

The
**BUTTERFLY
GARDEN**

By Carole Stivers



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Hayden Kayne checked his watch, scanning the tracks one more time for the streetcar. Already the sweat was pooling under his armpits and along his collar, staining his carefully ironed white shirt. But he'd have to hurry if he wanted to keep his morning appointment with Nancy Carroll. He'd come to dread these meetings—though certainly no match for her father, Nancy could be just as petulant and demanding as her late mother. But Miss Carroll was a client, and high-paying clients like her had been hard to come by since he'd left the firm.

Left the firm... Yes, that was the story he'd told everyone. They didn't need to know the details—that after Katrina, after his temporary eviction from the house he called home and his subsequent refusal to abandon his grievances against the powers that be, the firm had left *him*. His partners, the men he'd thought were his friends, had turned on him. They'd made it abundantly clear that they wanted no part of his “new politics.” People were talking, they said, and in a town like New Orleans, reputation was everything.

It was all worth it, though—this was the story he told himself. In the end, Mother Nature had taught him lessons that seven years of an Ivy League education had failed to convey: lessons about pride, lessons about humility... and about survival.

The streetcar screeched to a halt at his stop, and he waited as an elderly woman with an oversized purse fumbled up its steps to find a seat. Before Katrina, he'd steered his Mercedes along St. Charles each morning to the offices of Schmidt, LeCroix, and Kayne, LLP, a fifth-story Poydras Street complex replete with river views and a bevy of buxom receptionists in tight skirts. He'd enjoyed martini lunches and sports boxes in the company of politicians and

well-heeled businessmen. He'd entertained friends in the five-bedroom St. Charles mansion bequeathed to him by his late father. And he'd remained single, firm in his belief that life was simplest when lived alone.

Then came Katrina, and he was Saul on the road to Damascus, stricken with the blinding light of revelation.

He remembered it all with a clarity befitting Saul's biblical tale. Despite the evacuation orders issued by the Mayor, he'd decided not to leave his home as Katrina approached landfall. Instead, he'd channeled his dead father's advice to stay and captain the ship. The ultra-affluent denizens of Audubon Place, just a few blocks west of where he lived, had headed for fairer climes, hiring Israeli mercenaries equipped with bulletproof vests, AR-15's, and Glock handguns to guard their estates in their absence. But Hayden Kayne was not a member of that rarified, gated community. Nor was he one of the Garden District crowd, flying off to far-away vacation properties, leaving their homes to the whims of wind, water, and the opportunists who might follow. He had but one home. On relatively high ground, the Kayne mansion had withstood worse. And if he wished to preserve it, he had no choice but to stand that ground.

And so, dawn on August 29, 2005 had found him hunkered in his kitchen, the walls fortified with five-gallon carboys of water and crates of canned food. Though he could hear the rain hammering on the roof, assaulting the pavement outside, he couldn't see it through his shuttered windows. Nor did he want to. Hunching his shoulders, he focused instead on a book he'd selected from his father's library. Strange to think of it now: Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Then he'd heard something above the din of the rain—that sound like a freight train, roaring in at high speed, howling and whistling toward an unreachable station. The planks he'd nailed across his unshuttered kitchen window endured the assault—but only to a point. Without warning, they flew from their moorings. He caught sight of a heavy branch, torn from his old magnolia—just before it punched through the window like a thick wooden fist, laying waste to his kitchen sink.

He was fortunate; the severed tree branch served as a scaffold of sorts, offering resistance against the buffeting winds as he worked to mask the window with a length of plastic sheeting. The window somewhat secured, he clawed his way upstairs to the master bath and clamped on a pair of noise-cancelling headphones. Huddled on the floor between the shower and the toilet, he listened to the radio reports.

The radio, tuned to WWL, offered solace. The tower was still there, the announcer still speaking urgently into his headset. But the air around him grew thin, free of oxygen. Hayden conserved his breath, willing the roof over his head to stop shaking, imagining it peeling away like the lid from a can of tuna. His head down, he began to give up hope.

But when at last he dared to remove the headphones, he found that the wind had weakened. The terrible howling had ceased. As he learned later, the storm had moved east, its evil eye cast askance over its heavy shoulder, glowering back at the city of New Orleans. And soon, on a day when the sun had never shown its face, night descended. Swaddled in a comforter on the bathroom floor, he slept like a baby—the soundest sleep he would enjoy for many weeks.

