

The
**BUTTERFLY
GARDEN**

By Carole Stivers



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Marian Watson sipped her morning tea, allowing its sublime heat to seep into her bones. In her garden the milkweed plants, *Asclepias curassavica*, waved their red and yellow clustered blooms in a slight breeze. Bells of blue foxglove shivered above a riotous carpet of woodland phlox. The golden monarch butterflies with their delicate window-pane wings, newly hatched from their hidden chrysalises, danced from blossom to blossom. It was spring, a time of rebirth. A time of recovery.

Time. Maybe that was all it would take.

But Marian feared that she might never recover. On this warm New Orleans morning, her hands were cold, her thoughts muddled, her stomach clenched into a hard fist. Perhaps this was just what happened to a woman in her waning years—a slow decline into utter decrepitude. Perhaps it was the toll that sin eventually took on the soul of the sinner.

The old magnolia tree held court at the far side of the garden, its pungent, lemony scent heavy in the air. She fixed her gaze on the gardener, timing her heartbeat to the monotonous scrape of his rake across the exposed roots of the tree. Against the fence, he'd amassed a deep pile of white, waxen petals. The door to the potting shed stood slightly ajar, and she imagined the grimy pallet on the floor inside where he'd made his bed since the floods of Katrina. As in all things, she'd done what she thought was right; she'd given him a home until he could get back on his feet.

But in recent days, she'd come to question her own judgment. Even in this place with no seasons, a place where every intention was cloaked in innuendo, there were always signs. And she had ignored all of them. In her efforts to do good, it seemed she'd only

brought ruin...

She regarded the napkin arranged across her lap, counted the tiny red roses embroidered along its edge—just like the roses on William’s casket. It was clear to her now that she’d betrayed her husband. And though William may have deserved many things, he’d not deserved that. She shook her head. She still had time—young Miss Karyn Johnston had arrived as planned, and she trusted Hayden Kayne to help with the estate. She couldn’t change the past, but there was still time to change the future.

With effort, she placed her cup back onto its matching saucer, repressing the tremors that disturbed her fingers. They seemed to be getting worse, these tremors. Perhaps, as Letty said, it was her nerves. But more likely it was the caffeine. The tea tasted off, bitter. She’d have to talk to Letty—the girl was always losing track of time, steeping the leaves too long...

Suddenly she felt a heaviness, a pounding at her temples. Before her eyes, the garden erupted. Colors bled together, points blurring into a solid smear. On the table her hand lay limp, like a blue-white fish, oddly detached at the wrist. Watching it, wondering what it might do next, she felt a jolt. A sharp pain bolted from her breastbone, arcing up and along the edge of her jaw.

Something brushed her shoulder—something soft and distant. A feather, perhaps, or a wayward butterfly. A concerned voice echoed from somewhere far away. “Mrs. Watson?”

“I’m sorry...” Marian tried to speak, but nothing more came out. Her vision went black. She toppled from her chair, her shoulder striking the stone pavers with a painless thud.

Now something was pressing dully on her chest. Someone’s lips touched hers. William?

But no. It was a girl—a rosy-cheeked girl with blonde hair and her father’s blue eyes, her small body clothed all in pink and yellow. Her little girl gathered her up, up...into the radiance.

Earlier that morning, Miss Nancy Carroll had awakened from yet another fitful night of sleep. As she’d steadied herself on the little rug by her bedside, her gaze had flitted from her own wrinkled reflection in the bedroom mirror, out the garden window and down to the back lawn. From here, she could just see over the brambled fence and into her neighbor’s redolent butterfly garden.

On the patio near the garden stood the round glass table with its iron filigree legs—the table where, on beautiful mornings like this, Marian Watson took her tea. Nancy caught sight of Marian’s shapely head, her long neck, her fine auburn hair (no doubt dyed), her loose silken robe, sky blue, fluttering in the breeze as she arranged herself on a small, cushioned chair. With deliberate movements Marian picked up a delicate bone china teacup, etched with a red rose design on a cream-colored background, and brought it to her lips.

Of course, Nancy couldn’t see the cups clearly from here. But she’d known those teacups for years. They had belonged to William Watson’s mother, and to his grandmother before that. Like William and his mother and grandmother, like the monarch butterflies, like the milkweed where the butterflies laid their eggs and the nectar flowers where they fed—indeed, like Nancy herself—the teacups were native to New Orleans. Only Marian was out of place, a Chicago girl pretending at being a New Orleanian, if only by marrying one.

