

*The*  
**BUTTERFLY  
GARDEN**

*By Carole Stivers*



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By the time Hayden Kayne wandered down to his kitchen the next morning, his boarder and now self-appointed valet Richard was already making coffee. “Tough night, eh, Mr. Kayne?” Richard said with a smile.

“I’ll say.” Hayden grinned. “Though I daresay you and I have seen worse.”

“So true!” Richard poured a dollop of cream into his cup.

“I suppose it helps to have some perspective,” Hayden said. “Are the ladies up yet?”

“Miz Karyn and Miz Letty have yet to make an appearance,” Richard replied.

Hayden sighed. He couldn’t get the image of little Cochon out of his mind. The scroungy but loveable cat, named for the discarded pig’s head he’d been feasting on when Claude Thibodeaux rescued him outside a butcher shop after Katrina, had become a favorite at the Watsons’. Letty had doted on him, feeding him kitchen scraps until his stomach grew round as a melon. After the shock of Cochon’s demise, and with Letty’s nerves in tatters, Hayden had thought it best for all of them to leave the house.

But he had to admit, if only to himself, that he’d found immense relief in the possibility that his theories of murder and intrigue might be unfounded. Perhaps what had happened to the Watsons themselves was also a matter of inadvertent poisoning. Still, there were several unanswered questions. He’d need to maintain his professional objectivity until all of them were answered.

Last night, Karyn Johnston had seized on this new development as her own perceived exoneration. “Maybe now I’ll be able to move on,” she’d said as she’d hastily packed her overnight bag, “I never really planned on staying here long. In fact, I’d be gone now if Marian hadn’t put me on the trust.”

“You would?” Hayden had flinched. Of course he wanted her innocence to be proven. But it wasn’t proven yet. And even if it was, the thought of her leaving...

“Of course,” Karyn replied. “But now I feel...responsible. It’s like what happened with my mother, I suppose. All those years caring for her, then selling the house. I suppose it’s my lot in life to have to clean up after people.”

Just then Hayden caught sight of Karyn in the hallway, cloaked in the bulky lime green bathrobe he’d lent her. “You like some coffee, ma’am?” Richard asked.

“Why yes, thanks!” Karyn took the proffered cup and padded over to the table.

“Did you sleep well?” Hayden asked, taking a seat across from her.

“Better than I have in days,” Karyn said. “I didn’t realize just how much that house was wearing on me...”

Letty Butler appeared in the doorway, wearing her usual black skirt and loose, colorfully-patterned shirt. Hayden could have sworn he saw a blush light her cheeks as with a flourish, Richard served her a cup of coffee.

“I’m still worried about Claude,” Karyn said. “He should have called us by now.”

“Maybe Mr. Thibodeaux went on a bender with those friends of his,” Richard said. “They’re a wild bunch, I hear.”

“We left him a note on the shed door,” Hayden said. “He’ll know where to find us. And I wouldn’t be surprised if the place was swarming with police by tomorrow. They’re finally working on a warrant, and I mean to honor it.”

Karyn cast him a concerned look. “They’ll still be searching? But when will we get the results back—about the cat?”

“Dr. Barrington is personally seeing to the tox screen on that poor little beast,” Hayden replied. “The good doctor seems to have taken a very personal interest in this case.”

“He agrees there might be some relationship between the thing that killed the cat and

whatever killed the Watsons?” Karyn asked hopefully.

“As their personal physician, I can understand why he’d want to protect his own reputation,” Hayden said. “Mind you, it still wouldn’t rule out foul play. But at least the doctor might enjoy some vindication.”

Richard came over to the table, a thick brown envelope in his hand. “I got that paperwork you wanted, over at Land Records,” he said.

“They ran the chain of title on the Watson house?”

“Took some doin’ to copy it all, they said. But they phoned yesterday after you left, to say it was ready.”

“Thank you kindly, Richard,” Hayden was eager to get back to something he knew well—real estate. Picking up a butter knife, he slit open the envelope and pulled out a stack of off-white sheets. Many of the pages, handwritten or plunked out on some ancient typewriter, had carried deep creases, and the copies were almost illegible. Sitting back, he fished his reading glasses from the front pocket of his shirt. It might take him a while to sift through all this paperwork, but given the mischief he’d uncovered in the other Watson files, he’d need to be thorough...