He woke the next morning to the sound of distant sirens. He pushed open his front door, weak on its hinges, and walked out into the street. He was alone. Along St. Charles Avenue, a shallow stream lapped at the neutral ground and the now-abandoned streetcar tracks were littered with trash. The traffic lights at the corner of State and St. Charles dangled uselessly from shredded wires. The air was deathly still, the sun already bearing down with an intense, wet heat. Too much heat—the tree branches that had once sheltered the narrow sidewalks were, for the most part, either gone or denuded of their leaves.

A neighbor boy's small Honda cycle had taken to the air, coming to rest against the side of his garage. Miraculously, the key was still in the ignition. Dazed, still wearing the sweat-soaked tee-shirt and dungarees in which he'd ridden out the storm, Hayden mounted the cycle. He turned the key, pressed the starter, and heaved a sigh of relief as the cycle sputtered to life. Slowly he motored through the muck, steering clear of the deeper pools along the left side of St. Charles as he wended the familiar route to his downtown office.

Passing under the highway, he caught sight of Robert E. Lee, proud atop his towering plinth, still glaring down at him from the center of his eponymous Circle. He stopped, cocked his ear. There. A strange sort of burbling, a caroling, carried on the breeze. It was coming from the direction of the riverfront.

As he navigated the fleets of randomly parked vehicles and uprooted street signs along Higgins Boulevard, the sound became louder—a Tower of Babel, a river of sound like the din in a concert hall just before the conductor raises his baton. Then he saw it—the chic, columned façade of the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, all but obscured by slabs of soaked cardboard, hastily packed bags, and heaps of already fetid garbage. And people: people in lawn chairs and wheelchairs; people with no chairs at all, sitting on the pavement

amid the debris; people standing, leaning against the scarred sides of the building, their jaws slack, their stares empty. Women clutched babies; men clutched women and small children. Police armed with guns and EMT's armed with medical kits wandered aimlessly, their faces fixed in expressions of deep concentration—or abject fear.

In the shadow of a rotund, wheelchair-bound woman of indeterminate age, a wizened black man sat on the curb. “What’s going on?” Hayden asked.

“Ain’t you heard?” the man said. “The levees broke!”

“The levees?”

A younger man sporting a tank top, shorts, and flip-flops called out from one of the Center’s wide doorways. “It’s all under water, brother! These clothes are all I got!”

As if on cue, the woman miraculously rose from her wheelchair, smoothing her voluminous blouse over her ample bosom. “Gotta get movin’, Raymond,” she said to the younger man. “We ain’t the only ones in need.”

“They’s more of us out there, I assure you dat!” said the man on the curb.

“Right on, Richard,” Raymond said. “My friend Mikey has a boat that might suit us.”

That was how it started—how together with a band of complete strangers, none more fit than he but armed with one small motorboat, Hayden Kayne had set about a harrowing, days-long rescue operation in the floodwaters north and east of his little island. It was how he’d experienced those things that now he would never forget: the fierce heat; the dead, bloated bodies floating face down or washed ashore on abandoned doorsteps; and the rescue of a tiny baby, handed through a small attic window as its mother struggled to get free. The mother had lived, he thought—ferried away unconscious but still breathing. But it had been hours before he could release the lock of his arms around that child’s defenseless body. Surrendering him at last to the care of nurses, Hayden had felt a hollowness, like a part of him, leaving.

Eighty percent of the city was under water, some as deep as twenty feet. But for so many days, no help came. Where *was* everyone? Had the rest of the state, the rest of the country, been consumed by some plague of unknown origin? He hadn’t known at the time, that so much of this suffering had resulted from simple political stupidity. He hadn’t known, that though Katrina had given these floods their start, they were by no means a natural disaster; that like so many of the ills that plagued mankind, these floods were man-made—

all part of a series of unfortunate events put in motion long ago by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, perpetuated by the local levee boards, exacerbated by the torpidity of government bureaucracies.

And as if the floods and the lack of outside help were not enough, there were the constant rumors.

“I’m telling you, somebody dynamited them levees,” said Richard.

“And now there’s alligators in the streets,” said Raymond, nodding.

“Lord have mercy,” said Lucille, the corpulent but energetic woman whom Hayden later learned was Raymond’s grandmother. “The police in this town have gone crazy. If the ones on the street don’t get ya, the snipers will!”

