

The Most  
FAMOUS  
ILLEGAL  
Goose Creek  
PARADE

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## THE MOST FAMOUS ILLEGAL GOOSE CREEK PARADE

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## Chapter One



“Oh, Albert, isn’t it lovely?”

Al tore his gaze from the towering monstrosity before him to cast a disbelieving stare at his wife. Hands folded beneath her chin as if in rapturous prayer, Millie’s eyes sparkled. She gazed at the house as if she’d just caught sight of Buckingham Palace. He glanced back at the colossal three-story structure looming on the horizon across a stretch of neglected lawn the size of a football field. In fact, the house did have a castle-like look about it, with that round tower spiraling upward from a disturbingly asymmetrical roof.

The weather had finally turned mild after a brutal Kentucky winter, and they’d been able to resume the pleasant habit of an evening stroll after supper. The slight breeze that ruffled Al’s hair—he must remember to stop by Fred’s for a trim this weekend—still held a chill, but nothing like the icy blasts that had persisted all the way through the second week of March. Al preferred their regular route, which took them down Goose Creek’s picturesque Main Street, but tonight Millie had wanted to walk through the town’s oldest neighborhood to see if she could spot any blossoming jonquils. They spied sprouts aplenty, clusters of narrow green leaves with slender stalks straining skyward to catch the last rays of evening sunlight, but the blossoms were still tightly cocooned within their protective wrappings. Kind of like Al. He huddled deeper within the collar of his heavy jacket and looked again at the house.

Millie seemed to be waiting, so he ventured an answer. "It's the old Updyke place."

A completely unenlightened comment, but a cautious one. Thirty-six years of marriage had taught him a few things. Until he uncovered the reason for that gleam in his wife's eye, the wisest course was to stick with stating the obvious.

She ignored him, as she was apt to do when concocting an idea in that brain of hers. "Look at the gables, all those charming levels of the roof. And the chimneys. And that bay window! It's absolutely gorgeous."

He cocked his head to change his angle of inspection. Under no definition of the word would he call a broken, boarded-up window *gorgeous*. "Be expensive to replace that curved glass. Probably a special order."

"And you know there's a verandah in the back. It overlooks the lake."

The faint sound of alarms began clanging in the recesses of Al's brain. Surely this conversation wasn't headed where he feared. "It's not a lake, it's a pond. Probably covered in scum. Water draws skeeters," he cautioned. "And gnats."

She dismissed his warning by waving a set of pink manicured fingernails in his direction. "That's what screens are for. That verandah could be screened in easily, and think how peaceful it would be to look at the water over coffee in the mornings. I'll bet there are geese or ducks or something. We could be like Katharine Hepburn and Henry Fonda in *On Golden Pond*."

The volume of the alarms rose in his inner ears. Now she was imagining herself in that disaster of a house. Al didn't like the way this conversation was going, not one bit. "Those shingles are in bad shape. Bet they leak. Probably water damage inside. I can't even imagine how much it would cost to put a roof on that place."

A faint nod in answer told him she was barely listening. He added a note of sternness to his tone.

“And I’d be afraid to step onto that porch. Looks like it might collapse. No telling what shape the rest of the house is in after sitting empty for so long. Must be ten years since the Updykes left.”

“What a silly thing to say. It’s perfectly safe.”

“How can you be sure? Nobody’s been in that place in a decade.”

“Of course they have. Louise Gaitskill says the interior is in wonderful shape considering the house is over a hundred years old.”

The ringing in his ears became a claxon. Louise Gaitskill was not one of Millie’s circle of friends. To his knowledge they didn’t know each other well enough to enter into a casual chat about a deserted Victorian eyesore like this house. But a professional conversation?

Louise Gaitskill was a realtor.

He whirled to study his wife head-on through narrowed lids. “What are you getting at, Mildred Richardson? Out with it.”

