

The
**BUTTERFLY
GARDEN**

By Carole Stivers



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In the small, square kitchen of the Watson home, Karyn Johnston sat nervously down at the table. “Please,” she said, “have a seat.”

Marian’s faithful housemaid Letty Butler remained standing by the side cupboard, fidgeting with a set of salt and pepper shakers decorated with scenes from the French Quarter—most likely two of the many tourist trinkets that Marian had been known to collect. Across the room, the gardener Claude Thibodeaux refused to budge further than a few feet from the back door. “Mrs. Watson never allowed me in the kitchen, ma’am,” Claude said, his usually friendly eyes steady on Karyn in a way that was somehow unnerving. “She said I tracked in too much dirt.”

“All right, then,” Karyn said, standing up and splaying her fingers on the table for support. Of course this must be stressful for the two of them, she thought. With Marian gone, they no doubt expected to be dismissed. “I’ve talked with Mr. Kayne,” she began. “It’s taken us a few days to iron out the details, but it seems...It seems that I am now trustee of the Watson Estate.”

Karyn sensed an almost imperceptible shift in Claude Thibodeaux’s posture, a sort of stiffening as he let go of the screen door latch. For her part Letty was still as a statue, the whites of her large eyes glistening slightly as she ran her thin forefinger over the side of the salt shaker.

Claude cleared his throat. “Pardon, ma’am,” he said, “but what does this mean for Letty and myself?”

Karyn blushed. Of course she should have begun by addressing their most urgent concerns. She tried desperately to collect her thoughts. But instead, she was consumed with a sense of being in the wrong place, trapped in Marian's final, carefully-spun web.

She could have been back in Chicago, free and clear. She could have put all of this behind her, if she had just told Hayden the truth—that she wanted no part of it. But somehow Hayden had prevailed. “If I can straighten out the Estate,” he'd said, “I know I can make it right with Letty and Claude. But I'll need your help.” She'd fallen for his earnest plea—the chance, after all, to do some good. Besides, just leaving now—she knew that had the potential to send all the wrong signals.

She looked at Claude. “I have good news,” she said. “There's enough money in the available accounts at the moment to keep you both on.”

“Fer how long?” Claude asked, cocking his head of shaggy brown hair to one side and continuing to eye her in that same unsettling manner.

Karyn straightened, doing her best to look in control. “Mr. Kayne and I are still working that out, but of course we understand that this place represents more to both of you than a job.” She turned to Letty. “You, Letty, have lived here for quite some time...”

“Ten years this August,” Letty murmured.

“And you, Mr. Thibodeaux...” Karyn said. “We certainly understand your situation—your apartment flooded and all. We can't expect you to simply pick up and move out at a moment's notice. Besides, your services will be essential to keeping the exterior of the house and the grounds in good shape until...”

“'Til y'all sell it?” Claude asked, his eyes narrowing now.

Karyn did her best to hold his gaze. “Yes,” she said. “That's most likely what we'll do. Though we haven't totally determined that, and in any case it could take a while.” She offered a weak smile, hopeful of appeasing him. “Meanwhile, the lady next door—Miss Carroll? She's inquired after your services. If you wish, you're certainly free to work for her too, bring in some extra money while retaining your quarters here.”

“Miss Carroll told me as much,” Claude mumbled into the loose collar of his worn cotton shirt. As he raised one sinewy arm to scratch his head, Karyn could see the thickness of his knuckles, the dark stains under his fingernails. If he allowed himself, she thought, he might one day simply become one with the garden, an offshoot of the magnolia tree that he

so assiduously tended. “But I gotta say... This ain’t the way it was s’posed to be.”

“Supposed to be?” Karyn was caught off guard. But Claude met her question only with silence. “Well, Mr. Thibodeaux,” she went on, “It does bother me, you living in that dirty old shed out back when it’s just me and Letty in here. I’d be happy to offer you a room in the house...”

“No,” Claude said, a bit too abruptly. With his left hand he reached behind his back, once more seeking a grip on the door latch. “I mean,” he said, dropping his hands now and looking down at his mud-caked boots. “No thank you, ma’am. That’s a nice offer. But I’m fine where I am.”

“All right. Whatever you wish.” Karyn looked back at Letty, seeking her support. But the wiry woman, always so friendly in the past, didn’t return her gaze. “So, Letty,” she said, “do *you* have any questions?”

