
Chapter 1

Mia kept her eyes on the digital clock, willing the time to go faster. Today was Friday, and every Friday she paid for a private session in the backroom of 'The Barnyard', a sex club that catered to BDSM clientele. The instant her clock read five p.m., she went outside and picked up the bright yellow and orange A-frame sign that read *Mia's Flowers* from the sidewalk and brought it inside. She set the sign against the wall, closed the front door and locked the manual deadbolt. It was an unseasonably warm day, so she'd left the front door, the back door and the two large shop windows open for most of the afternoon to let air flow through the screens.

She'd been running a flower shop out of her house for a little over six months now, and even though living and working in the same building had been an adjustment, it had turned out to be profitable. The house had a large wooden porch that spanned the entire front and a big living room window so that people could see into her shop from the sidewalk. The front door opened to the living room, which she'd converted into her store. Shelving on the walls held vases, cards, stuffed animals, balloons and other little knickknacks. In the center of the room, she had a five-foot-

long freestanding rack with plastic holders to put the day's flowers in. Near the back wall, she had a tall desk with a stool where she did transactions and kept the money. To the right of her desk was the entrance to her kitchen, which she'd blocked off with a little baby gate. It wouldn't stop an adult from stepping over it and going into the kitchen, but it kept little ones from wandering in, and it was a nonverbal signal for adults to stay out. On the left wall, she had another baby gate to keep people out of the hallway that went to her bedroom, bathroom and guest bedroom that she'd converted to be her living room. Her back door was in the kitchen, and it led out to her greenhouse where she grew a good portion of the flowers that she sold.

Mia flipped the 'open' sign to 'closed', and she considered closing the shop windows but decided to leave them open a bit longer to let in some of the cooling evening air.

She hummed as she thought about her plans for the evening. She'd started paying for a private Domme six months ago, and Mistress Felicity had helped her immeasurably after the stuff she'd been through with her ex-boyfriend. Every once in a while, Mia had the urge to try out a male dominant again, but that thought was still too frightening. Women *felt* safer, whether they actually were or not. The only downside was that she had zero interest in being sexual with a woman, so after a session, she came home and took care of herself by masturbating.

At her desk, she started counting up the profits for the day and realized her favorite customer, Professor Aaron Sherman, hadn't been in. Losing track of the count, she double-checked the calendar on the wall. It was the first of May, and the professor always came in on the first and the fifteenth of the month. On the first, he sent flowers to his mom, and on the fifteenth, he sent them to his grandmother. He usually came in at least once or twice more to send flowers to other women, which Mia suspected were one-night stands. She'd never asked, but he was an unmarried, physically fit, thirty-seven-year-old professor,

so it stood to reason that he'd have plenty of opportunities to sleep around.

Mia's house was three blocks off campus from Northern Oregon University, so most of her customers were college students or people who worked on campus, and Aaron had been her best customer since day two. That first week she'd been open, she couldn't process credit cards yet, so he'd written a check for his flowers. She'd asked to see his ID to make sure it matched the information on his check and casually made a note of the fact that he was four years older than she and that he was an organ donor, before handing it back.

Putting the money and receipts back in the desk drawer, she went to look out her open window, wondering if something was wrong. Usually, he showed up during the lunch hour, but at least two other times he'd shown up right before she was about to close, so maybe he just hadn't made it yet.

Her session at The Barnyard wasn't until nine o'clock, so she seriously considered unlocking her front door and staying open an extra ten minutes to give Aaron time to show up. She wouldn't want him finding a new flower shop. She wouldn't just miss his business; she'd miss his flirty little smile and intelligent conversation.

While she was considering it, she heard the hinges squeak on her screen door in the kitchen and frowned at the thought of flies getting in. She was sure she'd closed it, but it wouldn't be the first time it had come unlatched. She walked toward the kitchen to close it, but as she was about to step over the baby gate, she saw a man standing in her kitchen. *Homeless*, her brain supplied as she instantly took in the disheveled appearance, the mismatched clothes, the long ratty hair and the crusty graying beard. He lurched forward, toward her.

Mia's body reacted before her brain had time to catch up. She heard a startled scream, realized the scream had come from her, and ran toward the front door. Her fingers reached out and

frantically flipped the deadbolt knob to unlock the door. His body slammed into hers from behind, shoving her against the door before she could pull it open. She started to scream again. His large hand clamped down across her mouth, muffling her sound. His entire body pressed into hers, keeping her pinned against the door, and his other hand flipped the deadbolt to lock it again.

