

The
**BUTTERFLY
GARDEN**

By Carole Stivers



~ 8 ~

Hayden Kayne hurried along the sidewalk, keeping his eyes peeled for the streetcar. He never should have sold his Mercedes...

In his mind, he could still hear Karyn Johnston's distressed voice on the phone: "Mr. Kayne, I've been trying to reach you, but I didn't want to leave a message...I've found something troubling here at the house..." She'd begged him to meet her there as soon as possible.

Gladly, he'd thought. I have a few things I'd like to talk to you about as well.

When at last he knocked on the door, his tie askew and his dress shirt soaked with sweat, it was Karyn who answered and drew him inside. "Mr. Kayne," she said, "Thank God you're here. Would you mind if I take you to Marian's room?"

She didn't wait for an answer. Turning on her heel, she led him up the stairs and into Marian's fusty boudoir. The floor was littered with large black plastic bags, billowing with heaps of timeworn coats, dresses, and hats. Quickly, Karyn closed the door behind them and turned to face him.

Hayden felt a jolt, as though the floorboards beneath him had suddenly slid aside to send him hurtling to some unknown deep. Prior to today, he'd thought of Karyn as an innocent, a victim, abruptly enveloped in a harrowing situation. But now he had no idea what motives drove her. Without thinking, he backed away. "Miss Johnston, I think..."

Karyn smiled nervously, her cheeks flushing a bright red. "I realize this must seem

strange to you,” she said. “But I need to show you something ...” Turning, she opened the top drawer of Marian’s bureau.

“What—?”

From Hayden’s vantage point, the drawer appeared to be empty. But reaching to the bottom, Karyn withdrew a large manila envelope. From it she removed a thin blue-covered volume—it was a day planner, a larger version of the little datebook he kept in his pocket. “There’s a note inside,” Karyn said, opening the front cover. “I touched it before I knew what it said...” From the pocket of her shift, she withdrew a pair of old leather driving gloves. “I’d like you to read it. But you can use these to handle it if you think that would be better.”

Donning the gloves, Hayden placed the note on top of the bureau. Then extracting a pair of reading glasses from his shirt pocket, he peered at it closely. The message there was stark, without context:

YOU PROMISED TO GIVE ME WHAT’S MINE

As he scanned the words, a blocky print etched in dark blue ink, the sneering face of Gerry Dupuy came immediately to mind. But Hayden shook his head. He’d come here to assuage, if he could, his doubts about Karyn. He turned to her. “Before I say anything, I’d like to hear your thoughts,” he said.

“My thoughts?”

“Yes. Who do you think wrote this message?”

Karyn sat down on the bed, the fingers of her right hand nervously twirling the little knots of cloth that dotted the duvet. “Honestly,” she said, “I have no idea.”

“And why do you think the note was kept here, in this book? Why was the planner itself hidden?” Hayden had never been a trial lawyer, but he’d attended his share of trials and depositions. He hated grilling Karyn like this, but he dreaded even more the questions he had yet to ask her.

“I’ve thought a lot about that since I found it this morning,” Karyn said. “I think... maybe Marian was planning to use the note in some way...maybe as evidence.”

“Evidence of what?”

“I can’t be sure...But this isn’t Marian’s writing. And this other person, whoever it was, seemed to be threatening her. ‘You promised to give me what’s mine.’ He seems to be hinting

at some sort of blackmail...”

Hayden stared once again at the message. The nib of the writer’s pen had dug deep into the page, the paper almost torn through at the end of each stroke. Certainly this wasn’t Karyn’s handwriting either. But then again, anyone could fake writing like this. “He? What makes you think it’s a he?” he asked.

For a moment, Karyn looked confused. “Or she...I suppose it could have been a she... But the writing—I guess I just assumed it was a man.”

Hayden steeled himself. He didn’t want to go down this road, but he had to. From his briefcase, he pulled out a small tape recorder and placed it next to Karyn on the bed. “I’m sorry,” he said, “but I’ll need to record you from here on in.”

Karyn stood up, staring at the recorder as though it was a small rodent that had just jumped up beside her. “*Record me? Why?*”

“As you seem to know, this note is highly suspicious. And as your lawyer...”

“*My lawyer? I thought you were the lawyer for the estate, just here to help me—*”

Hayden reached down to turn on the recorder. “Karyn, I’ve learned a few things...I’m going to tell you about them, and you can feel free to refute them if you wish. But I think that under the circumstances, I’ll want recordings to substantiate your responses.”

“Under the circumstances? What circumstances?”

Hayden laid his hand gently on Karyn’s shoulder, guiding her to sit back down next to the recorder. “I know about your father,” he said.

“My father? But he died years ago! And what has he got to do with this?”

“I think you know full well, what your deceased father has to do with your presence here. With why you came down here to work for someone you had supposedly never met before. My guess is that Marian Watson was someone you’d known about for quite some time...”

