

Presented by the Arbor Teas Summer Reading Series



Arbor Teas Summer Reading Series

Get ready to steep yourself in a story! The Arbor Teas Summer Reading Series presents an original work of fiction by a different author each year. Released one chapter per week, each serialized novel is meant to be enjoyed all summer long by tea-lovers and non tea-lovers alike. Why? Because next to iced tea, nothing goes better with summer than a good read. Enjoy!



By Carole Stivers



~ 1 ~

Marian Watson sipped her morning tea, allowing its sublime heat to seep into her bones. In her garden the milkweed plants, *Asclepias curassavica*, waved their red and yellow clustered blooms in a slight breeze. Bells of blue foxglove shivered above a riotous carpet of woodland phlox. The golden monarch butterflies with their delicate window-pane wings, newly hatched from their hidden chrysalises, danced from blossom to blossom. It was spring, a time of rebirth. A time of recovery.

Time. Maybe that was all it would take.

But Marian feared that she might never recover. On this warm New Orleans morning, her hands were cold, her thoughts muddled, her stomach clenched into a hard fist. Perhaps this was just what happened to a woman in her waning years—a slow decline into utter decrepitude. Perhaps it was the toll that sin eventually took on the soul of the sinner.

The old magnolia tree held court at the far side of the garden, its pungent, lemony scent heavy in the air. She fixed her gaze on the gardener, timing her heartbeat to the monotonous scrape of his rake across the exposed roots of the tree. Against the fence, he'd amassed a deep pile of white, waxen petals. The door to the potting shed stood slightly ajar, and she imagined the grimy pallet on the floor inside where he'd made his bed since the floods of Katrina. As in all things, she'd done what she thought was right; she'd given him a home until he could get back on his feet.

But in recent days, she'd come to question her own judgment. Even in this place with no seasons, a place where every intention was cloaked in innuendo, there were always signs. And she had ignored all of them. In her efforts to do good, it seemed she'd only

brought ruin...

She regarded the napkin arranged across her lap, counted the tiny red roses embroidered along its edge—just like the roses on William's casket. It was clear to her now that she'd betrayed her husband. And though William may have deserved many things, he'd not deserved that. She shook her head. She still had time—young Miss Karyn Johnston had arrived as planned, and she trusted Hayden Kayne to help with the estate. She couldn't change the past, but there was still time to change the future.

With effort, she placed her cup back onto its matching saucer, repressing the tremors that disturbed her fingers. They seemed to be getting worse, these tremors. Perhaps, as Letty said, it was her nerves. But more likely it was the caffeine. The tea tasted off, bitter. She'd have to talk to Letty—the girl was always losing track of time, steeping the leaves too long...

Suddenly she felt a heaviness, a pounding at her temples. Before her eyes, the garden erupted. Colors bled together, points blurring into a solid smear. On the table her hand lay limp, like a blue-white fish, oddly detached at the wrist. Watching it, wondering what it might do next, she felt a jolt. A sharp pain bolted from her breastbone, arcing up and along the edge of her jaw.

Something brushed her shoulder—something soft and distant. A feather, perhaps, or a wayward butterfly. A concerned voice echoed from somewhere far away. "Mrs. Watson?"

"I'm sorry..." Marian tried to speak, but nothing more came out. Her vision went black. She toppled from her chair, her shoulder striking the stone pavers with a painless thud.

Now something was pressing dully on her chest. Someone's lips touched hers. William?

But no. It was a girl—a rosy-cheeked girl with blonde hair and her father's blue eyes, her small body clothed all in pink and yellow. Her little girl gathered her up, up...into the radiance.

Earlier that morning, Miss Nancy Carroll had awakened from yet another fitful night of sleep. As she'd steadied herself on the little rug by her bedside, her gaze had flitted from her own wrinkled reflection in the bedroom mirror, out the garden window and down to the back lawn. From here, she could just see over the brambled fence and into her neighbor's redolent butterfly garden.

On the patio near the garden stood the round glass table with its iron filigree legs—the table where, on beautiful mornings like this, Marian Watson took her tea. Nancy caught sight of Marian's shapely head, her long neck, her fine auburn hair (no doubt dyed), her loose silken robe, sky blue, fluttering in the breeze as she arranged herself on a small, cushioned chair. With deliberate movements Marian picked up a delicate bone china teacup, etched with a red rose design on a cream-colored background, and brought it to her lips.

Of course, Nancy couldn't see the cups clearly from here. But she'd known those teacups for years. They had belonged to William Watson's mother, and to his grandmother before that. Like William and his mother and grandmother, like the monarch butterflies, like the milkweed where the butterflies laid their eggs and the nectar flowers where they fed—indeed, like Nancy herself—the teacups were native to New Orleans. Only Marian was out of place, a Chicago girl pretending at being a New Orleanian, if only by marrying one.

Nancy turned back to her mirror, her arthritic fingers fumbling with the pins binding flyaway wisps of gray to her thinning scalp. Patsy Lee had gone to visit her daughter in Houston, leaving Nancy without a personal maid. "Oh, posh..." Nancy muttered, tying a lime green headscarf around the mess. She didn't dare let her house girl Lorna touch her hair. The poor thing could barely poach an egg.

"Lorna!" she called. "Could I get a cup of tea up here on the balcony, please?" She didn't expect an answer. Though much too young to be going deaf, the girl seemed to be perfecting her powers of inattentiveness.

Nancy wedged open her balcony door. Though the cool of night had yet to burn off, the air was already heavy with humidity. Dew hung like crystalline beads from her railing. Redbirds, finches, and hummingbirds of every stripe swooped and called from the live oaks. Down in Marian's yard, Claude Thibodeaux stooped beneath the magnolia, raking its fallen flowers into a neat pile. Claude, and his father before him, had maintained the Watsons' garden for as long as Nancy could remember.

Perfect in its every imperfection, Marian Watson's butterfly garden was the pride of their neighborhood. After Katrina, when it seemed that the Garden District butterflies might never return, Claude had been the first to lure them back. Meanwhile Nancy's own gardener, Mr. Chauncey Turner, had abandoned her. He'd followed his son to Georgia, where young DeWayne could complete his medical studies at Emory; Tulane had closed on account of the floods, and Mr. Turner couldn't live without DeWayne. Now Nancy's meager garden plot, choked with weeds, served only to entice the few straggling butterflies who happened to

wander over the fence.

How things had changed since Katrina and Rita! Nancy had thought at first that it would just be a matter of time—that life would soon get back to what she'd once called normal. But over a year and a half had passed since those storms, and the once proud homes that lined her block, colonnade-encrusted battleships first erected over a century and a half ago, still stood sad, grubby, and unkempt. Many of her old neighbors had returned from their forced exile to assess the damage left behind by standing water, fires, and downed branches, to brave homes reeking of mold and rotted food. But many had given up, retreating to out-of-state vacation homes from which they would never return. Gone were the Landry's, the Smythe's and the Worthington's. Gone were the manicured neighborhood parks and their trimmed gardens. The little green Quaker parrots, once scarce, now multiplied unchecked in the stripped branches of live oaks. Even the posh little Prytania Street restaurant where Nancy and her friends had gathered each morning for tea and pastries remained shuttered, its owner seemingly on permanent hiatus.

And there was more. Nancy's dour mother had left this earth entirely—presumably for even warmer climes. Her frail lungs assailed by the pall of black mold that had taken residence in the lower floor of her home, she'd simply succumbed. Then, just a few months ago, William Watson had passed away unexpectedly, leaving his estate to his wife Marian.

William. Even in childhood, he'd been more to Nancy than just the towheaded neighbor boy who escorted her to primary school each morning, kicking stones and hopping over cracks in the sidewalk. When he'd started at the all-boys Jesuit High School in Mid-City, she'd dangled her feet from the front porch swing on long, sweltering afternoons, waiting to greet him with a glass of lemonade. And when he'd left New Orleans to attend Loyola in Chicago, she'd pined for weeks. Late each night, she'd crafted long epistles chronicling the goings-on at home, sealing them with kisses.

But William had never written back. And when he'd decided to stay in Chicago, she'd written him out of her life. He could rot there for all she cared, in that city of gangsters where no one had the manners of a goat. She imagined that if she ever saw him again, he'd be unrecognizable. No doubt he was one of *them* now, a cigarette dangling from a churlish lower lip, a bottle of beer clutched in one meaty fist.

More than ten years later, thirty years old and his father dead, William had returned home to take over his father's real estate business. She'd thought she'd forgotten him. But seeing him there, her feelings for him had all come flooding back. He was taller than she



remembered. Paler. But she recognized the same fine features, the same resolute jaw, the same slow smile as he appraised her from his front stoop.

"Why Nan, you haven't changed a bit!"

"Oh, shut your mouth, Will. Of course I've changed. As have you!"

"For the better, I hope?"

She'd felt the blush creeping up past her too-tight collar, the perspiration forming on her upper lip. She'd looked away. And when she'd looked back, there was Marian, standing behind him.

"Aren't you going to introduce us, William?" Marian had said it in that disgusting Chicago accent of hers. Her perfectly coifed hair had stirred only slightly in the breeze as she'd glided forward.

"Nan, I'd like you to meet my wife," William said. "Marian."

"Your..." Nancy had been speechless. There'd been a wedding? But where? Why? ... What?

"Sorry, Nan. A lot of things happened, and all rather suddenly. But I'm sure you and Mare will be great friends." William smiled at his new bride as Marian took his hand. She looked much younger than William. She was almost as tall as him, though. Down there on the walk, Nancy had felt like a dwarf.

"Well..." Her thoughts swimming like tadpoles, Nancy had struggled to muster her manners. "You simply must come over for tea with me and Mamma," she'd said, curling her lips into a forced smile. In her effort to portray the sweet Southern belle, she'd used an epithet for her mother that she'd never used before. William had looked at her strangely, but she'd plunged on. "We've started drinking tea instead of coffee. So much more refreshing in this heat!"

"That would be delightful," Marian had replied.