The putrid smell of body odor mixed with rotten meat assaulted her nostrils when his warm breath ghosted across her face. "Shut your fucking mouth," his gravelly voice demanded in her ear.

Her scream ended in a pathetic muffled whimper.

His hand stayed on her mouth, while his other arm went around her waist. He pulled her up tight against his body and said, "If you scream again, I'll slit your throat. Got it?"

A wave of nausea rolled through her as she nodded.

"Show me where the money is."

Hope shot through her. If he wanted money, there was a chance he'd leave once she gave it to him. Portland had a huge homeless population, and the majority of them were perfectly nice people who were in dire straits. But some of them were drug addicts, and others were mentally ill. Mia had never been afraid of the homeless people she saw regularly, but the man behind her was terrifying. She pointed to her desk, since his hand was still on her mouth.

He grunted and dragged her along with him. When they were standing in front of the desk, she tried to reach for the drawer she kept the money in, but he jerked her back.

"Don't fucking try anything."

His hand left her mouth and reached out to open the drawer she'd indicated. He scooped up the cash, shoved it in his pocket and slammed the drawer. "Is that it?" he yelled, clearly angry.

"M-most people pay with cards." Her voice came out shaky and high pitched, almost unrecognizable to her own ears.

"You must have more cash stashed somewhere!" His arm tightened around her waist. "Where is it?"

She had a small safe in her bedroom, but if he got her in the bedroom, there was no telling what he'd do to her.

"That's all I have."

"Lying bitch!" he hissed.

His free hand went to the back of her head, and then she was in motion. An involuntary scream came out of her just before her forehead cracked into the surface of the desk. He yanked her back up by the hair, pulling her headway back, and she felt his lips on her ear when he demanded, "Where is the rest of your money!"

The room seemed to be tilting. Little spots of light dashed around her eyes. "Bedroom."

He started hauling her toward the hallway.

"Hey!" a male voice shouted from the front of the house.

Mia turned and saw Aaron standing in front of her window. Her eyes grew wide and she screamed loudly, "Help!"

Aaron ran toward the front door.

The homeless man grunted and shoved Mia away from him as hard as he could.

She stumbled forward a few feet, crashed against the free-standing rack that held her flowers, clutched at it for support, and brought the rack down with her as she fell to the floor.

The next few seconds were blurry for Mia. She heard pounding footsteps and yelling male voices, as water from the flower rack seeped through the back of her skirt and blouse.

Then Aaron was kneeling on the floor next to her, with his cell phone against his ear. "Just lie still," he said, gently brushing the hair back from her forehead. "The police are on the way." Talking to his phone, he said, "Yes, I'm still here. Her forehead is bleeding. I don't see any other obvious injuries." Then to her, he said, "Are you hurt anywhere else?"

"No," she replied in a daze, lifting her hand to touch her forehead.

"Her arm is bleeding too," Aaron said. "Yes, she's conscious and talking."

Frowning, she looked at her own arm and saw blood. Confused, she pulled her sleeve up and stared at the little gash in her forearm. Only then did the pain register. She must have gouged it on the flower rack when she fell. At that point, the nausea came back full force. Groaning, she rolled onto her side and tried to push herself up to a sitting position.

"Hey, easy," Aaron's soothing voice said. His hand gently touched her shoulder. "It's okay. He's gone, and the police are coming."

Once she was upright, she swallowed a few times, and the nausea slowly receded. She felt liquid running down her nose and dripping off the end. She wiped at the tip of her nose and her hand came away bloody.

"We need to stop the bleeding and clean you up. I'll be right back," he told her as he stood up and rushed to the kitchen.

Mia looked at her fallen rack and very suddenly started to cry. Crying was not something she did often. The occasional sappy movie made her cry, but not much in real life brought on tears.

Aaron came back with a roll of paper towels. He ripped a couple off and then noticed her tears. "It's going to be okay," he said gently, as if talking to a wounded animal or an unhappy toddler. He put his hand on her shoulder again and gently squeezed it. "I'm here. He can't hurt you anymore."

She nodded, to acknowledge his statement, but continued to cry.

He let go, folded up one of the paper towels and said, "I'm going to put this on your forehead to stop the bleeding. Okay?" Once again she nodded, and he pressed the paper towel to her forehead. "Can you hold that right there?" When she reached up

to hold it, he didn't let go. "Other hand. I need to stop the bleeding on that arm, too."

She put her left hand over the paper towel to hold it.

"Put light pressure on it," he instructed. He used another paper towel to dab at her nose and the exposed areas of her forehead to clean up the blood that was already there. "You're going to need a shower later to get the blood out of your hair." Then he tore off a few more paper towels, folded them, lifted her injured arm and pressed them to that wound.

