

Second Chance in Pinecrest

Chapter One

It was a chilly Wednesday evening in the small town of Pinecrest, nestled deep in the mountains of Arizona. The sky was clear, and the stars shone brightly, casting a soft glow over the quiet streets.

Abby Douglas settled into her comfortable armchair with a book in her hand. As she took a deep breath, the stress of the day seemed to melt away. The living room was quiet, with only the sound of the pages turning and the occasional sound of the wind blowing in the tall pine trees outside.

She had prepared a simple dinner for herself, savoring the flavors of the chicken and vegetables she'd stir-fried. She liked to fix meals for herself that she didn't serve in her restaurant. The meal had been satisfying and now Abby was content to relax and lose herself in the pages of her book.

As she read, she could feel the characters almost come to life and the world around her fade away. But after a while, she noticed her eyelids were getting heavy, and she caught herself reading the same paragraph again.

The ticking of the clock caused Abby to look up at it. Only eight o'clock, a seemingly early hour for many, but it carried the weight of lateness for Abby. She had to be at the bakery at four in the morning to get started on her baking for the day. So, it was getting rather late ... for her.

She snickered. She always thought of it as her bakery, since baking was her passion. But in such a small town, she'd had to branch out into a traditional breakfast and even some regular lunchtime sandwiches and salads.

Even with that addition, she barely met her bills, both business and personal. But she enjoyed what she was doing, and that was all that mattered to her.

She looked around the living room of her little two-bedroom house. House! It was only a single-wide mobile home or manufactured home, as they were calling them these days to get away from the stigma attached to mobile homes. No matter what, it was still her home, finally.

Well, it wasn't much, but at least it belonged to her and, of course, the bank.

Little did she know that her world was about to get shattered ... again.

She had roused herself from drowsiness but was soon completely absorbed in the story so much that she didn't hear the knock on her door at first.

It wasn't until the second knock, louder this time, that she realized someone was at the door. Setting aside her book, she stood and walked over to the window to peer outside. She didn't recognize the beat-up old pickup sitting in her driveway, and her heart raced as she tried to remember if she was expecting anyone.

No, she knew she wasn't, so who could be knocking on her door at this hour?

Taking a deep breath, she walked over to the front door and looked through the peephole. She couldn't make out who was on the other side, but she could see the silhouette of a man. Her hand trembled as she reached for the doorknob, uncertain of what she would find on the other side.

She took a deep breath and unlocked the door, pulling it open just a crack. That was when she saw her ex-husband, Buck, standing there, his face twisted in anger and a menacing look in his eyes.

She hesitated for a moment, wondering if she should just ignore him and hope he would go away. But something about the way he was now pounding on the door made her think he wouldn't unless she talked to him.

"What do you want, Buck?" Her voice shook a little.

"Open up Abby. We need to talk," he growled, trying to push his way past her into the house.

She put her hand up to stop him. "It's getting late, Buck, and you know I need to get up early in the morning to start my baking. Besides, I'm not really in the mood for company right now."

He glared at her. "I don't care. We need to talk about what happened between us."

"There's nothing to talk about, Buck. We're legally divorced now and all you want to do is dominate me the way you did for six years. I'm not going through any of that again, so please leave."

She tried to shut the door, but Buck was too strong. He pushed his way into the house and slammed the door behind him.

Abby backed away, her heart racing as he advanced on her. She had been through this before, too many times, and she knew how it always

ended. She looked at her phone on the end table by her chair, wanting to call the police, but Buck's voice cut through the silence.

"Don't even think about it, Abby. You know what will happen if you call the cops."

With a sinking feeling in her stomach, Abby realized she was alone, with no one to turn to for help. It had never turned out well when Buck was like this and had her alone.

Her voice trembled as she asked, "What's the matter with you?"

"What's the matter with me?" he spat. "What's the matter with you? Why won't you ever talk to me? Why won't you give me another chance?"

Abby tried to keep her voice steady, knowing that if she showed fear, that would only anger Buck even more. "I told you there's nothing to talk about."

He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her close to him. "Don't lie to me, Abby. I know you still have feelings for me. I can see it in your eyes."

She tried to pull away, but he was too strong.

Her voice rose as she spoke. "Let go of me, Buck. I don't love you anymore."

He didn't let go. Instead, he leaned in and kissed her, forcing a sloppy kiss on her lips. She struggled against him, but he held her tight, his hand sliding around her back.

She pushed him away. "Stop it, Buck. This isn't right. I don't want this."

But Buck wasn't listening. He kissed her again, harder this time. The sour whisky on his breath gagged her and almost made her sick to her stomach.

