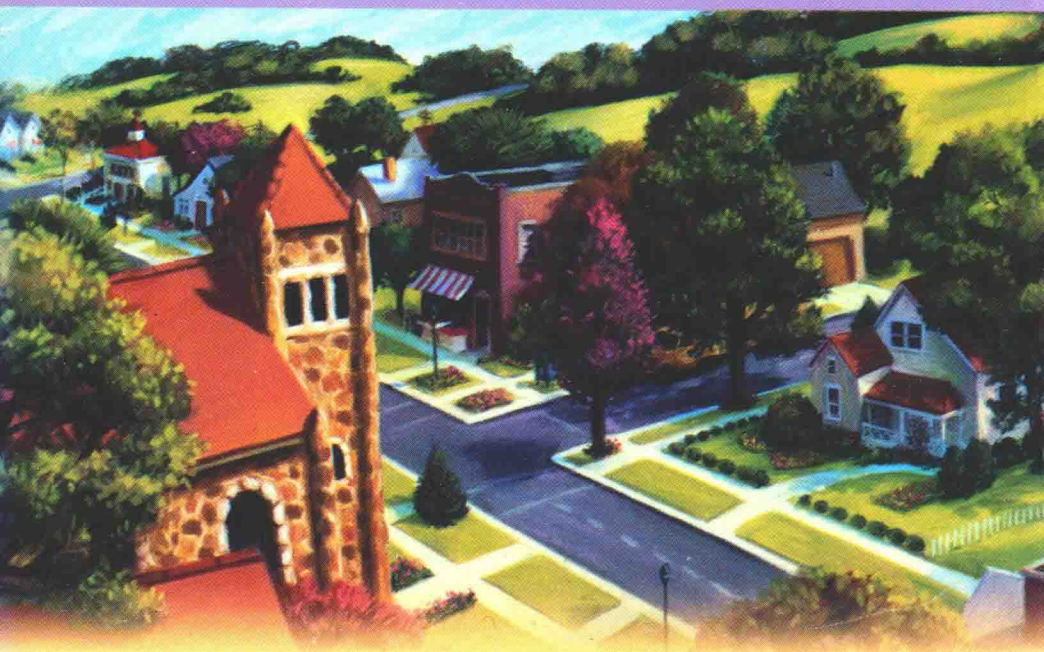


Enter the world of Mitford, and you won't want to leave



At Home in Mitford



JAN KARON

◆ The Mitford Years ◆

AT HOME IN MITFORD



JAN KARON



PENGUIN BOOKS

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Set in Berkeley Old Style Book

Designed by Helen Lannis

Illustrations by Donna Kae Nelson

Town map by David Watts

~ CONTENTS ~

One	Barnabas	9
Two	A Dubious Gift	27
Three	New Possibilities	45
Four	Company Stew	55
Five	The Big Six-0	73
Six	Dooley	85
Seven	The One for the Job	97
Eight	Golden Days	115
Nine	Neighbors	137
Ten	A Grand Feast	155
Eleven	A White Thanksgiving	173
Twelve	An Empty Vessel	199
Thirteen	Issues of the Heart	221
Fourteen	Absalom, My Son	241
Fifteen	The Finest Sermon	265
Sixteen	A Sure Reward	277
Seventeen	A Surprising Question	303
Eighteen	Something to Think About	317
Nineteen	A Love Story	329
Twenty	Baxter Park	353
Twenty-One	The Bells	379
Twenty-Two	A High Command	395
Twenty-Three	Homecoming	411
Twenty-Four	In New Life	425

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Main Street Grill



Farnbank



Porter Place

Waitt

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For Candace Freeland,
my daughter and friend

~ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ~

Warm thanks to Father James Harris, who inspired and encouraged me; to Jerry Burns, who published this book serially in the best of the small-town newspapers, the *Blowing Rocket*; to my doctor, Charles (Bunky) Davant, III, who also doctors all of Mitford; to Bonnie Setzer, Mary Richardson, and Helen Vennard for their support; to my daughter, who laughed in all the right places; to Mary Tarr and the ladies of our volunteer library; to our local police department; and to everyone who buys this book about a small town that does more than exist in the imagination—it really is out there.

