
CLAIMING MIA

BJ WANE

Blushing Books

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Chapter 1

“Sign here.”

With a hand that shook, Mia Reynolds put her signature in the designated lines, effectively ending her nineteen-year marriage on her thirty-seventh birthday. “Is that it?” she asked her lawyer, Bob Temple, who gazed at her across his desk with sympathetic eyes.

“That’s everything. This is a good thing, Mia. You can move on now, get on with your life. Why don’t you go out tonight and celebrate?”

She gave him a rueful smile. He wasn’t the only one pressuring her to move on, or to start going out more. “Maybe. But not tonight. I still have a full day to put in at the nursery and this stop has put me behind.” She rose, surprised to find her legs steady since her palms were still damp from stress. “Thanks for everything, Bob. Tell Dee hi, would you?”

“Will do but give her a call. I know she’d appreciate hearing from you.”

Mia stepped outside and inhaled a deep breath of New Mexico’s warm, arid summer air. Her friend, Dee, wasn’t the only person she’d neglected the past year during her separation

from Peter. She'd gotten over the surprise and hurt of her husband's betrayal a long time ago, so why had she kept herself so isolated from her friends? Slipping behind the wheel of her truck, she admitted it was the loss of what she'd grown accustomed to more than the loss of her husband she'd missed most when he walked out. Peter had become like her favorite robe, something she'd grown so used to and comfortable with, she never thought of sewing the frayed edges where it had become worn. Losing him hadn't bothered her nearly as much as the shame of him preferring a twenty-two-year-old *skinny* girl wearing a short, silky robe. Now, *that* bothered her.

It took less than ten minutes to reach her nursery and landscaping business located just a half-mile off Whitetail's Main Street. Of course, in her home town of just under fifteen thousand residents, it didn't take long to get anywhere, or for gossip to travel fast from ear to ear. She imagined news of her and Peter's finalized divorce had already spread from one end of Main Street to the other, the same as when they'd split up. Pulling around to the rear of the floral shop and office, she parked and hopped out, waving to her three part-time employees, third-year students from the University of New Mexico, forty minutes away in Albuquerque. She still managed to handle a good portion of the physical work her clients contracted by herself, but valued the manpower and time saved by employing the younger guys. Hiring Barry, Drew and Donny last month after she'd gone full-time with the business had been one of her smarter choices. Hanging on to her dead-end marriage far too long was one of the dumber ones.

Leaning against the truck, she took a moment to scan the acreage of her business and enjoy the fact it was all hers now. Peter had tried to get half of the nursery she'd spent the last fifteen years building up from scratch while he belittled her efforts and goals. She'd been only too happy to remind him how he used to refer to her part-time work as her 'little hobby' and

couldn't help grinning ear to ear when he'd taken his first look at last year's financial statement his lawyer produced. Signing over the house where they'd raised their twin sons in exchange for her business had been as difficult as she'd first thought. Priceless memories were stored inside the four walls. It had been the one asset it pained her to give up, but since she had to make a living with the nursery she couldn't afford to give him half the equity.

The boys turned eighteen last spring, and they'd just moved them into the dorms on the campus of Southwestern College in Santa Fe. They'd left small town U.S.A. without looking back and, wide grins splitting their handsome young faces, seemed to take to living in the big city like fish took to water as they wasted no time diving into college by taking a full summer load of classes.

Mia had always been happiest with her hands buried in dirt or in the midst of designing a garden. She never tired of the view of plants and flowers indigenous to her desert state spread out before her; the rows of flowering shrubs and prickly cacti just waiting to adorn someone's lawn or perk up an office front. Dealing with empty-nest syndrome on top of her divorce made her even more grateful for the longer planting and lawn care seasons that came with the extended warm months and short winters of New Mexico. With a sigh, she pushed away from the truck and resigned herself to getting back to the office work she'd neglected this past week, her least favorite part of owning her own business.

She should've known Trish, her part-time office assistant, would be ready to pounce as soon as she entered the building housing the floral and business office. "You're free! When are we going to celebrate?" The perky redhead greeted her from behind the long counter where she stood arranging a wildflower bouquet in a bright blue vase.