This wasn't the man she'd grown up with and married over six years ago. This was a stranger, a monster. And she needed to get him out of her house before something terrible happened.

Just then, they both heard the brief burst of a siren outside. Buck let go of Abby so quickly she almost fell.

He then staggered back out the door and almost ran to his beat-up old pickup.

Abby looked out the open door and was extremely grateful to see a Pinecrest Police car sitting there with its red and blue lights flashing and the spotlight on Buck.

As she stood there watching Buck get in his pickup and back out of her short driveway, she couldn't help but wonder if she would ever be able to feel safe again.

How much more of Buck's anger and punishment could she endure? Hadn't she had more than enough of that when she was married to him?

The last five years of their six-year marriage had gotten progressively worse until she'd finally moved in with her parents until she could divorce him.

Now, she had possession of their former home, but he still wouldn't leave her alone.

But what could she do? She'd thought about getting a gun, but she knew she could never shoot anyone, even Buck.

Just then, Marcus Lee, the evening police officer, got out of his police Tahoe and made his way up to her as she stood in the open door, leaning against the door facing.

"You all right Abby? He didn't hurt you, did he? I can still go get him and lock him up."

She looked at the man she and Buck had both gone through school with. She knew he liked her and now that she was divorced; he had given subtle hints to her about them maybe going out together. But she wasn't ready to date again if she ever would be, and she hoped she'd been able to explain that to him nicely.

She had thought she'd gotten that message across to him, but she could tell by the way he was looking at her right then that he still had hopes.

"No, Marcus, I'm fine. Don't arrest him. It would only make him madder the next time."

"Okay, if you're sure about that, Abby."

She nodded her head. "I'm sure. Thank you for showing up when you did, though."

He tipped his cap at her and turned to leave.

Halfway to his car, Marcus turned. "If you ever need anything, Abby, especially if Buck bothers you again, you've got my number. Please call me. Okay?"

She nodded, not sure he could see it, but she didn't trust her voice right then.

She watched him until he got in his car and pulled away.

Now what? There had to be something she could do to keep Buck away from her.

She went straight to her bedroom and to bed as quickly as she could. She'd lost interest in her book now. And besides, she needed to go to sleep, anyway. Hopefully, things would be better tomorrow.

Preston Woods scanned his surroundings, his heart racing with anticipation as he entered Pinecrest, a quaint mountain town nestled amidst expansive pine forests. The weight of his new role as the pastor of the Pinecrest Bible Church made him feel slightly apprehensive about his arrival.

It was early on a crisp Thursday morning, in late April. After spending seven years in the scorching heat down in Phoenix for his college and seminary education, he eagerly anticipated the pleasant summers that awaited him in this new, elevated setting.

Fresh out of seminary, this was Preston's first experience as a pastor. It had been four months since he completed his theological studies. He had quickly learned that finding a church in Arizona as a new pastor was no easy feat. However, now that he had been entrusted with this opportunity, he was determined to make a lasting impression and thus ensure the long tenure of his ministry.

The church stood on the near side of town along the county road he came in on. Preston decided to take a leisurely drive through the area. During his initial interactions with the church board and the delivery of his trial sermon, darkness had veiled the town, preventing him from truly appreciating its beauty.

The town was adorned with natural splendor, highlighted by a meandering stream that gracefully wound its way through the heart of Pinecrest.

His eyes scanned the quiet main street of Pinecrest, taking in the array of businesses that adorned both sides of the road. His attention was immediately drawn to the first establishment he encountered—a grocery store, a gas station, and a garage all in one long building.

As he continued his drive through the town, he observed the remaining businesses that lined the street. They exuded the familiar charm and character of a typical small town. However, one business caught his attention: a quaint and inviting place called Abby's Bakery and Coffee Shop. The name piqued his curiosity, and he made a mental note to pay it a visit soon.

If he could quickly settle into his new role at the church, Preston thought he might treat himself to a visit to Abby's Bakery and Coffee Shop. The morning's stress had left his stomach unsettled. He hadn't eaten breakfast and hoped that a hearty meal at the bakery would ease his queasiness and provide a much-needed moment of relaxation amidst the chaos of his first day in Pinecrest.

Remembering that the church office was at the back of the sanctuary building, Preston steered his car to the rear of the building and found a convenient parking spot in front of the office.

Preston took a deep breath, feeling a mix of nervousness and excitement as he emerged from his trusty ten-year-old SUV. He removed his prescription sunglasses, replacing them with a pair of round, wire-rimmed glasses that accentuated his thoughtful expression.

