

The
**BUTTERFLY
GARDEN**

By Carole Stivers



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Nancy Carroll pulled her chair closer to the small mahogany table in her restored front parlor. In this room, with its deep blue wallpaper and darkly-stained oak floors, she'd sought to recreate the ambience of her favorite café on Prytania Street, the little bistro that had been yet another victim of the storms. The same soft music, suggesting meetings at dusk between secret lovers, played from the old radio in the corner. The same lace curtains and matching lace doilies, woven in a fleur-de-lis pattern, bedraped every window and surface. And for her weekly teas, she took pains to procure the same dainties that she and her coterie had once enjoyed. It had taken ages for her housemaid Lorna to locate the delicate lemon cakes for Madeleine Barrington, and the Ceylon peach tea that Estelle Willoughby loved. But it was all a part of restoring the old order, of preserving the loyalties of these, the last of her friends.

Surreptitiously, or so she thought, Mrs. Willoughby added a second teaspoon of sugar to her cup before Lorna poured the tea. Across the table, Mrs. Barrington meticulously cut her tiny cakes into quarters before shoveling each portion rapidly toward her lipstick-stained teeth. Nancy sighed. Sugar may have enriched the paternal ancestors of these women, but it was wreaking havoc with their waistlines—Mrs. Barrington could do with a little less cream custard, and Mrs. Willoughby, her girth straining against the fasteners of her once-elegant dress, sweetened her tea to the point of saturation. But who was Nancy to judge? Madeleine Barrington, living comfortably uptown in the gated and guarded Audubon Place, and Estelle Willoughby, ensconced at her husband's idyllic horse farm out near Folsom, outranked her on every score. The wealthy deserved their due. And a time of dire emergency was no time for anyone to go on a diet.

Nancy looked back toward the kitchen to make sure that Lorna was out of earshot. Doing her best to quell her own rising sense of discomfort, she leaned forward with what she hoped would pass for a conspiratorial look. “So,” she asked, “do either of you have more information about the Watson...situation?”

Mrs. Barrington coughed daintily into her napkin, then let loose with a much less gracious hurrumph, a habitual deep clearing of the throat that she apparently deemed vital for opening the pipes. “The Doctor sees strong evidence of foul play,” she pronounced. “The Doctor” was George Barrington, her husband of forty-one years and a man who, like his wife, didn’t mince words.

Mrs. Willoughby set down her teacup and snagged a blueberry scone from a tray set enticingly before her. “Horton agrees,” she said. “And poor Tommy! He’s still suffering the trauma of William’s death...so *unexpected!*”

Nancy nodded. Tommy Willoughby, Estelle and Horton’s youngest, had always been enamored of William, relying on him for business and relationship advice as though William, and not Horton, were his father. Now in his forties, “young” Tommy had been there on that fateful day when William dismounted his palomino for the last time.

“Why on earth would both Watsons die of cardiac arrest, and within mere months of one another?” Mrs. Barrington said. “And Marian five years William’s junior? It makes no sense at all!”

“Tommy’s sure that someone was after the both of them,” Mrs. Willoughby said, picking up an embroidered napkin to dab at her over-rouged cheeks.

“*After* them?” Nancy asked. “But why? And how?”

“No one knows why...yet,” Mrs. Barrington said. “As to how, George thinks it may have been some sort of poison.”

Nancy coughed into her napkin, then folded it carefully in her lap. “Poison?” she croaked.

“There are quite a few that could have that effect. But as you know, Marian wouldn’t allow an autopsy on William,” Mrs. Barrington replied. “And when Marian herself died, there was no next of kin to authorize such a thing. George wanted the coroner to order one on the basis of a suspicious death, but everything was botched. By the time the order went through, she’d already been embalmed. According to George, the toxicology studies will be useless.”

Nancy gripped her teaspoon in an effort to quell the unexpected tremors that had beset her hands. “Might it just have been mold poisoning of some kind?” she suggested hopefully.

“No,” Mrs. Barrington said, realigning her butter knife decisively alongside her plate. “If that were the case, George insists he would have noticed the signs during William’s physical in December.” She looked around the table. “Of course, any type of poisoning could have been accidental. But *I* happen to believe it’s something more sinister. We must figure it out... Who might want to see the pair of them dead?”

Nancy let go of her spoon, catching it just as it clattered over the edge of the table. She was sorry she’d brought up the topic at all—but how to change the subject now that they were on it? Her hands still shaking, she poured Mrs. Willoughby another cup of tea. “More cake?” she offered, and Mrs. Barrington willingly snatched a second lemon cake from the proffered plate. Then Nancy remembered something—her conversation with Hayden Kayne just a few days after the funeral. “There’s something else,” she said. “The matter of the estate...”