“Is this all you’ll need to sell the house?” Karyn asked eagerly.

Hayden looked at her over his glasses. “Most of it, yes.”

Across the room, Letty turned from the window. “If I could,” she said, “I’d like to go visit my mother.”

Karyn put down her cup. “Of course, Letty,” she replied. “Do you need some money for a cab?”

“No need,” Richard volunteered. He turned to Letty. “I’ll go along. We can take the transit. Your mama’s at the Bywater, ain’t she?”

Again, Letty blushed. “There’s really no need, Richard...”

“No problem. I got friends over that way.”

Karyn stole a questioning look at Hayden as the two left the kitchen.

“Another thing I found out while going through Marian’s finances,” Hayden said. “Seems she paid for Letty’s mother to stay at a nice nursing home called St. Margaret’s.

They got flooded out by Katrina, and now she's at what used to be the Bywater Hospital. The poor woman is quite out of her mind with dementia... We'll have to find a way to keep all of Marian's good works in motion."

"Marian was a kind soul, wasn't she?" Karyn said. "All the money for the schools, helping out Letty and her mother. Letty told me it was she who offered the shed to Claude Thibodeaux..."

Hayden nodded. "You're right about the schools, and about Letty. But Claude and others like him wouldn't have had to rely on anyone's charity if the likes of William Watson had allowed them back into their homes after Katrina," he said.

Karyn took hold of his arm. "What happened?"

"After the floods, HUD told everyone that the St. Bernard Projects would be habitable after a simple clean-up. So, the residents who were still here went back there with mops and pails, ready to do the work. But they were locked out by HANO."

"Hano?"

"The public housing authority in New Orleans. The city would rather see these people homeless than let those projects stand. And even with William out of the mix, the other developers are still circling like vultures. Those apartments will never reopen at a price that the former tenants can afford."

"Mops and pails," Karyn said. "That's so sad. I remember reading about it in the Times-Picayune." She downed the last of her coffee, then looked around. "I seem to be the last one still not dressed. If you don't mind, I'll shower..."

Hayden offered her a smile. "Feel free. And please, use the master bath. My other guests aren't always the tidiest..."

"Thank you very much, kind sir!" Karyn said. "After that, I think I'll go over to the Watson house and pick up more of my things before the police descend on the place."

Hayden looked up. Should he let her return alone to the scene of a crime that she herself might have committed? But he couldn't think of a reason to hold her back. Her Goldman Sachs reference Robert Wilkins had called back early this morning to corroborate Karyn's tale of a summons from Marian. Marian's day planner and the strange note tucked inside was now securely stored in Hayden's safe. And he might be running a hotel in this old mansion,

but he wasn't running a prison. If Karyn didn't reappear after an hour or so, he'd send someone over to check on her. "Go ahead," he said. "I should have a better handle on all of this by the time you get back."

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Her fresh dress swaying in a light spring breeze, Karyn breathed deep the redolent morning air along St. Charles Avenue. But she still felt like a tourist here in New Orleans, a northerner whose every attitude seemed at odds with her surroundings. She felt no kinship with the rich, nor with the downtrodden, with those who worked the back rooms, nor with those whose motto was simply "Laissez les bon temps rouler." She'd counted on her studies—on a new career of some sort—to ground her, to offer purpose. But she'd already realized that nursing was not for her. This taking care, this cleaning up...was this really what she wanted to do for the rest of her life? She had to face it: She needed to look into another line of work. She was done with banking. But perhaps the job of a paralegal...

She thought about Hayden. She hated how he'd doubted her yesterday. More than anything now, she wanted to regain his trust. What was that he'd said? *I've grown quite fond of you.* No one, certainly no man, had ever said anything like that to her before. She remembered Hayden's soft reassurances as he guided her through their weekly debriefs on the Watson Estate, the strong support of his arm at Marian's funeral. She pictured the clarity of his gaze when he was puzzling over something, the softness of it sometimes when he looked at her...But no. She couldn't entertain such thoughts now. She'd already made up her mind about New Orleans, and Hayden was just another part of it.