With another steadying breath, Preston approached the door marked "Office." When he opened it, he saw a small, tidy space beyond. Stepping inside, he closed the door behind him, enveloping himself in a sense of anticipation and readiness for the journey that awaited him.

As Preston entered the office, his eyes were immediately drawn to a woman in her sixties. Her short gray hair framed a face adorned with gentle, kind eyes. Instantly, he sensed warmth and welcoming energy emanating from her.

Her beaming smile greeted him with genuine warmth. "Hello there, Pastor," she exclaimed cheerfully. "Remember me? I'm Myrtle Ferguson, the church secretary and clerk. Welcome to Pinecrest Bible Church." Her friendly greeting put Preston instantly at ease.

Preston offered a nervous smile in return. "Yes, Ma'am, I certainly remember you," he replied, his voice tinged with anticipation. "Thank you for the warm welcome. It's nice to see you again, Mrs. Ferguson."

Myrtle waved a hand dismissively. “Now, you can dispense with the ‘ma’am’ and Mrs. stuff. I’m just Myrtle, and that’s what everyone calls me,” she said, letting out a playful giggle. “At least to my face.”

Preston hoped that Myrtle’s friendly and outgoing nature would help him acquaint himself with the unfamiliar territory of this small town, which was so drastically different from any place he had ever lived before.

Myrtle showed Preston around the church office, acquainting him with the day-to-day operations and routines. He was pleasantly surprised to find that his office/study was more spacious than he had expected. As he entered the room, his eyes were drawn to a small round table with four chairs positioned to the right of the wide desk, creating a cozy, inviting space.

From the office, Myrtle guided Preston through a door nestled between his office and her desk. They ventured down a brief hallway, moving toward a door directly ahead and another on the right. Taking the door on the right, she led him up two steps, then he realized they were at the back of the platform, just behind the pulpit.

Having only preached his trial sermon to a small group in a classroom in the adjacent education building, Preston hadn’t yet viewed the sanctuary from this perspective.

Stepping up to the pulpit, Preston admired the intricate woodwork and then surveyed the rest of the sanctuary. He noticed there were stained glass windows on both sides of the high-ceilinged room, and he marveled at how the morning sun illuminated the windows on the east side, casting vibrant colors across the room.

Myrtle guided him down the aisle toward the double doors that led to the foyer, and they exited the sanctuary through the front doors, emerging onto the street end of the church.

They proceeded next door to the multipurpose building, which housed the Sunday school classrooms. Preston observed that there were three classrooms on each side, and he noticed sturdy wooden sliding partitions in each room. He knew they could open those partitions to create the Fellowship Hall, which intrigued him.

Exiting the building through the rear door, Myrtle guided him toward a delightful white house with a welcoming wrap-around front porch that faced the side street.

“This is your new home,” Myrtle said with a smile. “It may not be the largest house, but it’s cozy and welcoming.”

Preston nodded appreciatively. “I’m sure it will be perfect. Thank you so much, Myrtle.”

Myrtle handed him the keys to the house, a warm smile on her face. “When they heard you didn’t have any furniture, the ladies of the church rallied together and gathered the essentials to furnish the house. I hope they’ll be enough to meet your needs.”

He smiled back at her, appreciative of the gesture. “I’m sure they will, Mrs. ...”

She held up a hand, and he quickly corrected himself. “Myrtle. I’ve learned to make do with very little. Thank you and please extend my gratitude to the ladies of the church.”

“I’ll leave you to explore your new home on your own, Preston. I have some things I need to get done for Sunday,” Myrtle said, excusing herself.

With that, Myrtle left him and entered the office. Preston waited until she was inside before walking over to his new home.

“His new house.” That thought brought a big smile to his face. He hadn’t lived in a house since he turned eighteen and joined the Army.

Conveniently, Preston’s old Tahoe was parked halfway between the office and the parsonage, providing easy access for carrying things between the two locations.

He strolled around the house, taking in his new surroundings. Adjusting to life in a small town would require some time, but Preston felt a surge of excitement as he embarked on his new journey in Pinecrest.

Entering the parsonage through the back door, into the laundry room, Preston’s eyes lit up with delight at the sight of a washer and dryer. The presence of these appliances meant a significant convenience for him, as he had spent a considerable amount of time and money at laundromats throughout the years. The prospect of doing his laundry in the comfort of his own home brought a sense of relief and practicality.

As he entered the kitchen, Preston’s eyes widened in surprise at the spaciousness of the room. To his delight, he noticed an old, round wood table occupying the center, surrounded by four matching chairs. The sight brought a sense of comfort and warmth to his heart.