Mrs. Barrington nodded. “I hear tell that the executor will be that new girl, Karyn...”

“Johnston,” Mrs. Willoughby piped. “A lovely girl, to be sure. But why *her*, a veritable stranger and hardly qualified? Tommy could have done an excellent job...”

“Well,” Nancy said, “Mr. Kayne tells me that Miss Johnston is not just an executor. Marian named her as trustee!”

Mrs. Willoughby started, the remains of the last scone crumbling from her fingers to her plate. “*Trustee?* But how...”

“My thoughts exactly!” Nancy said. “As you say, the girl has no qualifications to speak of. And she’s only been in New Orleans, let alone in the employ of Marian Watson, for a few months! Of course, she’ll have the advantage of Mr. Kayne’s counsel...” Over the edge of her raised teacup, she peered at her two companions. “Why, come to think of it, one has to wonder why Marian didn’t choose Mr. Kayne to manage the estate. After all, Hayden seemed to have quite a close relationship with Marian...”

“With Marian?” Mrs. Barrington sniffed. “I would say not. It’s the younger lady he’s had his eye on. Or hadn’t you noticed? Didn’t you see them at the funeral?”

“But...” Nancy stared down into her cup, watching a few stray tea leaves swirl before congregating at last at the bottom. She pictured Karyn, her hand resting on Hayden’s arm.

Certainly, it had just been a fatherly gesture on Hayden's part... "But Miss Johnston is so... young! And Hayden... Mr. Kayne... When I spoke to him the other day, he didn't intimate anything of the sort..."

"Why would he?" said Mrs. Barrington. "In any event, she's not that much younger than he is—a few decades pass so quickly. And affairs of the heart are beyond the dictates of age."

Mrs. Willoughby sighed. "Affairs of the heart," she said. "Madeleine, you do have such a way with words!"

Mrs. Barrington glowed. "I've joined a book club." She turned to Nancy. "You should try it, dear. It helps take the mind to a higher place."

Nancy stared at Madeleine Barrington, her long face painted a uniform shade of ecru to hide her age spots, her narrow, aquiline nose held aloft. Was the woman implying that Nancy's mind was now in some *lower* place? Perhaps it was, for all she could think about at the moment was Hayden Kayne. A deep and rampant heat dampened her brow as she remembered all the times she'd fawned over the man, worked at looking her best for him. How stupid she'd been! Of course a man her age was no longer interested in women her age. "A book club..." was all she managed to murmur. "But what about your Garden Club activities?"

Mrs. Barrington lowered her penciled eyebrows as she appraised the last lemon cake, alone at the center of the serving plate. "We still meet, of course. But the Gardens have been slow to recover. It requires money, unfortunately, and our best fundraisers have been diverted to other matters since the floods..."

"Yes, slow to recover..." Nancy said. In the ensuing silence, she could hear a fly buzzing somewhere nearby. She turned to check the windows, open to a slight breeze, and took in the scent of magnolia wafting from the Watsons' back yard. Perhaps it was best to test the waters, now that she'd waded into them. "Well," she said, "at least now the Watson gardener can help me with my own garden..."

"Do you mean Claude Thibodeaux?" Mrs. Barrington asked. "You couldn't have arranged that before?"

"The Watsons wouldn't allow him to work for anyone else."

"Why not?" Mrs. Willoughby asked.

“We all know that Marian liked having things to herself!” Nancy blurted. Then, noticing the mild re-elevation of Mrs. Barrington’s brows, she fiddled with the chipped handle of her cup. “May she rest in peace...” she murmured.

“Well,” Mrs. Barrington said, “there will be plenty of work for a man of Claude Thibodeaux’s talents, once things in this town get sorted out.”

“You should get your dibs in right away, Nancy,” Mrs. Willoughby said.

“I’ve done as much.” Nancy took a deep breath before continuing, reciting in her head the script she’d so carefully memorized. “I went over there yesterday with the express purpose of talking to Claude. Of course, I had already secured Miss Johnston’s blessing.” She looked around the table. “And while I was over there, I managed to retrieve a tea tin that I had lent to Marian...”

“But dear, whatever did you want with an old tea tin?” Mrs. Willoughby asked.

Nancy steeled herself. Perspiration soaked the back of her light blouse, the orchid-patterned silk she’d had dry cleaned just for this occasion. “It belonged to my Mother,” she said. “An heirloom of sorts.”