"I don't have time to celebrate. Who are those for?" Mia

nodded to the arrangement of white lilies, yellow roses and blue delphinium as she leafed through the day's agenda.

"One guess." Trish's sly grin gave it away.

Mia frowned. "Another one? Didn't he just pick up a plant for his flavor of the month two weeks ago?"

"Yes, but you know how the Chief likes to spoil whoever these gifts are for. I think he enjoys keeping everyone guessing who gets them. Now, speaking of hot guys, I say we hit the bars this weekend and hunt down a man for you to sow some long overdue wild oats."

Mia rolled her eyes at her 'younger by twelve years' employee and friend. "Do you have any idea how long it's been since I did anything like that? I'm way too old to be out picking up a guy at a bar. And I don't need to sow some wild oats. I did that with Pete."

"Mia, I don't know what you did with that loser, but it sure wasn't the down and dirty. If it had been, you'd still be married. There. How's that look?" Trish turned the vase all the way around, checking to ensure the flowers were evenly arranged as Mia taught her.

Ignoring the remark that struck too close to home, she said, "Looks good. When is he picking it up?"

"Soon, so you'll be the lucky one to see he gets it. Tell him I said hi, will you?" She smirked.

Mia sighed in irritation. If there was anyone who could rub her the wrong way, it was their police chief, and Trish knew it. "He always chooses your half day to come by. Another thing that annoys me about the man. Go on, enjoy your afternoon. I'll see you in the morning."

As soon as Trish took off, Mia padded down the short hall to the small office and settled behind her desk to go over the books. Since she'd moved into the compact apartment upstairs, her rent was included in the nursery's bills, which helped a lot on her monthly expenses but was also a large debit she hadn't incurred

before the separation. Her bottom line didn't look near as good as the last year before they split. She'd managed to sock away a good sum from her little hobby over the years, but Peter's attorney won that round and half went to the man who was now living with a young woman who was only five years older than his sons. Shaking her head, she vowed to turn over a new leaf starting now and put that man out of her mind. What was done, was done.

Over the next hour, putting aside thoughts of her ex and his bimbo proved to be easier than not recalling a day almost ten years ago that remained seared into her memory. The day she could pinpoint as the beginning of her constant vexation with Nolan MacGregor, the town's bad boy turned law enforcer.

Clutching two filled grocery bags in her arms, Mia rushed out of the store regretting turning down the bag boy's offer of assistance. In a hurry to get home and put away the perishables before picking up the boys from school, she thought she could manage alone, but they were heavier than she'd anticipated. Slowing her steps, she rounded the corner, looked down the street for her car and stumbled to an abrupt halt, the scene before her catching her by surprise. She'd heard Nolan MacGregor was in town visiting his parents, but since she didn't know the man personally, she couldn't get as enthused about one of his visits as most of the female population in Whitetail. She'd never understood her friends' infatuation with the former high school troublemaker who had then gone on to surprise everyone by pursuing an exciting career as a DEA agent in Washington. Yes, he was tall, dark and handsome, but no man had caught her interest since she'd set eyes on her husband eleven years ago.

Not until this very moment as she stood there unnoticed and watched wide-eyed as he fisted one hand in his companion's long blonde hair and brought her up on her toes to meet the forceful possession of his descending lips. Mia's mouth went dry when his other hand latched onto the woman's right buttock, tightened and pressed her pelvis into contact with his. He maintained the masterful hold the whole time he kissed her with a thoroughness that threatened to buckle Mia's knees. Her pulse spiked and a warm flush spread throughout her body when she noticed his butt-holding hand kneading

the plump globe through the blonde's short skirt and the way his other hand tightened in her hair as he pressed her against the driver's side of his car.

This is wrong, just plain wrong, she thought with a rush of panic. She was a married woman, for God's sake, she had no business reacting so strongly to another man she didn't even know. Maybe she'd never felt Peter's hand squeezing her butt or enjoyed such a long, possessive kiss from the only man she'd slept with. She was the lucky one as her strait-laced husband would never grope her on a public street like the uncouth man a few feet from her was doing, oblivious, or just plain uncaring about the people watching.

