

Chapter

1

I think the butterflies knew what was coming that day—that *he* was coming, and that life as we knew it was about to change.

They didn't let on, of course. They simply continued their usual activity, flitting and floating, luring me outside.

One particularly large monarch caught my eye as it alighted on a marigold a mere two steps in front of me.

I froze, not even allowing myself the motion of a smile. The delicate orange-and-black wings, designed with more intricacy than any human could accomplish, fanned rhythmically, almost thoughtfully, while flashing their bitter toxicity to any birds that might otherwise target them as a tasty fast-food meal.

Barely breathing, I eased forward in excruciating slow motion. The monarch's antennae bobbed, smelling the sweet nectar as its straw-like black tongue uncurled and prodded deep inside the flower.

The butterfly sipped, tongue pumping like a slender

hose. I enjoyed the sight for a moment before raising my Nikon to frame the picture in my viewfinder, to capture this fleeting moment in all its peaceful, fragile splendor before—

VRRROOOMM!

The intrusive motor roar jolted my shoulders. I dropped my camera and it bounced on its strap against my chest.

The butterfly took off.

VRRROOOMM!

The ear-shattering noise increased, and sound waves shook the air. I cringed. Something—*someone*—was coming up my driveway. A rare occurrence, and one I'd rather not deal with.

Since I couldn't disappear like the butterfly, I darted through the flowers to the side of my house, slipping from sight just as a motorcycle roared into view.

A motorcycle, on my property.

The thought turned my stomach.

The rider must be lost or have the wrong house. He'd leave soon enough once he rang my doorbell and no one answered. I followed the horizontal vinyl siding of my house until I rounded the corner to my backyard.

My haven.

No motorcycle here.

The marigolds, so bright they radiated yellow and orange, called to the butterflies. *Come, taste, stay a while . . .*

Royal purple and passionate pink flowers adorned dozens of milkweed plants. Red and yellow zinnia blooms completed the garden. My peace slowly

returning, I sighed and watched the visiting butterflies sample the nectar.

One monarch perched on the edge of an impressive flower cluster, hanging so that its wings blinked open and closed as if winking at the ground.

Thoughtfully, I traced the surface of my camera. My photo opportunity in the front garden had been cut short, but maybe this would be a better one, a creative viewpoint I'd never tried before.

I slipped to the ground and lay back against the grass. Blades tickling my neck, I scooped into position one centimeter at a time until I saw the orange-and-black wings pulsing and the butterfly bobbing on the flower above me.

Perfect.

Easing my camera into position, I framed the shot. I'd snapped many butterfly pictures in my twenty-three years, but never one like this. Heart singing with satisfaction, I poised my finger for the right moment—full wingspan—to take the shot. No way would I lose this one.

“Hello?” A man's voice punctured the silence. Footsteps cracked branches and crushed plants as the guy approached with no regard for my garden, butterflies, or photo op.

Milkweed leaves quivered above me, but I didn't move. Amazingly, neither did the butterfly.

“Hello? Anyone here?” The voice rose louder, closer, twinging my nerves. I clutched my camera protectively.

Stems rustled beside me, followed by a pause that

made me hold my breath.

A terrible weight smashed onto my shin, a bolt of pain zinged up my leg, and my breath escaped in a shriek. I popped to a sitting position, and the butterfly darted away, along with my hopes of the perfect picture.

The man stumbled backward, looking appropriately shocked. I reached for my lower leg, half expecting to see a boot imprint, and rubbed the sore spot. Words scrambled through my head, but my lips stayed sealed.

They were so used to silence.

“I’m so sorry—I can’t believe I stepped on you. Man, that sounds terrible.” Looking chagrined, the stranger shook his head. “It *is* terrible. But I just didn’t see you there.” He edged closer. “Are you okay?” He dropped to one knee beside me. So close. Warm air stirred around us, unsettling, as if charged with electricity.

I edged away, then pushed myself up off the ground. “I-I’m fine.” Just a little flustered.

“Doesn’t sound like you’re fine.” He stood, and I glimpsed his eyes, rich blue. Morpho butterfly blue. Intense and stunning. Concerned.

What to do? What to say? For no reason at all, I felt myself blushing. Already, I was surely making an odd impression, proving the town gossips right.

I tilted my face downward and spotted his feet, his big, heavy black boots. They had to feel sweltering on a hot summer day like today.

The man’s gaze must have followed mine because he said, “You’re not wearing any shoes.”

My toes curled, gripping the earth. “I wasn’t

expecting any company.”

“Aren’t you worried you’ll step on something sharp?”

“No, I’m careful. Going barefoot feels wonderful in the summer.” I couldn’t help glancing almost sympathetically at his boots. “You should try it sometime.”

He laughed, the sound rich, almost soothing. I tried to join in, but didn’t quite know how.

My nerves fluttered. Who was this man and what was he doing on my property?

He scratched his head. I was surprised he could find it through such thick blond hair. He glanced from me to the spot where I’d lain mere moments before. “So why were you hiding in the weeds?”

My eyes widened. “Weeds?” After all the work I’d done to cultivate them? I covered a tiny laugh. “Oh, no, these aren’t weeds.” My fingers brushed a leaf tenderly. “They’re part of my garden, my butterfly garden. Monarchs love milkweed.”

“Yeah? Weed’s in the name, but they’re not weeds. Sure . . . makes perfect sense.” He smiled and tapped his temple. “Got it.”

“And I wasn’t hiding.” I shifted my camera. “Well, I guess I was . . . From the butterflies, that is. I was only trying to take a picture.”