Curiosity piqued, Preston opened each cabinet, one by one, revealing the contents within. To his relief, he found a set of four plates, cups, and glasses neatly arranged. There was even a complete set of silverware waiting to be used. As he continued his exploration, he discovered a frying pan and a medium-sized pot tucked away, ready for use. Though the kitchen supplies were modest, they were enough to fulfill his basic needs. With a grateful smile, he felt a renewed sense of gratitude for the thoughtful gesture of the ladies of the church who had gathered these essentials for him.

Having gained some basic cooking skills over the years, Preston felt confident in his ability to prepare a few different dishes using the supplies in the kitchen. However, he intended to take advantage of the local restaurants as much as he could, not only for the sake of variety in his meals but also to engage with the community and meet its residents.

Entering the living room, another pleasant surprise greeted Preston—a couch and a well-preserved, stuffed armchair. Though they showed signs of age, there were no noticeable tears or significant signs of wear.

As Preston continued down the short hallway, he reached the bathroom, which appeared to be fully functional. He took a quick glance around and noted that everything seemed to be in working order.

The first room he entered was empty, leaving him with the initial impression that he might be sleeping on the floor. However, as he stepped into the doorway of what must be the master bedroom, he was taken aback by what he saw. It was beyond his expectations.

To his surprise and relief, there was a full-size bed, complete with a neatly arranged pillow adorned with a pillowcase, sheets, and a cozy blanket.

The thoughtfulness and generosity of the church ladies deeply touched him. Their efforts to make him feel welcome and comfortable in the parsonage were truly heartwarming.

With the boxes brought in and temporarily set aside, hunger took precedence over unpacking. Preston decided to quell his appetite by heading to the nearby coffee shop, conveniently located diagonally across the street from the church.

As Preston swung open the door, a delightful aroma of freshly baked goods and brewing coffee enveloped him, enticing his senses with its inviting fragrance.

As the bell above the door chimed, signaling his arrival, Preston stepped into the cozy café. His eyes fell upon a young woman, around twenty, standing beside a table a few steps to his left. A friendly smile adorned her face, radiating warmth and hospitality.

“Hi there! Welcome to Abby’s. Do you want takeout, or do you want a table?”

He smiled back at her. “I would like either a late breakfast or an early lunch here.”

She motioned toward the seating area, which Preston immediately noticed held no booths, just tables with four chairs at each one.

“Take your pick. We’re not real busy right now.”

Abby had been taking a quick break but returned to the kitchen. After experiencing a busy breakfast crowd, she and her full-time waitress, Sheila Butler, began to gear up for the lunch rush.

As the only place open for breakfast and lunch in Pinecrest, Abby’s bakery and coffee shop enjoyed a steady stream of customers during these hours.

They closed at two so they could get things cleaned up and ready for the next day and still have some of their afternoon and all their evening to themselves.

Abby cherished Sheila as her trusted employee. Their shared history and long working relationship had cultivated a deep understanding and synergy between them. Sheila had become attuned to Abby’s habits, preferences, and even the smallest nuances of her work routine.

Abby also employed several high school girls who took turns working part time on Saturdays. Abby enjoyed mentoring them and providing them with their first work experience. She took pleasure in watching them grow and develop their skills.

In the kitchen, Abby swiftly moved from station to station, tending to the preparations for the upcoming lunch rush. With a damp cloth in hand, she diligently wiped down the gleaming counters, ensuring a clean and sanitary workspace. As she went about her tasks, she also took a moment to check the temperature of the grill and fryer, making certain they were ready.

Determined to maintain her focus, Abby immersed herself in the demanding tasks at hand, deliberately pushing aside the unsettling memories of her encounter with Buck from the previous evening. The mere thought sent a shiver down her spine, reminding her of the precarious situation she had found herself in. Grateful for the timely intervention of Marcus, who had appeared just in the nick of time to confront Buck and drive him away, she couldn't help but feel a mix of relief and lingering unease.

Buck's familiar pattern of drunkenness and its accompanying aggression cast a dark shadow over Abby's thoughts. The scars of their tumultuous marriage served as a haunting reminder of the violence she had endured at his hands. The fear and pain etched in her memory were vivid, and she carried the weight of those experiences deep within her.

But no more!

With a sense of relief and gratitude, Abby reminded herself of the progress she had made in leaving her painful past behind. The restaurant, having been in her father's name, remained untouched by the turmoil of her divorce from Buck. Also, the home she had kept served as a comforting reminder she was building a new life for herself, one filled with hope and the promise of a brighter future.

She took a deep breath. Those thoughts reminded her of the strength she had built up since leaving Buck.