It all seemed impossible—the dynamite, the alligators, the snipers—all based on latent urban legends that, like the waters that now roared through New Orleans’ sewer systems, had long been bubbling beneath the city’s surface. But in the heat of the moment, it seemed that none of these tales could readily be discounted.

One thing was very real indeed: the looting. A few instances were opportunistic, gangs clearing out big box stores and mom-and-pop shops with the same admirable alacrity. But the vast majority were perpetrated out of necessity, by people in need of food, fresh water, clothing, and medical supplies. Hayden had witnessed it himself; in fact, he’d taken part in it, scoring blankets, ropes, water, and nonperishable food for himself and his squad. But five long days after the storm, as Lieutenant General Honoré and his Joint Task Force Katrina troops finally took control of the rescue effort and the downtown streets, Hayden began to worry that his own property might be in jeopardy. The pain twisting in his empty gut, only partially assuaged by Lucille’s red beans and rice, was intensified by his fear of what he might find upon his return. Even if the house hadn’t been ransacked, it might have fallen victim to one of the many fires now sprouting up all over town. After so many days spent in the wild, it was time to go home.

He turned to his new friends. “Come on,” he said, “I’ve got space for all y’all.”

It was a long trudge back down St. Charles Avenue. With Lucille riding a new wheelchair fit for the occasion, they were wounded warriors coming home from a battle not yet won. But their small battalion was not prepared for the cordons of police, guns at the ready, who’d been sent to patrol the neighborhood. At the base of his own driveway, Hayden

approached one of the officers, a young blond man with a pimply face and a flat stub of a nose. “This is my house,” he said. “I live here.”

The man appraised him, his upper lip curling. And Hayden imagined himself: a skinny old coot with tattered clothing and a disheveled mop of stiff gray hair, stinking of sweat and filth. “Prove it,” the officer said.

Hayden dug his hands deep into the empty pockets of his jeans. He couldn’t prove it. “He’s got a gun!” another officer cried. The stub-nosed officer stepped forward and Hayden felt a sharp pain in the socket of his weaker left shoulder as his hands were yanked behind his back. He heard the snap of the cuffs.

“You ain’t got no right to treat my friend that way!” cried Richard. But the Louisiana State Police apparently thought they did. Young Raymond and his grandmother put up quite a fight as they were all loaded into an unmarked van. In the scuffle, Hayden felt the sting of a bean bag round on his right thigh. He leaned heavily on Richard as the vehicle plummeted back to town.

When the van’s doors finally swung open, they were inside a temporary jail facility, housed in the Union Passenger Terminal on Loyola Avenue. Staggering out, Hayden caught just a glimpse of the darkening sky before he was herded into a makeshift “dog cage.” He looked around him, at artists from the French Quarter, musicians out of Tremé, maids and dishwashers and bartenders out of the South Seventh, Bywater, and the Lower Ninth. Stewing sweat-soaked on the hot cement floor, he massaged the angry, bruised welt on his thigh. Unbeknownst to all of them, Rita would come soon enough. But now there was only a light shower, descending from the heavens to cleanse the foul air. And as the rains fell from the skies, so the scales fell from Hayden Kayne’s eyes.

He could see it now: that world where common people worked two and three jobs to make ends meet, where artists and musicians begged for pennies on the street while landlords, bankers, and the state made off with their hard-earned savings. It was the world his father had happily left behind, and from which Orson Kayne had prodigiously shielded his only son. But it was a world that desperately needed Hayden’s help.

A heavily whiskered man leaned in close, his breath sour with alcohol. “I seen you on the street. You one o’ them suits I seen workin’ in the high risers. How did the likes of *you* wind up in *here*?”

Hayden looked down at his hands, swollen and streaked with cuts. Was he still, after all

this, recognizable as his former self? He knew that inside, he was no longer the same man. And he knew too, why he was here. “It’s where I’m meant to be,” he said.

For he’d come full circle. It was in his blood.

Born Otto Koenig, Hayden’s father had emigrated from his home near Hamburg, Germany, to New York City at the age of eighteen. He’d come full of hope. But labeled a “probable conspirator” during World War II, he’d soon found himself interned at Fort Oglethorpe, a festering mile-square prison camp in northern Georgia. Subjected to hard labor and poor rations, he’d spent three years in abject confinement; the tuberculosis he’d contracted while at the camp would hound him for the rest of his life.

But Otto had risen from the ashes. At the age of forty-three, reborn as Orson Kayne and the owner of a lucrative import-export business operating out of New Orleans, he’d married Elisabeth Duclerc, a woman of fine Louisiana stock. Elisabeth had given him one child—a son whom Orson named Hayden after his favorite composer, Joseph Haydn.