Nancy turned back to her mirror, her arthritic fingers fumbling with the pins binding flyaway wisps of gray to her thinning scalp. Patsy Lee had gone to visit her daughter in Houston, leaving Nancy without a personal maid. “Oh, posh...” Nancy muttered, tying a lime green headscarf around the mess. She didn’t dare let her house girl Lorna touch her hair. The poor thing could barely poach an egg.

“Lorna!” she called. “Could I get a cup of tea up here on the balcony, please?” She didn’t expect an answer. Though much too young to be going deaf, the girl seemed to be perfecting her powers of inattentiveness.

Nancy wedged open her balcony door. Though the cool of night had yet to burn off, the air was already heavy with humidity. Dew hung like crystalline beads from her railing. Redbirds, finches, and hummingbirds of every stripe swooped and called from the live oaks. Down in Marian’s yard, Claude Thibodeaux stooped beneath the magnolia, raking its fallen flowers into a neat pile. Claude, and his father before him, had maintained the Watsons’ garden for as long as Nancy could remember.

Perfect in its every imperfection, Marian Watson’s butterfly garden was the pride of their neighborhood. After Katrina, when it seemed that the Garden District butterflies might never return, Claude had been the first to lure them back. Meanwhile Nancy’s own gardener, Mr. Chauncey Turner, had abandoned her. He’d followed his son to Georgia, where young DeWayne could complete his medical studies at Emory; Tulane had closed on account of the floods, and Mr. Turner couldn’t live without DeWayne. Now Nancy’s meager garden plot, choked with weeds, served only to entice the few straggling butterflies who happened to

wander over the fence.

How things had changed since Katrina and Rita! Nancy had thought at first that it would just be a matter of time—that life would soon get back to what she'd once called normal. But over a year and a half had passed since those storms, and the once proud homes that lined her block, colonnade-encrusted battleships first erected over a century and a half ago, still stood sad, grubby, and unkempt. Many of her old neighbors had returned from their forced exile to assess the damage left behind by standing water, fires, and downed branches, to brave homes reeking of mold and rotted food. But many had given up, retreating to out-of-state vacation homes from which they would never return. Gone were the Landry's, the Smythe's and the Worthington's. Gone were the manicured neighborhood parks and their trimmed gardens. The little green Quaker parrots, once scarce, now multiplied unchecked in the stripped branches of live oaks. Even the posh little Prytania Street restaurant where Nancy and her friends had gathered each morning for tea and pastries remained shuttered, its owner seemingly on permanent hiatus.

And there was more. Nancy's dour mother had left this earth entirely—presumably for even warmer climes. Her frail lungs assailed by the pall of black mold that had taken residence in the lower floor of her home, she'd simply succumbed. Then, just a few months ago, William Watson had passed away unexpectedly, leaving his estate to his wife Marian.

William. Even in childhood, he'd been more to Nancy than just the towheaded neighbor boy who escorted her to primary school each morning, kicking stones and hopping over cracks in the sidewalk. When he'd started at the all-boys Jesuit High School in Mid-City, she'd dangled her feet from the front porch swing on long, sweltering afternoons, waiting to greet him with a glass of lemonade. And when he'd left New Orleans to attend Loyola in Chicago, she'd pined for weeks. Late each night, she'd crafted long epistles chronicling the goings-on at home, sealing them with kisses.

But William had never written back. And when he'd decided to stay in Chicago, she'd written him out of her life. He could rot there for all she cared, in that city of gangsters where no one had the manners of a goat. She imagined that if she ever saw him again, he'd be unrecognizable. No doubt he was one of *them* now, a cigarette dangling from a churlish lower lip, a bottle of beer clutched in one meaty fist.

More than ten years later, thirty years old and his father dead, William had returned home to take over his father's real estate business. She'd thought she'd forgotten him. But seeing him there, her feelings for him had all come flooding back. He was taller than she

remembered. Paler. But she recognized the same fine features, the same resolute jaw, the same slow smile as he appraised her from his front stoop.

“Why Nan, you haven’t changed a bit!”

“Oh, shut your mouth, Will. Of course I’ve changed. As have you!”

“For the better, I hope?”

She’d felt the blush creeping up past her too-tight collar, the perspiration forming on her upper lip. She’d looked away. And when she’d looked back, there was Marian, standing behind him.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us, William?” Marian had said it in that disgusting Chicago accent of hers. Her perfectly coifed hair had stirred only slightly in the breeze as she’d glided forward.

“Nan, I’d like you to meet my wife,” William said. “Marian.”

