

# ONE

## *Growth*

Pam Walker had not seen her husband all morning and only vaguely remembered his whispers of “a secret project up in the fields” as he sprang out of bed before dawn. Had it not been for the phone call from Tallahassee she answered while finishing breakfast, she would have left Mark, and his project, well enough alone. But the phone conversation was unsettling enough for Pam to put on a light sweater and cross Farm to Market Road in search of him. Clipper and Cutter, their two Labradors who had been playing tug-of-war with a large rope in front of the inn, sensed an adventure was at hand, so followed closely on Pam’s heels.

Since opening the Montis Inn for business the prior November, Pam had seldom found time to stroll through the orchards and appreciate the quiet of their higher pastures. Straight rows of mature apple, pear and peach trees consumed most of their open property on that side of the road, and the land gently rolled from one orchard to the next, with most having wonderful views of Montis Inn to the east and Woodrow Lake to the south.

The smells, Pam noticed as she looked for her husband, varied dramatically from grove to grove. Surrounding her through all of them was a constant low hum of honeybees trying to get the early nectar. Spring was well under way.

“Mark?” she called across a field—a small and protected pasture that held Mark’s “Darwin experiments,” saplings of unknown origin that were too young to identify. On that morning, it seemed odd to Pam that the number of Darwin trees appeared to have increased exponentially even though Mark had gained some horticultural expertise over the preceding year.

Both dogs looked up in anticipation of hearing his voice, but there was no answer.

After combing two other fields, she followed the edge of the woods to the farthest corner of the smaller north orchard where she turned toward the mountains and ducked onto a path shrouded with low-hanging limbs of massive evergreens. After fifty yards the path opened onto a quarter-acre field dotted with two dozen white boxes on stilts—the apiary for Montis Inn.

From a distance, Pam could see Mark, who was facing away from her, standing in a hole knee-deep. He hoisted a few shovelfuls of dirt out, measured the depth of the hole with the shovel handle and held the shovel up to a large root ball of a tree lying on its side next to him. Then he began digging again.

“So this is your Manhattan Project?” she asked, walking up to him.

Mark looked up with a broad smile. “Well, good morning—I love you.”

It was something they said to each other every morning. He always delighted in seeing his wife unexpectedly, especially outdoors. She was tall and lean, and wore comfortable tan khakis and a plaid shirt with a yellow sweater that almost matched the color of her hair, which was being rustled by the breeze.

“Aren’t they just great?” Mark asked excitedly, regarding the dozen unplanted trees that surrounded him.

“More apple trees?” Pam asked.

“Oh, no—something much better. But I want it to be a surprise.”

“You just got a call from the Florida Department of Agriculture in Tallahassee,” Pam informed him.

“Oh, really?” Mark feigned ignorance of what they might possibly be calling about.

“It seems they want to know why you are exporting rare Tupelo gum trees out of their state.”

Mark hesitated only for a moment and cried out, “Surprise!”

“Surprise, what?”

Mark started talking with the exhilaration of a young boy. “These things are great, honey. Chuck Bryson told me about them last month.”

“Chuck advised you to illegally import gum trees to Lumby?” Pam asked in disbelief.

“Well, no,” he paused. “We never discussed that part of it, exactly. But this is better than gold.”

Pam looked at her husband with strained curiosity. “And how would that be?”

“Okay, let me explain. These,” he said, pointing to the saplings, “are just the beginning. I’m having another twenty delivered in a few days.”

“Perhaps not, according to Mr. Wilbur from the Department of Agriculture,” Pam corrected him.

“Oh, yeah, but I can work that out,” Mark said, dismissing her concerns.

She walked over to the gum trees for a closer look. “He said they found your trees in the back of a cattle truck with forged documents.”

“The trees?” Mark asked, sounding very surprised.

“No, the cattle,” Pam answered flatly.

“Not a problem,” he repeated. “Anyway, these are incredible. Tupelo gum trees—they live for one thousand years! Can you imagine that—*one thousand* years?” Mark uprighted a sapling. “And, they grow up to ninety feet tall.”

Pam held back a chuckle. “But why are you planting them here at Montis?”

“Because of the bees, of course.”

“The bees?” she asked.

“All right, here’s the plan,” Mark said, putting an arm around his wife. “These gum trees only blossom for two weeks out of the year, and the bees,” he explained, pointing at the hives, “will use the sweetest of nectars to produce Tupelo Honey and Honeycomb. The stuff is pure gold—hundreds of dollars an ounce. And we can sell some to the monks so they can make Tupelo Rum Sauce.”