~ CONTENTS ~

One	Barnabas	9
Two	A Dubious Gift	27
Three	New Possibilities	45
Four	Company Stew	55
Five	The Big Six-0	73
Six	Dooley	85
Seven	The One for the Job	97
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Eleven	A White Thanksgiving	173
Twelve	An Empty Vessel	199
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Barnabas



HE LEFT THE COFFEE-SCENTED warmth of the Main Street Grill and stood for a moment under the green awning.

The honest cold of an early mountain spring stung him sharply.

He often noted the minor miracle of passing through a door into a completely different world, with different smells and attractions. It helped to be aware of the little things in life, he told himself, and he often exhorted his congregation to do the same.

As he headed toward the church office two blocks away, he was delighted to discover that he wasn't walking, at all. He was ambling.

It was a pleasure he seldom allowed himself. After all, it might appear that he had nothing else to do, when in truth he always had something to do.

He decided to surrender himself to the stolen joy of it, as some might eat half a box of chocolates at one sitting, without remorse.

He arrived at the office, uttering the prayer he had offered at its door every morning for twelve years: "Father, make me a blessing to someone today, through Christ our Lord. Amen."

As he took the key from his pocket, he felt something warm and dis-

gustingly wet on his hand.

He looked down into the face of a large, black, mud-caked dog, whose tail began to beat wildly against his pant leg.

"Good grief!" he said, wiping his hand on his windbreaker.

At that, the dog leaped up and licked his face, sending a shower of saliva into his right ear.

"Get away! Be gone!" he shouted. He tried to protect the notebook he was carrying, but the dog gave it a proper licking before he could stuff it in his jacket, then tried to snatch it from him.

He thought of running, but if anyone saw him fleeing before a shaggy, mud-caked dog, everybody in town would know it within the half hour.

"Down!" he commanded sharply, at which the dog leaped up and gave his chin a bath.

He tried to fend the animal off with his elbow, while inserting the key in the office door. If he were a cussing man, he reasoned, this would offer a premier opportunity to indulge himself.

"Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth," he quoted in a loud voice from Ephesians, "but that which is good to the use of edifying..." Suddenly, the dog sat down and looked at his prey with fond admiration.

"Well, now," he said irritably, wiping the notebook on his sleeve. "I hope you've got that nonsense out of your system." At this, the dog leaped up, stood on its hind legs, and put its vast paws on the rector's shoulders.

"Father Tim! Father Tim!" It was his part-time secretary, Emma Garrett.

He stood helpless, his glasses fogged with a typhoon of moist exhalations.

Whop! Emma laid a blow to the dog's head with her pocketbook. Then, *blam*, she hit him again on the rear flank.

"And don't come back!" she shouted, as the yelping dog fled into a hedge of rhododendron and disappeared.

Emma gave him her handkerchief, which was heavily scented with My Sin. "That wasn't a dog," she said with disgust, "that was a Buick!"

In the office, he went directly to the minuscule bathroom and washed his face and hands. Emma called through the door. "I'll have

your coffee ready in a jiffy!"

"Blast! Make it a double!" he replied, combing the hairs that remained on the top of his head.

As he walked out of the bathroom, he looked at his secretary for the first time that morning. That he recognized her at all was remarkable. For Emma Garrett, full of the promise of spring, had dyed her gray hair red.

"Emma!" he said, astounded. "Is that you?"

"This," she said with feeling, "is the most me you've seen in years. That ol' gray-headed stuff is not me at all!" She turned her head both ways, so he could get the full effect.

He sighed with a mixture of delight and despair. He had hoped this might be an ordinary morning.



Harold Newland had brought the mail earlier than usual and, since Emma had gone to the bank, put it in a neat pile on the rector's desk. At the bottom of the pile, in reverse order of its importance, was the letter from the bishop.

He had asked the bishop to take his time, not to hurry his reply, and he had not. In fact, it had been a full two months since his own letter had been so thoughtfully written and posted.

He stared at the ivory envelope. There was no return address; this was not official stationery. If one did not know that distinctive, looping handwriting so well, one would never guess the sender.

