitter darkness, snowflakes fell thick and fast, swirling as in a shaken globe.

It was twelve minutes after six o'clock when a gray light rose above the brow of Hogback Mountain, exposing an imprint of tractor tires that linked Meadowgate's hay barn to the cow pasture and sheep paddock. The imprints of work boots and dog paws were also traceable along the driveway to the barn, and back to the door of the farmhouse, where smoke puffed from the chimney and lamplight shone behind the kitchen windows.

From a tulip poplar at the northeast corner to the steel stake at the southwest, all hundred and thirty acres of Meadowgate Farm lay under a powdery blanket of March snow.

Cynthia Kavanagh stood in the warmth of the farmhouse kitchen in a chenille robe, and gazed out on the hushed landscape.

“It makes everything innocent again,” she said. “A winter Eden.”

At the pine table, Father Timothy Kavanagh leafed through his quote journal until he found the record he'd jotted down. “Unbelievable! We've had snow one, two, three, four...this is the fifth time since Christmas Eve.”

“Snow, snow, and more snow!”

“Not to mention dogs, dogs, and more dogs! It looks like somebody backed up to the door and dumped a truckload of canines in here.”

Following his customary daylight romp, Barnabas, a Bouvier-wolfhound mix and his boon companion of ten years, was drowned in slumber on the hearth rug; Buckwheat, an English foxhound grown long in the tooth, had draped herself over the arm of the sofa; the Welsh corgi, aptly named Bodacious, snored in a wing chair she had long ago claimed as her own; and Luther, a recent, mixed-breed addition to the Meadowgate pack, had slung himself onto his bed in the corner, belly up. There was a collective odor of steam rising from sodden dog hair.

“Ugh!” said his wife, who was accustomed to steam rising off only one wet dog.

Father Tim looked up from the journal in which he was transcribing notes collected hither and yon. “So what are you doing today, Kavanagh?”

Cynthia mashed the plunger of the French coffee press. “I'm doing the sketch of Violet looking out the kitchen window to the barn, and I'm calling Puny to find out about the twins-they're days late, you know.”

“Good idea. Expected around March fourth or fifth, and here it is the fourteenth. They'll be ready for kindergarten.”

“And you must run to Mitford with the shopping list for Dooley's homecoming dinner tomorrow.”

“Consider it done.”

His heart beat faster at the thought of having their boy home for spring break, but the further thought of having nothing more to accomplish than a run to The Local was definitely discouraging. Heaven knows, there was hardly anything to do on the farm but rest, read, and walk four dogs; he'd scarcely struck a lick at a snake since arriving in mid-January. Willie Mullis, a full-timer who'd replaced the part-time Bo Davis, lived on the place and did all the odd jobs, feeding up and looking after livestock; Joyce Havner did the laundry and cleaning, as she'd done at Meadowgate for years; Blake Eddistoe ran the vet clinic, only a few yards from the farmhouse door, with consummate efficiency; there was even someone to bush hog and cut hay when the season rolled around.

In truth, it seemed his main occupation since coming to farm-sit for the Owens was waiting to hear from his bishop, Stuart Cullen, who had e-mailed him before Christmas.

I will almost certainly have something for you early next year. As you might expect, it isn't anything fancy, and God knows, it will be a challenge. Yet I admit I'm patently envious.

Can't say more at this time, but will be in touch after the holy days, and we shall see what's what (I do recall, by the way, that you're spending next year at the Owens' farm, and this would not be a conflict).

He had scratched his head throughout the month of January, trying to reckon what the challenge might be. In February, he'd called Stuart, attempting to gouge it out of him, but Stuart had asked for another couple of weeks to get the plan together before he spilled the beans.

Now, here they were in the middle of March, and not a word.

“You're sighing, Timothy.”

“Wondering when Stuart will get off the pot.”

“He's retiring in June and consecrating the cathedral-altogether, a great deal to say grace over. You'll hear soon, dearest.”

She handed him a mug of black coffee, which he took with gratitude.

