

The
**BUTTERFLY
GARDEN**

By Carole Stivers



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Hayden Kayne paid his cab fare and hurried toward the circular Pontchartrain entrance of Metairie Cemetery. The afternoon sky, leaden with impending rain, seemed designed for the occasion.

Near the small fountain just inside the cemetery gates, Karyn Johnston's slight figure was all but obscured by a trio of ladies in black crepe dresses and dark, floppy hats. Hayden squinted to make out the identities of Karyn's assailants. Nancy Carroll, one feeble, freckled hand clutching a white lace handkerchief, had hold of Karyn's arm and was staring into her eyes with her usual expression—genuine concern, bordering on cross condemnation. A few feet away, Madeleine Duparc Barrington, wife of the Watson family doctor George Barrington, surveyed the pair with her usual guarded civility. Estelle Azby Willoughby, the wife of William's former business associate Horton Willoughby, rifled through her purse to produce a tangle of tissues. The husbands, George and Horton, stood nearer the road, nervously checking their watches.

Even from a distance, Hayden could hear Nancy's brittle voice. "This is so horrible," she was saying. "So utterly...traumatic! My dear, have you any idea how this came about? Were there signs...?"

Karyn's cheeks glowed red, her eyes glistening as she stared at the ground. As Hayden approached, he could sense her silent gratitude. Allowing her to loop her hand over his arm, he guided her down the cemetery walk.

"I didn't see you at the Mass," he whispered.

“I’m not a Catholic,” Karyn muttered.

He offered her a dry smile. “I’m not either. You don’t have to be Catholic to attend a funeral Mass.”

“I know...” she said. “But...People here don’t know me. They’re apt to judge.”

Hayden glanced at her, hoping she wouldn’t notice the blush that crept up his neck. She was right. Considering how closely they’d worked together over the past few months, he himself knew so little about her.

Though he knew that Marian had been keen to hire a personal assistant after William’s death, he really had no idea why she’d chosen Karyn. Based on what Karyn herself had been willing to share with him, he knew that she’d been born in Chicago and had most recently lived in the suburban Illinois village of Fox Lake. He knew that though her aspiration was to become a nurse, she’d taken Marian’s offer largely out of a fascination with New Orleans and the need for a steady income.

In her naivete, Marian hadn’t requested a curriculum vitae, claiming that “the way a woman comports herself” was more important than any credentials she might produce. He’d managed to find a resume that Karyn had posted on a new website called LinkedIn just months prior, but he’d learned little more from it: a BA from the University of Illinois at Chicago with a major in Economics; three years working at a branch bank, followed by thirteen years with Goldman Sachs as a clerk in Investing and Lending. Apparently, the banking world had not appealed to Miss Johnston—or, more likely for a young woman, she’d found herself trapped in a repetitive, dead-end job. Perhaps she’d had a failed marriage. In any event, after an eleven-year hiatus, a time not covered by her resume, she’d wound up here. Her references, a Mr. Robert Wilkins at Goldman Sachs and an aunt, Mildred Johnston of Cleveland, Ohio, had added little beyond the usual glowing accolades. And elsewhere on the web, he’d found no outstanding warrants or other red flags to mar her record.

Based on the scant dates listed in the resume, Hayden had deduced that Karyn was roughly twenty years younger than he: When he’d been starting law school, she’d been toddling in diapers. She was certainly old enough to be on her own. Still, she seemed somehow vulnerable—perhaps a woman with a damaging past, one who needed looking after. He’d done what he could, taking her under his wing, teaching her the basics of estate law as they combed through William’s effects. And he’d found her to be a more than apt pupil. Perhaps, he’d told her, she should consider a career in law.

“Law?” She’d looked at him, her bright blue eyes wide with amazement, then mirth. “Why, Mr. Kayne, I couldn’t remember all that legal mumbo jumbo if you pasted it to my forehead!” She’d spoken the words in a forced Southern drawl, her affectation more appropriate to Scarlett O’Hara than to a Louisiana belle. She’d made him laugh—something that no woman had ever made him do.

He’d come here with news for Karyn, information he’d known since the day before Marian’s untimely death. But he would have to wait still longer to tell her; they’d need to be alone. And watching her now, he wasn’t sure how she would take it.

Karyn quickened her pace, her gaze still fixed on the path before them. “There was no way I could have saved her,” she mumbled.

“You did what you could,” he assured her. “Everyone knows that.” He felt her grip tightening on his arm and suppressed the urge to place his other hand protectively over hers.