But in the more than three decades since their first meeting, Marian had never made the effort to mix with Nancy and the other ladies of the neighborhood. She'd never once put in an appearance at the garden parties at City Park, the society dinners at the Ritz Carlton, the galas at the Orleans Club. Instead, she'd frequented the seedy shops in the French Quarter, befriending their proprietors and drinking mint juleps late into the evenings. She'd filled

William's home with trinkets. She'd acted the quintessential tourist, the grand city of New Orleans nothing more to her than a playground.

Nancy watched as Marian put down her cup. Marian's hand, long and well-formed, came to rest beside it. Nancy wondered—was Marian thinking about William? Was she at all sorry, about what had happened to him?

William's sudden passing at the young age of sixty-seven had come as a shock to everyone. Why, Nancy had just turned that age, and she felt nowhere near about to keel over...Casting about for an explanation, William's doctor George Barrington had concluded that William suffered from his father's weak heart. But that was a difficult pill to swallow. William, trim and athletic, had eschewed the alcohol and sweets that had been his father's downfall. On the very day of his death, he'd been out riding horses with Horton Willoughby's son. No, Nancy had theories of her own. Certainly William's wife, a full five years younger than he, had played some role in his early demise. Marian had never taken proper care of him—the woman was high maintenance at best.

Despite her suspicions, Nancy had played the perfect neighbor when William passed. She'd sent flowers, only to find them rotting on the Watson front stoop. She'd sent invitations to events that came and went with no reply. She'd done her best to earn the woman's confidence—but to no avail. Finally, at Claude's suggestion, she'd sent a gift, her mother's blend of medicinal tea leaves meant to "salve the nerves and bring on much-needed sleep." But in the days following William's death Marian had seemed set on avoiding sleep. Night after endless night, raucous music had blared from her casements. In the wee morning hours, Nancy's teeth had grated at the sound of harsh voices, floating on the high notes.

As Nancy watched from her balcony, Miss Johnston hurried out into the garden and placed her hand gently on Marian's shoulder. No one knew much about Miss Karyn Johnston—only that she came from somewhere in the north, that she kept to herself, and that she was taking pre-nursing classes at Delgado Community. In return for room and board, the young woman was constantly at the beck and call of her mistress. "Better her than me," Nancy thought, for Karyn's presence had seemed to calm Marian—the night music had stopped, and the house now routinely went dark at a respectable hour. Miss Johnston, it seemed, was keeping order in the house while Hayden Kayne picked up the pieces of William's estate.

"Oh, my goodness," Nancy muttered. Mr. Kayne. He'd be arriving soon for their monthly review of Daddy's estate, and here she was, still in her nightgown!

She withdrew from the balcony and rummaged through her closet, looking for a suitable dress—not too formal, not too casual, a light green floral print to match the unsightly scarf that now hid her unsightly hair. In the mirror, she adjusted the scarf and fastened a string of pearls around her neck. She must look her best, for Hayden Kayne had become a project of sorts. After the hurricanes, especially after Mother's death, she so needed the talents of the seasoned solicitor. He could be, she thought, her perfect ally in the fight to restore some semblance of order to the Garden District. But she'd have to work hard not to lose him.

She'd known the man for ages. Years ago, fresh out of law school and still wet behind the ears, the young Mr. Kayne had gotten his start helping Daddy navigate his business endeavors—buying out, managing, and consolidating a series of small department stores. After Daddy had passed, it was Mr. Kayne who had walked Mother through the details of the business. In Cora Carroll, he'd met with a shrewdness that he no doubt had not expected. But he'd always been kind, always patient. And over time, the sloping brow and sharp facial features that had once reminded Nancy of a vexatious bird's had come to resemble, in her eyes, those of a fox—wily and cunning, yet beguiling in the most fascinating way. He'd never married. In Nancy's imagination, a sort of nervous physical tension had grown between them. She'd even considered him as a prospect…

But now, as with everything, things had changed.

As Katrina had approached, Nancy had convinced her ailing mother to flee with her to the Landry's vacation home in Aspen. Following suit, their neighbors had formed a network of refugees, spread hither and thither, linked together only by a procession of dire TV news reports—the flooding, the power outages, the chaos. In the end, intending to stay away for just a few weeks, Nancy and her mother had not returned until the following January. But by all accounts, Mr. Kayne had never left.

Nancy had no idea what had happened to Hayden Kayne during that time. Whatever it was, he was different now. The new Mr. Kayne was no longer a champion of the establishment. Indeed, he was obsessed with restoring the "culture" of New Orleans. But it wasn't the culture that Nancy knew—the fundraisers and ice cream socials, staged in stately homes and halls. This new culture was driven by hedonistic tribes of artists, musicians, and tradespeople, emerging from the shadows to conquer the newly squalid streets. She still rankled at the memory of her last meeting with Kayne. "You must support our city's rebirth," he'd admonished her. "To do less would be a travesty."

Nancy had dug in. She knew very little about the estate that her parents had left behind.

All she knew, what had been beaten into her all these years, were the lessons learned by her forebears through the Civil War and the Great Depression. Fortunes were not built through sloth. They were maintained through vigilance, lost through inattention. As a case in point, she need only cite the family of the Watson gardener, Claude Thibodeaux; the Thibodeauxs, a once-wealthy line of white Creole stock, had lost everything in the Depression.

"There are so many now, seeking to do good," said Mr. Kayne. The Presbyterians had started something inexplicably known as RHINO, and a group of activist women had founded Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans.

But Nancy was neither Presbyterian nor political. It was no concern of hers if those neighborhoods on lower ground had succumbed to the floods—perhaps they shouldn't have been put there in the first place. She was determined to use what remained of her wealth only to restore her own beloved District to its former glory. And to that end, she must at least win Mr. Kayne's allegiance, if not his affections.

Her hand shaking, Nancy swatted at an errant mosquito. How quickly matters could take a turn for the worse, if not carefully overseen! Since William's death, Mr. Kayne had spent more time than necessary with Marian. And regarding Kayne's newfound aspirations toward the poor and downtrodden, Marian seemed to have become one of his most avid supporters. But of course she would, Nancy thought. A woman of uncertain breeding, Marian held little regard for things of value. Nancy, at least, understood the importance of heritage. She shuddered at the thought that all of William's hard-earned wealth might be squandered for the benefit of wastrels and beggars.

As she closed her balcony door, Nancy noticed that Marian was no longer visible at her little table. It was getting late—already past eight a.m.; her neighbor had probably finished her tea. Nancy sighed. She herself would have to go to the kitchen and brew her own, and some for Mr. Kayne as well. No doubt she'd find Lorna with her nose buried in one of those tabloids, the radio blaring some god-awful jazz tune...

"Oh Mercy!" It was Lorna's voice, piping up the banister from downstairs. "Mercy me!"

"Lorna? Lorna! What is it?" Nancy picked her way down the polished wood staircase to the rear parlor, her loose slippers threatening to lose their grip at every step. The kitchen was at the back of the house, connected to the formal dining room by a long, narrow hallway. As Nancy made her way across the dining room, Lorna's moans echoed off the hallway walls,



sounding hopelessly further and further away. "Lorna, for God's sake, what's happening?"

"Oh, Miz Nancy! Another one dead! That house is haunted for sure!"

"Who? Who's dead?"

"Letty Butler came to the back door! It's Miz Marian! She just dropped and died!"

"She what?" Nancy steadied herself against the maple credenza. "Lorna, do get hold of yourself!"

"Letty called 9-1-1, but for sure it's too late!" Lorna's bulk appeared at the far end of the hall where it joined the kitchen, blocking out the light from the back of the house.

Nancy felt faint, a sick feeling twisting in her empty stomach. "Lorna," she said. "Please get a grip on yourself! Perhaps she's just fainted..."

"No, ma'am," Lorna said. "Letty said Miz Karyn's doin' CPR. But it ain't workin'! Miz Marian is gone!"

From the front of the house, there came a sharp knock at the door.



By Carole Stivers



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Hayden Kayne checked his watch, scanning the tracks one more time for the streetcar. Already the sweat was pooling under his armpits and along his collar, staining his carefully ironed white shirt. But he'd have to hurry if he wanted to keep his morning appointment with Nancy Carroll. He'd come to dread these meetings—though certainly no match for her father, Nancy could be just as petulant and demanding as her late mother. But Miss Carroll was a client, and high-paying clients like her had been hard to come by since he'd left the firm.

Left the firm...Yes, that was the story he'd told everyone. They didn't need to know the details—that after Katrina, after his temporary eviction from the house he called home and his subsequent refusal to abandon his grievances against the powers that be, the firm had left him. His partners, the men he'd thought were his friends, had turned on him. They'd made it abundantly clear that they wanted no part of his "new politics." People were talking, they said, and in a town like New Orleans, reputation was everything.

It was all worth it, though—this was the story he told himself. In the end, Mother Nature had taught him lessons that seven years of an Ivy League education had failed to convey: lessons about pride, lessons about humility...and about survival.

The streetcar screeched to a halt at his stop, and he waited as an elderly woman with an oversized purse fumbled up its steps to find a seat. Before Katrina, he'd steered his Mercedes along St. Charles each morning to the offices of Schmidt, LeCroix, and Kayne, LLP, a fifth-story Poydras Street complex replete with river views and a bevy of buxom receptionists in tight skirts. He'd enjoyed martini lunches and sports boxes in the company of politicians and

well-heeled businessmen. He'd entertained friends in the five-bedroom St. Charles mansion bequeathed to him by his late father. And he'd remained single, firm in his belief that life was simplest when lived alone.

Then came Katrina, and he was Saul on the road to Damascus, stricken with the blinding light of revelation.

He remembered it all with a clarity befitting Saul's biblical tale. Despite the evacuation orders issued by the Mayor, he'd decided not to leave his home as Katrina approached landfall. Instead, he'd channeled his dead father's advice to stay and captain the ship. The ultra-affluent denizens of Audubon Place, just a few blocks west of where he lived, had headed for fairer climes, hiring Israeli mercenaries equipped with bulletproof vests, AR-15's, and Glock handguns to guard their estates in their absence. But Hayden Kayne was not a member of that rarified, gated community. Nor was he one of the Garden District crowd, flying off to far-away vacation properties, leaving their homes to the whims of wind, water, and the opportunists who might follow. He had but one home. On relatively high ground, the Kayne mansion had withstood worse. And if he wished to preserve it, he had no choice but to stand that ground.