“And how much,” Pam asked cautiously, “did the trees cost?”

Mark answered quickly. “About five hundred dollars each.”

Pam stepped back in alarm. “Mark! We’re barely breaking even at the inn! We can’t afford fifteen thousand dollars’ worth of trees.”

“But the honey is very rare.”

“Have you seen it?” she pressed him.

Mark smiled, knowing he had done his homework. “At the Lumby Feed Store. I saw a jar from Ellie’s Apiary for a hundred and twenty dollars.”

“And it said Tupelo Honey,” Pam continued.

“Not exactly, but Chuck and I had a long talk. He said that the label was surely mismarked but there were, indeed, very rare and expensive honeys to be made. And that’s when he told me about the Tupelo trees.”

“Ah,” Pam said, nodding her head. “One question: How do you get the bees to only go to these trees and not the other thousand fruit trees we have in the orchard?”

Mark looked at her intently but didn’t say a word. After a long pause he said in a more thoughtful voice, “I’ll discuss that very issue with Chuck—he knows everything about our bees.”

“And these gum trees? They’re indigenous to Florida?”

“And Mississippi swamps,” Mark elaborated.

“Low, wet lands in hot, high humidity,” Pam said academically.

“Exactly,” Mark answered.

Pam again raised her brow. “So what makes you think they’ll grow on a mountainside in dry air with a harsh winter climate?”

Mark again was stumped by his wife’s common sense. “I’ll be sure to talk to Chuck about that as well. Got to get back to work,” he said, jumping back into the hole.

Pam knew this was one battle not worth fighting. Glancing at her watch, she said, “Please remember that Brooke and Joshua are coming over for lunch before the delivery. You only have about an hour.”

“I’ll be early this time,” he said, lifting a shovel piled high with dirt.

Pam decided not to comment.

As she walked down through the orchard to Montis Inn, she stopped on the knoll where she and Mark used to picnic the summer before while the fire-ravaged abbey was being restored. They would sit on their favorite quilt and talk for hours about how to transform the abandoned monastery into an inn with historical landmark status. Those were seven of the most demanding but exhilarating months of her life.

As Clipper and Cutter played with trimmed branches, Pam looked down toward the inlet to Woodrow Lake a half mile

away. During the winter months, several acres that they had later bought between the orchard and the lake had been cleared, and true to their plan, a local carpenter had erected several barns and one large stable. The exposed soil surrounding the new buildings was slowly being replaced by a carpet of brilliant young grass.

Her sweeping gaze paused on Montis Inn, a century-old stone monastery that they had painstakingly restored. It was their second summer in Lumby, and Pam could not have been happier. The corporate life she had followed so rigidly in Virginia seemed foreign to her now. If not for Mark's unconditional belief that there was a better life for both of them, she would never have had the courage to change. In Mark's unpredictable way he had kept her more true to herself.

Pam returned to Taproot Lodge, the smaller of the Montis buildings that she and Mark had converted into their private residence. She was beginning preparations for lunch when Brooke opened the screen door.

"Can I come in?"

"Well hello, stranger," Pam said, giving her closest friend a hug. "Where's Joshua?"

"Playing with the pooches out back."

Out the window Pam saw Joshua on the ground with the dogs.

She called to him. "Joshua, would you get Mark from the bee field, please? I'm sure he's lost track of the time."

Joshua waved and was off with the dogs.

Pam poured two cups of coffee and placed sugar and cream on the table in front of her guest. "You look happy," she said to Brooke.

Brooke smiled. "I am. I don't know how I could have been so lucky to have found such a good man as Joshua."

"Four months and the honeymoon hasn't ended yet—that's a good sign," Pam teased.

Brooke silently looked into her cup of coffee.

"Or has it?" Pam asked cautiously.

"Oh, no. Nothing like that," Brooke said, frowning. Her mass of brown hair had gotten longer, and she unconsciously tied it into a knot at the nape of her neck. "But—"

Pam knew her friend was holding back. "But what?"

Brooke tilted her head and her hair sprang loose. "There's just not enough time. He's so busy, we seldom see each other."

"He has a lot on his plate right now," Pam noted.