A wistful smile twitched at the corners of her lips. “Only that I’ve loved this house since I was a girl. I went to a birthday party there once. We ate cupcakes out on the verandah and played croquet.” A quiet sigh escaped her lips. “I used to wonder what it was like to be rich and live in an elegant house like this one.” She did not meet his eye but continued to stare at the house. “And I happened to hear that the Updyke brothers have finally agreed to sell it.”

Aha! The truth emerged at last. Well, he’d better put the skids on this conversation right now. “We are *not* buying that house. Under no circumstances. Not even the slightest possibility. I refuse to discuss it, so put the idea out of your head.”

To prevent the inevitable argument he stalked away from her in the direction of the perfectly good home where they’d lived happily for nearly two decades, using his long-legged stride to its full advantage.

Quick footsteps scuffed on the road as she hurried to catch up. “But Louise says they told her they’re desperate for money and need to sell quickly. She thinks they’d be willing to let it go at a fraction of its value.”

“Louise is not a very good realtor if she tells people her clients are

desperate.” He stared straight ahead, not slowing one smidge even though she had to trot in order to keep up with him.

“But they want her to,” Millie argued. “They don’t care if everyone knows, because they want to unload—” She bit off the rest of the sentence.

Al pounced on the word with glee. “They want to *unload* a potential real estate catastrophe before the house collapses.”

“No,” she said as calmly as she could while huffing with the effort of staying beside him. “They need the money to renovate the restaurant they bought up in Cincinnati before the building inspector shuts them down.”

From the corner of his eye he spied a flush splotching her cheeks. Guilt pricked his conscience, and he shortened his stride. “They had no business opening that restaurant to begin with.”

“Oh, don’t be an old poop.” She gave his arm a playful nudge and settled into the slower pace. “It was their dream. Everybody should follow their dream if they have the chance.”

A longing glance over her shoulder was no doubt designed to inflict the maximum guilt on the “old poop” who dashed her girlish dreams of living in a grand house. Well, he refused to succumb to her obvious machinations. He loved this woman intensely, so much that in quiet times of reflection he could scarcely breathe at the depth of his feelings, but he was not blind to her ways. Over the years he’d fallen victim to her womanly wiles more than once. That’s how they’d ended up with two sets of golf clubs collecting dust in the attic and a bright pink Volkswagen Beetle with obnoxious curling eyelashes over the headlights. And Rufus, the world’s smelliest beagle. Not to mention a third child, though Allison was a joy he’d never regretted for an instant.

He shook off the tenderness that always accompanied thoughts of his only daughter. Now was not the time for softness. Millie could sense the slightest shift in his mood and would not hesitate to press the advantage with a ruthlessness at odds to her sweet manner and delightful dimples.

“We are not buying that house.” He punctuated the statement with a firm shake of his head.

His proclamation was met with silence. Al risked a sideways glance, and was not comforted by what he saw. A smile, nearly imperceptible and composed of unbendable steel, hovered about the lovely full lips. He knew that expression well, and the sight of it set his insides to quivering. She had no intention of giving in. And the truth that he had come to realize over the years, the one he tried to hide from her at all costs, was that in a match of wills, hers was the stronger.



Millie held her tongue for the duration of their stroll. Aware of the cautious glances Albert shot her way every so often, she maintained a pleasant expression. Pouting, she'd learned long ago, would serve no purpose besides irritating her peace-loving husband. When Albert was irritated, he became even more mule-headed than usual. At this stage of the negotiations it was extremely important to keep every conversation cordial.

She knew how his mind worked. He would process their discussion over the next few days. At odd times he would utter an objection out of the blue. While buttering his toast he might say, “That lawn is a disaster, you know.” Or when he slid into bed at night, “The property taxes are probably triple what we pay now.” She would reply with a smile and a nod and revel in a secret satisfaction. Let him brood over the downsides, all the while becoming accustomed to the idea.

