

*from* WAITING FOR BUTTERFLIES by Karen Sargent

## CHAPTER 1

Maggie heard the key in the front door and looked at the clock on the nightstand, 1:48 a.m. Nearly twenty-four hours had passed since the phone had jarred her awake and Sam out of bed. From his side of the conversation, she gathered an officer had been shot. “An off-duty detective” was Sam’s only offering as he got dressed, secured his weapon in his shoulder holster, and clipped his badge to his belt.

“Who?” she had called after him, but he was already out the bedroom door. Throughout the day news anchors filled in a few details: an officer, who remained unnamed due to a continuing investigation, had been found fatally shot in his parked car near an abandoned boat dock on the Mississippi. The shooting occurred around midnight, and her only communication with Sam all day had been a text saying he would be home late.

Maggie waited up, tucked into her reading chair in the corner of their bedroom, a leather journal open on her lap. The magnitude of the day weighed heavily on her. Her heart was so full of the agony she knew her husband felt that she was surprised there was room for more. But there was. Earlier in the evening a new grief found a vacant place and crowded in. Maggie prayed she could keep it hidden. Sam needed her now, even though she wanted nothing more

than to feel safe and protected in his arms. When his footsteps echoed in the hall, she closed her journal and put down her pen.

“Mags, why are you still up?” Sam lumbered through the doorway toward her. He placed a hand on each arm of the chair and leaned forward, his face inches away. Grey eyes, dull from the late hour, found hers.

“I’m so sorry.” She placed her hand on his cheek, and he pressed into it, resting a moment. “Do you want to talk?”

A sigh rose from deep inside as he pressed his lips against her forehead. “Right now I just want to take a hot shower and collapse.” He straightened with a groan and ran a hand through his tousled hair as he stood. The silver at his temples seemed more distinct, the creases in his forehead more defined.

“You’re exhausted.” Maggie untucked the front of his shirt, unfastened the bottom button, and started on the next.

He leaned his head back and squeezed the nape of his neck.

“Who was it?”

Hesitating as if saying the name would be physically painful, he loosened his tie, unbuttoned his collar, and turned toward the bathroom. “Ricky Simms. And we don’t have a single lead.”

“Oh, no,” she whispered as the realization seeped in. Sam blames himself. Simms was the new detective Sam had handpicked for his division. He’d groomed the rookie officer, told him to wear the uniform a few years to make himself a viable candidate, joking that Simms reminded him of his younger self when patrolling the streets couldn’t provide the challenge he sought. And there were no leads. Was this it? Would this be the cold case that ended up in a box coated with

dust and pushed to the back of a dark shelf, haunting her husband the rest of his career? Maybe not. It had only been one day. How many times had Sam voiced his disdain at Hollywood's unrealistic portrayal of police work? This wasn't a one-hour TV drama. But Maggie knew the first twenty-four hours were crucial.

She reached for the journal and squeezed it, measuring the weight of the prayers she had written inside, some with answers and some still waiting. Certain prayers demanded to be written down. The hustle of the day often made it difficult to settle her mind and left her feeling as if her prayers disappeared quicker than visible breath on a frigid day. But when she needed to explore precisely what she was feeling, thinking, questioning, the journal kept her focused. She picked up the pen and rolled it between her fingers. A tinge of guilt bit into her. Sam should have been the center of her prayer tonight. But he wasn't. Nate was.

Maggie could no longer shake the weariness that had enveloped her a few hours earlier. Sam started the shower, and as if on cue, sorrow stung her. She tried to blink away the tears, but it was no use. She opened the journal. The words of her last entry blurred.

*Lord, I know children are a gift, not only that You give to us, but a gift we give back to You. You allow us the privilege of experiencing the kind of unconditional, all-consuming love You have for us by giving us these little people to raise for You, to someday return to you with hearts that know You. But not when they are only nine-years-old, right? Forgive me, but I just can't wrap my heart around it, Lord. What is the purpose?*

She placed her pen on the page and continued.

*How will Nate's mom get through this? How does a mother watch her little boy slowly lose the battle for his life? How does a mom—*

Her hand froze. Did she dare write the words, so visible, so undeniable? Her fingers pushed the pen forward.

*—hold on to her faith . . . as she lets go of her child?*

The confession weighed on her, crushing her heart, making each beat labored, pounding, painful. To separate herself from her words, she closed the journal and ran her fingers over the smooth brown cover. Her thoughts wandered to morning. She longed to sit on the edge of Olivia's bed and wake her with a kiss, letting her face linger beside her child's, breathing in the warmth of her sleep. She imagined Rachel's morning sounds across the hall, dresser drawers opening and closing, the shower starting, her voice carrying the melody of her latest favorite song above the spray. Then she pictured Nate's mom. What familiar sounds would be replaced by silence in her morning?