He glanced at the ground, and his voice came out incredulous. “Of the dirt?”

“No, of a butterfly. From a unique perspective.” My shoulders bounced a little shrug. “But you scared it away.”

He nodded. “And then I stepped on you.”

I shrugged again. “You didn’t mean to. It was an accident.”

He squinted at me. “I’m making a bad first impression, aren’t I?”

“No . . . I, um, I’m just wondering why you’re here, that’s all.”

“Okay, well here goes.” He squared his shoulders. “I’m here to ask you a favor.”

A favor? From me? Again, a laugh stirred in my throat, a reflex my body had almost forgotten.

“Hear me out. It’s not really a favor so much as a business proposition.”

Business? I blinked. Did I look like a business woman? Certainly not. He must have me confused with someone.

He stuck out his hand. “My name’s Harvey.”

Feeling awkward, I met his palm. The firmness of his grasp and hearty handshake startled me. When his eyes assessed me, I wondered what he noticed. My hesitant expression, my messy brown hair, my plain T-shirt? Hopefully not the grass stain on my knee. I angled myself to try to shield it.

“Like I said, I’m sorry I hurt you. I am, really.” He released my hand and I glanced at it. My palm felt different somehow. Warmer, hyper-sensitive. How long had it been since I’d shaken someone’s hand? Touched someone’s hand, for that matter?

“Lila,” I said, suddenly remembering I should have introduced myself. “I mean, that’s my name.”

He brightened. “Nice to meet you, Lila. I hope you

don't mind, but I saw you head back here and just followed you. Don't worry, I'm not selling anything. I'm here to buy. And I'm willing to pay top dollar."

Confused, I glanced around. "But I don't have anything to sell."

"Sure you do." A grin split his face and creased the corners of his eyes. "I've heard all about you."

Oh dear, I wished he hadn't. I could just imagine . . .

"You raise butterflies, right? Lots of them. So many that people even call you the butterfly rec—" He cleared his throat. "Uh, girl. The butterfly girl, yeah. And I'm in need of butterflies, that's all. For a butterfly release, and I heard you're the one to talk to. Am I right?"

I took a moment to process his words. It was almost funny that he thought I didn't know people called me the butterfly recluse. How kind of him to want to shield me from the fact.

Even so, I shook my head. "I'm very sorry, but I can't help you. My butterflies aren't a business, and I would never sell them. Why, that would be like selling a . . . a rainbow. Or . . . a star."

His gaze intensified. "People do that, you know. Sell stars."

What? My jaw fell. "You're joking. No one owns the stars. They belong to God."

God. I really didn't want to think about Him, and how He controlled everything. Everyone. I clamped my mouth shut as my stomach twisted and my thoughts headed for a black hole.

Harvey's words pulled me back. "Well, technically

people sell the right to name the stars. Kinda the same thing, though.”

Sounded suspicious to me.

A swallowtail butterfly flew by, and my gaze wandered, following its irresistible course. Where was it headed? What would it see on its way?

“You sure like butterflies.”

My cheeks warmed. “I do.”

Harvey nodded. “So does Sally, so you must know how much a butterfly release would mean to her. I can’t refuse the bride-to-be her most important wedding request. What’ll make you say yes? There’s gotta be something. Name your price.”

“It’s not about money. I just don’t like it, the whole idea of it, and neither do they.”

“They . . .” Turning his head, he glanced around. “They . . . who?”

“The butterflies.”

He stared, forcing those blue eyes on me. “It’s not like I’m asking to kill the things. Sheesh. We’re letting them go, setting them free. Win-win. What could be better?”

“Maybe not locking them up in the first place? Some people who do butterfly releases even put individual live butterflies flat into envelopes. *Envelopes*—just so each guest can let one go.” I watched his reaction carefully.

He made a face. “I’m not gonna do that.”

“Good, because some of them wouldn’t make it. Imagine the wedding statement that would make: ‘Best wishes for a long and happy marriage, and oh, by the way, here’s your dead butterfly.’” I made a motion as if

shaking something free from an envelope, then pointed to the ground. ““Try not to step on it.””

He started to laugh, then snorted it short.

My mouth wasn't sure whether to smile or frown. He seemed like a nice enough guy. Not that I knew any men to judge him by. Old-time actors on classic TV probably didn't count.

But I supposed it was time I sent him on his way. He was a stranger, after all, and I did live alone on an isolated stretch of land. “I'm sorry I can't help you, but I'm sure you'll find someone who will.”

“I won't. There's no one else local, and there's not enough time. The wedding's in less than a month.” Harvey spread his hands. “I'm out of options. You're my last hope.”

Such exaggeration. Such determination. “Sorry, but maybe it's time to think about a dove release.” I paused. “Don't put those in envelopes, either.”

I headed for my sliding back door, hoping that today it wouldn't stick as it so often did. I grasped the handle. “Goodbye.”

“Just think about it, will you? Tell me you'll at least do that.”

“No, I'm sorry, but my answer's not going to change.” No point in wasting more of his time or giving him false hope. I swallowed a grunt as I tugged at my door. Of all the days to stick—

“Here, let me help you with that—”

“No!”

But he'd already pulled the door from me, yanking it open wide—so much wider than the crack I typically

slipped through.

A cloud of orange-and-black wings fluttered out the door and past our faces, rising and dispersing in all directions to the sky.

I took in the beautiful sight—the weightlessness, the grace, the freedom—with a wistful smile. “There goes your butterfly release.”