Turning the corner onto Mulberry Avenue, she eyed the familiar street with fresh eyes. Blacktopped driveways and arrow-straight sidewalks outlined squares of neatly maintained lawns, identical in size. Single-story homes of similar size and construction, though with enough individuality to give the neighborhood a pleasant, non-tract-like feel. Her gaze was drawn to their house in the exact center of the street. The holly bushes on either side of their mailbox, though winter-dull at the moment, were trimmed to perfect roundness. A

row of carefully tended Camellia shrubs, equally spaced in a strip of dark soil lining the sidewalk, led to the front door. At the moment they were mere bundles of sticks but had recently begun to show signs of producing the glossy dark leaves and pink blossoms that would lend an air of glory to the Richardson yard that none of their neighbors had managed to replicate. Thanks to Albert.

She cast a fond glance sideways, ignoring the stubborn set to his strong jaw. Such a perfectionist. It was one of the traits she admired about him. He approached every task with a thoroughness and determination that sometimes bordered on compulsiveness, and he never left a job half-done. He might grumble but she knew he loved the work, derived immense satisfaction from tackling new projects. The sight of a broken toilet handle or a chip in the wall paint rendered him positively gleeful. Without a doubt, his efforts to landscape their yard saved him from suffering a stroke after that alarming episode three summers ago. She herself had seen his blood pressure retreat to the normal range whenever he plunged his hands into rich Kentucky soil.

But now all the chores were done, inside the house and out. Retirement was only a few years away, and then what? Their home was in perfect repair.

Ah, but the Updyke property had *plenty* to do. Years' worth of projects to keep them both busy and healthy.

When they approached Violet's house, the curtains in the front window moved. Her best friend and next-door neighbor for nearly twenty years stood inside, peering at them through the binoculars she kept in readiness on the hall table. Probably beside herself with waiting to see how the conversation with Albert went. With a cautious glance at her husband, Millie gave a very slight shake of her head. The curtains fell back into place.

They stepped from the sidewalk onto their walkway, and Albert's face lost the perturbed expression. She spied the beginnings of a smile as he scanned the neat lawn, the gleaming windows, the front door he'd painted an inviting shade of red. Yes, their home was pleasant and

welcoming, and in excellent shape. According to Louise Gaitskill, it would bring a good price.

She allowed him to open the door for her and let her hand linger on his cheek with a gentle caress as she passed inside. After all these years of marriage, you'd think Albert would learn that she always had his best interests in mind.



## Chapter Two



Oh, just the usual complaints,” the old veterinarian assured Susan. “You know. Ear mites. Hookworm. Acute moist dermatitis. UTDs in the cats, of course. And fleas are bad around here. Standard stuff. Nothing you can’t handle.”

Susan worried the inside of her cheek between her molars. His vote of confidence in her skills meant absolutely zero since he’d only met her an hour before. How did he know what she, a brand new veterinarian with the ink barely dry on her license, could handle? On the other hand, she was certainly competent to diagnose and treat the common health problems of household pets. If he were telling the truth about his clientele, she shouldn’t have any problems taking over his practice.

*If he were telling the truth.* The suspicious thought snagged in her mental filter and dangled there at the front of her mind.

*What’s the matter with me? He seems like an honest man. There’s no reason at all to suspect Dr. Forsythe of being untruthful.*

No reason beyond her habitual mistrust of strangers and the certainty that all men except Daddy were out to take advantage of a female undertaking a business transaction alone in order to soak them for as much as they could. Which was ridiculous. This was a reputable doctor of veterinary medicine retiring from his practice, not someone trying to sell her a timeshare.

They stood behind a low counter in the otherwise empty reception

area, their conversation accompanied by cries for attention from a Yorkie and a Chow mix in the boarding room down the hall. The poor dogs had been excited to see them during her after-hours tour of the facility, and clearly expected to be let out of their kennels for a play period. The odors of disinfectant and pine lingered in the air and overpowered the more common smells that accompanied a vet's office, proof that the floors had been recently mopped.

"Will you be available for consultations if the *new doctor* has questions?" She emphasized the words in a clear message that she had not yet made a decision to sign the papers and become that new doctor.

"By phone, of course." His pleasant expression did not fade in the least. "But the missus and I are moving to Florida as soon as we wrap things up here."