And then he did the unforgivable. He raised his head, keeping his hold on the woman as he looked up the sidewalk right at Mia, those razor sharp, enigmatic blue eyes taking in her disheveled appearance with a crooked smile. Mia sucked in a deep breath, the sudden twitch between her legs adding to her discomfort from being caught staring. Irritation replaced mortification and she resumed her step, only to trip over a crack in the walk in her haste to reach her van. Her startled cry as she tried to keep from dropping her groceries resonated in the afternoon air right before a hard arm caught her around the waist.

"I've got you, sweetheart. Here, let me help you with those." Letting go of her, Nolan plucked the bags from her arms before she could stop him. "Where are you parked?" he asked, appearing unconcerned about the glare coming from his blonde companion.

"I can get them," Mia returned, flustered by his sudden nearness.

"I insist." The hard edge to his voice made her buttocks clench, that response as shocking as the one between her legs.

Gritting her teeth, she pointed to her minivan. "There." She dashed ahead of him to slide open the side door, damn near tripping again in her haste to get away from him. "Thank you," she said when he straightened after setting the bags on the back seat. He raised one black brow, the sardonic look as obvious as her prim tone.

"Take care, sweetheart." With a nod, he strolled back to the woman glaring daggers at Mia.

With a mental shake of her head, she climbed behind the wheel and drove home praying she could get herself under control before Peter got home from the office.

Something about the way Nolan had used his body to pin his date against the car, his grip on her head to hold her immobile for his possession, had stirred her in a new, exciting way she still didn't understand. Given everything she'd heard about the man put him as far from being her type as the distance between earth and the moon. She had seen him a handful of times since that day, and quite often since he'd taken the position as police chief, and her reaction to his knowing gazes was always the same. No man except him had ever caused her pussy to twitch from just a look, and because she couldn't pinpoint why he irritated her so much, she blamed it on that anomaly. If she didn't need the business, she would refer him to the florist whenever he called for an arrangement.

Thirty minutes later, she stood reaching for a potted vase sitting on the top shelf in the showroom when the bell over the door pealed. Before she could climb off the short stool, hard hands clasped her waist and lifted her down as if she weighed nothing. Flustered, she looked up, gritted her teeth and shifted in uncomfortable awareness when her eyes met Chief Nolan MacGregor's amused gaze. Okay, she admitted it wasn't the man's physical appearance she objected to. What woman wouldn't look twice at a six foot two, broad shouldered, slim hipped man who wore a Stetson tipped low enough to draw the eyes to the slit of his cobalt blue gaze? No, it was the arrogant dominance he wore like a comfortable coat that put her on edge whenever he entered her place, more so now he was crowding her against the shelves and making her even more aware of that ripped body. She much preferred easy-going, *polite* men.

Wishing it were anyone but him, she stated with a huff, "You're crowding me, Chief."

Those sensuous lips curved in a slow smile as he stepped back. "I wouldn't make you so uncomfortable if you'd let yourself cut loose with me."

Damn. There went that warm flush spreading through her

body when he thumbed back his hat far enough for those enigmatic blue eyes to zero in on her with a long perusal. He made no effort to hide the appreciative trail he took from her braided, dark brown hair to her sneaker-clad feet. How one look from him could make her dormant body sit up and take notice when she didn't even like the man was beyond her. She sure as heck didn't like it. She'd never been one to be ruled by baser urges, instead preferring a positive connection with a man or woman before embarking on a friendship, something that was definitely lacking between her and the chief.

Shuffling behind the counter, Mia breathed a sigh of relief once she put the wide, butcher block space between them. She glanced up, way up, at the only man who'd been able to get under her skin. There wasn't one thing she could pinpoint that rubbed her the wrong way; instead, it seemed to be the uneasy combination of arrogance, dominance and male magnetism she objected to, and her betraying body's response to those undesirable traits. There was no use denying the way her pulse spiked under the slow stroke of his ice-blue eyes that was as potent as a caress, a reaction she should be used to by now since it had been occurring from the moment she first set eyes on him kissing that woman all those years ago.