"I know, and I admire him for that, but he's working here during the day and then studying at the university until ten each night. He comes home exhausted, reads for another hour and then falls asleep as often at his desk as in our bed."

"Getting his master's degree is very important to him."

"I understand his focus." She dropped her head. "I just wish it was on me every once in a while. That sounds incredibly selfish, doesn't it?"

Pam offered her a warm smile. "No, it sounds quite normal, actually."

"And I would like to start looking for a home," Brooke went on.

"Is the cottage not working out?" Pam asked in mild surprise. Pam and Mark had all but given a small stone cottage in a far corner of their property to Brooke when she moved to Lumby the year before.

"It's wonderful, and we love it, but it is small, and I think we would like a home of our own."

Pam sat down. "That you would design yourself?"

"Probably," Brooke said thoughtfully, nodding her head. "But Joshua doesn't have time to really talk about it let alone look for land we could build on."

"But he seems happier than I've ever seen him," Pam said.

"He is, and I am." She paused. "I just miss him."

"And how is *your* schedule these days? I came by the cottage yesterday but no one was there."

"During the day, I'm almost as busy as Josh," Brooke admitted with some guilt. "I really like working at Spencer Associates—it's a great architectural firm, and after being on my own for so long in Virginia, it's nice to be able to talk out ideas with different colleagues." She took a sip of coffee. "I think I'm slowly gaining their respect. I was just assigned the Wheatley Boardinghouse remodeling job."

"That huge yellow bed-and-breakfast? That's a gorgeous building," Pam said admiringly.

Brooke leaned back, shrugging, but she smiled with pride nonetheless. "In dire need of repair, I'm afraid, but we'll take it one day at a time."

“A good approach for you and Joshua as well, I would think,” Pam said, patting her friend’s shoulder.

“I agree. And today is a good day to start. After the delivery, Joshua and I plan to spend the entire afternoon and evening together—the first in weeks. I’ve even prepared a surprise picnic for him.”

-----

Joshua threw a stick to Cutter while Clipper busied himself in the pit in which Mark was digging.

“Interesting saplings,” Joshua remarked as he offered a hand to Mark, who stepped out of the hole.

“They’re great,” he said, “but I have a few small snags in my special project.”

Joshua gave Mark a suspicious look. “What project?”

“The Tupelo Honey thing,” Mark said almost in a whisper.

On their walk back to Montis, Mark proceeded to tell Joshua about his conversation with Chuck Bryson, about buying trees from a shady character he found on the Internet and the trees being “inconspicuously” transported to Lumby.

“Is it illegal?” Joshua asked, taken aback by Mark’s story.

“No, not really. Certainly not federally and really not even by the state. But the trees may be protected to some degree—I just didn’t have time to look into the details.” He thought for a moment. “I’m sure the only reason the Department of Agriculture is involved is because George—”

“George?”

“The gum tree man in Florida—he tried to save a buck and stuck the trees in the back of a cattle truck that crossed state boundaries with false paperwork. So when the driver was pulled over, my trees became suspect.”

Joshua couldn’t help but laugh.

“I wish Pam reacted as well,” Mark admitted under his breath.

Joshua scratched his head. “Just out of curiosity, why do you think Florida gum trees will grow in Lumby?”

Mark shook his head dourly. Pam had asked the same question. Why hadn’t he thought to ask it of himself? “Well, that’s one of my problems, but I can’t return them—George’s phone has been disconnected. And they cost a bundle too.” He paused. “Oh, by the way, if Pam asks you about training our bees to only go to the gum trees, plead ignorance and suggest she call Chuck, okay?”

“I think the bees are the least of your get-rich-quick problems.”

“How come?” Mark asked.

“Well, if the trees belong to the Nyssaceae family, which I’m fairly certain they do since my graduate work is in agriculture, they won’t even start to flower for another ten years.”

Mark’s face went blank with horror. When he finally recovered, he said, “Well, don’t tell Pam that either, okay?”

“Mark, I used to be a monk,” he laughed. “I don’t see a lot of gray area to maneuver in.”

-----

After a hearty lunch, Mark and Brooke cleared the table while Pam enjoyed the last of her dessert.

“When is the delivery?” Brooke asked.

“At two,” Mark said, giving a quick glance at Joshua.

“So,” Brooke said, “don’t keep us in suspense—what did you decide upon?”

Pam put down her coffee mug. “Well, we spent the entire weekend laying out a short- and long-term plan for Montis, and Phase I, as we call it, is acquiring a goat.”