He dared not open it here. No, he wanted complete privacy in which to read it. Would it be in the bishop's own hand? If so, he would then have a precise sense of how seriously his remarks had been taken.

Years ago, his seminary friend had been moved by the Apostle Paul's comment that the letter he wrote to the Galatians was "by my own hand," as if it were an act of great personal sacrifice. As a young seminarian, Stuart Cullen had taken that to heart. Since his installation as bishop, he was known to personally pen all the letters of real importance to his diocese. How did he have the time, people inevitably wondered. Well, that was the whole point. He didn't. Which, of course, made his handwritten and reflective letters a treasure to anyone who received an example.

No, he would not open it, if only to see whether a secretary had typed it. He would wait until evening and the solitude of the rectory, and the peace of his newly dug garden.



After an early supper, he sat on the stone bench that was half-covered with a fine moss, under the overhanging branches of the rhododendron.

He read the letter, which was, indeed, handwritten in the large, exuberant style that demanded space to gallop across the page.

Dearest Timothy:

It is a good evening to sit in this pleasant room and write a letter. Correspondence is, for me, a luxury which stirs my sensibilities, especially if it be with an old friend.

I believe you'd enjoy the way Martha refurbished my disorderly bookshelves, and put this study into working condition. She has even had your favorite rug repaired, so that when you come again, you won't stumble over the torn patch and go reeling headfirst into the armchair!

You ask if I have ever faced such a thing as you are currently facing. My friend, exhaustion and fatigue are a committed priest's steady companions, and there is no way around it. It is a problem of epidemic proportions, and I ask you to trust that you aren't alone. Sometimes, hidden away in a small parish as you are now—and as I certainly have been—one feels that the things which press in are pointed directly at one's self.

I can assure you this is not the case.

An old friend who was a pastor in Atlanta said this: "I did not have a crisis of faith, but of emotion and energy. It's almost impossible for leaders of a congregation to accept that their pastor needs pastoring. I became beat up, burned out, angry and depressed."

The tone of your letter—and I presume you have been forthright with me, as always—does not indicate depression or anger, thanks be to God. But I'm concerned with you for what might follow if this goes unattended.

A few things to think on: Keep a journal and let off some steam. If that doesn't fit with your affinities, find yourself a godly counselor and let me know the cost, for the diocese will willingly cover it.

Your mother, I believe, left a considerable sum, and perhaps you need to use a bit of it for yourself, for something other than the children's hospital you've been so faithful to all these years. I know you well enough to believe I don't have to exhort you to prayer. You always had enormous stamina in this area, and if that has changed, well, then, Timothy, make it right again.

You may not know that you are one of the strongest, most durable links in this diocesan chain. You are important to me, and firsthand inquiry informs me that you are vitally important to your flock. Do not doubt it.

Martha has come in to tell me it is bedtime. I cannot express how wonderful it is to be sometimes told, rather than always doing the telling!

I really never dreamed I would marry, and no one was more surprised than myself when, at the age of 49, I was ready and willing to take yet another lifetime vow. Others found this extraordinary, but I found it the most natural thing on earth.

I cannot exhort you to go out and marry, Timothy, but I will say that these ten years with Martha have brought an ease to the stress which was plundering my own soul. I can't say that the pace is easier—if anything, it has accelerated—but I find the ability to bear it greatly increased.

As I recall from our days in seminary, you and I were much alike when it came to women. You were fairly smitten with Peggy Cramer, but when your feelings for her began to interfere with your calling, you broke the engagement. Even today, I feel confident in having advised you to do it. Yet I wonder—have you ever entirely reconciled this with your heart?

There she is again, my friend. And believe me, my wife does not enjoy reminding me twice. That she monitors my energy is a good thing. Otherwise, I would spill it all for Him and have nothing left with which to get out of bed in the mornings.

I exhort you to do the monitoring you so sorely need, and hang in there. Give it a year! Or, at most, give it two. If you simply cannot go the distance, Father DeWilde will be coming available in the fall and would be my choice for Lord's Chapel.

Timothy, if you have problems with this one-sided conversation, you know how to ring me up. Please know that you are daily in my prayers.

Ever in His peace,
Stuart