“No, ma’am,” Letty mumbled, her eyes pasted on the floor. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Karyn sighed. The poor thing was obviously still in shock. “Okay, then,” she said. “We’ll get through this just fine. And we’ll give you plenty of notice before any... further changes are made.” The energy draining from her legs, she sat down. “These are trying times, but I intend to make sure that you’re taken care of in the end.”

There was a hollow thunk as the shaker in Letty’s left hand clattered to the floor. At her feet, a cloud of white salt fanned across the polished pine floorboards. “Letty?” Karyn asked. “Is something the matter?”

“Oh no, Miz Karyn,” Letty replied, stooping hurriedly to retrieve a dust pan and brush from beneath the sink. “It’s just... It’s like you said. Tryin’ times...”

Karyn looked up just in time to see Claude Thibodeaux heading out the door. Oh well, she thought. It hadn’t gone too badly, considering.

Sighing again, she got up to climb the steep wooden steps leading to the upstairs bedrooms. At the door to Marian’s room, she slid inside and sat hesitantly down on the white coverlet draping the overstuffed feather bed.

This room was Marian’s alone. Ostensibly to afford his wife more privacy, William had taken another room down the hall, outfitting it with a large-screen TV and a built-in bar. A child of divorce, Karyn knew well the significance of such an arrangement—a sign of

estrangement, even in a marriage that on its surface might seem amicable enough. But, she reminded herself, she'd never really known William. She had no idea, the type of partnership that William and Marian had forged since they'd left Chicago.

Karyn closed her eyes, once more allowing a strange mix of bewilderment and anger to overwhelm her. She was indeed trapped. It pained her to be playing the part of a curator—an anthropologist, digging up bones, looking for clues she no longer wished to find. But Hayden was right. Letty still lived in the small maids' quarters off the kitchen, and Claude still slept in the potting shed along the side of the lot, a space that Marian had allowed him to occupy since Katrina. His former home off St. Bernard Avenue had been flooded during the hurricanes, and the repairs had yet to be made that would allow him to move back in. They were both in need of her help. And she had no intention of letting them down—certainly not in the way that Marian had done to her.

She'd been charged with sifting through Marian's things, clearing them out while searching for the estate documents that Mr. Kayne was sure must be somewhere in the house. Yesterday she'd almost finished with the closet, the musty dresses and coats all neatly folded and placed in bags for charity. She had only the top shelf to clear, the place where hats and shoes tumbled one over the other amongst boxes of all shapes and sizes. Best get busy.

Standing on a step-stool, she sorted out the shoes and dropped the hats into bags. Most of the boxes contained jewelry, the necklaces with large beads that Marian seemed to favor, the impossible bejeweled tiaras so popular in the season of Mardi Gras. At the far right end of the closet, she finally came to a large, flat box, tied with a length of pink ribbon. She brought it down and sat back on the bed. Expecting another tiara, she untied the ribbon and wedged open the box.

She could smell it before the box was fully open—a soft smell, like talc, tempered with the dust of age. Carefully she extracted a tiny knit cap, a pair of knit booties, a bib, a plush knit blanket—all snow white, canary yellow, rose pink. Enfolded in the blanket was a slim envelope, scented with honeysuckle. With hesitant fingers, she removed the letter inside.

It was written in the same hand that Karyn recognized from Marian's shopping lists—albeit more firm, less looping and down-sloping. And as she scanned the lines, she felt the pressure of a tremor, a held breath, caught in her throat.

My Dearest Coryn,

They won't let me bury you. They say you are too small for such an honor. So I bury you here, all the hopes I had for you, all the dreams. I give you a name, though no one else will.

They told me you were a girl. Not the heir that they wanted, and in any case not one of them. But I hope that in some way you know—I wanted you. I loved you.

I just didn't deserve you.

The letter, dated December 12, 1970, was signed with a scrawl—*Your Mother*

Karyn felt a hot tear, making its way down her cheek. That name, Coryn—so like hers... With trembling hands, she placed the baby clothing back into the box, secured the top and retied the ribbon. She cradled the box in her lap.