And so, dawn on August 29, 2005 had found him hunkered in his kitchen, the walls fortified with five-gallon carboys of water and crates of canned food. Though he could hear the rain hammering on the roof, assaulting the pavement outside, he couldn't see it through his shuttered windows. Nor did he want to. Hunching his shoulders, he focused instead on a book he'd selected from his father's library. Strange to think of it now: Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Then he'd heard something above the din of the rain—that sound like a freight train, roaring in at high speed, howling and whistling toward an unreachable station. The planks he'd nailed across his unshuttered kitchen window endured the assault—but only to a point. Without warning, they flew from their moorings. He caught sight of a heavy branch, torn from his old magnolia—just before it punched through the window like a thick wooden fist, laying waste to his kitchen sink.

He was fortunate; the severed tree branch served as a scaffold of sorts, offering resistance against the buffeting winds as he worked to mask the window with a length of plastic sheeting. The window somewhat secured, he clawed his way upstairs to the master bath and clamped on a pair of noise-cancelling headphones. Huddled on the floor between the shower and the toilet, he listened to the radio reports.

The radio, tuned to WWL, offered solace. The tower was still there, the announcer still speaking urgently into his headset. But the air around him grew thin, free of oxygen. Hayden conserved his breath, willing the roof over his head to stop shaking, imagining it peeling away like the lid from a can of tuna. His head down, he began to give up hope.

But when at last he dared to remove the headphones, he found that the wind had weakened. The terrible howling had ceased. As he learned later, the storm had moved east, its evil eye cast askance over its heavy shoulder, glowering back at the city of New Orleans. And soon, on a day when the sun had never shown its face, night descended. Swaddled in a comforter on the bathroom floor, he slept like a baby—the soundest sleep he would enjoy for many weeks.

He woke the next morning to the sound of distant sirens. He pushed open his front door, weak on its hinges, and walked out into the street. He was alone. Along St. Charles Avenue, a shallow stream lapped at the neutral ground and the now-abandoned streetcar tracks were littered with trash. The traffic lights at the corner of State and St. Charles dangled uselessly from shredded wires. The air was deathly still, the sun already bearing down with an intense, wet heat. Too much heat—the tree branches that had once sheltered the narrow sidewalks were, for the most part, either gone or denuded of their leaves.

A neighbor boy's small Honda cycle had taken to the air, coming to rest against the side of his garage. Miraculously, the key was still in the ignition. Dazed, still wearing the sweat-soaked tee-shirt and dungarees in which he'd ridden out the storm, Hayden mounted the cycle. He turned the key, pressed the starter, and heaved a sigh of relief as the cycle sputtered to life. Slowly he motored through the muck, steering clear of the deeper pools along the left side of St. Charles as he wended the familiar route to his downtown office.

Passing under the highway, he caught sight of Robert E. Lee, proud atop his towering plinth, still glaring down at him from the center of his eponymous Circle. He stopped, cocked his ear. There. A strange sort of burbling, a caroling, carried on the breeze. It was coming from the direction of the riverfront.

As he navigated the fleets of randomly parked vehicles and uprooted street signs along Higgins Boulevard, the sound became louder—a Tower of Babel, a river of sound like the din in a concert hall just before the conductor raises his baton. Then he saw it—the chic, columned façade of the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, all but obscured by slabs of soaked cardboard, hastily packed bags, and heaps of already fetid garbage. And people: people in lawn chairs and wheelchairs; people with no chairs at all, sitting on the pavement

amid the debris; people standing, leaning against the scarred sides of the building, their jaws slack, their stares empty. Women clutched babies; men clutched women and small children. Police armed with guns and EMT's armed with medical kits wandered aimlessly, their faces fixed in expressions of deep concentration—or abject fear.

In the shadow of a rotund, wheelchair-bound woman of indeterminate age, a wizened black man sat on the curb. "What's going on?" Hayden asked.

"Ain't you heard?" the man said. "The levees broke!"

"The levees?"

A younger man sporting a tank top, shorts, and flip-flops called out from one of the Center's wide doorways. "It's all under water, brother! These clothes are all I got!"

As if on cue, the woman miraculously rose from her wheelchair, smoothing her voluminous blouse over her ample bosom. "Gotta get movin', Raymond," she said to the younger man. "We ain't the only ones in need."

"They's more of us out there, I assure you dat!" said the man on the curb.

"Right on, Richard," Raymond said. "My friend Mikey has a boat that might suit us."

That was how it started—how together with a band of complete strangers, none more fit than he but armed with one small motorboat, Hayden Kayne had set about a harrowing, days-long rescue operation in the floodwaters north and east of his little island. It was how he'd experienced those things that now he would never forget: the fierce heat; the dead, bloated bodies floating face down or washed ashore on abandoned doorsteps; and the rescue of a tiny baby, handed through a small attic window as its mother struggled to get free. The mother had lived, he thought—ferried away unconscious but still breathing. But it had been hours before he could release the lock of his arms around that child's defenseless body. Surrendering him at last to the care of nurses, Hayden had felt a hollowness, like a part of him, leaving.

Eighty percent of the city was under water, some as deep as twenty feet. But for so many days, no help came. Where *was* everyone? Had the rest of the state, the rest of the country, been consumed by some plague of unknown origin? He hadn't known at the time, that so much of this suffering had resulted from simple political stupidity. He hadn't known, that though Katrina had given these floods their start, they were by no means a natural disaster; that like so many of the ills that plagued mankind, these floods were man-made—

all part of a series of unfortunate events put in motion long ago by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, perpetuated by the local levee boards, exacerbated by the torpidity of government bureaucracies.

And as if the floods and the lack of outside help were not enough, there were the constant rumors.

"I'm telling you, somebody dynamited them levees," said Richard.

"And now there's alligators in the streets," said Raymond, nodding.

"Lord have mercy," said Lucille, the corpulent but energetic woman whom Hayden later learned was Raymond's grandmother. "The police in this town have gone crazy. If the ones on the street don't get ya, the snipers will!"

It all seemed impossible—the dynamite, the alligators, the snipers—all based on latent urban legends that, like the waters that now roared through New Orleans' sewer systems, had long been bubbling beneath the city's surface. But in the heat of the moment, it seemed that none of these tales could readily be discounted.

One thing was very real indeed: the looting. A few instances were opportunistic, gangs clearing out big box stores and mom-and-pop shops with the same admirable alacrity. But the vast majority were perpetrated out of necessity, by people in need of food, fresh water, clothing, and medical supplies. Hayden had witnessed it himself; in fact, he'd taken part in it, scoring blankets, ropes, water, and nonperishable food for himself and his squad. But five long days after the storm, as Lieutenant General Honoré and his Joint Task Force Katrina troops finally took control of the rescue effort and the downtown streets, Hayden began to worry that his own property might be in jeopardy. The pain twisting in his empty gut, only partially assuaged by Lucille's red beans and rice, was intensified by his fear of what he might find upon his return. Even if the house hadn't been ransacked, it might have fallen victim to one of the many fires now sprouting up all over town. After so many days spent in the wild, it was time to go home.

He turned to his new friends. "Come on," he said, "I've got space for all y'all."

It was a long trudge back down St. Charles Avenue. With Lucille riding a new wheelchair fit for the occasion, they were wounded warriors coming home from a battle not yet won. But their small battalion was not prepared for the cordons of police, guns at the ready, who'd been sent to patrol the neighborhood. At the base of his own driveway, Hayden

approached one of the officers, a young blond man with a pimply face and a flat stub of a nose. "This is my house," he said. "I live here."

The man appraised him, his upper lip curling. And Hayden imagined himself: a skinny old coot with tattered clothing and a disheveled mop of stiff gray hair, stinking of sweat and filth. "Prove it." the officer said.

Hayden dug his hands deep into the empty pockets of his jeans. He couldn't prove it. "He's got a gun!" another officer cried. The stub-nosed officer stepped forward and Hayden felt a sharp pain in the socket of his weaker left shoulder as his hands were yanked behind his back. He heard the snap of the cuffs.

"You ain't got no right to treat my friend that way!" cried Richard. But the Louisiana State Police apparently thought they did. Young Raymond and his grandmother put up quite a fight as they were all loaded into an unmarked van. In the scuffle, Hayden felt the sting of a bean bag round on his right thigh. He leaned heavily on Richard as the vehicle plummeted back to town.

When the van's doors finally swung open, they were inside a temporary jail facility, housed in the Union Passenger Terminal on Loyola Avenue. Staggering out, Hayden caught just a glimpse of the darkening sky before he was herded into a makeshift "dog cage." He looked around him, at artists from the French Quarter, musicians out of Tremé, maids and dishwashers and bartenders out of the South Seventh, Bywater, and the Lower Ninth. Stewing sweat-soaked on the hot cement floor, he massaged the angry, bruised welt on his thigh. Unbeknownst to all of them, Rita would come soon enough. But now there was only a light shower, descending from the heavens to cleanse the foul air. And as the rains fell from the skies, so the scales fell from Hayden Kayne's eyes.

He could see it now: that world where common people worked two and three jobs to make ends meet, where artists and musicians begged for pennies on the street while landlords, bankers, and the state made off with their hard-earned savings. It was the world his father had happily left behind, and from which Orson Kayne had prodigiously shielded his only son. But it was a world that desperately needed Hayden's help.

A heavily whiskered man leaned in close, his breath sour with alcohol. "I seen you on the street. You one o' them suits I seen workin' in the high risers. How did the likes of *you* wind up in *here*?"

Hayden looked down at his hands, swollen and streaked with cuts. Was he still, after all

this, recognizable as his former self? He knew that inside, he was no longer the same man. And he knew too, why he was here. "It's where I'm meant to be," he said.

For he'd come full circle. It was in his blood.

Born Otto Koenig, Hayden's father had emigrated from his home near Hamburg, Germany, to New York City at the age of eighteen. He'd come full of hope. But labeled a "probable conspirator" during World War II, he'd soon found himself interned at Fort Oglethorpe, a festering mile-square prison camp in northern Georgia. Subjected to hard labor and poor rations, he'd spent three years in abject confinement; the tuberculosis he'd contracted while at the camp would hound him for the rest of his life.

