

ONE

Invitation

Wednesday night

**Pam and Fark Walker
cordially invite you to
a family reunion
at Montis Inn
July 14–July 22**



**A celebration of 25 years of marriage
and a renewal of wedding vows
will be held on July 21 at 7 p.m.
Black tie optional**

Pam Walker rolled the ecru-colored card between her slender fingers as she sauntered from the bedroom into the kitchen at their home at Montis Inn. It was shortly before midnight, and all lights in their house were off except for the wrought-iron fixture above the large oak kitchen table where her husband, Mark, sat reading the newspaper. The old casement windows were open, and a gentle summer breeze wafted

through the large room.

She placed the invitation on the table, continuing to study it as she tightened the belt around her robe. “You don’t think the typo is a bad omen?” she asked, sitting down next to Mark. Not getting any response from him, she leaned over and petted Cutter, one of two black Labrador Retrievers that were fast asleep by his feet. “You don’t like it either, do you, boy?” she asked the dog.

“Honey,” Mark said, without looking up, “it was my name they messed up, and I really don’t mind.”

Pam tucked her short ash-blond hair behind her ears. “It’s still unbelievable that they were actually mailed out with that typo.”

Mark softly laughed, seeing more humor in the mistake than his wife did. “I’m sure we’re not the first couple who each thought the other had proofread the draft before giving the store the okay to address and send out the envelopes.”

Pam continued to stare at the card as she thought about the coming week. “I still don’t think it’s a good idea that we’re closing down the inn for nine days during our busiest season.”

Mark shrugged. “It’s a little late to worry about that. Like it or not, those invitations were mailed out a month ago, and everyone will be arriving in three days. Don’t worry, we’ll get through it,” he said absently, turning to page four of the weekly newspaper.

The Lumby Lines

What’s News About Town

BY SCOTT S. STEVENS **July 12**

A busy prefair week in our sleepy town of Lumby.

Main Street is abuzz with preparations for hosting this year’s Chatham County Fair, which will open with great fanfare in exactly five days. Jimmy D will announce the start of the activities by detonating the town’s 1892 cannon, the very one that misfired last winter, leveling the park’s gazebo. Late yesterday afternoon, the cannon lost a wheel on North Farm to Market Road, so the scheduled dry run has been postponed until tomorrow at 10:00 a.m.

And good news for all swine owners and spectators alike: for the first time since the unfortunate tragedy when Mr. Olson’s pig found its way into the farm combine exhibition during the Rocky Mount fair two years ago, the pig races are being reinstated. This year, they will be held Wednesday in Tent 6, directly across the path from the

Bacon Barn.

The Parks Department has purchased eight new Porta Potties for the grand event. To their disappointment, though, the Porta Potties arrived two days ago with missing parts. The Parks Department has been notified that, due to weight restrictions, the Porta Potties were disassembled prior to shipment from the Atlanta airport, and the commodes never made it on the flight. Talk about lost luggage.

Finally, the good men and women of the Highway Department have done it once again: in an effort to make Fairground Road one way, two crews (each obviously unaware of the other) posted DO NOT ENTER signs at both ends of the street, thereby allowing no access to the fairgrounds. Sheriff Dixon has rescinded all motor vehicle tickets issued in the last forty-eight hours in violation of the signs.

Mark's laugh, as he finished the article, was halted abruptly when Pam said, "Fark!"

Clipper, the Walkers' other Lab, was startled out of a light sleep and barked in reply.

Mark grinned. "I'm actually starting to like my new name—it sounds like Hungarian nobility."

Pam shook her head in loving disbelief. "Honey, I guarantee that's not what it sounds like. If anything, I think it's a bad omen." She pulled the soft cotton collar up around her neck as if to ward off her concerns, then leaned back, closed her eyes and did what she did best: considered the best- and worst-case scenarios. She continued as if talking to herself. "I see it coming. The front page of *The Lumby Lines* will read 'Family Reunion Implodes at Montis Inn.'"