And for the first time since the discovery of her father's letters in Marian's dusty attic, Karyn allowed herself to imagine Marian as someone other than the heartless vixen who had ruined her family. She imagined the younger Marian, vulnerable, in search of love. For all the burdens that Karyn herself had borne, could it be that Marian had carried as many or more? Could it be that Marian had spent a lifetime trying to make amends for her unintended affair with a married man? Perhaps she'd not known of Frank Johnston's family at all when their affair began. Perhaps finding out about them had precipitated her decision to terminate the relationship. All despite the baby she'd carried—*Coryn*.

A sister. One whom Karyn would never meet. One who had never been born...

The realization washed over her, a realization soon followed by a deep sense...of something like remorse. A sick feeling roiled her stomach. She wanted nothing more than to leave this room. To leave this house, a house that had divulged all the secrets she would ever need to know.

Across the room, a torn nylon stocking protruded from one drawer of Marian's dark mahogany bureau. Just the thought of combing through those mangled stockings, those cotton-crotched panties and reinforced brassieres...Swallowing hard, Karyn pulled a laundry hamper over from the closet and placed it next to the dresser. Tugging on the handle of the topmost drawer to work it open, she scooped out a load of soft undergarments and placed them in the hamper. She worked fast now, intent only on getting through this as quickly as possible. But as she unloaded the last of the clothing, her fingernails caught on an old paper drawer liner, brittle and cracked. And before the liner dropped back down into place, she

spied something—a plain manila envelope of the type she’d once used for interoffice memos. Her heart leapt. Maybe this was what Mr. Kayne needed. Maybe now at last, she could stop looking...

Her hands shaking, she withdrew the envelope and brought it over to the bed. But she soon realized that whatever was inside, it wasn’t what Mr. Kayne had been looking for; instead she found only a thin booklet, its dark blue cover inscribed in gold—“2007 Day Planner.” She leafed through it to find the last entry, made appropriately on Friday the 13th of April, the day before Marian’s death: “Notary with Mr. Kayne - 11 AM.” Nothing there that Karyn didn’t already know. But as she closed the book, a shred of white paper fell from between the front cover and the first page. She peered at it—a small, crumpled rectangle, torn along one side as though ripped from a pad. Turning it over, she saw the message written there...

Karyn sat up straight. Without her noticing, the room had darkened, the sky outside the bay window clouding over. As she stared at her own reflection in the small mirror atop the bureau, she realized that her left hand was clutched over her heart. Just then, a dark form passed in the hallway. “Letty?” she called out.

Thin fingers grasped the door from the other side. “Yes, ma’am?” came the timid reply. “Do you need something?”

“No,” Karyn said, doing her best to control the panic that choked her voice. “No. I just...wondered if that was you.” She stared once more at the piece of paper, debating what to do with it. She made to slide it into the pocket of her shift. But no. Hastily, she shoved it back inside the planner and slipped the planner into the envelope. Carefully, she replaced the envelope under the liner and closed the drawer tight. Her heart racing, she hurried down the stairs to the kitchen and picked up the phone, reassured by the dial tone as she placed the receiver to her ear. Reciting the number in her head, she dialed Hayden Kayne.

“Hello,” came his reassuring voice.

“Mr. Kayne! I need to talk—”

“You have reached the office of Hayden Kayne. I am temporarily out of the office, but your call is important to me. Please leave a message, including a call-back number, and I will get back to you as soon as I can.” There followed an annoying beep, and for a moment Karyn thought of leaving a message. But what would she say? And who might hear it? She hung up.

When she turned around, there was Letty again, staring over her shoulder.

“Letty,” she said, “I...I need to get some...uh, milk...for breakfast tomorrow. Do you need anything more for our dinner tonight?”

“No, ma’am,” the woman said, her eyes steady on the phone.

Grabbing her purse from its hook on the side of the cupboard, Karyn hurried toward the front door. “I’ll be back soon!” she called over her shoulder.

As she headed down the street toward the little market on St. Charles, Karyn fought to keep her mind from racing. The old homes, their grilled fences entwined with Confederate jasmine, overhung with sweet olive and crepe myrtle, all seemed to be closing in...

“Miss Johnston?”

Karyn looked up to find Madeleine Barrington lurching toward her. Navigating the uneven sidewalk on a pair of impossibly high heels, the doctor’s wife was nearly out of breath. “Miss Johnston,” she panted, “I’ve been meaning to call on you. However are you holding up, dear?”

Without thinking, Karyn clutched her purse tight to her chest. “Uh...As well as you might imagine, under the circumstances,” she said.