She nodded, scanning the reception counter. A dog cookie jar sat on one end, and a kitty treat jar on the other. From this vantage point she could see into both of the small waiting rooms, four blue plastic chairs situated in each. A sign suspended from the ceiling in front of a partition between the two directed *Playful Pups* to the left and *Kud-dly Kitties* to the right.

Where did Disagreeable Dogs and Cantankerous Cats wait?

Dismissing the snarky thought, she asked, "What about reptiles? Do you treat many of those?"

Though most of her vet school classmates avoided caring for reptiles if they could, Susan loved them. She shared her apartment with a bearded dragon she had inherited during a practicum when he escaped the confines of an inadequate enclosure and surprised his owner's mother in the shower. The stunt, apparently the last of many, had resulted in banishment from the family home. Susan had assured the tearful little boy that she would take good care of Puff and love him forever.

Susan never broke a promise.

"Not many," the doctor admitted. "I'm afraid things are pretty common in Goose Creek. Very few exotics. Nothing out of the

ordinary to speak of.” His expression brightened with a sudden memory. “Though Clete Watson’s boa constrictor did come down with a skin fungus last year.”

“You treated it with Canesten cream?”

“Yup. Cleared up in a couple of days.” The man’s lips curved into a broad smile. “You know your stuff. I had to look up the treatment. Makes me feel better, knowing I’m leaving my patients in competent hands.”

Now he was flattering her, something to which Susan was not susceptible in the least. *If* she decided to buy the Goose Creek Animal Clinic from Dr. Forsythe, the decision would be based on a careful analysis of all available facts. And in order to thoroughly analyze the situation and make an informed business decision, there was one more thing she must do.

“I’ll want to inspect your records,” she told him. “Accounting, payroll, and of course the patient charts.”

“I thought you would. It’s all in here.” He patted the top of the computer monitor on the reception desk. “My receptionist convinced me to convert from paper last year. Against my will, I might add, but I figured I’d better get automated before I handed the place over to someone else. A young person like you probably knows your way around a computer better than your own living room, but an old man like me needs things written out.” He picked up a thin folder from the desk and extended it toward her. “The password and instructions are here. Have at it.”

Startled, she stared at the folder without taking it. “You mean now?”

He tossed a set of keys on the desk. “You drove all the way up here to see the place, so there’s no time like the present. I’m going to take those pups out for a romp before I head home for the night. You’ll lock up, won’t you?”

He was going to leave her here alone? Was he insane? How did he know she was trustworthy?

Shock must have shown on her face, because he gave her an encouraging smile. "After you contacted me last week I called a couple of your professors, longtime friends of mine. They vouched for you." He winked. "And besides, the petty cash and all the good drugs are locked in the safe." With a final grin he set the folder on the desk and disappeared behind the door leading to the clinic section. A moment later the dogs' plaintive yips changed to joyful barks and she heard the clang of kennel doors being opened.

Susan hesitated only a moment before seating herself in the rolling chair. She reached for the folder, a sense of excitement swelling inside her chest. If the books looked as good as she expected, she was going to do it. Take Daddy up on his offer to cosign a loan, buy a veterinary clinic, break her apartment lease, and move to Goose Creek, Kentucky.

Heaven help her.



The evening wore on with Millie maintaining a pleasant attitude that nagged at Al. What scheme was she cooking up? He found it impossible to concentrate on *Wheel of Fortune* and *Jeopardy* with her sitting there, rocking and knitting and humming an off-key tune like she hadn't a care in the world. Even his favorite show, *Person of Interest*, failed to distract him. How could it with that gargantuan house lurking in his mind like a monster, overshadowing his thoughts?

Over a hundred years old, she'd said. Probably hadn't been maintained at all. Old man Updyke had been a pinchfist.

He aimed a scowl in her direction. "I'll bet the plumbing is original."

She looked up from her knitting, eyebrows arched over inquisitive eyes. "What was that, dear?"

"The Updyke place. Like as not those old pipes are et up with corrosion. Wiring's probably shot too. That place is nothing more than

a giant tinderbox. One spark and *poof*.” He sketched an explosion in the air with his hands.