So here he sat, retired from nearly four decades of active ministry as a priest, toasting himself by an open fire with his good-humored and companionable wife of seven years, and situated in what he believed to be the most breathtakingly beautiful countryside in America.

Why bother, after all, about some “challenge” that may or may not be coming. Hadn't he had challenges enough to last him a lifetime?

His wife, on the other hand, was ever drumming up a challenge. During their year at the farm, conveniently located twenty min-utes from Mitford, she'd decided to accomplish three lifetime goals: learn needlepoint, make perfect oven fries, and read War and Peace.

“So how's it coming with War and Peace?”

“I despise telling you this, but I haven't opened it once. I'm reading a charming old book called Mrs. Miniver.”

“And the fries?”

“Since Dooley comes tomorrow, I'll be conducting my next experiment-to see whether soaking the potatoes in ice water will make them crispier. And I'm definitely using peanut oil this time.”

“I'll peel and cut,” he said. He hadn't seen any activity around the needlepoint plan, so he declined to mention it.

“Pathetic,” she said, reading his mind. “I'm all thumbs. Learning from a book is not the way to do it. I've decided to let Olivia tutor me, if she has a free day now and then. Besides, having lunch with someone who also wears eye shadow might be fun.”

“I'm definitely a dud in the eye shadow department.”

She thumped into the wing chair opposite him and took a sip from her coffee mug. “And what about you, dearest? Have you accomplished all your lifetime goals?”

Oddly, the question stung him. “I suppose I haven't thought about it.” Maybe he hadn't wanted to think about having any further goals.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the back of the wing chair. “I believe if I were charged with having a goal, it would be to live without fretting-to live more fully in the moment, not always huffing about as I've done in recent years...to live humbly-and appreciatively-with whatever God furnishes.”

He reflected for a moment and raised his head and looked at her. “Yes. That would be my goal.”

“But aren't you doing that?”

“No. I feel obligated to get out there, to open myself to some new and worthwhile service. I've been a bump on a log these last weeks.”

“It's OK to be a bump on a log once in a while. 'Be still,' He tells us, 'and know that I am God.' We must learn to wait on Him, Timothy. All those years of preaching and celebrating, and doing the interim at Whitecap-what a lovely legacy God allowed you to have there; and ministering to Louella and Miss Sadie and Hélène Pringle and Morris Love and George Gaynor and Edith Mallory and the Leepers...” She took a deep breath. “On and on, an entire community, for heaven's sake, not to mention volunteering at the Children's Hospital and rounding up Dooley's little sister and brothers...”

“One brother still missing,” he said, “and what have I done about it?”

“There may be nothing you can do about it. There's absolutely nothing to go on, no leads of any kind. Maybe God alone can do something about it. Perhaps Kenny is God's job.”

The fire crackled on the hearth; the dogs snored.

His wife had just preached him a sermon, and it was one he needed to hear. He had a mate who knew precisely what was what, especially when he didn't.

“'Let us then be up and doing,'” he quoted from Longfellow, “'with a heart for any fate!' Where's the grocery list?”

“In my head at present, but let's get it out.” She opened the small drawer in the lamp table and removed her notebook and pen.

“Steak!” She scribbled. “Same old cut?”

“Same old, same old. New York strip.” This would be no Lenten fast, but a Lenten feast for a starving college boy who was seldom home.

“Russet potatoes,” she said, continuing the litany.

“Always best for fries.” His blood would soon get up for this cookathon, even if he couldn't eat much on the menu. While some theologians construed St. Paul's thorn to be any one of a variety of alarming dysfunctions, he'd been convinced for years that it was the same blasted affliction he'd ended up with-diabetes.

“Pie crusts,” she said, scribbling on. “Oh, rats. For the life of me, I can't remember all the ingredients for his chocolate pie, and of course, I didn't bring my recipe box.”

“I never liked the recipe we use,” he said, suddenly confessional.

“You're not supposed to even touch chocolate pie, Timothy, so what difference does it make? Dooley loves it; it isn't half bad, really.”

“It needs something.”

“Like what?”

“Something more...you know.”

“Whipped cream!”