Mark leaned over and kissed Pam on the cheek. "That's ludicrous. Dennis Beezer would write a far wittier caption—something like 'Montis Murders Mortify Municipality.'"

She squinted at him out of the corners of her eyes. "You've been thinking about that for days, haven't you?"

"Weeks," he admitted with a sheepish grin. Laying the paper down, he turned in his chair. "I really don't understand why you're so concerned. I can't wait to see my family again."

"Including Lynn?"

"I'm sure she won't come," Mark replied quickly, not willing to consider any other possibility. He paused, trying to count the years since he'd last seen his brother and two sisters. "It's different for you—you talk to your mother every couple of weeks. But as close as my family was while we were all growing up, we lost touch when we went our separate ways. And then after a few strained holiday gatherings—"

"I remember."

"And then the civil lawsuit. Not getting together came easier than making an effort to mend the rifts and smooth out the hard feelings. And ever since coming to Lumby, I haven't reached out to any of them. I think it's sad that we touch base only once a year with a Christmas card."

Pam pulled her knees into her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs. "In some ways, I've done the same with my mom. Although I've invited her here several times, I never really insisted that she

come.” She looked at her husband. “Do you think we’ve been selfish in not wanting to share Montis with anyone?”

Mark didn’t reply immediately. “Not intentionally, but maybe,” he finally said. “What we have here is so great, and we’ve built so many good relationships in Lumby, maybe some of our more casual friends from the past just got a little more distant. But this is good; inviting our families to join us as we celebrate our anniversary might be the fresh start that we need to bring them back into our lives.”

“But having them *all* here, together, for an entire week?”

Mark took his wife’s hand in his and held it tightly. “I think you’re obsessing just a little.”

Pam frowned and gently pulled free of his grasp. “Obsessing, am I? May I remind you that you haven’t seen one of your sisters since you sued her husband, who stole a quarter of a million dollars from you?”

“Okay, seeing Lynn after all this time would be a little awkward. But I’m sure she won’t have the nerve to show up.”

“Even though she RSVP’d that she is planning on coming?”

“In writing—she couldn’t even bring herself to call,” Mark reminded her. “Lynn is only concerned with appearances; she always does what she thinks is socially correct. I’m sure we’ll get a carefully worded and tremendously shallow letter from her tomorrow, regretfully canceling her plans to join us.”

“You’re probably right about that,” Pam said, sighing deeply. “She would never have the audacity to come to our home. But what about Carter? Your brother-in-law is one of the most disliked national radio talk show shock jocks around, and he’ll soon be walking down Main Street in Lumby, acting the ultracompetitive, confrontational jerk that he is, just to get fodder for his show.”

Mark shook his head. “Nope, that’s not going to happen. Carter promised that the reunion is off limits. He said he’ll be broadcasting reruns during the entire week.”

Pam raised a brow. “And you actually believe him?”

Mark picked up the newspaper in an attempt to escape any further discussion about the reunion. Although he would never admit as much, he was almost as apprehensive as his wife about his relatives descending on the small town of Lumby and causing mayhem at Montis Inn and in the life that he and Pam had so caringly and lovingly built together over the last several years. But he also knew that time was passing quickly, and that there would be few opportunities to rebuild the ties he once had with his brother, Patrick, and at least one of his sisters.

“Fark?” Pam said, still waiting for his response.

“Okay, Pam,” he said, folding the newspaper. “Yes, I admit we may have a few small family issues, but when you really think about it, who doesn’t?” Before letting his wife reply, Mark pushed the paper in front of her. “This,” he said as he tapped his finger on a front-page article. “This will take care of everything.”

Pam put on her glasses and began to read. “A pie-eating contest?” she asked in confusion.

“Yep,” he said confidently, ignoring her skepticism. “Well, I mean, no, not that specifically, but the county fair—the entire thing, the whole enchilada.”

Pam leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. “What about the fair?”

Mark lifted his hands as if the answer was obvious. “It’s opening on Tuesday, and it’s the perfect distraction. Everyone can go to—”

“Their separate corners,” she said glibly.