But Otto had risen from the ashes. At the age of forty-three, reborn as Orson Kayne and the owner of a lucrative import-export business operating out of New Orleans, he'd married Elisabeth Duclerc, a woman of fine Louisiana stock. Elisabeth had given him one child—a son whom Orson named Hayden after his favorite composer, Joseph Haydn.

Preferring to spend her energies in the attendance of lavish parties and the harassment of her husband, Elisabeth left her only child in the care of nannies. But little Hayden could always find refuge in his father's study. And when Elisabeth died of an undiagnosed kidney ailment shortly after Hayden's tenth birthday, father and son had lived on happily in the mansion where Orson entertained his wealthy clients and bragged of his son's budding intellect.

Hayden huddled under a thin prison issue blanket, doing his best to stay dry. Yes, suffering was in his blood. And though he'd been brought up with the cream of New Orleans society, he couldn't help but wonder if history was repeating itself—reminding him of his roots as a reviled outsider. Was it not his destiny to defend the downtrodden?

It was only after Hayden's release five days later that the charges against him were at last enumerated: resisting arrest (not true in his case), public intoxication (again, not true). He had to work hard to get his friends out—especially Richard, whose previous record and penchant for wise-cracking made him no friend of the police. But he kept his promise to house them all in his mansion.

The abandonment by his law partners hadn't been long in coming. By the time Messrs. Schmidt and LeCroix returned from their self-imposed exile, the word on Hayden Kayne was already spreading amongst their clients. He was a nuisance, a detriment, a thorn in the side of the authorities. He'd gone quite mad, associating with beggars and thieves. But even without

the firm, Hayden soon found himself a busy man. First there were his own lawsuits and countersuits, his petitions and grievances against the Federal government, the State Governor, the City of New Orleans and its Mayor, various law enforcement officials, the Orleans Parish Levee Board, and the myriad others he felt had wronged him and his cohorts. Then there was his pro bono work—free legal services for anyone whom he felt had a case. And as if his acts of legal charity weren't enough, he developed a passion for improving the means of the struggling artisans who, to him, represented the hope of culture reborn in his beloved city. At the mansion, he worked weekends to fend off outbreaks of mold and mildew, repair rotted railings infested with termites, and mend swollen window frames. All he asked of his impoverished tenants and clients was that they help with the reclamation.

Now, his funds were dwindling. He comforted himself that he'd managed to beat back the majority of his demons. He was too busy to succumb to the "thousand-yard stare" he'd seen in the eyes of so many others. All he needed was a positive cash flow. And if that meant groveling at the feet of rich clients like Nancy Carroll, daughter of the miserly Edwin Carroll, and her neighbor Marian Watson, widow of the even more tightfisted William Watson...so be it. It was a price he was willing to pay.

He was hurrying now down the uneven sidewalk of Nancy's block, his eyes fixed on her front stoop. At her gate he wrested his datebook from his vest pocket to check his calendar. He'd have just enough time to stop by Marian's after his meeting with Miss Carroll. Not to see Marian, of course—in fact, he hoped she wouldn't be home. The person he really wanted to see was her assistant, Miss Karyn Johnston. There'd been a new development, something he needed to discuss with her...

But what was that sound? From somewhere at the back of the Carroll house, he heard a strange, keening, cry. Grasping the gate handle for support, he remembered the tiny, dark-skinned baby, squirming in his arms, the soft feel of its skin against his bare chest. Its mother, crying out from the attic window. The shouts of her rescuers: *Now just stay back, ma'am*. *We'll get you out, but we're gonna have to make this wider!*

He shook his head. *It's over...all in the past.*

Steeling himself, he ascended the stairs to Nancy's porch. He took hold of the weathered brass knocker whose lion's head scowled ominously back at him. He gave it three forceful raps, then stood back to wait while hurried footsteps approached from within.

The door swung open to reveal Nancy Carroll, her loose headscarf in disarray, her face

crimson. "Oh, Mr. Kayne," she cried. "Thank God you're here! Marian is...well, it seems..." She stopped. For a moment she only stared at him, her painted eyebrows raised in a frenetic arc. "Why, Mr. Kayne," she said. "You're white as a sheet! Are you quite all right?"

Hayden looked down at his hand, now gripping the railing. His heart tripped in his chest. From somewhere down the street, he could hear the wail of an approaching siren.

Nancy straightened her headscarf. "Mr. Kayne?"

Hayden looked behind him at the empty street, at the live oaks whose leaves hung limp in the lifeless air. *Yes,* he told himself. *Quite all right. Not a cloud in the sky.*



By Carole Stivers



~ 3 ~

Karyn Johnston lay flat in bed, pinching the bridge of her nose between thumb and forefinger. She'd awakened with yet another of the dull headaches that had begun to plague her.

Marian's lawyer Hayden Kayne had told her that the headaches might be due to eye strain, all those hours spent helping him sort through the stacks of documentation he'd recovered from William Watson's downtown offices. But the pair of cheap reading glasses that Karyn had procured at the Walgreens wasn't helping. Perhaps it was her sinuses, rebelling against the decades-old dust that coated every surface in this stuffy old house. Or perhaps it was something else—the pressure of secrets long kept, only now resurfacing...

She looked across the room at the weathered oak bookcase, crammed with tattered children's books and a fleet of tiny model boats. Since William and Marian Watson had had no children and William had been an only child, Karyn assumed that her assigned room was the small chamber that William himself had occupied in his boyhood. William, it seemed, had been a boy intrigued with pirates and adventure on the high seas—hardly a foreshadowing of the man he would one day become. Or perhaps it was...For hadn't he become a pirate of sorts, absconding with wealth, amassing property—laying waste to innocent lives? It would seem so, based on what little she'd been able to understand of his business dealings.

Karyn sat up. The morning air was still, the humidity palpable—like a large, moist hand, pressing down. She supposed that those who'd lived in New Orleans all their lives were used to this. They moved slowly, parsing out their energy, penning up their nervous anticipation

of a relief that never came. But she would never be that sort of person. Legs akimbo, she breathed deep, surrendering herself to a mind game she'd begun to play each morning. She imagined herself a little girl on a cold, crisp December morning in Fox Lake, Illinois. Before her lay the snow-encrusted acreage of her childhood home. Her mitted hands gripped those of her mother and father, her body forming a small bridge between them. Her father cried out, "Jump!" and together her parents swung her high, her tiny booted feet scraping the tops of the highest drifts. She squealed with glee, then landed flat, her arms flapping to create angels. This was heaven. These were the things she wished had never changed.

She rubbed her eyes and checked the time on her watch. Mr. Kayne had told her he might come by this morning, after his meeting next door with Miss Carroll. Placing her hands flat on the bed, she swung her feet to the floor. At the full-length mirror she ran a brush through her pale blonde hair, blending in the thin streaks of gray and tying it back with a plain brown elastic. From the closet she chose a loose cotton shift, unlikely to be stained by the perspiration that would soon be exiting her every pore—and unlikely to expose the extra pounds she'd already put on since migrating south. She slipped into a pair of flat leather sandals. From her nightstand, she scooped up her Human Physiology textbook—maybe she'd have time to finish yesterday's assignment before Mr. Kayne arrived. Again she checked her watch. She needed to get downstairs. She needed to keep a close eye on Marian. Tucking the book under her arm, she headed down the back stairs to the kitchen where Letty Butler was brewing the morning tea.

The spry, rangy housekeeper turned to her as she came in. "Tea, Miz Karyn?" Letty asked.

An acrid odor wafted through the kitchen, and again Karyn pinched the bridge of her nose. She offered the maid a weak smile. "None for me, thanks, Letty," she said. "I'm already craving something with ice."

Letty smiled back, daubing at her forehead with a white cloth napkin. "You got that right, Miz Karyn," she said. "But the missus, she's got to have hot tea in the mornin'."

Karyn remembered once again her surprise when Marian Watson had first contacted her—had it really been just a few months ago? "I'm sure you must find it odd," Marian's soft voice had piped over the phone, "my calling you out of the blue like this…But I knew your father once. We worked together at Goldman Sachs in Chicago. The other day, I spoke with your father's old friend at the bank, Robert Wilkins? He told me you were currently at loose ends, and I thought you might like to come down here to New Orleans and help me sort



through some things..."

Karyn had been dumbfounded. "What sorts of things?"

"I...The storms left everything in such a mess, and...my husband has just recently passed away. Mr. Wilkins thought you might be able to help...organize things. He told me you took such wonderful care of your mother." Listening to Marian's pleading voice, a mild accent not quite placeable as northern or southern, Karyn had felt herself softening. "I understand you're interested in a nursing career?" Marian had continued. "We're certainly in need of nurses down here. We have a fine school, and I could help with your tuition."

"Thank you kindly, Mrs. Watson. But I'll have to think about it."

Putting down the phone, Karyn had felt an odd sense of familiarity. Marian seemed as much in need of care as her own mother had been. But was that a good thing?

Florence Johnston had never been in need, really. She'd been needy—quite another thing altogether. And after Mama's first cancer diagnosis, things had only gotten worse. The sole caregiver, or at least the only one allowed into the house by her distrustful mother, Karyn had been forced to put her own life on hold. After working for thirteen years at the same bank where her father had made his career, she'd had to cut her work hours. She'd turned down the promotion she'd more than earned. Eventually, mired in the minutiae of her mother's daily care, she'd abandoned not only her job but any thought of her own future.

It hadn't been until Mama's death ten years later, after the funeral and the flowers and the condolences, that Karyn had woken to the realization that there was nothing left to hold her in place. Soon she'd be fifty years old, a life at least half spent—and with nothing to show for it. She'd wanted more than anything to start over.