"You're doing great," he said encouragingly. "The cops will be here any second."

Tears were still rolling down her face, but her breathing was almost back to normal, as if her eyes hadn't gotten the message from her brain that she was done crying. Feeling confused and woozy, she looked at her locked front door. "How did you get in?"

"I broke the screen out of your window and climbed through. Sorry about that. I didn't know the back door was open. I might have been able to catch the son of a bitch if I'd known."

"Catch him?" She shook her head. "I'm glad you didn't get the chance to try. He could have hurt you, too. I think he's either high on something or clinically insane. Either way, he's dangerous."

He smiled. "Just because I'm a professor, doesn't mean I can't kick his ass."

That comment caught her off guard and made her chuckle even though tears kept sliding down her cheeks. Remembering the time, she looked at the digital clock on her wall. She blinked a few times, not quite believing it was only ten minutes after five o'clock. Could that possibly be true? Ten minutes? Frowning, she said, "You're late," then belatedly realized her tone had been accusing.

"I know. I'm sorry. I wish I hadn't been. One of my students caught me as I was leaving for the day, and she had to explain in

detail all the reasons why she was going to be late turning in her paper."

"I'm glad you came anyway."

"I knew you'd..." he paused and looked toward the door as they both heard sirens in the distance, and then he finished his thought, "...stay open a few minutes late for me." Focusing back on her, he said, "Put your knee up, so you can press your injured arm against it, while I go unlock the front door."

"Don't leave!" she pleaded, reaching out in a panic to clutch his pants with her injured arm.

"I'm not leaving." His voice was back to that gentle 'soothe a wild animal' tone. "I promise. I'm just going to open the door and come right back. Okay?"

Feeling ridiculous, she released his khaki Dockers and nodded.

"Prop your knee up," he said again, raising his voice to be heard over the now deafening sirens.

She did, and as soon as her arm was against her knee, he took his cell phone out of his pocket and put it to his ear. "Are you still there?" he asked while standing. "Yeah, I think they're here. I'm opening the front door."

Mia's shop became flooded with men and women in uniforms. Police, firemen and EMTs were all there, asking her endless questions and checking her wounds. Feeling close to tears again, she called out softly, "Aaron?"

Then, as if by magic, he was kneeling beside her, holding her hand, and keeping her grounded and sane while chaos ensued around them.

THE EMTS CHECKED Mia for signs of a concussion. The lead EMT was a tall African American man with warm hands and a calm demeanor, who introduced himself as Isaac. When no

signs of a concussion were found, he helped Mia stand, to make sure she was steady on her feet. Deeming her in non-critical condition, he got her a chair to sit in, so she could be off the floor, and then put temporary bandages on Mia's forehead and arm.

While that was happening, a female officer introduced herself to Aaron as Officer Williams, and she took his statement, while three other cops were busy collecting evidence. Once Mia's medical needs were taken care of, she also gave her statement to Officer Williams.

After that, Isaac came back and said, "As soon as the police are done, we can take you to the hospital."

"The hospital?" Mia shook her head.

"Your arm is going to need a couple stitches, and a doctor should check you again for a concussion."

"I'm sorry," she said, "but my insurance isn't going to cover an ambulance ride, and I can't afford it out of pocket. I'll drive myself to urgent care later."

"No." Aaron took her hand in his.

"No?" She looked at him in confusion.

"You could have a concussion. I'll drive you."

"But...that would be such an imposition. I'm sure you have other things—"

"Mia," he cut her off. "You've had a trauma. You're not thinking rationally. Driving yourself to the hospital after this kind of physical and emotional upheaval isn't safe for yourself or for the other people on the road. I can drive you, or you can give me the name of someone else that can. Which will it be?"

Apparently getting on board with Aaron's plan, the EMT said, "Maybe a parent, a sibling, a significant other, or a friend?"

Feeling defeated, Mia shook her head. "My parents are retired in Arizona, my sister lives in Florida with her husband, and I don't have a significant other. My best friend, Patty, is on vacation in Hawaii."

"Then I guess it's decided. I'll drive you," Aaron said with an air of finality.

"Okay," Mia gave in. Her only transportation was her work vehicle, so getting a ride with Aaron would be easier than trying to drive her big white delivery van to the hospital.

"How much longer are the police going to be?" Aaron asked Isaac.

"I'll go find out."