“No, to the fairgrounds. We’ll all be too busy to argue. I’ve signed Montis up for a bunch of competitions.”

Pam glared at her husband. “You’re not serious.”

Mark flipped over the newspaper so Pam could see the fair schedule. “Some of these events are going to be *so* cool,” he said with mounting enthusiasm.

She continued to look skeptically at the man who had proven, on so many occasions, that he was adept at conjuring up harebrained schemes. “Don’t tell me you’re going to be chasing after a greased pig.”

Mark looked insulted. “Of course not—that’s for kids. But maybe we’ll try the tractor pull and the demolition derby.”

She panicked when she heard those words. “With our Jeep?”

“I haven’t figured that one out yet,” he replied. “And there’s bull wrangling.”

“*Bull wrangling?*” she repeated slowly.

Mark nodded and then said in his deepest voice, “With horns. Very dangerous. A real manly-man competition.”

Pam covered her mouth as she laughed. “Oh, this train wreck is coming right at us a mile a minute.”

Just thinking about the fair excited Mark to no end, and all of his unspoken worries about the reunion faded away. He shot out of his chair, kissed his wife on the head and poured himself another cup of coffee. “It’s going to be great. And we can take little Jessica on all the rides.”

Pam coughed. “How old do you think little Jessica is?”

Mark looked up in thought. “Well, when we last saw her, she was about four, and that was about four years ago, so she’s around eight—the perfect age for going to the fair.”

“I don’t want to burst your county fair balloon, but we saw your niece eight years ago, and she was eight at the time, so that would make little Jessica sixteen and probably not all that interested in going on the carousel with you.”

“No, that can’t be,” Mark said, waving his hand at her. “Your math is all wrong. She isn’t that old.”

“Train wreck,” Pam repeated.

“Honey, you worry too much,” he assured her. “And Kay will be here to calm everyone down.”

Pam smiled at the thought of seeing her mother again. “She is a rudder, isn’t she? Always so steady and levelheaded.”

“Just like her daughter—very predictable.”

Pam groaned. “That really means boring, doesn’t it?”

“I guarantee that’s one thing you’re not,” Mark said.

“Did I tell you she called the other day to ask if she could bring a friend?”

“Oh, that’s great. Who is she bringing?”

“We talked so briefly, I forgot to ask, but I’m sure it’s Noreen Buckman. Ever since Dad passed away, she’s been Mom’s closest friend—a wonderful companion for playing bridge and going to an early matinee. And I’m sure Mom doesn’t want to travel alone.” Pam thought for a moment. “I’ll give them the two adjoining suites in the guest annex.”

“Whatever you want,” Mark said, taking his wife’s arm and leading her into the bedroom. But instead of going to bed, he pulled two chairs in front of Pam’s desk. “Let’s go online and see what else we can do at the fair.”

“It’s late, honey. We’ve got to get some sleep.”

“But this is *the* county fair,” he said, turning on her computer. “It only comes to Lumby once every four years. This is the highlight of most folks’ lives around here.”

“And that alone doesn’t concern you just a bit?” Pam watched over his shoulder as he booted up the computer and found the fair’s webpage. “Click on Fair Sponsors,” she said. “We should be mentioned.”

As soon as the webpage refreshed itself, the Montis Inn name and logo popped up at the top of the page, separated from and far bigger than any of the other sponsors that were listed.

“Wow,” Pam said, resting her hand on Mark’s shoulder as she leaned closer to the terminal. “How did we get such great billing?”

“I gave them a little more than the normal donation,” he said quickly.

“How much more?”

“Don’t ask,” he replied as he navigated his way through the site.

“Wait, what’s that red notice?” Pam asked, pointing to the bottom of the page. She read aloud: “‘July 14 Update: The Lumby Fire Department concession stand known for refried, chocolate-covered doughnuts will not be open until Wednesday due to damages sustained during a grease fire earlier this morning.’”

“That’s too bad,” Mark moaned. “I just love their deep-fried Twinkies.”

