

The
**BUTTERFLY
GARDEN**

By Carole Stivers



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Karyn Johnston lay flat in bed, pinching the bridge of her nose between thumb and forefinger. She'd awakened with yet another of the dull headaches that had begun to plague her.

Marian's lawyer Hayden Kayne had told her that the headaches might be due to eye strain, all those hours spent helping him sort through the stacks of documentation he'd recovered from William Watson's downtown offices. But the pair of cheap reading glasses that Karyn had procured at the Walgreens wasn't helping. Perhaps it was her sinuses, rebelling against the decades-old dust that coated every surface in this stuffy old house. Or perhaps it was something else—the pressure of secrets long kept, only now resurfacing...

She looked across the room at the weathered oak bookcase, crammed with tattered children's books and a fleet of tiny model boats. Since William and Marian Watson had had no children and William had been an only child, Karyn assumed that her assigned room was the small chamber that William himself had occupied in his boyhood. William, it seemed, had been a boy intrigued with pirates and adventure on the high seas—hardly a foreshadowing of the man he would one day become. Or perhaps it was... For hadn't he become a pirate of sorts, absconding with wealth, amassing property—laying waste to innocent lives? It would seem so, based on what little she'd been able to understand of his business dealings.

Karyn sat up. The morning air was still, the humidity palpable—like a large, moist hand, pressing down. She supposed that those who'd lived in New Orleans all their lives were used to this. They moved slowly, parsing out their energy, penning up their nervous anticipation

of a relief that never came. But she would never be that sort of person. Legs akimbo, she breathed deep, surrendering herself to a mind game she'd begun to play each morning. She imagined herself a little girl on a cold, crisp December morning in Fox Lake, Illinois. Before her lay the snow-encrusted acreage of her childhood home. Her mittened hands gripped those of her mother and father, her body forming a small bridge between them. Her father cried out, "Jump!" and together her parents swung her high, her tiny booted feet scraping the tops of the highest drifts. She squealed with glee, then landed flat, her arms flapping to create angels. This was heaven. These were the things she wished had never changed.

She rubbed her eyes and checked the time on her watch. Mr. Kayne had told her he might come by this morning, after his meeting next door with Miss Carroll. Placing her hands flat on the bed, she swung her feet to the floor. At the full-length mirror she ran a brush through her pale blonde hair, blending in the thin streaks of gray and tying it back with a plain brown elastic. From the closet she chose a loose cotton shift, unlikely to be stained by the perspiration that would soon be exiting her every pore—and unlikely to expose the extra pounds she'd already put on since migrating south. She slipped into a pair of flat leather sandals. From her nightstand, she scooped up her Human Physiology textbook—maybe she'd have time to finish yesterday's assignment before Mr. Kayne arrived. Again she checked her watch. She needed to get downstairs. She needed to keep a close eye on Marian. Tucking the book under her arm, she headed down the back stairs to the kitchen where Letty Butler was brewing the morning tea.

The spry, rangy housekeeper turned to her as she came in. "Tea, Miz Karyn?" Letty asked.

An acrid odor wafted through the kitchen, and again Karyn pinched the bridge of her nose. She offered the maid a weak smile. "None for me, thanks, Letty," she said. "I'm already craving something with ice."

Letty smiled back, daubing at her forehead with a white cloth napkin. "You got that right, Miz Karyn," she said. "But the missus, she's got to have hot tea in the mornin'."

Karyn remembered once again her surprise when Marian Watson had first contacted her—had it really been just a few months ago? "I'm sure you must find it odd," Marian's soft voice had piped over the phone, "my calling you out of the blue like this... But I knew your father once. We worked together at Goldman Sachs in Chicago. The other day, I spoke with your father's old friend at the bank, Robert Wilkins? He told me you were currently at loose ends, and I thought you might like to come down here to New Orleans and help me sort

through some things...”

Karyn had been dumbfounded. “What sorts of things?”

“I...The storms left everything in such a mess, and...my husband has just recently passed away. Mr. Wilkins thought you might be able to help...organize things. He told me you took such wonderful care of your mother.” Listening to Marian’s pleading voice, a mild accent not quite placeable as northern or southern, Karyn had felt herself softening. “I understand you’re interested in a nursing career?” Marian had continued. “We’re certainly in need of nurses down here. We have a fine school, and I could help with your tuition.”

“Thank you kindly, Mrs. Watson. But I’ll have to think about it.”

Putting down the phone, Karyn had felt an odd sense of familiarity. Marian seemed as much in need of care as her own mother had been. But was that a good thing?

Florence Johnston had never been in need, really. She’d been needy—quite another thing altogether. And after Mama’s first cancer diagnosis, things had only gotten worse. The sole caregiver, or at least the only one allowed into the house by her distrustful mother, Karyn had been forced to put her own life on hold. After working for thirteen years at the same bank where her father had made his career, she’d had to cut her work hours. She’d turned down the promotion she’d more than earned. Eventually, mired in the minutiae of her mother’s daily care, she’d abandoned not only her job but any thought of her own future.