As they led the small group past a line of modern stone and marble vaults that looked more like the model buildings in one of William’s sales presentations than the solemn resting places of the rich and infamous, Hayden felt the crunch of dry pavement beneath his soles. It was difficult to believe that the Cemetery had been under water just twenty months ago. He looked out across the acres of gravesites, imagining that ghostly array of crosses and lost angels emerging from a sea of fetid floodwaters...

But that was before. Now, all was well. The white walls of the vaults had been scrubbed clean, the lawns resodded. Neatly printed blue street signs once more directed visitors to their destinations in this quiet, upscale “city of the dead.”

They turned right to follow another narrow, paved road. Ahead in the distance, Hayden could see the Lake Lawn Metairie Funeral Home, the dark hearse approaching them, a ragged procession following. He led Karyn off to the left and they picked their way along an aisle of spongy grass to the Watson family vault.

Like the others along this lane, the austere edifice of unadorned granite most resembled the sort of financial establishment that might be found in some faraway northern city—the type of city from which many of these families had once come to make their fortunes in New Orleans. A set of cement steps led to a small portico. To either side of the portico, a square column supported a stone roof that offered a modicum of shade to a marble slab, engraved with the names of those entombed within.

Inside the vault, each person was allowed the dignity of sleeping in his or her coffin for a minimum of a year and a day. There they could remain, so long as no one new came along. William, barely in the grave three months, had yet to serve his term. But Hayden had been assured that none of the current occupants need be disturbed; there was an empty spot for Marian's casket, right next to her mother-in-law's. He stared up at the stone angel topping the vault, this one with an index finger held prudently to her lips. "Don't complain," she seemed to say. "Beggars can't be choosers."

The hearse pulled up along the road, and Karyn watched with a stony expression as the pallbearers dutifully unloaded the mahogany casket and maneuvered it over the grass to place it atop its stand. The three black-clad ladies and the two straggling husbands, silent now, had gathered to Karyn's left. But the musicians and tradespeople who'd followed the hearse from Lake Lawn on foot remained uncertainly clustered by the road. These more indigent friends of Marian's had followed her here out of respect. Now, uncomfortable at what had been billed as a "private affair," they stood with their hands in their pockets, perhaps mapping out escape routes.

Hayden had done his best to locate loved ones, but Marian didn't have "people" of the sort one might imagine for a society matron of her stature. A frantic search had turned up no relatives in Chicago, or elsewhere for that matter. Her most devoted friends seemed to be the shop owners and bartenders whose establishments she had graced with her presence, and the young musicians whose careers she had so generously supported. The musicians had done her proud. Stepping side to side in the slow gait of the dirge, they'd accompanied the casket, borne by six young volunteers from Cohen College Prep, from the door of St. Louis Cathedral to the hearse. There, on cue, they'd broken into a riot of raucous jazz, picking up a joyous second line as the hearse proceeded slowly down Royal to St. Charles, down St. Charles to Lafayette Square and the bust of John McDonogh. From there, they'd all coaxed their stripped-down vans and dilapidated motorcycles up the highway to this, Marian's final resting place.

Hayden had made sure that everyone here was a part of Marian's life, of her legacy. Now, only he himself felt out of place. Why was *he* here?

Marian had come to him for help only after William's death. Certainly, William and his father would never have considered engaging his services—their type was known to check lineages back for generations, and the son of a German immigrant would never have passed muster. But now, it seemed there was no one else left. The former Watson associates, a crowd

of ancient fools, had long ago left the business world to waste the remains of their money on more frivolous pursuits. Strangely, in the end it would fall to him to determine the fate of the Watson fortune.

The task would be daunting, especially since no one seemed to know exactly what that fortune entailed. Marian, who had had no involvement in the family's financial affairs beyond the blind permission of her signature at William's every request, had been no help at all. As for William and his father Henry, they had done all their own bookkeeping. They'd employed an out-of-town lawyer to handle the Estate, and it was from that doddering solicitor's office that Hayden had finally procured a copy of the Watson Trust. But those documents had only been boiler plate, comprising the necessary instructions and signatures but lacking the all-important list of assets. Combing through stacks of papers from William's New Orleans offices in an effort to locate the list, Hayden had instead found something else altogether: evidence of a raft of questionable acquisitions, dating all the way back to Watson Properties' early days.