"Thanks, Chief, but I have enough on my plate right now to keep me from even thinking about being added to your long list of conquests," she returned primly, ignoring his taunting smirk. "Thank you for your order. Trish has it all ready for you." She pulled the vase forward.

"I didn't peg you as the type to listen to small town rumors, Ms. Reynolds." He nodded at the colorful arrangement. "Nice, thank you. I'm glad I caught you in." The way he drew out *Ms. Reynolds* in a slow drawl hinted he knew about the finalization of her divorce. He and every other citizen in Whitetail.

Reaching into his breast pocket, Chief MacGregor pulled out two tickets and slid them across the counter toward her. Tilting

his hat back even further, he offered her a better view of his rugged face bronzed by sun and wind and capped with coal black hair tinted grey around his forehead. “You haven’t paid these.”

“I’m sorry, I’ve been so busy, I forgot.” Picking up the parking tickets, she winced at the fines. Her habit of pulling over and parking wherever it was convenient to expedite her errands resulted in a parking fine more often than not. That was just one of Pete’s constant complaints that went along with her always being in a hurry. “I can come in later this afternoon and take care of them.”

Leaning on the counter, he replied in that deep voice that never failed to curl her toes. “See that you do. Or, better yet, don’t. Now that you’re officially free, it’ll give me a good excuse to offer you a choice of consequences.”

The corners of his mouth kicked up in another smile, but she couldn’t miss the hint of a threat behind his words that set her heart to hammering with uncertainty. That didn’t concern her near as much as the sudden warm gush between her legs. She didn’t even like the man, for pity’s sake, and she really didn’t care for his forward insinuations.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked in irritation.

DAMNED if that prim and proper tone didn’t do it for him every time he heard it, Nolan mused, enjoying Mia’s flustered look. He’d been lusting after the attractive brunette since first clapping eyes on her standing on the sidewalk, her green eyes round as saucers as she watched him kissing a woman he couldn’t even remember by name. When her surprised, flustered look changed to one of curiosity, he’d experienced a tug of interest. But it wasn’t until she’d shifted her gaze to his date and he caught a flare of envy that he’d become intrigued. She’d been married back then, which put her off limits, but when he’d returned to his

hometown to take a permanent position at the police department, he'd heard about her impending divorce and his captivation with the prickly landscaper had grown steadily in the past six months.

The first time he'd seen her after returning, she'd been bending over the garden bed lining the front of the small police station he'd agreed to take over almost as soon as the offer came across his DEA desk in Washington eight months ago. Her loose shorts molded a nicely rounded, soft backside, and when she spun around at his greeting, the innocent spark of interest in those guileless green eyes and the quick attempt she made to stifle it had pleased him. It was the same look he'd caught on her face that memorable day on the sidewalk.

He tipped his hat down and picked up the vase. "Take me up on my offer of a hot and heavy affair and I'll show you. You know where I'm at if you should change your mind. Put this on my tab, will you?" He walked out, feeling her eyes drilling a hole in his back. The problem wasn't a lack of attraction on her part, he mused as he settled behind the wheel of his cruiser, but fear of what he made her feel.

It had only taken a few bland inquiries of his new staff about the gardener to confirm she was in the middle of a nasty divorce. As he'd settled into his new job, one that promised a quieter pace he'd been yearning for some time, his initial thought upon hearing about her recent split was to continue ignoring the pull she wrought. At forty-three, he preferred uncomplicated relationships with women who enjoyed his dominant proclivities and sexual control. But during those first weeks of acclimating himself to the dynamics of policing a small town and the surrounding low-populated counties, he kept coming across the woman who'd first caught his interest ten years ago.

The more she snubbed his teasing advances with her prim nose in the air and twitched that enticing ass as she turned from him, the more he wanted her. Maybe it was the challenge she

presented, or the glimpse of interest he'd caught on her expressive face that kept him interested in pursuing her. He didn't know her ex, Peter Reynolds, but the gossip grapevine reached his ears everywhere he went, and it had been easy to condemn the prick who had betrayed his family for a much younger woman.