“Your...” Nancy had been speechless. There’d been a wedding? But where? Why? ... What?

“Sorry, Nan. A lot of things happened, and all rather suddenly. But I’m sure you and Mare will be great friends.” William smiled at his new bride as Marian took his hand. She looked much younger than William. She was almost as tall as him, though. Down there on the walk, Nancy had felt like a dwarf.

“Well...” Her thoughts swimming like tadpoles, Nancy had struggled to muster her manners. “You simply must come over for tea with me and Mamma,” she’d said, curling her lips into a forced smile. In her effort to portray the sweet Southern belle, she’d used an epithet for her mother that she’d never used before. William had looked at her strangely, but she’d plunged on. “We’ve started drinking tea instead of coffee. So much more refreshing in this heat!”

“That would be delightful,” Marian had replied.

But in the more than three decades since their first meeting, Marian had never made the effort to mix with Nancy and the other ladies of the neighborhood. She’d never once put in an appearance at the garden parties at City Park, the society dinners at the Ritz Carlton, the galas at the Orleans Club. Instead, she’d frequented the seedy shops in the French Quarter, befriending their proprietors and drinking mint juleps late into the evenings. She’d filled

William's home with trinkets. She'd acted the quintessential tourist, the grand city of New Orleans nothing more to her than a playground.

Nancy watched as Marian put down her cup. Marian's hand, long and well-formed, came to rest beside it. Nancy wondered—was Marian thinking about William? Was she at all sorry, about what had happened to him?

William's sudden passing at the young age of sixty-seven had come as a shock to everyone. Why, Nancy had just turned that age, and she felt nowhere near about to keel over...Casting about for an explanation, William's doctor George Barrington had concluded that William suffered from his father's weak heart. But that was a difficult pill to swallow. William, trim and athletic, had eschewed the alcohol and sweets that had been his father's downfall. On the very day of his death, he'd been out riding horses with Horton Willoughby's son. No, Nancy had theories of her own. Certainly William's wife, a full five years younger than he, had played some role in his early demise. Marian had never taken proper care of him—the woman was high maintenance at best.

Despite her suspicions, Nancy had played the perfect neighbor when William passed. She'd sent flowers, only to find them rotting on the Watson front stoop. She'd sent invitations to events that came and went with no reply. She'd done her best to earn the woman's confidence—but to no avail. Finally, at Claude's suggestion, she'd sent a gift, her mother's blend of medicinal tea leaves meant to “salve the nerves and bring on much-needed sleep.” But in the days following William's death Marian had seemed set on avoiding sleep. Night after endless night, raucous music had blared from her casements. In the wee morning hours, Nancy's teeth had grated at the sound of harsh voices, floating on the high notes.

As Nancy watched from her balcony, Miss Johnston hurried out into the garden and placed her hand gently on Marian's shoulder. No one knew much about Miss Karyn Johnston—only that she came from somewhere in the north, that she kept to herself, and that she was taking pre-nursing classes at Delgado Community. In return for room and board, the young woman was constantly at the beck and call of her mistress. “Better her than me,” Nancy thought, for Karyn's presence had seemed to calm Marian—the night music had stopped, and the house now routinely went dark at a respectable hour. Miss Johnston, it seemed, was keeping order in the house while Hayden Kayne picked up the pieces of William's estate.

“Oh, my goodness,” Nancy muttered. Mr. Kayne. He'd be arriving soon for their monthly review of Daddy's estate, and here she was, still in her nightgown!

She withdrew from the balcony and rummaged through her closet, looking for a suitable dress—not too formal, not too casual, a light green floral print to match the unsightly scarf that now hid her unsightly hair. In the mirror, she adjusted the scarf and fastened a string of pearls around her neck. She must look her best, for Hayden Kayne had become a project of sorts. After the hurricanes, especially after Mother’s death, she so needed the talents of the seasoned solicitor. He could be, she thought, her perfect ally in the fight to restore some semblance of order to the Garden District. But she’d have to work hard not to lose him.

She’d known the man for ages. Years ago, fresh out of law school and still wet behind the ears, the young Mr. Kayne had gotten his start helping Daddy navigate his business endeavors—buying out, managing, and consolidating a series of small department stores. After Daddy had passed, it was Mr. Kayne who had walked Mother through the details of the business. In Cora Carroll, he’d met with a shrewdness that he no doubt had not expected. But he’d always been kind, always patient. And over time, the sloping brow and sharp facial features that had once reminded Nancy of a vexatious bird’s had come to resemble, in her eyes, those of a fox—wily and cunning, yet beguiling in the most fascinating way. He’d never married. In Nancy’s imagination, a sort of nervous physical tension had grown between them. She’d even considered him as a prospect...