“Oh,” Mrs. Willoughby said, “I remember! Hadn’t you given Marian some of your Mother’s special medicinal tea?”

Nancy fidgeted with her napkin. “Oh yes!” she giggled. “That I did. But according to her housemaid, Marian had thrown it all away. The mold got to it, just like it has everything else...” She looked up at the high ceiling of her parlor, drawing her guests’ attention to the spots where ugly black stains had eaten away at the once ornate plaster medallions. “Anyway, Miss Johnston was out on an errand. So, I wound up having to find the tin myself.”

Mrs. Barrington fixed her with a steady gaze. “In my opinion, it’s good she didn’t drink the stuff. Dr. Barrington says that when it comes to anything herbal that claims to have medicinal properties, quality control is crucial,” she said. “He won’t allow that sort of thing in our house unless he knows the source.”

Nancy felt the skin of her cheeks growing hot. “I know what he would suggest,” she said. “One of those awful sleeping pills. But my Mother’s tea was quite safe, I can assure you...”

Mrs. Barrington smiled, the smug, contented smile of a lizard after it swallows a fly.

“I’m not suggesting that it wasn’t,” she said. “But herbal remedies must be treated with the same respect as medicines. After all, we are what we eat!” And with that she shoved back from the table, abandoning the remaining cake. Bringing herself to her full height, she again issued a hearty hurrumph. “Wonderful, as usual, Nancy,” she said. “But I’ve got to get going. You two can chat on without me...”

Mrs. Willoughby struggled with the arms of her chair, seemingly eager to follow suit. “Me too, I’m afraid,” she said. “Horton needs me back in time for dinner, and traffic will be atrocious. Thanks so much for the wonderful tea!”

Nancy saw her friends to the door, then wandered disconsolately back to her place at the table. She’d been a fool to bring up her visit to the Watson household yesterday. Still shaken, she was certainly in no fit state to frame her side of the story...

She looked around. “Lorna!” But Lorna was nowhere to be seen. As the room darkened, she wished Patsy Lee was here. Her devoted personal maid would have waited patiently in the kitchen, sensed when the front door closed behind the last remaining guest, slid unobtrusively into the dining room and removed the service in the blink of an eye. Patsy was the one friend who could have been trusted with her closest confidences.

But Patsy Lee was still in Houston. Patsy’s daughter had what she referred to as a “special needs child,” a sweet little boy who hadn’t uttered one word since the day of his birth over seven years ago. There’d never been much in the way of schools for Simon in New Orleans, but when they’d evacuated to Houston after Katrina, they’d soon found a special school there. Nancy had begun to despair of Patsy’s ever returning. “Family’s everything,” Patsy had said. She hadn’t said something else: that Nancy wasn’t family. But Nancy had felt it.

Her ears prickled. She heard something, a rustling. She looked toward the hallway leading to the kitchen, sure that someone was there. “Lorna?” she called again.

But the person who stepped out of the shadows was not Lorna.

“Patsy!” Nancy cried out, running with arms open toward the compact, sturdily built black woman who stood in Lorna’s place. “You’re back!”

“That I am, Miz Nancy!” Patsy said, steadying herself as Nancy enveloped her in a tight embrace. “But don’t go squeezin’ the life outta me now!” Patsy’s deep, phlegmy chuckle took Nancy back to her younger years, when Patsy’s call had meant dinner was on the table.

Holding her close, Nancy could feel the beat of the older woman's kind heart.

"Back for good, I hope?" Nancy asked.

But Patsy only brought her small, sturdy hands to Nancy's forearms, held her there before gently nudging her away. "No, ma'am. I just thought...I just thought I'd stop by and say hello. I owe you that. You've always been good to me. I wanted to let you know in person that I'll be moving to Houston full-time."

Nancy stood frozen to the spot, a strange numbness overtaking her. She turned abruptly, seeking the stability of her seat at the table. "I'm sorry, Patsy. I suppose...I was hoping..." Nancy blinked, fighting back the tears that threatened to leak from her tired eyes.

"I know it's hard, Miz Nancy. But those floods washed away our lives. I wanted to come back here so bad. Shantel, too. She wanted to come back to where she was born, to the place where she gave birth to little Simon. But there's nothing here for us now. No house, no school. Nothing."

"You could live here with me...All of you..."