“That’s good,” Mrs. Barrington huffed, plunking her small grocery bag down on the walk. “Good. And how is Claude Thibodeaux? I hear that Nancy Carroll is quite keen to have his services...”

“They’ve spoken,” Karyn said. “Thank you, Mrs. Barrington.”

“And that maid, that...Letitia, is it?”

“Letty,” Karyn said. “Letty Butler.”

Mrs. Barrington sniffed. “If you must know,” she said, “I never cared for that woman.”

Karyn started. “But why, Mrs. Barrington? She’s an excellent cook. And she’s always been so kind to me...”

Mrs. Barrington’s bony fingers dug uncomfortably into the skin of Karyn’s wrist. “Did you know that this Miss Butler’s mother practiced black magic, back in the day? Their kind

all lived out on the bayou in one of those rundown shacks...all members of some African voodoo cult, conjuring up potions and the like.” Her grip tightened still more. “I wouldn’t place any trust in that woman, if I were you.”

Karyn blinked. The feeling from Marian’s room, the cloying scent of claustrophobia, was creeping back, choking her...

But Mrs. Barrington persisted in her tirade, waving her free arm toward the street. “All this rabble, rising up after Katrina, causing a commotion...It’s a shame,” she opined. “We’re doing our best to put things back in order, but if those people have their way, we’ll have another War on our hands. By God, next thing you know, they’ll be tearing down the statue of Robert E. Lee!” A loud rale emanated from somewhere deep in the woman’s chest as she cleared her throat in disgust.

Karyn struggled to maintain her composure. “I’m sure that won’t happen, Mrs. Barrington,” she mumbled.

Mrs. Barrington let go her death grip on Karyn’s arm, but only slightly. “Well, dear...” she said. “I did want to talk to you about something more important. You see, my husband, the doctor...” She paused, staring now into Karyn’s eyes to make sure she was paying attention. “He suspects that something more might have been going on with the Watsons.”

Karyn’s heart quickened, her vision blurring as she tried to focus on a small wart on the side of the woman’s imperious nose. She remembered Nancy Carroll at the funeral, her strangely accusatory expression: *Who could possibly want to harm such lovely people?* But Karyn had been reassured by Hayden’s seeming dismissal of Nancy’s suspicions.

“Something...more?” she murmured.

“It makes no sense, does it, that William and Marian died of the same cause, and so close in time to one another? George thinks it had to be some sort of poison.”

“Poison? But how—”

“He says there are medications that can cause the type of cardiac arrest that both of the Watsons suffered. But neither one was on any sort of suspect medication. So, it had to have been something else...”

Karyn fought to keep her gaze steady. “Mrs. Barrington,” she said, “are you saying that someone intentionally poisoned the Watsons?”

“No...no, no, no. Of course not,” Mrs. Barrington stuttered. “Of course it might have been accidental. George tried to get an autopsy ordered on Marian, but he was too late...Any such toxins would have been flushed out during the...embalming process.”

Karyn winced, once more imagining Marian, her eyes fluttering closed, her lips turning a strange shade of purplish blue.

Mrs. Barrington leaned in close, the tinge of mint tempering the odor of her otherwise stale breath. “Something strange is going on, I warrant you,” she said. “It may have been accidental, it may have been otherwise. But some sort of threat was in play, perhaps in that very house! It may still be. If I were you, I would be careful. At the very least, I would consider moving out entirely until this issue is resolved!”

Karyn gathered herself up. “Thank you for your concern, Mrs. Barrington,” she said. “But at the moment, Letty, Claude, and I have nowhere else to go.”

Mrs. Barrington at last backed off, smoothing her frayed chignon with one distracted hand. “Yes,” she said. “Of course. You poor thing...And what a burden, being called upon to run a household you have only just joined.”

“Mr. Kayne is helping me,” Karyn said. “And once everything is resolved, as you say, we’ll all be able to move on.”

“Yes, yes,” Mrs. Barrington agreed. “But do be careful, dear.” She glanced nervously toward the streetcar tracks. “And now, if you’ll excuse me, I have an appointment with my accountant.”

As Madeleine Barrington hurried away, Karyn noticed the woman’s abandoned sack of groceries, alone on the sidewalk. A bottle of wine, a wedge of cheese, a packet of delicate macarons—trifles so easily left behind by those for whom money was of no consequence.



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