“So the options for death at the county fair would be either heart attack from clogged arteries or being gored by a bull?” she asked.

He pretended not to have heard the comment and continued to scroll down to the events listing. “Here it is,” he said.

They silently read the long list of activities: Fiddling Competition, Livestock Auction, Grange Judging.

“How about that?” he asked, pointing to the barrel races.

“Peanuts is our only horse, and she would have a nervous breakdown if you put a saddle on her back and asked her to trot between two barrels.”

Mark nodded in agreement. “Okay, how about this?”

“Ox yoking?” Pam laughed. “That would be a challenge—we have neither ox nor yoke.”

“All right,” he said, “let me find Jimmy D’s website. I hear he’s listed the best competitions on his *From the Mayor* webpage.”

Mark began to scan the results of his search but then abruptly stopped.

“What is it?” Pam asked.

“Huh. It seems someone’s been blogging about Lumby on MySpace,” he answered as he clicked on a website link.

Suddenly, they were looking at an attractive teenager with short strawberry-blond hair who was holding a can of Bolt, the highly caffeinated drink that had recently become an overnight fad with high school and college students. She wore a scoop-necked magenta tank top that fit tightly over her well-developed chest and, layered over that, a sheer black blouse that hung loosely off her shoulders. The cut of her hair, with long bangs, complemented her face, and although she was a few pounds overweight, anyone would consider her very cute on first impression. Wearing ample makeup and stylish jewelry, she looked as if she were in her early twenties.

“*Jessica?*” Mark stuttered.

Pam groped for words. “Seems your niece isn’t so little anymore.”

He blinked several times, trying to make sense of the MySpace page. He scanned Jessica’s profile and then took another minute to skim his niece’s daily blog entries from the prior week.

“Jessica is writing about coming to Lumby,” he explained.

“Is that good?” Pam asked, sinking into the chair next to her husband.

“I don’t think it’s necessarily bad. She’s calling it ‘A Trip to Lumby Land.’”

Pam pulled her chair closer to the desk and tilted the screen for a better view. It took both of them several minutes to carefully read everything on Jessica’s page, including the blog entries that related to their family reunion.

Pam gasped. “She calls Montis Inn a musty old monastery!”

“Remember, she’s just a kid,” Mark said, coming to his niece’s defense. “And, honey, she’s not that far off the mark: Montis is, in fact, a hundred-year-old abbey.”

“But *musty*?” Pam cringed.

“That’s just an assumption by a teenager who has never set foot in anything older than a new pair of jeans. I’m sure she didn’t write that intentionally.”

“Intentional or not,” Pam said, running her hands through her hair, “this could be read and believed by *anyone*. To write about our inn and our town like that is just irresponsible.”

“But honey, it’s just the Internet.” Mark shrugged. “Everyone knows that whatever they read should be—”

“Trashed,” Pam interjected.

“No, just checked out thoroughly,” Mark corrected as he continued to study his niece’s webpage. “Oh, look, she also has a video.”

Mark clicked on the button and a second later, pop rock music blared out of the computer speakers. An image of Jessica filled the screen.

“Hey, everyone,” the teenager said. “Like, I’m being dragged out of my room tomorrow for a lame reunion in Nowhere, USA. My cam is on, so stay tuned. I’ll be uploading Lumby Land streams every night.”

And then the computer went silent.

“Well, that seems harmless enough,” Mark said.

Pam sat motionless. “A stream?”

“A video,” he answered as he quickly typed in another web address. “Let’s see if she’s on Facebook.”

Pam glanced suspiciously at her husband. “How do you know about all these networking websites?”

Mark smirked. “I’m hip. I know what all the young kids are doing.”

Pam patted her husband’s shoulder. “Then you’ll know exactly how to stop Jessica’s blogging the second she walks in the door. The last thing we need is a rebellious teenager broadcasting our every move over the next week.”

Mark raised his fist in solidarity. “I’m with ya, bro,” he said in his best, albeit painfully unsuccessful jive.