“Ah.” Her head dipped serenely before she returned to her task.

Al glowered as he directed his attention to the fifty-two-inch flat screen television the kids had given him for Christmas. He couldn’t see a thing beyond the image of that steeply pitched roof, the shingles ruffled like a frilly bedspread. No repairing that mess. They’d have to put on an entire new roof, and all those steep levels and chimneys would cost a fortune.

From his bed between their chairs Rufus gave a quiet yip in his sleep and his back legs buffeted the air. Squirrel-chasing dreams, no doubt. It was the dog’s single redeeming grace, as far as Al could see. Rufus hated squirrels with a passion and successfully kept their yard and birdfeeders squirrel-free. Of course he’d been known to tear through screen doors when he spied one, and once the pursuit of his mission had cost them a set of living room draperies.

There were probably hundreds of squirrels living in all those massive trees surrounding the Updyke house. Maybe thousands.

Millie’s cheerful voice interrupted his brooding. “How about a slice of lemon cake?”

“What?” Al twisted in his chair to level a wide-eyed stare on her. Lemon cake, made from his dear mother’s recipe, was his favorite dessert in the world. A staple at family Christmas and Easter celebrations, the recipe called for the cake to sit for three days entombed in a cocoon of plastic wrap in order for the tangy glaze to fully saturate every spongy morsel.

Was there no end to the woman’s machinations? No depth to which she would not sink?

“Lemon cake,” she repeated, wrapping her knitting needles in yet another half-finished wooly scarf and stowing the bundle in the basket at her side. “I made it on Wednesday.”

On Wednesday? So this scheme wasn’t a spur-of-the-moment idea at all. She had two days’ head start on him.

He allowed suspicion to saturate his tone. “Why?”

Her eyes widened. “For tomorrow, of course. But you seem out of sorts this evening, so I thought a treat might put you in a better mood. I think two days is long enough, just this once.”

Tomorrow? Tomorrow was Saturday. Nothing special about a Saturday besides being a weekend. Saturdays did not warrant lemon cake in and of themselves. Something else then. Were the kids coming for the weekend? Lord, he hoped not. He loved them dearly, of course, but baby Lionel was a handful now that he’d started to walk. A glance around the room revealed that Millie had not put her immense collection of knickknacks up out of the toddler’s range. Not the kids then.

Wait. What was the date? This morning he’d turned the page on his calendar to March twenty-third. So tomorrow was the twenty-fourth.

Drat!

He’d forgotten their anniversary.

“A piece of cake would be good,” he conceded with a nod.

Millie bustled out of the room, humming. Rufus bounded to his feet mid-snore and waddled after her, no doubt hoping for a handout.

Al stared after them, chagrined at his lapse. No need to admit his near-error. He’d get up early and run out for a card. Maybe pick up some flowers too, something special in light of the lemon cake. After thirty-six years of marriage—no, thirty-seven—they’d moved beyond the gift stage decades ago. He settled deeper in his recliner, his taste buds anticipating the first delicious bite of sugary tartness.

Then he jolted straight up as realization struck him like a slap in the face. Millie did know him well. His mood was lighter already. That in itself was more than a little alarming.



Millie sat in bed, leaning against fluffy pillows and paging through the *Better Homes and Gardens* she’d picked up at the Save-A-Lot that morning. This month was a special issue devoted entirely to old home renovations, which she and Violet agreed must be the Lord giving a

divine nod to her plans for the Updyke house. So many beautiful pictures of country kitchens, updated bathrooms, and cozy bedrooms. Already the image of the entry hall she would create loomed clearly in her mind's eye. Comfortable and welcoming, something that would set people at ease the moment they stepped through the doorway. Not too much furniture, or it would feel crowded. A simple runner on the floor, a few old-fashioned pictures on the walls. A small table, a coat rack, and maybe an antique wooden bench. She'd always admired those. The handrail on the stairway would take on a regal gleam with a little polish and a lot of work.