His wife loved whipped cream; with the slenderest of excuses, she would slather it on anything.

“Not whipped cream. Something more like...” He threw up his hands; his culinary imagination had lately flown south.

“Meringue, then.”

“Meringue!” he said, slapping his leg. “That's it!”

She bolted from her chair and trotted to the kitchen counter. “Marge's recipe box...I was thumbing through it the other day and I vaguely remember...Let's see...Onions in Cream Sauce, Penne Pasta with Lump Crabmeat, that sounds good....”

“Keep going.”

“Pie!”

“Bingo.”

“Buttermilk Pie...Vinegar Pie...Fresh Coconut...”

“Mark that one!”

“Egg Custard...Fresh Peach...Deep-Dish Apple...”

“Enough,” he said. “I'm only human.”

“Here it is. Chocolate Pie with Meringue.”

“Finish that list, Kavanagh, and I'm out of here.”

Ha! He'd denied himself as sternly as one of the Desert Fathers these last weeks; he would have the tiniest sliver of that pie, or else...

“I know what you're thinking,” she said.

He pulled on his jacket and foraged in the pockets for his knit cap, and kissed her warm mouth.

“You always know what I'm thinking,” he said.

His hand was on the doorknob when the phone rang.

“Do try to find a haircut while you're in town,” she said, picking up the receiver. “You've got that John-the-Baptist look again. Hello! Meadowgate Farm.”

He watched her pause, listening, then grin from ear to ear.

“Thanks for calling, Joe Joe. That's wonderful! Congratulations! Give Puny our love. I'll be over on Thursday. Timothy's headed into Mitford now, I'm sure he'll stop by.”

“So?” he asked, excited as a kid.

“Boys! Weighing in at fifteen pounds total! Thomas and...” She paused, and looked all-knowing.

“And?”

“Thomas and Timothy!”

“No!”

“Yes! One named for Puny's grandfather and one named for you. Now there are two little boys in this world who're named for you, and I hope you realize that people don't go around naming little boys for a bump on a log.”

Boys! And because Puny's father was long deceased, he would be their granpaw, just as he was granpaw to Puny and Joe Joe's twin girls.

His entire chest felt suffused with a warm and radiating light.

He turned onto the state road, which had already been scraped for the school buses, and headed south past the Baptist church and its snow-covered brush arbor. He glanced at the wayside pulpit, which was changed weekly.

if loving god were a crime, would you be in jail?

Getting around was a piece of cake. The heavens had given them only a couple of inches, and in a farm truck built like a tank, he felt safe and thoroughly above it all.

Patently envious. Patently envious. What could a bigwig bishop, albeit his oldest friend, envy in a country parson? There it was again, the tape running in a loop and promising to work his mind into a lather.

“I roll this whole mystery over to You, Lord,” he said aloud, “and thank You for this day!”

In truth, the whole day belonged to him. He would stop by the hospital to see Puny and her new brood; he would run over to Hope House and visit Louella; he would make a noon stop at Lew Boyd's Exxon where the Turkey Club was lately convening; he would have a chin-wag with Avis at The Local....

As for getting a haircut, he had no intention of trusting his balding head to Fancy Skinner ever again, period; Joe Ivy had retired from cutting hair and wanted nothing more to do with such a trade; trooping to the barber shop in Wesley would take too much time. So, no, indeed, absolutely not, there would be no haircut on this trip into civilization.

The sun broke through leaden clouds and flooded the countryside with a welcome light.

“Yee hah!” he shouted against the considerable din of the truck engine.

Why had he felt so bereft and grumpy only a half hour before, when he was now beginning to feel like a new man?

He switched on the radio to the blast of a country music station; it was golden oldies time.

“I bought th' shoes that just walked out on me....” someone sang. He sang along, hardly caring that he didn't know the words.

“Country come to town!” he whooped as he drove into Mitford.

Roaring past the Exxon station, he blew the horn twice, just to let the general public know he'd arrived.

He bent and kissed her forehead.

“Well done,” he said, a lump in his throat. Two sets of twins! May God have mercy....

“They're whoppers,” she said, smiling up at him.