But now, as with everything, things had changed.

As Katrina had approached, Nancy had convinced her ailing mother to flee with her to the Landry’s vacation home in Aspen. Following suit, their neighbors had formed a network of refugees, spread hither and thither, linked together only by a procession of dire TV news reports—the flooding, the power outages, the chaos. In the end, intending to stay away for just a few weeks, Nancy and her mother had not returned until the following January. But by all accounts, Mr. Kayne had never left.

Nancy had no idea what had happened to Hayden Kayne during that time. Whatever it was, he was different now. The new Mr. Kayne was no longer a champion of the establishment. Indeed, he was obsessed with restoring the “culture” of New Orleans. But it wasn’t the culture that Nancy knew—the fundraisers and ice cream socials, staged in stately homes and halls. This new culture was driven by hedonistic tribes of artists, musicians, and tradespeople, emerging from the shadows to conquer the newly squalid streets. She still rankled at the memory of her last meeting with Kayne. “You must support our city’s rebirth,” he’d admonished her. “To do less would be a travesty.”

Nancy had dug in. She knew very little about the estate that her parents had left behind.

All she knew, what had been beaten into her all these years, were the lessons learned by her forebears through the Civil War and the Great Depression. Fortunes were not built through sloth. They were maintained through vigilance, lost through inattention. As a case in point, she need only cite the family of the Watson gardener, Claude Thibodeaux; the Thibodeauxs, a once-wealthy line of white Creole stock, had lost everything in the Depression.

“There are so many now, seeking to do good,” said Mr. Kayne. The Presbyterians had started something inexplicably known as RHINO, and a group of activist women had founded Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans.

But Nancy was neither Presbyterian nor political. It was no concern of hers if those neighborhoods on lower ground had succumbed to the floods—perhaps they shouldn’t have been put there in the first place. She was determined to use what remained of her wealth only to restore her own beloved District to its former glory. And to that end, she must at least win Mr. Kayne’s allegiance, if not his affections.

Her hand shaking, Nancy swatted at an errant mosquito. How quickly matters could take a turn for the worse, if not carefully overseen! Since William’s death, Mr. Kayne had spent more time than necessary with Marian. And regarding Kayne’s newfound aspirations toward the poor and downtrodden, Marian seemed to have become one of his most avid supporters. But of course she would, Nancy thought. A woman of uncertain breeding, Marian held little regard for things of value. Nancy, at least, understood the importance of heritage. She shuddered at the thought that all of William’s hard-earned wealth might be squandered for the benefit of wastrels and beggars.

As she closed her balcony door, Nancy noticed that Marian was no longer visible at her little table. It was getting late—already past eight a.m.; her neighbor had probably finished her tea. Nancy sighed. She herself would have to go to the kitchen and brew her own, and some for Mr. Kayne as well. No doubt she’d find Lorna with her nose buried in one of those tabloids, the radio blaring some god-awful jazz tune...

“Oh Mercy!” It was Lorna’s voice, piping up the banister from downstairs.
“Mercy me!”

“Lorna? Lorna! What is it?” Nancy picked her way down the polished wood staircase to the rear parlor, her loose slippers threatening to lose their grip at every step. The kitchen was at the back of the house, connected to the formal dining room by a long, narrow hallway. As Nancy made her way across the dining room, Lorna’s moans echoed off the hallway walls,

sounding hopelessly further and further away. “Lorna, for God’s sake, what’s happening?”

“Oh, Miz Nancy! Another one dead! That house is haunted for sure!”

“Who? Who’s dead?”

“Letty Butler came to the back door! It’s Miz Marian! She just dropped and died!”

“She what?” Nancy steadied herself against the maple credenza. “Lorna, do get hold of yourself!”

“Letty called 9-1-1, but for sure it’s too late!” Lorna’s bulk appeared at the far end of the hall where it joined the kitchen, blocking out the light from the back of the house.

Nancy felt faint, a sick feeling twisting in her empty stomach. “Lorna,” she said. “Please get a grip on yourself! Perhaps she’s just fainted...”

“No, ma’am,” Lorna said. “Letty said Miz Karyn’s doin’ CPR. But it ain’t workin’! Miz Marian is gone!”

From the front of the house, there came a sharp knock at the door.



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