"No, ma'am. Like I said, Simon needs a special school. He's in a fine one now, doing better every day. He says 'Mama' now, and 'please.' We got assistance, and Shantel got herself a job at the Walmart." Patsy sat down across from Nancy, in the spot so recently occupied by Mrs. Willoughby. "You had those ladies over, I see," she said, surveying the ruins of the pastries amidst the lipstick-tinged teacups. "I'm guessing the tall one with the long face and the short, fat one..."

Despite her impending tears, Nancy smiled. "They're all I have, now, Patsy. Everyone else is gone."

"Chauncey too? You're without a gardener?"

"Chauncey Turner is in Georgia, with his son DeWayne." Nancy attempted another smile. "Can you believe it? DeWayne's in his third year of medical school."

"That's the future, Miz Nancy," Patsy said. "Someday, young folks like DeWayne are gonna come back here and fix things. Then we'll have houses and schools and hospitals...and parks, too. That's my dream, anyway."

"I'll be long gone by then..."

"Don't talk like that, Miz Nancy." Patsy placed her hands gently on the table in front of

her, regarding Nancy now with true concern. “I know your Mama died,” she said. “Lorna told me about that.”

“You talked to Lorna?” Nancy asked. “But Patsy, why didn’t you call me?”

“I didn’t want to disappoint you, ma’am.”

Nancy reached across the table to take Patsy Lee’s hand. She felt the warmth of it, the heft of it. The woman had troubles of her own, and she’d already decided not to burden Patsy with hers. “Patsy,” she said, “you could never disappoint me.” Letting go, she brought a napkin to her eyes as the tears began to spill. “But you can indeed make me sad. And that, unfortunately, you have done.”

Patsy ran her palm across the table in front of her, a small wave of crumbs cresting in its wake. “C’mon now, Miz Nancy,” she said, getting to her feet. “I’ve got a few hours. Let’s get this mess cleaned up.”

Madeleine Barrington accepted a martini, dry with a single olive, from her husband’s outstretched hand. She plopped down onto her plush living room couch and threw off her shoes, digging her toes into the deep white wool carpet. “That woman,” she said. “I don’t know how she goes on living in that awful house!”

“Nancy Carroll?” George asked. “Why, I suppose it’s all the poor thing’s ever known.”

Mrs. Barrington ignored her husband. “She’s living in a mausoleum,” she said. “And letting herself go, always prattling on about inconsequential things. Today she seemed bent on telling us all about her plans for resurrecting that wretched garden of hers. And something else about a tea tin!”

“A tea tin?”

Madeline waved her free hand dismissively. “Some old thing her mother gave her. And how she had to go over and get it back from the Watson house.”

George frowned. “But why was it at the Watson house?”

“Apparently she’d given Marian some of that awful medicinal tea her mother used to concoct, the one she claimed helped her sleep.”

George sat down beside her, snatching up his newspaper. “Hmmm... You know what I

think about that sort of self-medication. How many times I lectured Cora Carroll...But she always turned a deaf ear.”

“I told Nancy as much.” Mrs. Barrington sniffed. “If it’s not cleared by the FDA, it’s not clearing our doorstep!”

George put down his paper, staring at her over his reading glasses. “Say...You don’t think it was the tea that—”

Madeleine offered him a shrewd look. “I considered that,” she said. “But it made no sense. It certainly wouldn’t explain William’s death—I can’t remember him ever downing a cup of tea.”

“I suppose...”

Madeleine took a long sip of her martini. “Anyway, Nancy said Marian threw that awful stuff away, on account of mold.” She sighed, sinking deeper into her cushions. “Such a strange relationship those two had.”

George had opened his paper to the sports section. “Who?” he murmured distractedly.

Madeleine Barrington glared at her husband. “Why, Nancy and Marian, of course! Nancy’s always been jealous about the Watson’s gardener, Claude Thibodeaux. And she *always* carried a torch for William...”

Again, George stared at her. “William?”

“Wake up, George! Don’t tell me you didn’t know that!” Madeleine huffed. “And recently she’s had her eye on Hayden Kayne, too.”

George rubbed his forehead. “Kayne?” he said. “Of all people...”

Madeleine took a final gulp of her drink. “It’s hopeless,” she said with a sigh. “Unfortunately, there’s one thing Nancy never learned—something that horrid mother of hers never taught her. If she wants to snag a man—even a gardener—she’d best focus a bit more on her own appearance.” Closing her eyes, Madeleine sniffed. “When it comes to Nancy Carroll, her garden is the least thing in need of a makeover.”

Intent now on his Times-Picayune, George Barrington offered only a wry smile.



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