After the Depression, many small property owners had needed quick loans. Henry wasn't in the loan business—his business was real estate. Nonetheless, he'd agreed to make the loans with the owners' property as collateral. Then, it seemed, he'd recruited someone working for the notary, an apprentice by the name of Jacob Miller, whose job it was to take the signed loan agreements from the notary's office to the Land Office for binding. And together, Henry and Jacob had perpetrated a malicious scam. No doubt exacting a handsome fee from Watson Properties, Jacob had slipped additional pages into certain of these agreements before submitting them to the Land Office. These pages, unseen by signer and notary alike, conveyed the property outright to one Henry Watson.

In hindsight, the scam seemed obvious. The bound Land Office copy of the contracts in these cases didn't match the copy that was provided to the original property owner. But when the owners called foul, the Land Office documents were the only ones honored. Court records showed multiple efforts to sue, but, perhaps owing to Henry's influence over the judges, no one had succeeded in proving his duplicity. "Everybody knew he was up to something with that Jacob Miller," said the Land Office secretary who helped Hayden review the acts of sale. "Especially when Miller mysteriously disappeared in the early '50's. But no one could ever get anything to stick on old Henry Watson!"

For his part, Hayden had dreaded the possibility of having to inform Marian of possible liabilities. He stared at the casket. At least now he wouldn't have to. And he was glad,

because for all her faults, for all her vanities and vagaries, her frailties real or feigned, in Marian he'd come to sense a kindred spirit. She was generous to a fault; no sooner had she engaged his services than she had expressed an interest in funding a music and arts school for the children of the Ninth Ward. He'd been happy to help her make better use of the spoils that William and his family had accrued at the expense of others.

He was aroused from his reveries by a gentle shuffling of feet among the assembled group. The priest, a black-frocked man so small in stature that he'd escaped Hayden's notice, had already finished his prayers and was stalking back toward the hearse in a manner that left the impression of someone having to use the toilet. Turning, Hayden found himself face to face with Nancy Carroll.

"Mr. Kayne, are you feeling better?" Nancy asked, placing that small, arthritic hand of hers on his sleeve.

"Better?"

"The day Marian died...I was worried you might be suffering some sort of attack..."

Hayden smiled his best smile. "Oh, that!" he said. "It was nothing. Just a momentary dizziness. I think it's the mold in my house...I must be allergic."

"Yes, the mold! It can be quite poisonous, you know," Nancy chirped. Hayden watched Nancy's eyes, narrowing as they appraised him. She'd taken to fawning over him since her mother's recent death. He suspected an ulterior motive—not true devotion, but rather a need for something else—something yet unspecified.

But, he reminded himself, he owed her his respect. His relationship with the Carroll family went back decades, to a time when fresh out of Harvard, he'd come home to find his father in ill health and the Kayne businesses foundering. Nancy's father, Edwin Carroll, had swooped to the rescue, securing for young Hayden a position with Rolf Schmidt and Adrian LeCroix, two long-time friends who, like so many others in Garden District society, seemed to owe Carroll favors. Thus installed, Hayden was ideally placed to fulfill the terms of a deal. In return for discounts on his own father's imports from Taiwan and the Philippines, Hayden would be put in charge of legal affairs regarding the expansion of Carroll's department stores in Louisiana and Mississippi. It wasn't long before Texas and Alabama were thrown into the mix. And for the better part of his early career, Hayden Kayne had found time to do little else but litigate on behalf of Edwin Carroll. Now, with Cora Carroll gone to meet her maker—or whomever else she found herself beholden to—there was far too much money in the estate

for Nancy alone. It was his job to help Nancy part with as much of it as he could; but gently, and with as much care for her frail ego as he could muster.

Studiously avoiding Karyn's gaze, Nancy sidled closer. "So...what do you think was going on with the Watsons?"

Hayden stepped back, glancing around him. "Going on?"

"Marian...her death. It was just like William's—so sudden. We've all been wondering..." She waved her hand toward the others, the Barringtons and the Willoughbys, all respectfully keeping their distance.

"It *is* rather strange," Hayden said. "But surely you don't suspect foul play?"

"Foul play?" Nancy grinned at Karyn, whose face remained expressionless. "How could I? Who could possibly want to harm such lovely people?" She turned to once more seek the affirmation of her friends. But they had already deserted her, tottering back toward the paved road. "Well, it appears my ride is leaving..." Nancy sighed. "May I still expect you Monday morning?"