“Just one goat?” Brooke asked.

“Just one,” Pam confirmed with a nod.

“Great choice,” Brooke said. “Small, easy to care for, something that the kids can pet.”

“Exactly,” Pam smiled.

Mark coughed.

Joshua coughed back.

“Is that a secret code?” Brooke asked, seeing the look that passed between the men.

Pam answered for them. “No, just a sound of mild protest, I think. Mark wanted to bring in a few other critters, and it took several hours to convince him otherwise.”

“Hello?” A deep bass voice was heard from just outside the lodge.

“Matthew?” Pam jumped up from her chair.

A tall man in his sixties with thick gray hair stuck his head through the doorway. “Are we interrupting?”

“Come in, come in,” Mark said with a wide smile, waving his arm.

During the preceding summer, after Pam and Mark purchased Montis, several of the monks had returned to Montis Inn, formerly Montis Abbey, and assisted in its restoration. As their friendship developed, Pam had lent the brothers a well-experienced hand by structuring a new business venture that secured the finances of Saint Cross Abbey, the monastery they now called home.

Brother Matthew, wearing a long black robe tied at the waist with a simple black belt, stepped into the kitchen. “We were just driving from Wheatley to Lumby and thought we would say hello. We haven’t seen you for several months,” he said, smiling beneficently at Joshua and Brooke. “How is the married couple?”

Brooke got up and hugged Matthew.

Matthew, though twenty years his senior, had been Joshua’s closest friend when they were monks together at Montis Abbey. When the monastery closed, the remaining brothers, excluding Joshua, joined Saint Cross Abbey, an hour away.

Pam looked out the door and saw Brother Michael sitting in the car and waved for him to come in.

Mark offered Matthew a chair at the head of the table. “A perfect day to visit, actually. You can bless the beasts of burden that will be delivered within the hour.”

“Beast,” Pam corrected him.

“Ah.” Brother Matthew nodded. “So Montis Livery is now open for business?”

“Within the hour,” Pam said, checking her watch, “if getting one goat is considered an official opening.”

“Do you have time to join us?” Brooke asked.

“Absolutely,” Matthew said. “Do you mind if I use your back room to disrobe?”

“Not at all. We’ll meet you in front,” Pam said, grabbing a bottle of champagne and enough paper cups to go around.

Within a few minutes the group of six was crossing Farm to Market Road and walking down the half-mile path to the stables. The barns, painted fire-engine red with white trim, had been finished the week before, and both Pam and Mark were pleased with the results.

Matthew fell behind the others, walking more cautiously over the rough path. Pam stayed by his side.

“So, how is the Saint Cross rum sauce business progressing?” she asked.

He smiled at her happily. “We feel very fortunate—far better than could ever have been expected. In fact,” he laughed and lowered his voice, “we recently received an offer to buy our business.”

Pam turned to him in surprise. “Would you really consider selling it?”

“Oh no, definitely not,” Matthew answered. “We would be too bored without it. I’m sure they weren’t at all serious.” He shook his head at the thought of the unexpected offer. “Can you imagine the oddity of some large corporation wanting to buy our little rum sauce business?” he asked, almost thinking aloud. “Personally, I think someone was pulling our leg, but we consider it a nice compliment anyway.”

“Well, you have a great product and you’ve expanded quickly,” Pam said.

Brother Matthew nodded. “We have indeed. We’re selling our rum sauce on both coasts now. To keep up with demand, last month we acquired new equipment that will increase our capacity tenfold and will carry us forward for years.”

“That sounds promising,” Pam said.

“We hope so. It will carry our debt forward as well,” Matthew added with a worried look.

When Pam and Matthew finally arrived at the stable, the others were already in the far barn, having first inspected the main stable.

Walking back toward the latecomers, Brooke asked, “What do we do now?”

“When in doubt,” Pam said, holding up the bottle of champagne and handing it to Mark to pop the cork. “On second thought,” she added, “perhaps we should wait for our new family addition—our goat.”

“Oh no,” Mark said smoothly, so silky Pam should have noticed. “I think all of this would go much better if you—we—had at least one glass of champagne.”

Brooke held out a cup as Mark poured. “So do you bless barns, Brother Matthew?” she asked.

“Only when they sneeze,” Mark quipped.

Matthew chuckled. “We can. And it’s far from the strangest things we can bless.”