But was Marian Watson the right person to start over with? From Robert Wilkins, she'd learned that Marian Jolly, a former secretary at Goldman, had married a Mr. William Watson out of New Orleans. "Right after that, they moved down south," Bob said. "When his father died, as I recall—still sitting on a pile of money." An on-line search had turned up William's business and home addresses—and more than one mention of his wife Marian, an established patroness of education for underprivileged children. William Watson's obituary was prominently displayed in the New Orleans Times-Picayune:

January 20, 2007

William Henry Watson, son of noted financier Henry R. Watson and long-time resident of the Garden District, died suddenly yesterday afternoon at the age of 67.

Mr. Watson, a son of New Orleans, had served as President of Watson Properties since 1970. He was a member of the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce, a long-time member of the Krewe of Rex, and an excellent horseman.

William leaves behind his wife of 37 years, Marian Watson (née Jolly), originally of Chicago.

The funeral service, for invited guests only, will be held at St. Louis Cathedral on Friday, January 26, 2007. The service will be followed by a second line. A private interment service will be held at Metairie Cemetery. In lieu of flowers, Mrs. Watson requests that donations be made in William's name to the music program at the New Orleans College Preparatory Academies.

An article published a week after the funeral revealed more details:

February 2, 2007

The New Orleans business community was stunned last month at the sudden death of Mr. William Watson, President of Watson Properties. The cause of death, which occurred shortly after a horseback outing near Folsom with his friend Tommy Willoughby, was determined to be cardiac arrest.

According to his physician Dr. George Barrington, Mr. Watson had been in excellent health at his most recent check-up, mere weeks prior. "I'm stymied as to how a healthy, vibrant man, a non-smoker and at most a moderate drinker, could have succumbed in such a catastrophic manner," said Dr. Barrington.

Marian Watson, William's wife of 37 years, did not agree to an autopsy.

William's father, Henry R. Watson, founded Watson Properties in 1933, buying up Garden District plots at bargain prices and reselling them to wealthy buyers. After Henry's death in 1970, William returned from Chicago, where he had forged a successful career as an investment banker at Goldman Sachs, to take the helm of his father's company.

Under William's leadership, Watson Properties shifted focus to commercial real

estate development, erecting upscale shopping malls in Metairie and Slidell. More recently, however, the younger Watson had begun once more to dabble in housing. When he died, he was embroiled in negotiations around a bid for redevelopment of New Orleans' St. Bernard Projects as mixed-income units.

Last Friday, as mourners for William Watson formed a second line down Royal Street, former residents brandishing mops and pails gathered outside the St. Bernard Projects on Milton Street, demanding to be let back into their apartments. Though they remain evicted, the protesters may have gained a reprieve. According to Hayden Kayne, the current spokesperson for Mrs. Watson, Watson Properties will not pursue the St. Bernard deal at this time. The company has suffered attrition over the past few years as the elder partners have retired. With William no longer at the helm and no one to take the reins, it remains to be seen what will become of the company.

In the end, Karyn had agreed to an interview. And as she'd sat with Marian in her quaint New Orleans kitchen, the older woman silently studying her over a cup of Earl Grey, she'd already known she would accept the offer. With the help of Mr. Wilkins, she'd sold her Fox Lake home. The money from the sale had barely covered her mother's outstanding medical bills and her own meager expenses, but at least there was someone waiting for her, a new place to be.

Karyn watched through the back window as Marian arranged herself at her small garden table. Her back toward the house, Marian's gaze seemed fixed on the far corner of the yard, toward the spot where her gardener, Claude Thibodeaux, toiled under the old magnolia. When Letty arrived with the tea tray, Marian turned slightly toward her, her head nodding almost imperceptibly in acknowledgement.

Karyn had to admit it—she'd been rescued by Marian Watson. But then, two weeks ago, everything had changed. Marian had asked her to fetch an old fur coat from the attic—she was planning another donation to one of the myriad charities she supported. Clawing through spider webs and thick motes of dust on her way to the clothing rack, Karyn had pushed aside a tall shoe box. Its contents—letters, tens of them, some bearing floral patterns, some on business stationery—had been sent scattering across the unfinished floor. And as she'd stooped to gather them up, one packet, bound in a frayed rubber band, had caught her eye. She'd read the return address: Frank Johnston, c/o Goldman Sachs, Chicago, Illinois.

Karyn had worked hard to forget how her childhood had ended so abruptly. She'd honed and polished those memories of a carefree life when she was small—her father a powerful businessman, her mother a devoted homemaker. Commuting between his pastoral estate in Fox Lake and his posh Wacker Drive office, hosting lavish parties in the company of his gracious wife, Frank Johnston had been a man both feared and worshipped. But now, Karyn's darker memories had returned: meals alone with her mother; Mama's face, sullen and puffy; raised voices echoing down darkened halls. A teen-aged Karyn had plugged in her ear phones and turned up her music, trying not to hear what they said—but hanging on every word. Her father had spent too many late nights at the office. He'd missed birthdays, forgotten anniversaries. He'd forgotten his vows.

When it had finally happened, Karyn had been surprised by the speed with which Frank Johnston had been banished from her life. Only over time had she pieced it together. Some "brazen hussy" had lured Frank away from his home, away from his family. And then, when he had admitted the affair to his wife, professed his love for this vixen, begged her to marry him—that woman had left him for another man.

She remembered her father's seedy Chicago apartment, the imperceptible but ever-accruing changes in him—his shirts wrinkled, his suits smelling of smoke and alcohol. She remembered her legally prescribed visits on odd weekends—the Cubs games, the hotdogs and Cokes, the take-out from the little Greek restaurant around the corner. Karyn had never confronted her father with what she knew. So many times since, she'd imagined herself holding his hands, looking into his soft brown eyes, telling him that she understood. But back then, she'd been too young for that. Instead, she'd held her knowledge as a form of power—an absolution from the unnamed guilt she'd suffered over her parents' divorce.

On a sunny Saturday morning shortly after her eighteenth birthday, Karyn had knocked on her father's apartment door. When he didn't answer, she'd called her mother. And when her mother didn't answer, she'd called the police. It was she who had identified Frank's body.

Sitting now at Marian's kitchen table, Karyn opened her physiology textbook to the spot she'd marked: "Control of Respiration." The brain, its inspiratory and expiratory neurons discharging and ceasing to discharge in an intricate dance of exquisite synchronicity, commands the body to keep breathing. To stop breathing is unnatural—a thing you must will yourself to do. Or, in the case of her father, force yourself to do. She wondered: moments after stepping off that chair, had Frank Johnston changed his mind? Had he even for an instant thought of her, of what she would find?

Karyn looked out the window again, at the garden, the glass-topped table, the frail figure sitting there. She watched as Marian lowered her right hand slowly to the table, next to her teacup. After all those years of wondering about the woman responsible for the ruin of her family—after all those years of finally trying to forget—Marian was the last person Karyn had expected to find. Had Marian meant for her to see those letters? Had she any inkling whatsoever, of the pain that they would cause—of the pain she'd already caused?

Time and again, Karyn had suffered at the selfishness of others. But that didn't matter now. For over the days since she'd discovered the evidence of her father's love for Marian Jolly, she'd come to a decision. Whatever game Marian was playing, she'd soon learn that two could play at it.

Then, something caught her eye. Marian had shifted in her seat. She was leaning, listing, her left arm drawing close to her body like a wounded wing.

Without thinking, Karyn jumped up from her seat, her chair clattering to the floor. She pushed out through the back screen door, ignoring the slam as it snapped shut behind her. She tripped over the stone pavers to reach Marian's side. "Mrs. Watson?" she said. Lightly, she touched the woman's shoulder.

Marian's lips parted, and Karyn remembered her own mother, mouthing words soundlessly from her death bed. "I'm sorry," her mother had said.

"I'm sorry," Marian seemed to say now, just before she toppled from her chair.

Karyn stared down at Marian's prostrate body. Strangely, she remembered her father, that sense of everything spinning out of control, moving faster than she wanted it to. "Sorry?" she said. "Is that all? After everything you did—?"

Letty was running toward them now, her hands wringing her apron. With a start, Karyn realized that her own hands were clenched into fists. She clamped her eyes shut.

No time for that. Think, think...

Marian's body, stiff when she fell, had gone limp. Willing herself into autopilot, Karyn knelt down, nudging Marian onto her back. She placed her ear to the woman's dry lips, listening, feeling for a breath. There it was again—that faint, acrid smell. But nothing more. And no pulse at the carotid artery where Karyn placed her expectant fingers.

Positioning her hands one atop the other in the middle of Marian's chest, Karyn pushed

hard and fast, counting to thirty. She tilted Marian's head, lifting her chin. Pinching Marian's nostrils shut, she breathed into her mouth and watched her thin chest for movement. But though the older woman's chest did rise, the lace of the silk slip beneath her robe rustling softly in the weak breeze, she remained unresponsive. Karyn administered a second breath. Then she sat back on her haunches to face Letty. "Do you have an AED?" she called out hoarsely.

Letty's face went blank. "A what...?"

Karyn felt her legs growing numb, a dizzy sensation clouding her vision. "Get a doctor!" she said, her voice hollow in her own ears. "Call 9-1-1!" She placed her hands on Marian's chest, centering herself for another round of CPR. She wouldn't stop until the medics came—though she knew, it was already too late.



By Carole Stivers



~ 4 ~

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.



By Carole Stivers



~ 5 ~

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 orchidpatterned 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.



By Carole Stivers



~ 6 ~

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.



By Carole Stivers



~ 7 ~

Staring out the café window at the sun-drenched street, Hayden Kayne scratched his forehead. Whether intentional or not, William Watson's paperwork was in sad disarray. Hayden had yet to obtain a comprehensive listing of the property contained in the Watson Estate, something referred to in the Trust as "Exhibit A." And if he couldn't locate such, he had no idea how Karyn Johnston could be expected to manage it.

It was strange that someone as parsimonious as William hadn't kept better track of his assets. But there was more to it than that; Hayden had begun to entertain his own suspicions of foul play. The death of William Watson had certainly been unexpected, but Marian? At their last meeting, in front of the notary on the day before she died, Marian had seemed distracted, nervous. But there'd certainly been no sign that she would drop dead the following morning. Did someone really "have it in" for the Watsons? And if so, why? Perhaps the missing Exhibit A would offer some clue.