Preferring to spend her energies in the attendance of lavish parties and the harassment of her husband, Elisabeth left her only child in the care of nannies. But little Hayden could always find refuge in his father’s study. And when Elisabeth died of an undiagnosed kidney ailment shortly after Hayden’s tenth birthday, father and son had lived on happily in the mansion where Orson entertained his wealthy clients and bragged of his son’s budding intellect.

Hayden huddled under a thin prison issue blanket, doing his best to stay dry. Yes, suffering was in his blood. And though he’d been brought up with the cream of New Orleans society, he couldn’t help but wonder if history was repeating itself—reminding him of his roots as a reviled outsider. Was it not his destiny to defend the downtrodden?

It was only after Hayden’s release five days later that the charges against him were at last enumerated: resisting arrest (not true in his case), public intoxication (again, not true). He had to work hard to get his friends out—especially Richard, whose previous record and penchant for wise-cracking made him no friend of the police. But he kept his promise to house them all in his mansion.

The abandonment by his law partners hadn’t been long in coming. By the time Messrs. Schmidt and LeCroix returned from their self-imposed exile, the word on Hayden Kayne was already spreading amongst their clients. He was a nuisance, a detriment, a thorn in the side of the authorities. He’d gone quite mad, associating with beggars and thieves. But even without

the firm, Hayden soon found himself a busy man. First there were his own lawsuits and countersuits, his petitions and grievances against the Federal government, the State Governor, the City of New Orleans and its Mayor, various law enforcement officials, the Orleans Parish Levee Board, and the myriad others he felt had wronged him and his cohorts. Then there was his pro bono work—free legal services for anyone whom he felt had a case. And as if his acts of legal charity weren't enough, he developed a passion for improving the means of the struggling artisans who, to him, represented the hope of culture reborn in his beloved city. At the mansion, he worked weekends to fend off outbreaks of mold and mildew, repair rotted railings infested with termites, and mend swollen window frames. All he asked of his impoverished tenants and clients was that they help with the reclamation.

Now, his funds were dwindling. He comforted himself that he'd managed to beat back the majority of his demons. He was too busy to succumb to the “thousand-yard stare” he'd seen in the eyes of so many others. All he needed was a positive cash flow. And if that meant groveling at the feet of rich clients like Nancy Carroll, daughter of the miserly Edwin Carroll, and her neighbor Marian Watson, widow of the even more tightfisted William Watson...so be it. It was a price he was willing to pay.

He was hurrying now down the uneven sidewalk of Nancy's block, his eyes fixed on her front stoop. At her gate he wrested his datebook from his vest pocket to check his calendar. He'd have just enough time to stop by Marian's after his meeting with Miss Carroll. Not to see Marian, of course—in fact, he hoped she wouldn't be home. The person he really wanted to see was her assistant, Miss Karyn Johnston. There'd been a new development, something he needed to discuss with her...

But what was that sound? From somewhere at the back of the Carroll house, he heard a strange, keening, cry. Grasping the gate handle for support, he remembered the tiny, dark-skinned baby, squirming in his arms, the soft feel of its skin against his bare chest. Its mother, crying out from the attic window. The shouts of her rescuers: *Now just stay back, ma'am. We'll get you out, but we're gonna have to make this wider!*

He shook his head. *It's over...all in the past.*

Steeling himself, he ascended the stairs to Nancy's porch. He took hold of the weathered brass knocker whose lion's head scowled ominously back at him. He gave it three forceful raps, then stood back to wait while hurried footsteps approached from within.

The door swung open to reveal Nancy Carroll, her loose headscarf in disarray, her face

crimson. “Oh, Mr. Kayne,” she cried. “Thank God you’re here! Marian is...well, it seems...” She stopped. For a moment she only stared at him, her painted eyebrows raised in a frenetic arc. “Why, Mr. Kayne,” she said. “You’re white as a sheet! Are you quite all right?”

Hayden looked down at his hand, now gripping the railing. His heart tripped in his chest. From somewhere down the street, he could hear the wail of an approaching siren.

Nancy straightened her headscarf. “Mr. Kayne?”

Hayden looked behind him at the empty street, at the live oaks whose leaves hung limp in the lifeless air. *Yes*, he told himself. *Quite all right. Not a cloud in the sky.*



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