His so-called house help of ten years, and the one whom he loved like a daughter, lay worn but beaming in the hospital bed.

He took her hand, feeling the rough palm that had come from years of scrubbing, polishing, cooking, washing, ironing, and generally making his life and Cynthia's far simpler, not to mention indisputably brighter.

“Thank you for naming one of your fine boys after this old parson.”

“We won't call 'im by th' fancy name. It'll jis' be Timmy.”

“Timmy. I always liked it when Mother called me Timmy.”

“Timmy an' Tommy,” she said, proudly.

“Timmy and Tommy and Sissy and Sassy.”

“You'll be the boys' granpaw, too,” she said, in case he hadn't considered this.

“It'll be an honor to be their granpaw.”

“Father?”

Since he'd officiated at her wedding several years ago, she had taken to calling him by his priestly title in a way that subtly claimed him as her true father. He never failed to note this. Blast, if he wasn't about to bawl like baby. “Yes, my dear?”

“I sure do love you and Cynthy.”

There they came, rolling down his cheeks like a veritable gulley washer....

“And we sure do love you back,” he croaked.

“So, how's the food at Hope House these days?”

He sat on the footstool by Louella's rocking chair, feeling roughly eight or ten years old, as he always had in the presence of Miss Sadie and Louella.

“Oh, honey, some time it's good, some time it ain't fit for slop.” He noted that Louella said ain't now that Miss Sadie, who forbade its use, had passed on. “You take th' soup-th' menu has th' same ol' soup on it every day, day after day, long as I been here.” She looked thoroughly disgusted.

“What soup is that?”

“Soup du jour! If they cain't come up with more'n one soup in this high-dollar outfit, I ain't messin' with it.”

“Aha,” he said.

“My granmaw, Big Mama, said soup was for sick people, anyway, an' I ain't sick an' ain't plannin' to be.”

“That's the spirit.”

Louella rocked on. The warm room, the lowering clouds beyond the window, and the faint drone of the shopping network made him drowsy; his eyelids drooped....

Louella suddenly stopped rocking. “I been meanin' to ask-what you doin' 'bout Miss Sadie's money?”

He snapped to attention. “What money is that?”

“Don't you remember? I tol' you 'bout th' money she hid in that ol' car.”

“Old car,” he said, clueless.

“In that ol' Plymouth automobile she had.” Louella appeared positively vexed with him.

“Louella, I don't have any idea what you mean.”

“Your mem'ry must be goin', honey.”

“Why don't you tell me everything, from the beginning.”

“Seem like I called you up an' tol' you, but maybe I dreamed it. Do you ever dream somethin' so real you think it happened?”

“I do.”

“A while before she passed, Miss Sadie got mad 'bout th' market fallin' off. You know she made good money in that market.”

“Yes, ma'am, she did.” Hadn't she left Dooley Barlowe a cool million plus at her passing? This extraordinary fact, however, was not yet known to Dooley.

“She say, 'Look here, Louella, I'm goin' to put this little dab where those jack legs at th' market can't lose it.' I say, 'Miss Sadie, where you goin' to put it, under yo' mattress?' She say, 'Don't be foolish, I'm goin' to put it in my car an' lock it up.' She'd quit drivin' an' her car was up on blocks in th' garage. She say, 'Now don't you let me forget it's in there.'”

“And?” he asked.

“An' I went an' let 'er forget it was in there!”

The 1958 Plymouth had been sitting for several years in the garage behind Fernbank, Miss Sadie's old home on the hill above Mitford. Fernbank was now owned by Andrew Gregory, Mitford's mayor, his Italian wife, Anna, and his brother-in-law, Tony.

“Well, it probably wasn't much,” he said, reassuring.

“Wadn't much? It mos' certainly was much. It was nine thousand dollars!”

“Nine thousand dollars?” He was floored.

“Don't holler,” she instructed. “You don't know who might be listenin'.”

“You're sure of that amount, Louella?”

“Sure, I'm sure! Miss Sadie an' me, we count it out in hun'erd dollar bills. How many hun'erd dollar bills would that be? I forget.”