Nate's mom, a woman Maggie knew only through pictures and a blog she stumbled upon months ago where she learned about their fight for his life. She followed their struggle, celebrating when the news was good, praying when it wasn't, all the while marveling at the depth of his mother's faith, her lack of anger, her total acceptance of God's will. And each week she fell more in love with the little boy whose smile betrayed the disease that ravaged him.

Last week's post had been a good report: Nate's blood counts were up, and the doctors were encouraged by the initial results of a new experimental treatment. But today, when the latest post appeared, shock and anguish sliced through Maggie as she read the single sentence his mother had written: "Last night we laid Nate in the arms of Jesus."

"What are you writing?"

Sam stood in the doorway to the master bath, toweling his hair. His athletic build from the early years of their marriage was still evident despite the approach of middle age. His bicep

flexed at the movement, and Maggie longed for the strength of his arms around her. She clasped the journal once more before tucking it into the side table drawer.

“Oh, just ... stuff. You know—” She resisted the urge to lighten her burden. Although Sam would want to know about Nate, it wasn’t the right time.

“Stuff? I’ll never get that, Mags. When something bothers you, you write. When something bothers me, I need to hit golf balls or chop wood, work through it.” Sam grabbed her hands and pulled her to him.

“Yes, that’s what you always say.” Her smile was gentle. “But it’s not just writing, remember? It’s praying, too.”

“Yeah, I don’t get that either. But that’s okay. Praying about a problem is your department; doing something about a problem, that’s my department.”

Sam’s arms encircled her waist and her body settled into his. His familiar scent was therapy. Her heartbeat slowed; her tension eased.

“Come on.” He pulled back and kissed her forehead. “Let’s get some rest.”

Maggie slid into bed and tucked herself close to Sam, inviting sleep. But his breathing didn’t ease. While she teetered between both worlds, he was still working the case. Resisting the rest that lured her, she skimmed her fingertips up his arm and across his chest. His muscles were rigid, his whole body tense. “Want to talk?”

“No.” His chest rose and fell. “Yes. If there was something to talk about.”

He was holding back, as he often did, not disclosing information in order to protect the investigation, or maybe to protect her from worry. But he might succumb with a little encouragement. “There has to be something. What’s your instinct tell you?”

“My instinct?” He grunted. “It doesn’t matter what my instinct tells me. It only matters what the evidence tells me. And there is none.”

“Come on, Lieutenant Blake. Trust yourself. You’re good at what you do.”

He shifted from his side to his back and stared toward the ceiling. The investigation reclaimed her husband. Attempting to keep him with her, she traced a path with her finger from his temple, along his jawline, down his neck. The combination opened the vault.

“It doesn’t add up.”

His jaw clenched beneath her fingertips.

“Simms was off duty. He’d worked the day shift with me, and had to be back on at 7:00 a.m. So what was he doing parked at the riverfront so late?” He shook his head. “He was a good cop. I know my detectives.”

She sensed a question in Sam’s statement. “But?”

“But ... something’s off.”

He grew quiet again. Maggie brushed her fingers along his temple, imagining thoughts ricocheting inside his head like silver orbs in a pinball machine.

“Ricky was shot at close range, through the driver’s window.” His voice was a whisper.

“A murdered detective, a mysterious gunman. This is Cape Spring, Sam, not St. Louis or Memphis, not some big city.”

“The kind of headline you hear on the evening news somewhere else, right? But it happened. Here. To Ricky Simms.” Sam raked his hand through his hair. “No evidence, no witness.” He turned back on his side and pulled her close. “Does all this make you nervous, scared?”

“A little,” she confessed as she turned her back to him and snuggled closer. But after all these years of being married to law enforcement, I’ve learned I can’t walk around worried every moment you’re at work. It’s not in my hands.”

Sam kissed the back of her neck. “Good. Don’t worry. I can take care of myself. I will take care of myself—so I can take care of you and the girls.”

And that’s all it took. A sob swelled in her throat. She tried to hold back but the tears surfaced.

“Hey, what’s wrong? Come on, Mags. Don’t cry. It’ll be okay.”

“I know. It’s not that. It’s just ... well, I don’t want to go into it, but what if something happened to one of the girls? I don’t think my heart could survive.” She’d presented Sam a mystery, a giant leap from the Simms case to this, but she refused to burden him with the details.

“Why would you say that? Nothing is going to happen to Rachel or Olivia. This doesn’t have anything to do with the girls.”

“It’s just been on my mind tonight, and I can’t stop thinking about it.” Her throat tightened, restricting her voice to a whisper. “Losing one of the girls is my biggest fear.”

Sam lay still beside her. She imagined him visiting that horrific place for a brief second.

“I’m so—” she started.

“No.” He shook his head. “We’re not talking about this. It’s late and we’re both exhausted.”

His arm tightened around her. “Nothing is going to happen. Our girls are healthy and happy and safe. And we’re both here to make sure they stay that way.”

“Promise?” Maggie said.

“Promise.”