He'd decided to try contacting the former successor trustee, the man whose name had been crossed out on the trust documentation signature page and later replaced with Karyn's—a certain Mr. Gerry Dupuy. At first he'd hit a wall—the man seemed impossible to track down. But then, through William's old associate Horton Willoughby, he'd learned that Estelle and Horton's son Tommy had been a friend of Mr. Dupuy's. After some finagling, Tommy had finally agreed to set up a meeting.

"My son had a falling out with this Mr. Dupuy," Horton said. "As did William, apparently. Though for many years, so far as I recall, Mr. Dupuy had acted as William's



advisor in a number of business transactions."

"And this 'falling out,' as you call it...Did it happen in December of 2006? When Gerry Dupuy's name was removed from the trust?"

"Apparently so," said Horton, "though my son had nothing to do with Mr. Dupuy by that time."

"Do you know why Tommy parted ways with this fellow?"

"Mr. Kayne," Horton said, "if I knew half of what goes on in my sons' lives...Tommy doesn't want to talk about it. And Estelle and I have always had a laissez-faire policy when it comes to these things. We invite our children to let us know if they need our help. Aside from that, their lives are their own."

"I understand," Hayden said. Thankfully, his own father had been the same way.

The little bell on the café's door jingled and a young man with light blond hair, a tight black tee shirt and khaki chinos entered. He swiveled on a pair of beige deck shoes, scanning the room with the sort of vigorous energy exuded by people with athletic builds and outsized egos. Hayden kept his head down, hoping that this was not his man.

But it was. The young man strode forward, hand extended.

Hayden half stood to greet him. "Mr. Dupuy?"

"At your service," the man said, his voice a bit higher-pitched than Hayden had expected based on the strength of his handshake. Gerry Dupuy signaled the waitress for a cup of coffee. Taking a seat, he looked around the room, drumming the table lightly with his fingers.

Hayden cleared his throat, uncertain how to proceed. "I'm sorry," he said, "but how much do you know about the reason I wanted to see you?"

Mr. Dupuy stopped his drumming long enough for the waitress to deliver his coffee. Adding a generous draught of cream, he stirred vigorously. "Never cared for the coffee here," he muttered. "Probably why Tommy chose this place for us to meet…" He looked up, and Hayden was astonished by the blue clarity of his eyes. "As to the purpose of our meeting, our mutual friend Tommy Willoughby was not generous with the details. Though I assume this has something to do with the Watsons?"

"And why would you assume that?" Hayden asked, not yet ready to be fully

forthcoming.

"Unless I'm mistaken, I was listed as successor trustee on the Watson Trust. News is they're both safely stowed, and you're their legal representative. I suppose you're here to deliver the goods, such as they are."

"You believe that you're still their trustee?" Hayden asked.

"I was, last time I knew."

"I'm sorry," Hayden said. "But that's no longer the case. William had you removed last December."

Gerry looked up from his coffee, his expression unreadable.

"I would have thought—" Hayden began.

But now the man was smiling broadly, his two rows of even white teeth gleaming in the dim light of the café. "You would have thought he'd told me?" He laughed. "No, he didn't. I think you'll find that William Watson was a man of many mysteries."

"I'm sorry..."

But Gerry was still smiling. "You think it bothers me? Actually, it comes as a relief!"

"A relief?"

Gerry leaned forward, his face just inches from Hayden's and the dark smell of the coffee already strong on his breath. "That man was in debt up to his eyeballs. I'd be surprised if he had much more than that old house and a measly hundred grand or so, stashed away in some savings account."

Hayden's mind raced. Could this man be believed? But it might make sense. At least it would explain why there was no record of assets in the Trust—perhaps they'd all been liquidated. He folded his hands on the table in front of him in an effort to control their involuntary movement. "In debt?" he asked. "To whom?"

"You don't want to know," Gerry said, his expression going suddenly serious.

Hayden swallowed hard, thinking of Karyn. "Unfortunately, I believe that I will need to know. The current trustee will be responsible for the debts incurred."

"Current trustee? What poor slob did he leave in charge?"

"That," Hayden said, a line of sweat beginning to form on his upper lip, "is none of your business."

"Well," Gerry replied, "if it makes you feel any better, these people that Billy owed money to? They're not going to come forward for their payout. Those debts were strictly confidential."

"Confidential?"

Again Mr. Dupuy leaned forward, and Hayden caught a whiff of sweet aftershave. "I suppose it's okay to let the cat out of the bag, now that he and his wife are no longer with us," he said. "But Lord knows how many broken hearts old Billy left behind..."

"Broken hearts?" Hayden felt a jolt. Had William been having affairs?

"All beautiful young men, mind you. He wouldn't settle for second best—though he didn't deserve half of them." Mr. Dupuy sat back, stretching his long legs. "Don't get me wrong. Billy was handsome enough. It was no problem fixing him up on dates. The only problem was that he had a nasty habit of dumping them. Then it got complicated. He had to pay out the hush money—didn't want 'em telling, now did he?"

Hayden felt the blood draining from his face. "And you?" he asked. "Why did you do all of this...fixing? What was in it for you?"

Mr. Dupuy smiled again. "You silver spoon types just don't get it, do you?" he sneered. "What on God's green earth do you *think* was in it for me? William Watson had money. He had lots of secrets. And I knew them all. Why else do you think he listed me on the trust?"

Hayden leaned forward now, angry. "But what you don't realize, Mr. Dupuy, is that you have just drawn suspicion upon yourself."

"Suspicion?"

"There may very well be an investigation into the unexpected deaths of William and his wife," Hayden said. "And what I know about you now could be highly incriminating."

Gerry's reaction to this news was not at all what Hayden had expected. "Hah!" he laughed, slamming his open palm down on the table. "Killing a guy and his wife just to inherit his debts, which, as his fixer and one-man dating service, you happen to be the only one fully privy to? Even *I'm* not that stupid!" He pushed his chair back from the table. "Just try and find some assets in that guy's name!" he said. "I'm telling you, he bled it all dry." He

stood up, tugging at his tee shirt, smoothing it down over his flat stomach. "Hey, you're not too bad looking for an old coot," he said. "Let me know if you need anything, will you?"

And with that, Gerry Dupuy strode back to the door, pausing to turn around for a final pronouncement. "And you can tell that faggot Tommy Willoughby, he's outed now too!" Around the room, heads turned. But only for a moment, before burying themselves once more in open newspapers.

As Gerry Dupuy pushed out through the door, Hayden found his hands balling into fists. He got up. He needed to get out of this stuffy café, clear his head...But as he wended his way down Magazine Street and entered the maze of narrow roads that constituted the Garden District, his thoughts only became more muddled. In his mind, he was back at Harvard, back on those tree-lined campus streets. Beside him was his roommate, a cold beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Charlie Greene—the first person he'd ever trusted with his heart.

Shy and introverted, trained by his father to distrust women, Hayden had arrived at Harvard an open book. Whenever he'd thought about it later—something he'd tried his best not to do—he'd realized it was no surprise that he'd fallen for his freshman roommate. Everyone had loved Charlie—the instigator, the life of every party. His mistake had been believing that Charlie loved him back. He'd believed it with all his heart—until Charlie had gone home the summer after their junior year to "straighten out." Hayden had never had the courage to track him down. Doggedly, he'd finished his law degree. He'd come home to the only place he knew. And after that, he'd resolved to keep his heart to himself.

Blinking back his anger, Hayden sped his pace. All these years, he'd told himself that he hadn't just loved Charlie—he'd been *in* love. That his love had been real—not selfish or vain, certainly not the kind that William and his friend Mr. Dupuy espoused. But what exactly *was* love? Those days in the boat, adrift in the New Orleans floodwaters...That moment when he'd taken a baby from the arms of its desperate mother to cradle its soft body, to feel its tiny heart beat against his own heaving chest...That was more like love. He supposed now that he'd never really understood it at all. He'd lived his whole life at a distance, as though it belonged to someone else.

He looked around. These stately homes, their gracious porches, hanging pots spilling over with blossoms, open shutters and closed curtains—had he ever really known this place? There were pockets of New Orleans where illicit affairs and backroom deals were the norm. But these old District families had long ago learned to insulate themselves from all of that. They'd joined all the right clubs, associated with all the right people, donated money to all

the right causes.

He thought about Gerry Dupuy, his slick smile and slick hair. Where was he from? What did he do, when he wasn't arranging trysts for would-be victims? Mr. Dupuy wasn't out of the woods yet. He might not have killed the Watsons to get his hands on their money. But had it come down to something else altogether—revenge over the loss of a promised inheritance, a fortune squandered? And if it wasn't Mr. Dupuy himself, the man's allegations regarding William's promiscuity suggested a whole host of possible spurned lovers, any one of whom might have committed murder out of revenge.

His pulse slowing at last, Hayden felt his faculties returning. He'd always found refuge in his work. And he had, in fact, managed to keep his heart to himself...

Until just recently. Looking up, he found himself standing in front of the Watson home. Without thinking, he mounted the front steps and rang the bell. The door cracked open and the Watsons' maid, Letty Butler, peered at him from inside.

Hayden cleared his throat. "Is Miss Johnston here?" he asked.

"She's out makin' groceries right now, Mr. Kayne," Letty replied.

"Will she be back soon?"

Letty looked down at the floor. "I think so," she said. "You could wait here if you want."

"Thank you kindly, Miss Butler," Hayden said. "I think I'll take you up on that."

She ushered him inside. "You want some iced tea?" she asked.

"Oh no," Hayden replied. "I'm good, thanks." But Letty just stood there, kneading her palms, watching him as he took a seat on the small couch in the parlor. "Is something on your mind, Miss Butler?" he asked.

"I know there's some talk goin' on right now, that people think Mr. William and Miz Marian mighta been...k...ki..."

Hayden reached out to lay a reassuring hand on Letty's. "It's all conjecture at this point, Letitia," he said.

But Letty was intent on saying something. "I know it probably doesn't mean a thing," she said, still looking down as though in apology. "But there's somethin' strange Miz Karyn said...it bothered me when she said it. It *still* bothers me..."