Karyn stared up at him, her gaze growing hard. “Why are you treating me like this? If you suspect me of something, I’d rather you just come out with it!”

Hayden closed his eyes. “I came by here earlier,” he said, willing calm into his voice. “While you were out. And your maid Miss Butler told me something. Something you said to

Marian, even as she lay dying. Do you remember what you said?”

Karyn’s cheeks went white as the sheets on Marian’s bed. “N-no,” she stammered. “I didn’t say anything. I was too busy trying to remember my CPR...”

“You don’t remember saying ‘after everything you did’? Letty Butler was sure she heard you say that.”

For a moment, Karyn just stared at him. Then, the dam broke. She hunched forward, her fists balled in her lap. “I didn’t know,” she cried. “I didn’t know what I know now!”

“What you know now? And what is that?”

“I thought...All those years, I’d imagined some sort of terrible woman, the kind of woman who would steal a man away from his family without a second thought. Away from his wife, his daughter...”

“You thought it was Marian who was responsible for the dissolution of your parents’ marriage? For your father’s suicide? Is that why you came down here?”

Karyn looked at him, anger flaring in her eyes once more. Was she angry at Marian? At herself? Or at him, for his sudden betrayal of her trust? “Once I realized it was her, I blamed her for *everything*,” she spat. “But you have to understand—it wasn’t me who found Marian. It was *she* who found *me*!”

Hayden stared at her, thoroughly confused. “What do you mean?”

“Until just a few months ago, I had no idea who Marian was,” Karyn said. “But then she called me, out of the blue. She offered me a job, asked me to come down here. I didn’t understand it. But I’ve found out a few things since. And now...I think I do understand...”

Hayden rubbed his forehead. “What is it that you understand? Because I have to admit...”

Karyn pulled a tissue from her pocket, dabbed at her eyes. “I know she never wanted to harm my mother, or me,” she said. “I know why she brought me down here, after my mother died. And I know why she named me trustee.”

“Why is that?”

“Because she knew about me all along. She cared about me. It’s why she left my father. I think...” Karyn choked out the words. “Marian cared more about me than my own father

ever did.”

Hayden sat down on the bed beside Karyn. “But how can you be so sure of that?”

Karyn’s gaze drifted toward the closet, at a flat box now lying on the floor, tied neatly with a pink ribbon. “Did you know that Marian lost a daughter?”

“No...”

“A miscarriage. But she did name the baby—Coryn...” Karyn turned to face him. “Hayden, Coryn would have been my half-sister.”

Hayden blinked. “It might make sense... why she would bring you on without so much as a background check.” He looked down at his hands. “But you don’t deny that you said those things, do you? About how Marian being sorry wasn’t enough, even as the poor woman was in the throes of death?” Once more, he confronted Karyn. “Maybe you know now that Marian wasn’t the evil woman you once thought she was. But you didn’t know it that day.”

Karyn looked up at him, her brow creased. “If you believe I have it in me to kill someone, I’m not sure I could ever convince you otherwise.” He watched a tear trace down her cheek. “But I thought you trusted me. Of all the people here, you were the one person I thought *I* could trust...”

Hayden removed his reading glasses and brought his hand up to pinch the bridge of his nose. Despite himself, he could feel his defenses crumbling. He palmed the recorder and turned it off. “I do want so much to trust you,” he murmured. “Actually...I’ve grown quite fond of you.” Then he caught himself. Gritting his teeth, he slid the planner and its incriminating note back into the envelope and placed the envelope in his briefcase. “But I’ll need to hang on to this for now.”

Karyn cast him a worried look. “What do you plan to do with it?”

“As you said,” Hayden replied, assuming as officious a tone as he could muster, “it constitutes evidence. I’m hearing that an investigation is being called for. And if not, I’ll call for one myself. There should be a complete search of the house. And you, Letitia, and Claude Thibodeaux will need to be prepared for a thorough interrogation.” He squared his shoulders. “The police might not be as indulgent as I am.”

Hayden led Karyn down the stairs to the kitchen, where on the counter shrimp, morsels of chicken and pork sausage, okra, and black-eyed peas waited to be tossed into a pot of

thickened broth. Letty Butler started as they entered the room, her hand frozen on her kitchen knife.

“Don’t worry, Miss Butler,” Hayden reassured her. “I’ve talked with Miss Johnston.” He cast a glance at Karyn. “As I promised, we’re trying to sort things out.”

Karyn glared back at him but was quick to assuage the maid. “I’m so sorry, Letty,” she said. “If you have any more misgivings about how I behaved that day, I would hope you could feel free to talk with me directly.”

Letty kept hold of her knife, her wide eyes imploring. “You’ll stay for dinner, Mr. Kayne?” she asked.