She turned right down the Watsons' street and walked the few short blocks to their house. It was her house now, but one she hoped she could soon forget. As she climbed the front steps, she mentally listed out which of her belongings she'd need to take with her before the property was cordoned off. She should try and take everything. After all, her job there was done. And the thought of policemen, pawing over her things, sent shivers up her spine.

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Nancy Carroll stared down at the two remaining party dresses lying on her bed, the lavender flowered one and the forest green, trying to decide which one looked less shabby. The top button on the back of the green dress was missing, but the hem of the lavender was frayed. Again, she felt that hole in her heart that Patsy Lee had left behind. Patsy would have made the decision for her. She would have done whatever mending needed doing before

Nancy could take another breath. But Patsy was in Houston for good now, with her daughter. She doubted she'd see much more of her doting maid.

Nancy managed a smile. She'd been invited to the Garden Club fundraiser as a guest of Madeleine Barrington, and she was so looking forward to it—she'd hardly been outdoors since the day of Marian's funeral. It would do her good to get away from this place, to spend time with people worthy of her attention for once. And there were things she needed to discuss, but only with someone she could trust.

She started at the ring of the phone. Still in her nightgown, she scuttled over to the bedside table and fumbled the receiver to her ear. "Hello?"

"Nancy, is that you?" It was Mrs. Barrington's voice, though raised by at least an octave from its normal baritone.

"Madeleine?" she asked. "Yes, of course it's me. Is something the matter? Has the party been canceled?" Nancy sat down on the bed, a sinking feeling already descending on her.

"No," Mrs. Barrington wheezed. "At least I don't think so...Actually, I'm trying to reach someone at the Watson house. But no one is answering. Do you know if they're at home?"

Nancy went to the window, stealing a peek over the fence to the spot where she'd last seen Marian alive. The garden was deserted. The glass table and the little chair were gone, the pavers scrubbed clean. "I don't know," she said, her thoughts racing. "Is something wrong?"

"The cat," Mrs. Barrington said. "We found out something about the cat."

"Madeleine," Nancy said, "whatever are you talking about? What cat?"

"That mangy little mouser that Claude Thibodeaux kept around. He died yesterday evening."

"Died? Then, what more is there to know about him?" Nancy was pacing her floor now, thinking about the gardener—still homeless, now catless.

"Nancy," Mrs. Barrington said. "George just got hold of a copy of the toxicology report. The cat had ingested a poison. Nothing standard like rat poison or some such. It has a similar structure to...what was that, dear?" There was a muffled sound as Mrs. Barrington conferred with her husband, and Nancy imagined the man's florid gesturing as his wife cupped her hand over the receiver. Then Madeleine's voice reverberated once more. "Something called

digitoxin? They used to use it for heart patients, but George says they don't use it any more. It's derived from the foxglove, I believe...something I learned in one of those lovely lectures at the Club..."

There was more rustling, and Nancy could hear George Barrington's strained voice. "For God's sake, Madeleine, get to the point!" the man pleaded.

"Yes," Mrs. Barrington said. "The point is that this poison might be coming from the garden. But somehow it seems to be affecting members of the household. Karyn Johnston and her house staff are in grave danger, Nancy! They need to be alerted as soon as possible!"

Nancy once more sank down on the bed. She'd already done her part. She'd gone over to the Watsons', retrieved that nasty stuff, disposed of it. She'd had assurances that this mess was going to be cleaned up... "Alerted," she murmured. "Yes. I can do that. As soon as I get dressed...But Madeleine..."

"Yes?"

"Are the police still coming?"

There was a scuffle at the other end of the line, and Dr. Barrington came on. "They're getting a warrant, but the way they are these days, it's taking forever. I urged them to go without one, and to bring some scientists with them to take samples. Meanwhile, everyone should leave that house immediately. And they should *stay* away until this thing is resolved!"