"Miss Johnston?" As he regarded the maid's troubled countenance, Hayden felt a strange sort of numbness wash over him, a sense of time standing still. He remembered his father, telling him about his mother's death as they sat together in the hospital waiting room. And years later the policeman, calling to inform him of his father's passing. You always knew, somehow, when bad news was coming.

Letty looked at him, fear showing in her eyes. "It was that day when Miz Marian died. When I saw Miz Marian on the ground, and I came out the back o' the house and Miz Karyn was just standin' there...Miz Karyn said something..."

Hayden grasped the arms of his chair. "What did she say?" he asked.

A tear streaked down Letty's cheek. "She said, 'Sorry? Is that all?' And then somethin' about 'after everything you did."

Hayden stared at her. "She said that to Marian? But I thought she was administering CPR..."

"No," Letty said. "It wasn't that way. Miz Karyn saw me comin', and *then* she went down and started pumpin' on Miz Marian's chest. But not until then."

Hayden felt himself standing up. "You know, Miss Butler," he said. "You might have misheard. But I do thank you so much for telling me this. And...and don't worry, I'll try and sort this out." He reached down to smooth his slacks over his thighs. "I just realized I have another appointment," he said. "Would you let Miss Johnston know I stopped by?"

Pacing the worn floorboards of his home office, Hayden held his hand to his forehead. His encounter with Gerry Dupuy had been disturbing enough. But now, he needed to concentrate on Karyn Johnston. He had to admit, it had bothered him that Marian had named Karyn as successor to the Watson Estate. No one seemed to understand why—not even Karyn. Or was Karyn not telling the truth? Did she, in fact, know why?

He went to his computer and once more pulled up Karyn's resume. In Chicago she'd worked at Goldman Sachs, in the same department where William and Marian had worked when they first met. But William and Marian had married and gone off to New Orleans by the time Karyn came along...He decided to take another tack; perhaps an interview with her references might help. But a call to the office of her former boss Mr. Robert Wilkins was greeted by an out-of-office message. He switched to Aunt Mildred. An online search turned

up Mildred's address in Cleveland, but there was no phone number. At a loss and more out of habit than hopefulness, he pulled up the Clerk of Courts site for Cuyahoga County, Ohio, and keyed in the address. To his surprise, he found an entry regarding a foreclosure dispute that Mildred Johnston had had with her bank in 1969. The dispute had been settled when ownership of her West Side Cleveland home was transferred to her brother Frank Johnston of Fox Lake, IL, who had offered cash to purchase the property outright.

"Frank Johnston," Hayden murmured. He might be Karyn's father.

He refocused his search on Frank. It didn't take him long to find the article in the Chicago Sun-Times describing Frank Johnston's tragic death in 1974, a presumed suicide. The article offered some conjecture as to a possible cause. Frank had been separated from his wife for four years at the time of his death. What's more, he had recently been dismissed from his job as a loan analyst at Goldman Sachs. Hayden shook his head. Frank had worked at Goldman Sachs, in the same department and at the same time as Marian. Most likely she'd known him. And the newspaper article carried salacious hints of an extramarital affair...

Pacing again, Hayden tried to do the math in his head. Might Karyn have been Marian's daughter by Frank? No. The dates were all wrong; Marian would have had to give birth at the tender age of eleven. But perhaps there was still too much coincidence here. It might make sense that Karyn, who seemed to have nothing going on in Chicago, would look for a new life elsewhere. But why had Karyn come to New Orleans, a city so recently ravaged by floods, a place where she knew no one, to work a job with little pay and no reward? Had she made a point of seeking out Marian? And above all, why had she said what Letty had repeated?

After everything you did...

There were lots of questions. But it seemed that only one truly needed answering: What had Marian done?

"Somethin' botherin' you, Mr. Kayne?"

Hayden wheeled around. "What?"

Richard, the old black man who'd become a fixture in the house ever since their shared adventures after Katrina, emerged from the relative dim of the hallway.

"My man," Hayden said, "didn't I tell you to always knock first?"

Sauntering into the office, Richard appraised the mess of papers on the desk, the files arranged haphazardly on the floor. "You ain't usually home mid-day," Richard said with his usual slow smile. "Look here now, how about you and me enjoy a little aperitif?"

Hayden smiled back. "You know I don't drink this early in the day, Richard."

"Just me then. I sure would love some o' that fine scotch you keep for the rich folks!"

"All right," Hayden said. "A small glass couldn't hurt." He went to the bar and poured Richard a single shot. "Here you are!"

Richard raised the glass in a mock toast before bringing it to his lips. "Mmmm," he said. "Now that's the good stuff." He regarded Hayden with a critical eye. "Mr. Kayne," he said. "I know what you're worried about."

"You do?"

"Them Watsons. It's all the talk in town. And I know you'd like to be the one to figure it out." Richard took another sip, closed his eyes, savoring it. Then he sprawled lazily on Hayden's worn leather couch. "Listen here now," he said. "I don't know much. But in all these years I did learn one thing."

Despite himself, Hayden laughed. "And what's that?"

"If you got a question, the answer is always in the same place. Right there in front of your face."

Hayden grimaced. Across the room, his phone rang.



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.



By Carole Stivers



~ 9 ~

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.

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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."

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.

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

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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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.



By Carole Stivers



~ 10 ~

Nancy Carroll was heading their way from her kitchen, the steaming teapot teetering on the tray she carried. This new tea was an experiment, she said—jasmine green. And though a coffee man himself, Hayden Kayne had found its florid, bitter taste to be strangely invigorating. "Would you two like a bit more?" Nancy asked.

"Oh, no thanks, Miss Carroll." Karyn Johnston grinned. "One more bite or sip, and I'll have to buy all new clothes!"

"Let me help you with that, dear," Hayden said, getting up to take the teapot and usher Nancy back to the table.

Nancy settled heavily in her seat and took up her cup once more. "So," she said, "I can't tell you how relieved I am that this whole thing was none of my fault..."

Hayden smiled. "Your mother's tea leaves were indeed tinged with the poison," he said. "But so was the water pitcher in Marian's room. Not to mention the whiskey decanter in William's bedroom, and the bottle of mouthwash they found in his medicine cabinet. As we now know, it was all the handiwork of Claude Thibodeaux. At least he was careful not to tamper with things that might have harmed Karyn or Letty."

"It's only by God's grace that neither of us sampled that tea ourselves!" Karyn said.

"And you say Marian knew it was Claude who had killed William?" Nancy asked.

"It's possible, based on that note she had hidden away," Karyn replied. "Though if she

did, she obviously had no idea how he'd done it..."

Nancy shook her head. "And never will, poor thing."

Hayden sipped his tea, silent. He'd puzzled over it endlessly. And he thought he had it figured out, what Marian had known before she died. She'd known what Claude wanted—the property that had been stolen from his grandfather. Most likely she'd known about that even before William was killed. Perhaps to mollify Claude, perhaps to soothe her own soul, she'd offered the gardener shelter, a place to stay after Katrina. More than likely, she'd promised to name Claude a trustee, should William die before she did. But something had happened. Perhaps Claude's threats had hardened her naturally generous heart. Perhaps she'd suspected that Claude had killed William to get what he wanted. In any event, she'd changed her mind about the trust, instead using it to repay an old debt—to Karyn. That decision had spelled her doom.

There was just one thing that Hayden might never know: How much had Marian really known about her husband?

For Hayden knew William now, better than he ever had when the man was alive. Better than most, perhaps. A gay man with no interest in women, William had managed to stay well clear of his childhood home until the elder Watson was completely out of the picture. But when he was finally summoned home to run his father's company, he'd had to face the music. He'd no doubt dreaded the close examination that he, a single man of marriageable age, would receive upon his return to New Orleans—not only by the community at large but by his own mother, a fastidious social climber who would never accept him for who he was. And so he'd found a bride in Chicago, someone to shield him from suspicion. Marian, newly pregnant by a man she'd discovered was married, had been ripe for the picking.

True, the Watsons' decades-long marriage might once have been based on devotion of a sort. But it had most likely been rooted in deceit—a deceit that had continued for years.

"Cat got your tongue, Hayden?" Karyn asked.

Hayden grimaced. "Not a good metaphor, given the circumstances."

Nancy gazed out the side window of her little parlor. "It's a shame that the poison came from the garden."

Hayden nodded. "Madeleine Barrington was correct in identifying it as a plant toxin, but she was wrong about the source. The culprit here is only a chemical relative of the toxin

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found in the foxglove. Based on what they found in Claude's little chemical laboratory, the poison in this case is something called a cardenolide—a milkweed toxin."

"It seems Claude was experimenting with quite a few species not native to this area," Karyn said. "Most recently, he'd taken to growing one of the more toxic species, something called the wooly pod milkweed."

"So sad," Nancy said. "Those have such a pretty purple bloom in the summer..."

"I read up on it," Karyn said. "Apparently, monarch caterpillars love the stuff. They've developed a natural adaptation that allows them to eat all the milkweed they want, despite the toxin it contains. And the ingestion of all that toxin serves them well. It renders them poisonous to whatever might try to eat *them*..."

Nancy sank back in her chair. "That's all well and good for the monarchs, I suppose. But I can't imagine we'll be planting another butterfly garden around here in the near future."

"I can understand the aversion, given what's happened," Karyn replied. "Though milkweed is relatively harmless to humans so long as somebody isn't intentionally concentrating their toxin like Claude did!"

Hayden reached over to pat Nancy's shoulder. "Don't worry," he said. "My friend Richard knows a fine gardener who would love to plant you something different. Roses, perhaps? Or vegetables? I've used this gardener friend of his, and I can vouch for his skills..."

"Yes," Nancy said. "Yes, Hayden, that would be wonderful." She placed her cup firmly back onto its saucer. "We must move on, and a rose garden sounds like just the thing. But..."

"Yes?" Hayden asked.

"What will become of the Watson property now? Are you going to be able to sell it?"

Hayden picked up another blueberry scone from the plate at the center of the table, allowing its sweet aroma to dull his rueful thoughts. "If Claude Thibodeaux had believed in the law, if he'd just come to me before resorting to murder, I could have helped him. Now... It'll take some doing, but I should at least be able to sell the property."

