

Chapter 1

Anja Madsen was a walking contradiction. At six feet tall, with hands that could probably snap a tree in half, she wasn't exactly the butterfly type. But if you took a stroll through her apartment in The Tower, the active community she called home, you'd find butterflies on the walls, the curtains, even the throw pillows. Little ceramic caterpillars lined her shelves. Even her kettle had butterfly patterns all over it.

It was Matthew, the activity coordinator and nineteen-year-old genius with more ideas than his clipboard could hold, who first spotted Anja's hidden soft spot for those delicate creatures. After a quick visit to her apartment, half expecting a lecture on discipline or a weightlifting demo, he walked out with an idea.

The backyard of The Tower screamed indifference, an endless expanse of grass, dotted with a couple of old rocking chairs no one seemed to care about. Director Lawrence Fisk's future was tied to it. After months of resident complaints and a stern warning from the building owners, his lack of vision had finally caught up with him. He knew if he didn't turn that sad patch of lawn into something inviting, he could kiss his job goodbye. But Fisk wasn't the kind of man who liked change, especially not the kind that cost money.

Matthew, on the other hand, saw opportunity where Fisk

saw problems. He had a knack for discovering people's passions and strengths, and he made it his mission to bring them to light and put them to use. He believed thriving people tapped into their full potential. A butterfly garden was what he had in mind, and he knew exactly who should be in charge.

Ms. Madsen had steel in her eyes, the kind forged by a life not cushioned by hugs and kisses. Her decades working in a juvenile rehab center had shown her everything. She'd been screamed at, spat on, even smacked in the face. She'd broken up brawls and knife fights. She'd pulled countless kids back from overdoses, suicide attempts, and escape attempts. With her towering height and a frame like a refrigerator, she could grab three teens at once and have them begging for mercy. If anyone could stand up to the director and drag this project into reality, it was Anja Madsen.

Returning from her daily five-mile walk—rain or shine—she pushed through the entrance with the authority of a bouncer ready to eject troublemakers from the premises.

"Good morning, Ms. Madsen!" Matthew called, hurrying to catch up.

"Morning, Matthew," she said, heading straight for the stairs. He jogged to keep up, determined to stop her before she disappeared.

"Ms. Madsen, there's something I'd like to discuss. Could you spare a minute?"

She turned, and Matthew, a good five or six inches shorter than her, felt the full weight of her presence.

"What's on your mind, boy?"

It wasn't just her height or the broad shoulders that filled the space, it was the way she carried herself, with an air of

commanding power wrapped around her like armor. Her gaze was hard, unyielding, and her words cut the air with the kind of confidence that left no room for argument.

"Would you mind coming to my office?"

Her steps were so swift that by the time he walked in, she was already seated, colorful, butterfly-adorned walking sticks propped against the chair.

"What d'you want to talk about?"

Matthew took a breath. "I would like to transform part of the backyard into a butterfly garden, and wondered if you'd be open to helping me convince the director."

It was rare for anything to catch Anja Madsen off guard, but that did. Her eyes lit brighter than the neon butterfly on her living-room lamp. Something deep inside her stirred, a sense of purpose she hadn't felt in a long time. This wasn't just about butterflies or pretty flowers; this was the chance to fulfill a dream she had quietly nurtured for years.

To Anja, butterflies weren't just beautiful; they were messengers. Their brief, fragile lives were a reminder to seize the moment while you can. Every flap of those delicate wings was a signal to notice what mattered, what was alive, vibrant, and fleeting. This project wouldn't just transform land; it would transform lives in The Tower.

"I'm in."

Once Anja made up her mind, there was no hesitation. She moved like a hawk diving for prey: focused, swift, unstoppable. With his suggestion, Matthew had unknowingly unleashed a force of nature. She was on a mission to turn the bleak stretch behind The Tower into a sanctuary for all things winged and delicate, and nothing would stand in her way.