Nancy's gaze drifted toward the window. She imagined her trash bin by the back door, its top removed, its contents ransacked. Had that poor little beast managed to get in there somehow? She'd need to check on that before she did anything else.

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Karyn scaled the dark stairs to the second floor of the Watson home and made her way to the room she'd inhabited for the past two and a half months. Had it only been that long? It seemed like ages. Going to the closet, she took down the clothing that was hers, laying it out on the small bed and folding it. She extracted her suitcase from under the bed. The airline tags were still tied to the handle, remnants from the day she'd first arrived in New Orleans. She'd offered to take the bus, but her old boss Robert Wilkins wouldn't hear of it. "You meet all sorts on the bus," he'd said. Little had he known, what sorts Karyn would meet once she arrived here.

When at last everything was folded and accounted for, she realized that her suitcase and backpack just wouldn't be sufficient. She hadn't acquired much since coming here—just a few light dresses and the thick physiology textbook she'd bought at the school bookstore. And a new pair of sandals. And a sun hat. In any event, it wasn't all going to fit.

She retraced her steps to the kitchen. Peering atop the refrigerator where Letty kept a stack of empty paper shopping bags, she imagined herself one of those “bag ladies” she'd seen at the streetcar stops—but it would have to do for now. Finding one the perfect size, she pulled it down with some effort. Then...there it was again. That smell. She looked out the back door. Claude. Had he gotten the message they'd taped to his door?

Cracking the back door open, Karyn looked out toward the shed on her right. Good... the note was gone. But where was Claude? She crept across the pavers toward the shed door, studiously avoiding the spot where the little cat had collapsed the night before. But as she went, the smell only got stronger. What *was* that?

Circling the shed, she came around to the other side. Here, there were only a few feet of clearance between the wall of the shed and the fence marking the limits of the property. “Ugh!” She brought her hand up to cover her nose. A putrid smell, like something vegetable that had long since died, assailed her nostrils. In the shadow of the fence, a wooden compost box, the kind her father had once built in Fox Lake, sat with its top askew. Daring to approach it, she could see only a tangle of thin stalks protruding from under the cover, all overrun with ants. “Ugh!” she said again. But at least now she knew the source of that smell...

Still cupping her hand over her nose and mouth, she retraced her steps to the shed door. The door was open. “Mr. Thibodeaux?” she called. But her voice only echoed hollowly back to her. Leaning forward, she stuck her head in past the jamb.

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Hayden slammed the sheaf of copied records down on the table, staring at a single scrawled signature. “Jacob Miller...” he said out loud to himself. “Henry Watson's notorious notarial assistant! It's a swindle, just like all the others—but this time with the Watson home as the prize...”

Hayden closed his eyes. It was obvious. The true owner of the Watson home and property had been Casimir Thibodeaux, Claude's grandfather. And with his forebears gone to their graves, a strong case could now be made that Claude himself was the rightful heir...



Suddenly, he remembered the note that Karyn had discovered: “YOU PROMISED TO GIVE ME WHAT’S MINE.” Had that note been penned by Claude? But Marian had not complied. On the day before her death, she’d given it all to Karyn...

His heart pounding, he picked up the phone and dialed the Watsons’ number. There was no answer. He checked his watch. Karyn was most likely still there. Still upstairs, packing. Alone—but perhaps not.

Leaving the papers strewn on his kitchen table, he left the house and headed for the street. He was in luck. A streetcar was slowing at his stop.

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Though it was a bright day, the inside of the windowless shed was pitch dark. In the far corner, Karyn could just make out a stack of old plant pots and the makeshift pallet, a tattered pillow bunched up at one end, where she assumed Claude spent his nights. But there was no Claude. Then something caught her eye, a glimmer. What was that? As her eyes adjusted to the dark, she realized that there was glassware of some sort arranged on a table across from the bed. She stepped inside and stood in front of the table.

The collection there reminded her of a chemistry class she’d taken in high school—a few beakers, a large flask, a distillation apparatus. And next to these a hot plate, a balance, a tattered notebook. She leaned down to read what was written there. Her eyes went wide. “December 12, 2006. Killed 2 mice,” she read. That handwriting, those square capitals... She knew them.