"But according to what you discovered, Claude owns it," Nancy said. "Do you think he'll agree to a sale?"

Hayden sighed. "It's true. No doubt the court will find that Claude is the rightful owner.

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But I doubt he'll ever be able to live there. And I'm sure he'll soon see the value of cashing out, if only to make his prison life more bearable."

"It's amazing how Hayden figured it all out," Karyn said, casting Hayden an admiring glance. "Apparently, Claude Thibodeaux's grandfather Casimir was defrauded by William's father Henry, way back in 1933. Casimir thought he was signing a loan agreement, but Henry illegally filed it as a conveyance of property."

"No doubt it was a story that old Casimir had recounted many times over the years," Hayden said. "The story of how the well-to-do Thibodeaux family lost their beautiful home to a scam artist who took it for his own. I daresay it weighed heavily on our man Claude."

Nancy sank back in her chair. "My Lord," she said, "one thinks one knows a person..."

Hayden smiled. Nancy would never know the half of it. Not that in the wake of the Great Depression, Henry Watson had built his real estate empire almost entirely on the strong-armed or fraudulent acquisition of properties from debt-ridden small businessmen like Casimir Thibodeaux. And certainly not that William Watson was nowhere near the man that Nancy had always imagined him to be.

But Hayden was glad now, that he knew Nancy. He placed his hand atop hers on the table. "I don't know how we can thank you enough, Nancy," he said. "You're a true heroine!"

"He's right," Karyn beamed. "I owe my life to you..."

Nancy blushed. "You can thank my mother for training me," she said. "Just hand that woman a frying pan and you could forget about household rodents!"

Karyn winced. "Though I know that the feline species is a sensitive topic right now, I'd rather employ a cat for work like that..."

Hayden pushed back from the table. "Well, ladies, I need to take my leave. Believe it or not, I have a new client in Horton Willoughby. I'm not sure what the issue is, but he'll be filling me in all too soon."

Karyn stood up. "Will you be going home first?" she asked.

"Yes, I'll need to pick up my briefcase and call a cab..."

"I'll come along then," Karyn said. "I have my finals tomorrow. I guess I owe it to Marian to finish up my nursing classes." She turned once more to Nancy. "May I come by after?" she said.

"Please do!" Teetering to her feet, Nancy saw them to the door, waving hesitantly as they made their way down the front stairs.

As they retraced their steps toward St. Charles, Hayden stole a glance at Karyn. Her fair hair was tied loosely back from her face, a wayward strand fluttering across her cheek. Her blue eyes, focused ahead, reflected the pearlescent sky. Suddenly she pointed to a pair of butterflies, flitting aimlessly nearby. "I guess they're looking for a new home now," she said.

Hayden watched the monarchs dance, the spring sun illuminating the golden panes of their wings—one plunging ahead, diving, then circling, allowing the other to overtake it. "They'll do fine," he replied. "We all get uprooted from time to time."

Karyn stopped, turning back toward the Carroll house. "She's lonely, isn't she?" she asked.

"Nancy?" Hayden thought about Nancy Carroll. He'd known her for so many years, though not nearly so well as he should have. He still remembered her trusted maid Patsy Lee, her old gardener Chauncey Turner—both so many miles away now. "We all are," he said. "Lonely." He watched Karyn's expression, waited for the now familiar dawn of understanding to light her features. But she only continued looking at Nancy's house, its ornate railings covered with a grimy veneer of chipped white paint.

Embarrassed, Hayden averted his gaze. Out on St. Charles, a group of kids in black and white school uniforms were horsing around at the streetcar stop. Some held instrument cases, some only their shining brass instruments—trumpets, trombones, saxophones, their dull gold surfaces glistening in the sun. He remembered the hymn he'd heard played at Marian's service, its soft, melancholy cadence—*Just a Closer Walk with Thee*. He liked this—walking next to Karyn. "I'll make sure Richard sets Nancy up with some new help," he said. "We'll get her going again."

Karyn looked at him then. "You like to take care of people, don't you, Hayden?"

Hayden turned to her. He drew in a breath. Gently, he touched her hand. "I'd take care of you too," he said. "if you'd let me."

She blushed—as he'd known she would. "I'm not sure you're up to it," she said. "I'm quite a handful."

Speechless, he stared at her. Then he felt something bubbling up from deep within him—from a place he'd forgotten was there. A smile. A chuckle. A laugh.

A hurt look clouded Karyn's face. "Why are you laughing at me? You never take me seriously..."

"Karyn," Hayden said. "I do take you seriously. Seriously enough to know that you're far from a handful. On the contrary..." But he couldn't finish. He could expound at length on the vagaries of contract and property law. He could hold forth for hours on the newly found philosophy of forgiveness and renewal that had guided him since the floods. But he couldn't possibly say the things he needed to say now—things he'd never said to any woman.

Karyn grasped his arm, and he felt the sensation of her touch run through him. "Really, Hayden," she said. "I'm thinking of going back to Chicago. I like the seasons..."

"Chicago?" Hayden looked down at the pavement, hoping his eyes wouldn't betray the feeling in his gut, that familiar feeling of losing his way that she always seemed to elicit.

Karyn sought his gaze. "I don't belong here," she said. "I guess I'm like those butterflies, still looking for somewhere to belong."

"But..." Hayden's mind did what it always did, trying desperately to retreat to logic. But there was no logic to the way he felt.

"I'm sorry, Hayden." Karyn's voice was soft now, quavering. "I don't mean to disparage this place. I know you must love it—you've lived here all your life. But as for me...I feel as though I've gained a family, only to lose it again. I feel as though I'm sinking..."

A soft breeze stirred, and now the butterflies were spiraling away from them. Hayden looked up at the blue sky—at the live oaks, their fresh coat of tender green leaves shivering like wings. Then he took Karyn's hands in his, looked into her eyes. He could get lost, he knew, in those eyes...He swallowed hard. He *would* get lost.

"Karyn," he said. "I'm sinking too." Letting go, he spread his arms wide, his fingers unfolding toward the pot-holed street, the stooped houses, the assembly of musical children, still waiting for the late streetcar. "We're all sinking. That's what New Orleans is...a place that's constantly sinking. But it always rises again. And it's that ability to rise back up, to be reborn—like the butterflies. That's what binds us all here."

Karyn raised her hand to shelter her eyes from the sun. She smiled, a crooked smile.

Hayden steeled himself. "Stay," he said. "Please, stay. Here, you can make a difference."

He had to strain to hear what she said next. "Counsellor," she murmured, "on this matter, I will most certainly consider your argument."

Nancy Carroll stood on her front stoop, watching Hayden Kayne and Karyn Johnston walk away. Hayden was indeed a shrewd one. He'd corroborated Claude Thibodeaux's story about the property: the story that Claude himself had told her on the day before her tea party with Madeline Barrington and Estelle Willoughby—the day when she'd caught him unawares in his little "laboratory." On that day, Claude had told her everything—more than she'd ever wanted to know.

Claude had made William Watson's death seem like a just retribution. He'd appealed to Nancy's sense of pity over the constant injustices that the man and his father had perpetrated on him and his family. His assertion that William had preferred men had been jarring, but reassuring; at least it explained why Nancy had never been successful in winning William's affections.

And of course Claude had had to finish the job by offing Marian. As Claude so rightfully contended, Marian never should have been there in the first place. In the end, Marian had been a fool—that silly woman had promised Claude she'd put him on the trust, only to renege. She'd had no idea of the danger she'd exposed herself to.

But then, as Nancy had stood transfixed in that squalid little shed of his, Claude had finished his diatribe with a threat. Since he'd used the tea that she herself had provided to effect Marian's murder, couldn't she be considered an accomplice? He wasn't much for brains. But he'd been clever, that Claude Thibodeaux.

They'd struck a deal. Claude had promised to come forward with his copies of the land records, to set things straight so that he could finally and legally take possession of the Watson home. For her part, Nancy had kept the silence she'd promised him, exacting in return only a reduced fee for his gardening services.

But as the days had gone by, she'd realized that Claude had no intention of following through on his part of the bargain; he and his family had already suffered too much at the hands of the courts, and trust in the legal system just wasn't in his veins. In fact, she'd realized with increasing alarm that she had no idea what he planned to do; what *was* in his veins, it seemed, was quite a bit of alcohol. And to make matters worse, she'd become aware that her continued silence might render her an accessory after the fact. She'd have to tell



someone. But who? She'd decided on Madeleine Barrington—though she'd dreaded the look she imagined on that boorish woman's face, she would confess all to her at the Garden Club party.

In the end, Claude had saved her. He'd gone completely off the rails, attacking poor Karyn Johnston. Enough was enough—she'd had no choice but to club him. Now, she liked the odds. If he had any word at all, it would be his word against hers.

She looked to her left, at the abandoned Watson home, its proud entryway and grilled porch still wrapped with police tape. Perhaps she could purchase it at a discount...



MEET THE AUTHOR: Carole Stivers

Carole Stivers is a Silicon Valley biochemist whose "home genre" is science fiction. Her near-future science fiction novel *The Mother Code* is on track for publication by Berkley Books (Penguin Random House) in May 2020. It has already been sold in countries around the world, including the UK, Germany, France, Holland, Spain, and Brazil. And, it was recently optioned for film by Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment.

In addition to her passion for science fiction, Carole has been a life-long fan of mystery—starting as a child reading Nancy Drew, graduating to Agatha Christie and "Ellery Queen," and later to John Grisham and Scott Turow. "A good mystery is not too far a cry from a good work of science fiction. Both deal with intricate human relationships, strained by extraordinary circumstances," Stivers says. "And if the mystery includes a twist of science, all the better!"

Yearly visits to the California coast's many monarch butterfly refuges, coupled with multiple trips to New Orleans before and after Katrina, suggested the perfect plot and setting for her mystery story *The Butterfly Garden*, a tale of clashing social values and long-simmering animosities, stirred in the wake of a devastating storm.

Carole's favorite tea is Arbor Teas' Organic Jasmine Green Tea. "After hours of steeping, the floral richness of this tea only deepens, without any bitter aftertaste," she says. "It's the perfect fuel for keeping the creative juices flowing!"



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