Nolan's upbeat mood from sparring with Ms. Reynolds lasted while he stopped in for lunch with his mother and watched her beam over the vase of flowers. No one meant more to him than the woman who had adopted him when he'd been an orphaned toddler and raised him with a strict, but loving hand. His father passed away two years ago, which had been one of the driving factors in his decision to retire from his federal government job as a DEA agent and move back home. He smiled to himself as he now left her house to return to the office. Mia, along with a majority of the town, believed he gifted the plants and flowers to his occasional dates, and it tickled his mother and him to let them think that. Little did they know he hadn't slept with the few women from Whitetail he'd taken out. When it came to sex, he never compromised on his kinks, and therefore stuck with pursuing submissive women for bed partners.

Except when it came to Mia Reynolds.

As soon as Nolan swung into the station's parking lot and saw who was waiting for him in an unmarked car, he shoved aside all thoughts of his prickly landscaper. Sliding out of his police-issued SUV, he didn't spare Chuck Campbell, his ex-boss at the DEA, a glance as he strode inside, tossing over his shoulder, "Let me help save your breath and your time. The answer's no." Letting the door shut in Chuck's face, he nodded to Carrie, the dispatcher, on his way back to his office.

Settling behind his desk, he fumed at the memories seeing Chuck again had conjured up. He had spent ten of his fifteen years with the DEA undercover, forced to sit back and watch one atrocity after another because his false identity and end goal prevented him from stepping in. When the position of police

chief opened in his hometown, hundreds of miles from Washington, he'd snatched it up and had been blissfully happy with his choice.

As Nolan knew he would, Chuck followed him into the office, shut the door behind him and held up a placating hand. "You don't have a choice, and it gives me no pleasure to say that." He tossed a photo on Nolan's desk before taking a seat facing him. "Drug overdose, in your jurisdiction."

Shit. Gut churning, he looked down at the photo and swore again. She couldn't have been more than eighteen.

"Best guess, she was between fifteen and twenty. We haven't identified her yet. Third one in two months within a hundred miles of each other. The coroner reports for all three confirmed a heavy dose of tainted cocaine as cause of death." Settling back in the chair, his ex-boss waited with patient calmness that crawled right up Nolan's spine.

Unable to help himself, he glanced down again and winced. It wasn't the worst he'd seen, but bad enough. Pushing the picture toward Chuck, he said, "If it's drug trafficking that's resulted in death due to contamination, and it probably is, that's out of my jurisdiction. Nice seeing you again."

Ignoring him, Chuck forged on. "Nice try. We discovered all three in your counties, which means you're going to help us stop this flow, with luck, before anyone else turns up dead."

Nolan wasn't a hard-hearted son-of-a-bitch, but he had left the DEA for several reasons, one being burnt out on undercover work. "I'm not about to spend another year of my life infiltrating a drug smuggling ring," he warned. "I'll retire first."

"You don't have to, I've got agents ready to slip in if you can lock down the source. We also have a man undercover in Mexico with a known dealer and smuggler. Look, Nolan, I get it, I honestly do. But whether you like it or not, this is part of your new duties as chief. You know what kind of suspicious behavior to look for. If you don't have the manpower, stake out the

highway bars yourself. Those dives are always popular for drug transfers and you're new enough on the force no one will recognize you right away."

Nolan fought back his annoyance. So much for trading in his taxing federal job for an easier, less stressful gig. "I left my bar hopping days behind me years ago, but you're right. Those would be the best places to start. I can put a man or two on a rotating schedule, along with myself."

"Contact me with anything, even a suspicion. It'll be more than we have now. It's always been up to us to take over where Border Patrol has failed."

Nolan stood up for the agents willing to take on such a daunting, never-ending task as stopping the flow of drugs pouring over the border. "They can't be everywhere at once."

"I know." Chuck ran a hand through his greying hair. "I'm just frustrated and sickened by the senseless deaths."

"You and me both."

His plans to pursue Mia now she was free had just hit a snag, but Nolan wouldn't let that stop him. He'd just have to find a way to squeeze her in around bar hopping the next couple weeks. He wasn't looking forward to keeping an up close and personal eye on the clubs, but he would do what was necessary to get the tainted drugs off the streets.