It hadn’t been until Mama’s death ten years later, after the funeral and the flowers and the condolences, that Karyn had woken to the realization that there was nothing left to hold her in place. Soon she’d be fifty years old, a life at least half spent—and with nothing to show for it. She’d wanted more than anything to start over.

But was Marian Watson the right person to start over with? From Robert Wilkins, she’d learned that Marian Jolly, a former secretary at Goldman, had married a Mr. William Watson out of New Orleans. “Right after that, they moved down south,” Bob said. “When his father died, as I recall—still sitting on a pile of money.” An on-line search had turned up William’s business and home addresses—and more than one mention of his wife Marian, an established patroness of education for underprivileged children. William Watson’s obituary was prominently displayed in the New Orleans Times-Picayune:

January 20, 2007

William Henry Watson, son of noted financier Henry R. Watson and long-time resident of the Garden District, died suddenly yesterday afternoon at the age of 67.

Mr. Watson, a son of New Orleans, had served as President of Watson Properties since 1970. He was a member of the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce, a long-time member of the Krewe of Rex, and an excellent horseman.

William leaves behind his wife of 37 years, Marian Watson (née Jolly), originally of Chicago.

The funeral service, for invited guests only, will be held at St. Louis Cathedral on Friday, January 26, 2007. The service will be followed by a second line. A private interment service will be held at Metairie Cemetery. In lieu of flowers, Mrs. Watson requests that donations be made in William's name to the music program at the New Orleans College Preparatory Academies.

An article published a week after the funeral revealed more details:

February 2, 2007

The New Orleans business community was stunned last month at the sudden death of Mr. William Watson, President of Watson Properties. The cause of death, which occurred shortly after a horseback outing near Folsom with his friend Tommy Willoughby, was determined to be cardiac arrest.

According to his physician Dr. George Barrington, Mr. Watson had been in excellent health at his most recent check-up, mere weeks prior. "I'm stymied as to how a healthy, vibrant man, a non-smoker and at most a moderate drinker, could have succumbed in such a catastrophic manner," said Dr. Barrington.

Marian Watson, William's wife of 37 years, did not agree to an autopsy.

William's father, Henry R. Watson, founded Watson Properties in 1933, buying up Garden District plots at bargain prices and reselling them to wealthy buyers. After Henry's death in 1970, William returned from Chicago, where he had forged a successful career as an investment banker at Goldman Sachs, to take the helm of his father's company.

Under William's leadership, Watson Properties shifted focus to commercial real

estate development, erecting upscale shopping malls in Metairie and Slidell. More recently, however, the younger Watson had begun once more to dabble in housing. When he died, he was embroiled in negotiations around a bid for redevelopment of New Orleans' St. Bernard Projects as mixed-income units.

Last Friday, as mourners for William Watson formed a second line down Royal Street, former residents brandishing mops and pails gathered outside the St. Bernard Projects on Milton Street, demanding to be let back into their apartments. Though they remain evicted, the protesters may have gained a reprieve. According to Hayden Kayne, the current spokesperson for Mrs. Watson, Watson Properties will not pursue the St. Bernard deal at this time. The company has suffered attrition over the past few years as the elder partners have retired. With William no longer at the helm and no one to take the reins, it remains to be seen what will become of the company.

In the end, Karyn had agreed to an interview. And as she'd sat with Marian in her quaint New Orleans kitchen, the older woman silently studying her over a cup of Earl Grey, she'd already known she would accept the offer. With the help of Mr. Wilkins, she'd sold her Fox Lake home. The money from the sale had barely covered her mother's outstanding medical bills and her own meager expenses, but at least there was someone waiting for her, a new place to be.

Karyn watched through the back window as Marian arranged herself at her small garden table. Her back toward the house, Marian's gaze seemed fixed on the far corner of the yard, toward the spot where her gardener, Claude Thibodeaux, toiled under the old magnolia. When Letty arrived with the tea tray, Marian turned slightly toward her, her head nodding almost imperceptibly in acknowledgement.

Karyn had to admit it—she'd been rescued by Marian Watson. But then, two weeks ago, everything had changed. Marian had asked her to fetch an old fur coat from the attic—she was planning another donation to one of the myriad charities she supported. Clawing through spider webs and thick motes of dust on her way to the clothing rack, Karyn had pushed aside a tall shoe box. Its contents—letters, tens of them, some bearing floral patterns, some on business stationery—had been sent scattering across the unfinished floor. And as she'd stooped to gather them up, one packet, bound in a frayed rubber band, had caught her eye. She'd read the return address: Frank Johnston, c/o Goldman Sachs, Chicago, Illinois.