When Isaac walked away, Aaron rubbed his thumb over the back of Mia's hand. "I've got to make a call. I'll be right back." Once she nodded, he walked a few feet away and got out his phone.

Even with the other people in the room, Mia could still hear Aaron's conversation. "Hey, I'm sorry, but I'm not going to be able to make it tonight. A friend of mine was attacked, and I've got to take her to the hospital. Is it okay if I pick up Travis in the morning instead?"

Before she could overhear any more of his phone call, Isaac had come back. "They estimate about half an hour to finish up here."

"Okay," Mia nodded. "Thanks."

"While they're doing that, can I have you sign some paperwork for me? I have to document it when people refuse service."

"Of course."

While Isaac went to get the paperwork, Aaron came back.

"You did have other plans," Mia accused, "and you had to break them for me."

"I didn't have to. I wanted to." He knelt so they could be at eye level with her still seated on the chair. "Seeing that guy attack you was really upsetting for me. I couldn't just leave you here and go about my night as if nothing had happened. Taking you to the doctor and hearing from a professional that you're going to be fine will help me calm down. Okay?"

Feeling bad, she looked at her lap and nodded. "Yeah, okay."

"Good."

Remembering her own plans for the evening, she looked over at him. "Could you bring me my phone? It's in the kitchen on the counter."

"Sure."

Once he handed her the phone, she sent a quick text to Mistress Felicity to let her know she couldn't make it tonight and then stuck it in her pocket.

"Did you have plans tonight, too?" Aaron asked.

Blushing, she muttered, "Kind of, but nothing I can't reschedule."

Isaac came back, and soon Mia was filling out paperwork.

FORTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER, Aaron closed the door when the last policeman left. During that time, Mia had changed into some dry, comfortable clothes, and the police had taken the clothes she'd been wearing as evidence. She and Aaron had picked up the rack, and she'd mopped up the water from her hardwood floors with some towels. They'd gone through the flowers to see which ones were salvageable. Then just before the police left, Officer Williams had handed Mia her business card and a small stack of papers with the case number, some information on victims' rights when it came to 'aggravated robbery', and the EMTs' refusal of treatment acknowledgment.

Aaron looked at the time. "It's almost six-thirty. Did you want to eat something before I take you to urgent care?"

Putting a hand on her stomach, she shook her head. "I don't think I can eat."

"What about something bland? Some crackers maybe? Or toast?"

"I have some soda crackers in the cupboard above the sink. We could take them with us."

He nodded. "I'll get those. You get whatever you need to take with you to the hospital."

When he went to the kitchen, Mia stood in the middle of her shop staring down her dark hallway. She knew she needed to walk back there to her bedroom to get her purse, but her feet wouldn't move in that direction. Her eyes played tricks on her, and she imagined movement in the shadows at the end of the hall.

"Mia?"

Her body flinched at the sound of his voice, and she took a deep breath to calm herself. "Yes?"

"Do you have any bottled water?"

"Bottom shelf of the fridge."

"Thanks."

He came back in holding the crackers and two waters. "Ready to go?"

Feeling embarrassed and weak, she mumbled, "Could you come with me to the bedroom to get my purse?"

"Absolutely. We can go through the entire house and make sure everything is shut and locked before we go."

"Okay." She knew it was silly and unnecessary, but she was grateful that he'd offered.

Together, they checked every room, and without being asked, Aaron made sure every window was locked, every closet was searched, and even checked under her bed. Once the entire house was absolutely secure, he said, "Ready to go now?"

"I am."

They went out the front, and she locked the door before following him to the street where his black Toyota was parked.

"Which hospital?" he asked, once they were in the car.

He punched the address she'd given him into his GPS and pulled into traffic. "Looks like we'll be there in about fifteen minutes."

Instead of commenting on that, she said, "You were very thorough when checking the house for me."

He chuckled. "My son, Travis, is nine. A couple years ago, he went through a monster-in-the-closet phase, so believe me, I know how to check a room."

Cringing, she said, "Well that's a little humiliating, isn't it?"

"Humiliating?" he asked.

"Sorry. I'm glad that you did such a thorough check. It was exactly what I needed, to feel safe. But it's also a little humiliating, because I'm not a child. I'm thirty-three."

Aaron shook his head, while keeping his eyes on the road. "You were assaulted by a stranger in your own home, Mia. He threatened to kill you. It's not humiliating to need some reassurance; it's normal human nature." There was a short pause before he added, "You can't expect this event to just disappear from your psyche. It's going to affect you. It *should* affect you. If it didn't, I'd be worried."

Frowning, she said softly, "I don't want it to affect me."