When Albert came out of the bathroom in his pajamas, she casually set the magazine face-down on her nightstand.

"That yard is mammoth," he announced as he slid beneath the comforter beside her. "Do you know how long it would take to mow it?" He pounded his pillow, a tad more violently than necessary, and settled his head into the indentation.

"You could buy a riding mower." The moment the suggestion left her mouth, she realized her mistake.

Albert sat straight up. "Do you know how much those things cost?" Accusation sparked in the glare he turned on her. "I'm not made of money, you know. I'm retiring in three years. *Three years*, Millie. We need to start tightening our belts. Saving our pennies. Stretching every dime."

"You sound like Violet," she remarked mildly.

Momentarily distracted, his mouth snapped shut. Violet's constant use of clichés drove her husband insane.

"In this case, it's justified. Mildred Richardson, you've gotten an idea in that head of yours and it's addled your brains. You're not thinking clearly. We need to be on the same page, now more than ever." He warmed visibly to his topic. "Retirement looms, Millie. It looms over us like clouds on the horizon. Those clouds can be white and fluffy"—the heavy creases on his brow deepened—"or they can be dark and threatening."

Oh, dear. His voice had taken on the dramatic tone of a bad Shakespearian actor. Never a good sign.

“Don’t take on so, dear. Remember your blood pressure.”

“I *am* remembering my blood pressure,” he countered. “What do you think my blood pressure will be when I’m seventy-two years old and forced to go back to work because we’ve spent all our money fixing that behemoth of a house? By then the computer industry will have left me behind. My skills will be obsolete.” Reproach settled over his features. “I’ll have to go to work as a Walmart greeter. Is that what you want, Millie?”

“Now you’re just being ridiculous.” She rearranged her pillow. “You act as if the house were ready to collapse, and you haven’t even seen it. For all you know it might be in perfect condition. It could be a real bargain. Maybe even an opportunity to *make* money.”

There. Though that was definitely a broad hint at step two in her plan, it wouldn’t hurt to let him ponder the idea of making money. She turned off the light on her nightstand and slid lower beneath the comforter. “The least you could do is look at the house so we know what we’re turning down.”

In the silence that followed, she turned onto her side—facing Albert, because after all tomorrow was their anniversary and she did love him and didn’t want him to think she was angry with him even though he was being stubborn—and closed her eyes in preparation for sleep.

“Fine. I’ll look at it.”

Surprised, Millie’s eyes flew open. “You will?”

“As an anniversary present.” His expression hardened. “And just so you know, while we’re inspecting the house I intend to point out all the flaws and pitfalls of this crazy scheme so you will put it out of your mind once and for all.”

Of course he would. But getting him through the door was an important step, and it had happened rather more easily than she’d expected. An excellent sign.

“I would expect nothing less.” Millie sat up to place a tender kiss

on her husband's tight lips and felt them soften beneath hers. "Thank you. I love you."

"Do you?" His eyes searched hers. "Even after thirty-seven years?"

"Now more than ever." She flashed one of the dimples he loved to kiss. "Turn off that light and I'll prove it."

With a click darkness descended, and Millie nestled into the familiar warm embrace of her husband's arms.

## Mother Richardson's Lemon Cake

### *Cake*

$\frac{3}{4}$  cup oil

1 cup canned apricot nectar

(comes in a can in the juice section)

4 eggs

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup sugar

1 lemon cake mix

### *Glaze*

1 $\frac{1}{2}$  cups confectioners' sugar

$\frac{1}{4}$  cup lemon juice

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour a Bundt cake pan. Mix all ingredients thoroughly and pour into prepared pan. Bake at 350 for 25 minutes, then reduce the temperature to 325 and bake for another 25 minutes. Cool slightly, then remove cake and turn it over onto a cake stand or cake carrier with a cover. While the cake is still hot, poke all over with a toothpick, and then pour on the glaze.

Cover the cake stand, and then wrap the covered stand tightly with several layers of plastic wrap. Let the cake sit for 2 to 3 days before serving.