Karyn had worked hard to forget how her childhood had ended so abruptly. She'd honed and polished those memories of a carefree life when she was small—her father a powerful businessman, her mother a devoted homemaker. Commuting between his pastoral estate in Fox Lake and his posh Wacker Drive office, hosting lavish parties in the company of his gracious wife, Frank Johnston had been a man both feared and worshipped. But now, Karyn's darker memories had returned: meals alone with her mother; Mama's face, sullen and puffy; raised voices echoing down darkened halls. A teen-aged Karyn had plugged in her ear phones and turned up her music, trying not to hear what they said—but hanging on every word. Her father had spent too many late nights at the office. He'd missed birthdays, forgotten anniversaries. He'd forgotten his vows.

When it had finally happened, Karyn had been surprised by the speed with which Frank Johnston had been banished from her life. Only over time had she pieced it together. Some “brazen hussy” had lured Frank away from his home, away from his family. And then, when he had admitted the affair to his wife, professed his love for this vixen, begged her to marry him—that woman had left him for another man.

She remembered her father's seedy Chicago apartment, the imperceptible but ever-accruing changes in him—his shirts wrinkled, his suits smelling of smoke and alcohol. She remembered her legally prescribed visits on odd weekends—the Cubs games, the hotdogs and Cokes, the take-out from the little Greek restaurant around the corner. Karyn had never confronted her father with what she knew. So many times since, she'd imagined herself holding his hands, looking into his soft brown eyes, telling him that she understood. But back then, she'd been too young for that. Instead, she'd held her knowledge as a form of power—an absolution from the unnamed guilt she'd suffered over her parents' divorce.

On a sunny Saturday morning shortly after her eighteenth birthday, Karyn had knocked on her father's apartment door. When he didn't answer, she'd called her mother. And when her mother didn't answer, she'd called the police. It was she who had identified Frank's body.

Sitting now at Marian's kitchen table, Karyn opened her physiology textbook to the spot she'd marked: “Control of Respiration.” The brain, its inspiratory and expiratory neurons discharging and ceasing to discharge in an intricate dance of exquisite synchronicity, commands the body to keep breathing. To stop breathing is unnatural—a thing you must will yourself to do. Or, in the case of her father, force yourself to do. She wondered: moments after stepping off that chair, had Frank Johnston changed his mind? Had he even for an instant thought of her, of what she would find?

Karyn looked out the window again, at the garden, the glass-topped table, the frail figure sitting there. She watched as Marian lowered her right hand slowly to the table, next to her teacup. After all those years of wondering about the woman responsible for the ruin of her family—after all those years of finally trying to forget—Marian was the last person Karyn had expected to find. Had Marian meant for her to see those letters? Had she any inkling whatsoever, of the pain that they would cause—of the pain she'd already caused?

Time and again, Karyn had suffered at the selfishness of others. But that didn't matter now. For over the days since she'd discovered the evidence of her father's love for Marian Jolly, she'd come to a decision. Whatever game Marian was playing, she'd soon learn that two could play at it.

Then, something caught her eye. Marian had shifted in her seat. She was leaning, listing, her left arm drawing close to her body like a wounded wing.

Without thinking, Karyn jumped up from her seat, her chair clattering to the floor. She pushed out through the back screen door, ignoring the slam as it snapped shut behind her. She tripped over the stone pavers to reach Marian's side. "Mrs. Watson?" she said. Lightly, she touched the woman's shoulder.

Marian's lips parted, and Karyn remembered her own mother, mouthing words soundlessly from her death bed. "I'm sorry," her mother had said.

"I'm sorry," Marian seemed to say now, just before she toppled from her chair.

Karyn stared down at Marian's prostrate body. Strangely, she remembered her father, that sense of everything spinning out of control, moving faster than she wanted it to. "Sorry?" she said. "Is that all? After everything you did—?"

Letty was running toward them now, her hands wringing her apron. With a start, Karyn realized that her own hands were clenched into fists. She clamped her eyes shut.

No time for that. Think, think...

Marian's body, stiff when she fell, had gone limp. Willing herself into autopilot, Karyn knelt down, nudging Marian onto her back. She placed her ear to the woman's dry lips, listening, feeling for a breath. There it was again—that faint, acrid smell. But nothing more. And no pulse at the carotid artery where Karyn placed her expectant fingers.

Positioning her hands one atop the other in the middle of Marian's chest, Karyn pushed

hard and fast, counting to thirty. She tilted Marian’s head, lifting her chin. Pinching Marian’s nostrils shut, she breathed into her mouth and watched her thin chest for movement. But though the older woman’s chest did rise, the lace of the silk slip beneath her robe rustling softly in the weak breeze, she remained unresponsive. Karyn administered a second breath. Then she sat back on her haunches to face Letty. “Do you have an AED?” she called out hoarsely.

Letty’s face went blank. “A *what...?*”

Karyn felt her legs growing numb, a dizzy sensation clouding her vision. “Get a doctor!” she said, her voice hollow in her own ears. “Call 9-1-1!” She placed her hands on Marian’s chest, centering herself for another round of CPR. She wouldn’t stop until the medics came—though she knew, it was already too late.



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