"Eight o'clock sharp," Hayden confirmed.

As he watched Nancy hurry away, Hayden caught sight of a slight, middle-aged man, almost obscured in the shadow of a neighboring vault. A billed tweed cap shaded his pale blue eyes and a pair of scruffy jeans and worn leather work boots were just visible below his oversized raincoat. The man stepped tentatively toward Karyn. "My condolences, ma'am," he said softly.

Karyn offered the man a wan smile. "Why, Mr. Thibodeaux," she said, "It's me who should be offering you condolences. You've been so loyal, for so many years..." She turned to Hayden. "Of course you know Claude Thibodeaux, Marian's gardener?"

"Not very well," Hayden said. He offered his hand for a shake. But the man merely doffed his cap with one stained hand before turning to follow the others.

"He's shy," Karyn said.

"Seems so," Hayden replied. "And there's a maid, I believe...Letitia Butler?"

"Letty," Karyn said. "She couldn't come. Though I know she wanted to."

Hayden met Karyn's gaze. "So, what about you? What are you planning on

doing now?”

Karyn blushed deeply, but she didn't turn away. “I'm not sure...I'll go back to Chicago, I suppose.”

Hayden looked around, making sure that no one was within earshot before leaning in close to her. “Karyn, there's something I need to tell you. Something that happened the day before Marian died.”

Karyn looked up at him, worry clouding her eyes. “Yes?”

“As you know, all the Watson assets were originally held in a trust, with William and Marian as co-trustees. In the most recent copy of the trust documents—”

“The ones you got from that old lawyer's office?”

“The same. In those records, there was a successor trustee listed as well. But his name was lined out and the change notarized. Marian told me that this person had been in business with William but was no longer employed by Watson Properties.”

“Interesting...”

“In any event, with William gone, I gave Marian a few options. She could either name a successor trustee, someone to take over the trust if she died, or designate an executor of the trust, someone to disperse the assets upon her death. I met with her in the afternoon, the day before she died. And she made her choice...just in time, it seems.”

Karyn cast him what seemed a hopeful expression. “I suppose I know what you're going to tell me. It's obvious that she would choose you as executor, Hayden...”

“No, not me. To my surprise, Marian didn't appoint an executor. She opted to name a successor trustee.” Hayden watched Karyn's face for some sign of realization, but found none. “She chose you,” he said.

Karyn stared at him, and for a moment he imagined a tremor, a slight quiver in her lower lip. “Me?”

“I was as shocked as you seem to be...But it's official—In addition to the notary, she enlisted me as a witness. I can show you the document if you wish.”

“But—”

Hayden cleared his throat, assuming a lawyerly tone. “And if you wish, I will happily

act as your counsel.”

“Of...of course...”

Hayden coughed lightly into the crook of his arm, buying time to further assess Karyn’s reaction. Not surprisingly, she remained dumbfounded. Indeed, Marian’s choice of a veritable stranger as a successor trustee had made little sense to Hayden at the time. And as he’d pondered it in the wake of her death, the mystery of it had only compounded. But it was Marian’s choice, made under his witness. And he was still her representative as well.

“Now, as de facto trustee of the estate,” he said, “you have the right to stay on at the house. And to decide who can stay on with you...so long as we can find a way to keep paying them. Unless...” He paused. There was, of course, another option. “Unless you’d rather dispose of the property immediately?”

Karyn’s expression was blank, her eyes focused on some unseen middle distance. “No. Oh, no. That’s fine. I’ll have to think about it, of course. Thank you so much. I—I don’t know what to say...”

“You’ll stay, then?” Hayden said. “At least until you’ve had time for further reflection. And we’ll try to find a way to keep Miss Butler and Mr. Thibodeaux on at their current salaries, as funds allow. In my view they’ve suffered enough disruption—”

Without warning, Karyn threw her arms around his waist. He felt the pressure of her soft cheek against his chest. When she pulled back to look up at him, he found himself wondering if he’d remembered to clip the pernicious hairs that flourished so freely in his nostrils. “I guess Miss Carroll was right,” Karyn said, her eyes glistening. Just as abruptly, she righted her posture and nervously straightened her jacket. “About the trauma, I mean. It’s been a lot to take in...”

“Just give me a few days,” Hayden said. “I’ll need time to set you up with access to the necessary accounts.”

He looked over her shoulder. The crowd was gone. The hearse was gone. And a fine rain had already begun to soak the lilies atop Marian’s casket.



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