“Umm, that would be ninety bills.”

“Yessir, honey, it was ninety, it took us 'til way up in th' day to count them hun'erds out, 'cause ever' time we counted 'em out, Miss Sadie made us start all over an' count 'em out ag'in!”

“Good idea,” he said, not knowing what else to say.

“We got a rubber band and put it aroun' all them bills, an' took out a big envelope and whopped 'em in there, an' I licked th' flap and sealed it up tight as Dick's hat band, so nothin' would fall out.

“She say t' me, 'Louella, you th' best frien' I ever had, but you cain't go down there with me, this is between me an' th' Lord.'

“Then she struck out to th' garage, an' when she come back, she was proud as a pup wit' two tails.

“I say, 'Miss Sadie, where you put that money in case you pass?' She say, 'I ain't goin' t' pass any time soon, don't worry about it. Sometime later she mention that money; we was livin' at Miss Olivia's ol' house. She say she ought to go get it out of where she put it, but th' market was still real bad.

“Then, we both plumb forgot.

“Th'other day I was settin' in this rockin' chair watchin' th' soaps an' it come to me like a lightnin' strike. I said, oh, law! Somethin' bad goin' to happen to Miss Sadie's money, an' Miss Sadie, she'll be hoppin' mad.”

He was dumbfounded by this strange turn of events. As far as what might be done about it, his mind felt oddly pickled.

Louella's immense bosom heaved with a sense of the urgent mission to be carried forth; she leaned toward him and lowered her voice.

“So,” she said, “what you goin' t' do 'bout Miss Sadie's money?”

On the way to Main Street, he zoomed by their yellow house on Wisteria Lane and found it looking spic, not to mention downright span. Harley's general supervision of its welfare made it possible to spend this carefree year at Meadowgate.

He threw up his hand and waved.

“We'll be back!” he shouted.

He wheeled into Lew Boyd's Exxon, still occasionally referred to as the Esso station, and saw the Turkey Club sprawled in plastic deck chairs inside the front window. The lineup included J. C. Hogan, longtime Mitford Muse editor; Mule Skinner, semiretired realtor; and Percy Mosely, former proprietor of the now-defunct Main Street Grill.

He'd been hanging out with this bunch for eighteen or twenty years, and it had been a rude awakening when Percy and Velma packed it in last Christmas Eve, vacating a building that quickly became a discount shoe store. Currently occupying the spot where the club's rear booth had stood was a rack of women's pumps, sizes eight to ten.

“Hooboy!” Mule stood and saluted. “Here comes our Los Angelees movie producer.”

“Who, me?”

“Pretty soon, you'll be whippin' that back in a ponytail an' wearin' a earring.”

Father Tim suddenly felt his hair flowing over his shoulders like a medieval mantle.

“Come on, leave 'im alone,” said Percy. “He's livin' out in th' boonies, he don't have to slick up like we do.”

“If you call that slicked up, I'm a monkey's uncle.”

“How long're you stuck out there in th' sticks?” asked Percy.

“Hal and Marge will be living in France for a year, so...roughly nine more months. But we don't feel stuck, we like it.”

“I lived in th' country when I was comin' up,” said Percy, “an' it like to killed me. They ain't nothin' but work on a farm. Haul this, fix that, hoe this, feed that. If it ain't chickens, it's feathers.”

“About time you showed up, buddyroe, my fish san'wich is goin' south.” J.C. rooted around in his overstuffed briefcase and came up with something wrapped in recycled foil.

Mule sniffed the air. “How long has that thing been in there?”

“Seven o'clock this morning.”

“You're not goin' to eat it?”

“Why not? Th' temperature's just a couple degrees above freezin'.”

Father Tim noted that the editor's aftershave should effectively mask any offensive odors within, loosely, a city block.

“What'd you bring?” Mule asked Percy.

“Last night's honey-baked pork chop on a sesame-seed roll with lettuce, mayo, and a side of chips.”

“Man!” said Mule. He expected that anybody who'd owned the Grill for forty-odd years would show up with a great lunch, but nothing like this. He peered into his own paper sack.