Hayden patted her thin shoulder. “Of course,” he said. The poor woman needed someone else in the house right now, and perhaps that would be best. He hated that it had to be this way. But when it came to Karyn Johnston, he had yet to settle on a verdict.

Nancy Carroll gazed out the back window of her second-story bedroom, taking in the bedraggled garden by the corner of her lot. Claude Thibodeaux had spent the late afternoon turning up the soil in preparation for planting; even from here she could smell the rich odor of her household compost, now blended with the alluvial sands common to the neighborhood. Things were moving right along, she thought. Soon she’d have real progress to show her friends.

She heard a tapping sound from downstairs. Her knees aching in protest, she made her way down the gloomy stairway and along the dark hall to reach the back kitchen door. There stood Claude, his overalls and boots caked with dirt. He smelled a bit swampy, but his crooked smile was pleasant enough.

“I’m done with the clearing,” he said. “In two days I’ll come back with the plants and start puttin’ ‘em in.”

Nancy went to the jar in the pantry and pulled out a crisp fifty-dollar bill. “Here,” she said, handing it to him. “This should cover your costs. But regarding the labor...As per our agreement, I’ll be expecting a reduced fee.”

Claude took the bill and shoved it deep into the pocket of his overalls. Then he touched the brim of his cap with a grimy forefinger. “Still thinkin’ on it,” he said.

As she closed the door, Nancy could see him ambling off around the side of the house. Thinking on it, indeed. He owed it to her now. She supposed he was going home to that dreadful cave that Marian had had him staying in ever since his apartment got flooded. It really was too bad, a hard-working man like Claude, someone from a good family, forced to live in such squalor. But that would soon be remedied.

As he sopped up Letty's stew with thick pieces of bread at the Watson kitchen table, Hayden realized that he'd been starving—what with the unsettling coffee hour he'd shared with Gerry Dupuy and the allegation from Letty that had stirred his distrust of Karyn, he hadn't had a meal all day. But he was finding it difficult to avoid Karyn's gaze from across the table. And Letty Butler, hunched over her own small table in the corner nearest the back door, now kept a furtive watch on both of them.

Chewing his food, Hayden silently weighed the evidence first against Mr. Dupuy, then against Karyn. He wanted so much to believe Karyn's account, that she'd had no knowledge of Marian or William until just recently. But could it be that Karyn had secretly plotted to poison first William, then Marian, all on account of something that had happened decades ago? Or was it Gerry Dupuy, feeling wronged by the Watsons, who had engineered their deaths? Maybe it was someone else entirely, perhaps one of William's discarded lovers, or another business associate? After what he'd learned about William, the possibilities seemed endless. In any event, if Mr. Dupuy was correct about the status of the estate, he'd need to move quickly to find a buyer for the house. And in the end, Claude Thibodeaux and Letty Butler would be the ones to pay, losing their jobs and their homes in one fell swoop. Wasn't that always the way it was—the poor paying for the misdeeds of the rich?

Karyn held her nose high, sniffing the air. "There's that awful odor again," she said. She looked toward the door. "Letty, do you smell that?"

"Yes, ma'am," Letty said quietly. "I've been smellin' that skunky stuff for weeks now. I used to think it was that tea I brewed for Miz Marian, but I still smell it every once in a while..."

Karyn's eyes lit up. "I thought I sensed it on Marian's breath, too!"

Letty turned in her seat. "You don't think that tea was bad, do you?"

"I'm not sure, but—"

Letty stood up, kneading her palms together nervously. “Now, Miz Karyn, I never meant any harm. But we ran outta that Earl Grey that Miz Marian liked, and I started makin’ the new one from Miz Nancy Carroll ‘cause Claude told me it was supposed to be good for the nerves. Miz Marian seemed mighty nervous, and—”

“I’m not accusing you of anything, Letty. I just want to see if that tea is the source of this odd smell. Do we still have it?”

Letty looked down at the floor. “Sorry, ma’am. Miz Carroll came by the other day. She said she wanted to get the tin back, that it was some kind of heirloom her mother gave her.”

Karyn stood up, crossing to the sink with her empty plate. “So, you gave it back to her?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“We might want to retrieve it, check to make sure it’s not tainted. Miss Carroll could get sick...”

“Oh, I doubt she’ll use it, ma’am. She told me she was gonna throw it out as soon as she got home.”

“Still,” Karyn said, “I think I’ll give Miss Carroll a call...” Her hands wet with sudsy water, she took Hayden’s plate.

Suddenly, Letty let out a shriek. She wheeled around, her thin index finger pointing toward the back door. “Oh!” she cried. “It’s Cochon! Whatever’s wrong with him?”

Outside, a plump but mangy animal staggered along the edge of the patio, its spindly legs wavering as though it had had too much to drink. Without warning, the little calico cat named Cochon dropped like a stone.



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