“Okay,” Brooke said in anticipation.

“I’m really not prepared,” Brother Matthew said.

“Oh, anything would do—a blessing lite is fine,” Brooke encouraged him.

Matthew winked at her and placed his left hand on the beam and bowed his head. “Bless this stable,” he said quietly.

There were a few seconds of silence.

“That’s it?” Brooke asked in amazement. “Will that really work?”

“Work?” Brother Matthew asked.

“Like a divine insurance policy?”

Matthew shook his finger at Joshua, smiling. “I’m interested to hear what you’ve been telling her about our God.”

Just then a large animal truck slowly passed the long drive to the stable, stopped and then reversed course. As the truck, painted a bright yellow that had peeled and been dinged over time, backed into the dirt driveway, Pam read the black lettering under a comical painting of a moose: “Four Legs Down—Large Animal Transport.” The truck continued rolling backward to where the group was standing.

“What a huge truck for one small goat,” Pam said, surprised.

The brakes squealed loudly as the truck came to a stop. The driver jumped out of the cab.

“Any of you Mark Walker?” he asked the group.

They all looked at Mark. “I am,” he said, stepping forward.

“Sign here,” he said, passing Mark a clipboard that had seen better days.

As soon as the driver opened the rear door, a menagerie of animals broke into a deafening chorus.

Pam raised her voice over the barnyard sounds. “You must have quite a few deliveries today.”

“No, ma’am, just Mark Walker—Montis Stable,” he said politely.

Pam peered inside, where the sunlight created slatted shadows. “But there must be some mistake. I think that one,” she said, pointing to one of several goats tied to a crib, “is ours.”

He studied the invoice. “Yes, ma’am. I have here one draft horse, one mule, eight chickens and four guinea hens.” Then he flipped the page. “Oh, and two sheep.”

Pam looked at Mark in disbelief. “And a goat?”

“No, ma’am, three goats.”

Pam shot another dirty look at Mark.

“Honey, let me explain.” Mark went over and put his arm around her shoulder. “One goat would have been lonely—you said it yourself. They need companionship. Didn’t you say you would lie in bed at night worrying about one small goat down here by itself?”

“Yes, but—”

“And didn’t you say that one goat certainly wouldn’t be enough for several children to play with at one time?”

“Yes, but—”

“And didn’t you give me an article to read about chicken feed?”

Pam took a few steps back and crossed her arms over her chest. “So we skipped our short-term plan and went directly into where we want to be three years from now?”

“Exactly,” Mark said with confidence.

Brooke started laughing, and then Joshua followed suit, as did the monks of Saint Cross Abbey. In fact, Brother Michael was laughing so hard he fell back into a bale of hay.

And that set the stage for one of the more unfortunate events of the day. Clipper and Cutter, who had been left behind in the house at Montis, heard the distant sounds of laughter, and being the bored puppies that they were, they bolted through the screen door and started making their way to the barn.

At the same time the driver began unloading his cargo. He backed out one draft horse, handing the reins to Joshua, and three tethered goats, handing the ropes to Pam.

“All yours, ma’am,” he said to her with a quick smile.

The driver proceeded to cart the chickens and guinea hens, in groups of three, to the stable as Mark had requested. Returning to the animal trailer, he was walking the sheep down the ramp when two rather large, energetic Labs burst onto the scene.

And so the tightly coupled series of events unfolded:

The sheep, standing on the ramp, were the first to spook, jerking the lead out of the driver’s hand and bolting away from

the trailer.

The goats, panicked by the sudden dash of the sheep, sprang loose and followed the sheep up the hill, leaving Pam in the dust.

The chickens, which had attracted the greatest attention of the dogs, went every which way with feathers flying.

Finally, the horse, normally a docile animal, decided there was too much commotion and galloped for higher ground with Joshua firmly holding on to its halter. But Joshua could offer little resistance as the two-thousand-pound gelding gained momentum, so he did the only sane thing that came to mind: He let go, fell to his knees and watched the horse lumber away.

By the time the driver jumped into his cab and drove off, there wasn't one animal to be seen at the grand opening of Montis Stable. And any plans Brooke had had for a quiet afternoon with her husband were dashed as she watched Joshua join Mark in a chase after several goats that had found their way to the lower orchard.

"Well, it seems everything is quite normal at Montis once again," Brother Matthew said with a wide grin.