“So, what is it?” asked J.C., hammering down on the fish sandwich.

“I can't believe it.” Mule appeared disconsolate. “Fancy's got me on some hoo-doo diet again.”

“Why is your wife packin' your lunch? You're a big boy, pack your own bloomin' lunch.”

Mule examined the contents of the Ziploc bag. “A sweet potato,” he said, devastated. “With no butter.”

“A sweet potato?” Percy eyed the pathetic offering with disbelief. “What kind of diet is that?”

Mule slumped in his chair. “I can't eat a sweet potato; no way can I eat a sweet potato. I feel trembly, I had breakfast at six-thirty and now it's way past twelve.”

“What'd she give you for breakfast? A turnip?”

“Hard-boiled eggs. I hate hard-boiled eggs; they give me gas.”

“So, Percy,” said Father Tim, unwrapping a ham and cheese on white from the vending machine, “see what you did by going out of business? Left us all high and dry.”

“Yeah,” said Mule. “I was happy with things th' way they were.”

J.C. gobbled the remaining half of his sandwich in one bite. “Ah guss nobar hurrbowwissonor...”

“Don't talk with your mouth full,” snapped Mule, who was digging in his pockets for vending machine change.

J.C. swallowed the whole affair, and knocked back a half can of Sprite. “I guess you turkeys didn't hear the latest about th' Witch of th' North.”

“Witch of th' South,” said Percy, recognizing the nickname, albeit incorrect, for his much-despised former landlord.

“Turns out she said her first clearly understandable word since that big crack on th' head in September.”

“Money!” exclaimed Percy.

“What about money?”

“Money had to be th' first word out of that back-stabbin', hardhearted, penny-pinchin'...”

“Now, Percy,” said Father Tim.

J.C. glared at the assembly. “Do you want to hear th' dadgum story or not?”

“Say on,” commanded Father Tim.

“Ed Coffey was in town yesterday, haulin' stuff out of her carriage house up at Clear Day to take down to her Florida place. He said that right before he left, she was sittin' in her wheelchair at th' window, lookin' at birds, and she motioned him to come over....”

Mule looked disgusted. “If brains were dynamite, Ed Coffey wouldn't have enough to blow his nose!”

“Then, she motioned 'im to come closer....”

The Turkey Club sat forward.

“Ed said instead of all that word salad she'd been talking, she spoke up as good as anybody....”

“What'd she say, dadgummit?” Percy's pork chop was stuck in his gullet; if there was anything he disliked, it was the way some people had to be th' bride at every weddin' and th' corpse at every funeral.

“Yessir, he said he was standin' right there when it rolled out, slick as grease.”

“You already told us that, you goofball. What was it she said?”

J.C. wiped his perspiring forehead with a wadded-up paper towel. “Get off my bumper,” he snapped at Percy.

The Muse editor sat back in the plastic chair and looked once more at the eager assembly. “She said God.”

“God?” Percy and Mule exclaimed in unison.

“No way!” Mule shook his head. “No way Edith Mallory would've said God, unless she was tryin' to say th' word that used to get my butt whipped when I was little.”

“Right,” said Percy. “No way.”

Yes, thought Father Tim. Yes!

He stopped by the grease pit where Harley Welch was lying on his back under a crew-cab truck.

“Harley!” He squatted down and peered at his old friend.

“Rev'ren', is that you?”

“What's left of me. How's it going?”

“Goin' good if I can git this U joint worked offa here. When's our boy comin' home?”

“Tomorrow. We'll catch up with you in a day or two. Did you hear about the twins?”

“Yessir, hit's th' big town news. Spittin' image of th' ol' mayor, they say.”

He laughed. “I guess Lace is coming in?”

“Yessir, she's wrote me a time or two lately; you know she got that big scholarship.”

“I heard. That's wonderful! By the way, when is the last time you worked on Miss Sadie's car?”

“Oh, law, that's goin' too far back f'r m' feeble mind. Let's see, didn't she pass in th' spring?”

“She did.”