He reached over and took her hand in his, still keeping his eyes on the road. "I'm sure that's true, but it's also unrealistic. And if your inner dialogue is all about how you should be able to get past this event and be 'normal', that's going to cause a lot of unnecessary guilt and anger to be aimed at yourself. So you need to repeat after me: "This attack wasn't my fault."

"Yeah, I know," she said, scowling at his profile.

"You may know it intellectually, but do you *feel* it?" While she was thinking that over, he squeezed her hand and added, "You know I'm a professor of sociology, right?"

"Yes."

"I've also studied a lot of psychology over the years, and I think it will help you to repeat after me: "This attack wasn't my fault."

"That's silly. I told you I know it's not my fault." It seemed

even more childish than having him check her house for boogeymen.

"This will be beneficial, even if it seems ridiculous, so I want you to listen to me, and repeat what I say: 'This attack wasn't my fault.'" His tone was now more stern than encouraging.

"Fine," she muttered, giving in. "This attack wasn't my fault."

"I was violently attacked, and it's going to affect me."

"I was violently..." her voice wavered, "...attacked, and it's..." her eyes felt watery again, and she whispered the last bit, "...it's going to affect me."

"It's normal to be affected by a traumatic event."

She shook her head. "I don't want to do this."

"Last one," he said, his tone encouraging again. "It's *normal* to be affected by a traumatic event."

Stumbling over the words, she repeated them back to him.

"Good job." He squeezed her hand in support. "It will be perfectly normal to run through a gambit of feelings over the next few days. Fear, anger, guilt, anxiety, depression, numbness, resentment, shame and loss. Some people experience post-traumatic stress disorder. These are all normal responses, and you shouldn't try to push those feelings away or pretend they aren't there. Acknowledge them, accept them, and hopefully, with time, you'll move past them."

Wiping at the new tears on her face, she said, "I hate crying."

"I'm sorry if I was too pushy. As a professor, I'm used to giving instructions and pushing reluctant students into following them. And, well, I guess it's in my nature to be the bossy alpha in the room." He patted her hand and let go.

Startled out of her tears, Mia's whole body shuddered as she thought about the implications of that statement. She used to love bossy dominant alpha males, but now that happiness always mixed with fear when she was around them. She wasn't just afraid of what they would do to her, she was also frightened by her own willingness to comply with whatever they demanded.

Her entire being seemed to automatically gravitate toward dominant men. But she didn't fully trust herself to be around them anymore.

"What's with the wedding ring?" Aaron asked, stopping her train of thought. "You told that EMT Isaac that you didn't have a significant other, but I've never seen you without your wedding ring on."

Fiddling with the gold band, she said, "I'm not married. I went to a pawnshop and bought this ring the day before I opened my business. It's a safety precaution. I'm working with the general public, and I didn't want random customers asking me out." Wincing, she added, "Now that I say it out loud, that sounds so conceited. But it wasn't my idea; it was my father's."

Aaron nodded. "I get it. You're a very attractive woman. Wearing a wedding ring is a good way to keep strangers from giving you unwanted attention."

Her eyes opened wide at the word 'attractive'. She didn't think of herself as ugly, but she also didn't think of herself as a classic version of supermodel beauty either. Most people didn't call her beautiful; they called her cute. She was on the short side; she had straight black hair that went down to the middle of her back, boring brown eyes, and pale skin. The best thing she could say about herself was that she was evenly proportioned. She wouldn't call herself thin, but the weight she had was distributed equally. Her waist wasn't tiny, but her breasts and rear end were big enough to give her an hourglass shape anyway.

"It seems to have worked. No one has asked me out since I started the business. Either that, or I'm too old now for anyone to notice," she said with a little self-deprecating laugh.

"I'm one hundred percent sure it's the ring. I would have asked you out if you weren't wearing it. Besides, thirty-three is the perfect age for guys to notice you, because a good portion of people in their thirties are recently divorced."

Feeling thrilled, awkward and nervous about him saying he

would have asked her out, she purposely changed the subject. "The hospital is just up the street on the right."

He nodded. "How long do you suppose we'll be waiting in urgent care? My guess is three hours."

"I hope not," she groaned. "I'm going to stay positive and guess half an hour."

He laughed out loud. "Clearly, you've never been to urgent care before."

She slouched in her seat and groaned again.

"Why don't you try to eat a couple of crackers while I find a parking spot?"

Food was sounding slightly less repugnant, and since he'd already admitted to being a bossy alpha type, and she knew how she reacted to them when push came to shove, she opened the box and started nibbling on a cracker.