“You lookin’ fer somethin’?”

She wheeled around. Claude stood blocking the door, something long and metallic gleaming in his hand.

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Wearing her forest green dress and with her make-up appropriately applied, Nancy Carroll draped a light sweater over her shoulders and stepped out her back kitchen door. She hadn’t seen her maid Lorna since dinner last night, but this time she was thankful for that. The fewer prying eyes, the better.

The trash bin stood under the kitchen window. She winced, expecting to find it without its lid. But no, the lid was sealed and latched, the bin undisturbed. Undoing the latch and

lifting the lid carefully, she peered inside. There was the wrapper from last night's piece of fish. She tweezed it up between her thumb and forefinger. Yes. There, clear at the bottom of the bin, was the little red plastic bag that contained her mother's tea leaves. The twist tie was still wrapped tight around its top, and the bag appeared intact. Nancy sighed, releasing a deep breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

Straightening her sweater, she looked toward the fence. Best get over to the Watsons' now. She hoped no one would be home. She didn't want to be any more involved in this mess than she already was. And she certainly didn't want to be late for Madeleine's party.

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Nearly choked by the lock of Claude's muscular arm around her neck, Karyn fought to fill her lungs. She had to lean into him just to maintain her balance as he pulled her backward across the patio, through the back door of the house and into the kitchen. She could smell the sweat on his clothing, the alcohol on his breath, the panic of his indecision. "I told her," he muttered. "I told her what I wanted. She promised she'd give it to me..."

"Please," Karyn said, her voice thin through what little airway he allowed. "I had nothing to do with this..."

"Maybe you din't," Claude spat. "But you're deep in it now..."

"Wh... What are you going to do?" She didn't really want to know. She was only stalling now, her oxygen-starved brain searching desperately for options.

"Just like the other two. You're gonna git gone," he said simply. "I'm gonna tell everybody you weren't interested in any of this. That you left."

Karyn was starting to see stars now, the edges of her vision blurring. "Yes," she murmured. "I can do that. I'll just leave..."

Claude laughed, his thick chest rattling against her shoulder blades. "No, ma'am! It ain't that simple," he said. "You know too much."

Karyn once more glimpsed the flash of his carving knife. Claude was raising it now, readying it...but he couldn't seem to steady his hand.

Suddenly, she heard the familiar creak of the screen door spring. The back door flew open and there stood Hayden, his eyes wide in disbelief. "What—" he said. But it seemed he could say no more. The word hung there in the room, an eternal question.

“You don’t wanna come any farther,” Claude warned.

Hayden stood stock still, but Karyn could see his eyes darting from side to side, searching the room, his hands twitching at his sides.

“I only asked fer what was mine,” Claude said, the words hissed drunkenly into her ear. “Is that too much to ask?”

Gathering himself, Hayden gazed directly at Claude, his gray eyes strangely aglow under the shelf of his brow. “No...It’s not too much,” he said. “In fact, I came over here to tell you. This place *is* yours. And I have the paperwork to prove it.”

As if that was possible, Claude’s grip tightened. But out of the corner of her eye, Karyn could see the knife’s edge lower slightly. “How kin I believe you?” Claude said. “You’re just another one o’ them fast-talkin’ lawyers, always conspirin’ to take what ain’t yours! Way I see it, things won’t get straight ‘til you’re *all* dead and gone!”

“Please,” Hayden said. As he raised his hands, palms forward, Karyn watched his gaze drift slightly to her right, over her shoulder. “Mr. Thibodeaux, you’ve got to believe me. I have all the evidence we’ll need at my house. We can go to court, clear all of this up...”

But the knife stayed where it was. Karyn closed her eyes. Strangely, in that moment she thought of Marian—kind, misguided, now lost forever.

Suddenly, she was shaken by a hard jolt. Her ears rang at the sound of a splintering clang. Claude’s hold on her loosened, the knife falling from his hand and clattering to the floor. Struggling to stay upright as Claude’s body crumpled behind her, she turned to follow Hayden’s line of sight.

There stood Nancy Carroll, a heavy frying pan clutched to her chest.



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