“I worked on it sometime before she passed, she was still drivin'. I remember she rolled in here one mornin', I had to change out 'er clutch. Miss Sadie was bad t' ride 'er clutch.”

“Do you know if it's still parked in the garage up at Fernbank?”

“I don't know if he's sold it. They was some talk Mr. Gregory was goin' to restore it....George Gaynor worked on it a day or two, maybe. I cain't hardly recall.”

“You pushing along all right with Miss Pringle?” Hélène Pringle was the piano teacher who rented his house in Mitford, and Harley was his old buddy who lived in the basement.

“Let's jis' say I've heered more piana music than I ever knowed was wrote.”

Father Tim laughed. “Come out to the sticks and see us, will you?”

“I will,” said Harley. “I'll bring you'uns a pan of m' brownies.”

“I'll hold you to it.”

“How's Miss Cynthy?”

“Couldn't be better.” He stood, hearing the creaking of his knees. “Got to put the chairs in the wagon, as my grandmother used to say, and run to The Local. Regards to Miss Pringle!”

He walked to the truck, whistling a tune he'd heard on the radio.

There was nothing like a visit to Mitford to get a man's spirits up and running.

He blew through the door of one of his favorite Mitford haunts, the bell jingling behind him.

“'I love the smell of book ink in the morning!'” he called out, quoting Umberto Eco.

“Father Tim!” Hope Winchester turned from the shelf where she was stocking biographies. “We've missed you!”

“And I, you. How are you, Hope?”

She lifted her left hand to his gaze.

“Man!” he said, quoting Dooley Barlowe.

“It was his grandmother Murphy's. Scott is at a chaplain's retreat this week, he gave it to me before he left.”

“One knee or two?”

“Two!”

“Good fellow!” He still felt a sap for having done a mere one knee with his then neighbor.

He gave Hope a heartfelt hug. “Felicitaciones! Mazel tov!”

“Muchas gracias. Umm. Obrigado!”

They laughed easily together. He thought he'd never seen the owner of Happy Endings Bookstore looking more radiant.

“I have a list,” he said, hauling it from the breast pocket of his jacket.

“Your lists have helped Happy Endings stay afloat. Thank you a thousand times. Oh, my, that's a long one.”

“It's been a long time since I came in. Tell me, how is Louise liking Mitford?”

“I'll be right back,” she said. She hurried to the foot of the stairs and called up for her sister, recently moved from their deceased mother's home place.

Louise came down the stairs at once, fixing her eyes on her feet. Hope took her sister by the arm and trotted her over.

“Father Tim, this is my sister, Louise Winchester.”

With some difficulty, Louise raised her eyes and met his gaze. “So happy...” she said.

Hope smiled. “Louise is shy.”

“I find shyness a very attractive characteristic. It's as scarce these days as hens' teeth.”

He took Louise's hand, finding her somehow prettier than her sister, with a mane of chestnut hair and inquisitive green eyes.

“Louise, we're happy to have you among us, you'll make a difference, I know. May God bless you to find your way here, and prosper you in all you do.”

He was delighted by her seemingly involuntary, albeit slight, curtsy.

“Father Tim wondered how you like living in Mitford.”

A slow flush came to her cheeks. “It feels like...home.”

“Louise is working wonders with our mail-order business and has organized everything from A to Z.”

“Well done, Louise!” He felt suddenly proud, as if she were one of his own.

“Here's Father Tim's list. We have only three of the nine. Could you order the others today?”

“Just regular shipping,” he said, noting that Margaret Ann, the bookstore cat, was giving his pant legs a good coating of fur. “I'm about to be covered up, and not much time to read.”

“Pleased to meet...” said Louise.

By George, she did it again! If push came to shove, Emma Newland could get a curtsy demo right here on Main Street.

“Any plans?” he asked Hope.

“We'd like to talk with you about that; we're thinking October, when the leaves change. Would you marry us, Father?”

“I will!” he vowed.

“Though we attend Lord's Chapel, we're hoping to find a little mountain church somewhere. Something...” She hesitated, thoughtful.

“Something soulful and charming?”

“Why, yes!”

“Completely unpretentious, with a magnificent view?”

“That's it!”

“I'll put my mind to it,” he said.

He told her about the hospital staff that was blown away by its patient's delivery of a second set of twins; how the boys looked strong, healthy, and uncommonly like their paternal great-grandmother and Mitford's former mayor, Esther Cunningham; how Louella had apprised him of nine thousand dollars that she thought was hidden in Miss Sadie's car, and that so far, he had no clue what to do about it.

He reported that the snow on the roads was freezing fast; that Edith Mallory had spoken an intelligible, not to mention extraordinary, word for the first time since her grave head injury seven months ago; that J.C. Hogan was wearing aftershave again, for whatever this piece of news was worth; that Avis had given him a considerable bit of advice about perfecting oven fries; that Hope Winchester had an engagement ring and wanted him to marry them; that Louise Winchester promised to be a fine addition to Mitford; and last but certainly not least, that he'd seen a crocus blooming in the snow, hallelujah.

He was positively exhausted from the whole deal, both the doing of it and the talking about it; he felt as if he'd trekked to another planet and back again.

“Good heavens,” said his wife, “I'm worn out just listening.”

And how had her day gone?

Joyce Havner had called in sick.

Violet, the aging model for the cat books his wife was famous for writing and illustrating, had brought a dead mouse into the kitchen.

A pot of soup had boiled over on the stove while she did the watercolor sketch of Violet gazing out the window.

She had handed off the sketch to the UPS driver at one o'clock sharp; it was on its way to her editor in New York.

Olivia Harper had called, and Lace was arriving from UVA tomorrow.

“That's it?” he asked.

“Don't get high and mighty with me, Reverend, just because you've gone to the big city and bagged all the news, and your wife stayed home, barefoot.”

He laughed. “Missed you.”

“Missed you back,” she said, laughing with him.

In the farmhouse library, an e-mail from Father Tim's former secretary, Emma Newland, joined the queue.

Dear Fr Tim

Last year, you told me to buy a black coat to go with my good navy dress for the trip to England.

To wear the dress, I was supposed to lose ten pounds. But now the trip is only weeks away and I've gained fourteen!!#)!!* Don't mention this to a soul.

Since there's no way I'm going to lose twenty-four pounds by June, I'll have to buy a new dress to go with my black coat.

So should I buy navy like I'd planned to wear all along? Or should I buy black, which will go with everything?

Love to all.

P.S. Advise ASAP, sales start next week.

P.P.S. Harold no longer forced to take own toilet paper to post office, economy clearly on upturn.

They had prayed their Lenten prayer, eaten their modest supper, and made the pie-which would doubtless improve by an overnight repose in the refrigerator.

Now, they drew close by the fire, to the sound of a lashing March wind; she with Mrs. Miniver and he with The Choice of Books, a late-nineteenth-century volume he'd found in their bedroom. He was vastly relieved that she'd made no more mention of his hair, what was left of it.

“Listen to this, Timothy.”

Cynthia adjusted her glasses, squinting at the fine print. “'It's as important to marry the right life as it is the right person.'”

“Aha! Never thought of it that way.”

“I considered that very thing when I married you.”

“Whether I was the right person?”

“Whether it would be the right life,” she said.

“And?”

“And it is. It's perfect for me.”

His wife, who preferred to read dead authors, put her head down again.

“How dead, exactly, must they be?” he had once asked.

“Not very dead; I usually draw the line at the thirties and forties, before the mayhem began setting in like a worm. So...moderately dead, I would say.”

He tossed a small log onto the waning fire; it hissed and spit from the light powder of snow that had blown into the wood box by the door. A shutter on the pantry window made a rattling sound that was oddly consoling.

“And here's something else,” she said.

“'This was the cream of marriage, this nightly turning out of the day's pocketful of memories, this deft, habitual sharing of two pairs of eyes, two pairs of ears. It gave you, in a sense, almost a double life: though never, on the other hand, quite a single one.'”

He nodded slowly, feeling a surge of happiness.

“Yes,” he said, meaning it. “Yes!”