As she often did, Abby took a moment to look at her beloved restaurant. She loved the way it was laid out. The entrance greeted guests with the cozy aroma of freshly brewed coffee and the warmth of the bakery's ovens. Positioned along the right wall, the counter stood as a focal point, beckoning customers to take a seat on one of the seven stools.

To the left of the entrance, the spacious dining area unfolded, with fifteen well-arranged tables. Abby took pride in the symmetry and organization of the room. Three rows, each containing five tables, created a harmonious flow.

But what Abby valued the most about the restaurant's layout was its open design. From any point in the bustling kitchen, she could clearly see the register, the front door, and almost all the tables—save for one tucked away in a cozy corner. This open visibility was crucial during the occasional moments when she worked alone.

The unobstructed view allowed her to maintain a watchful eye over the entire dining area, ensuring prompt and attentive service to her guests.

She'd just turned away from the grill to face the front of the restaurant when the bell over the door chimed. She looked that way to see who had come in. Then she turned all the way around to get a better look at the man that she was sure she'd never seen before.

He didn't look very tall. In fact, Sheila was at the table closest to the door, and he looked to be about her height, which was five feet seven. But he had soft sandy blond hair that was just touching his ears with short bangs in front. Then she saw his blue eyes, which seemed to sparkle even from that distance.

Before she caught herself, she thought about how attractive the man looked. Wow! She had to turn back around to face the grill again before he caught her gawking at him.

She heard Sheila greet him and when Abby turned back around, she saw him sit exactly where she had expected him to sit. There was one table along the front windows open and he sat there in a chair that allowed him to see the entire room, the outside and the door all at once.

Was he a cop? Cops were usually the only ones she'd ever noticed sitting so they could see everything the way he was.

When Sheila came into the kitchen, Abby stopped her and whispered. "Let me wait on him, okay? I'd like to find out if he's a tourist or what."

Sheila nodded and went back out with the coffeepot to fill coffee cups.

When the new man laid down his menu on the table, Abby started that way. He looked up as she approached, and she saw his eyes were soft and kind, making her want to sit down and talk to him.

No! She had sworn off men after Buck. But she forced a smile on her face as she approached him.

"Hi, welcome to Abby's Bakery and Coffee Shop," she said, trying to maintain a professional distance.

The man smiled back at her. "Thank you. I'm new to town and was looking for a good place to grab some lunch."

Abby snickered. "Well, you've come to the right place, especially since we're the only restaurant open for either breakfast or lunch. We close at two and the supper club doesn't open until four."

He laughed. "So, you each have your exclusive times."

She tried to keep her professional demeanor in place, but knew she was failing miserably.

“I’m sorry, but all our pastries for the day are already gone. But we have everything from eggs to pancakes for breakfast. For lunch, we have sandwiches and salads. We make three sizes of hamburgers.”

He didn’t respond to that but stood and she couldn’t help the pleasant feeling it gave her not to have to look up a long way to talk to a man. He was only about three inches taller than her.

He stuck out his hand. “I’m Preston Woods, the new pastor at Pinecrest Bible Church.”

Abby wiped her hand on her apron and reluctantly shook his hand. “I’m Abby Douglas. “Nice to meet you,” she replied, trying to keep her tone polite but distant.

“What can I get you this morning?”

He pointed at his coffee cup. “If your food is as good as this coffee, then I can’t wait to try it.”

He looked down at the menu briefly and then back at her. “I think I’ll have the Number Three Burger with cheese. Do you have cheddar?”

She nodded. “Yes, we do, but are you sure you want our one-third pounder?”

He smiled, and she quickly had to gather her thoughts again. What was it about this man? She wasn’t even close to being ready to have this kind of reaction to any man, let alone a preacher.

He laughed this time. “Even though, I may be small, I have the appetite of a lumberjack.”

She wondered about that since she fed lumberjacks all the time and those guys could really put it away.

“Okay. Do you want the works on it and fries too?”

“Yes, ma’am. That sounds great.”

Abby went back to the kitchen, almost shaking her head in disbelief. She had to see this. Most people had a difficult enough time eating her quarter pound burger, much less the third pounder.

As she prepared his meal, Abby couldn’t help but glance out at him occasionally. He seemed engrossed in a book he had brought with him but would occasionally look up and, when he caught her looking, would smile at her.

That was when she noticed his left hand didn't look right. It was stiff and didn't seem to work. He was holding the book down with that hand, but not in a normal way. It was like the hand was frozen or stiff.

When she took his order over to him, she couldn't help looking at his left hand again. Just as she realized it wasn't real, he caught her staring.

He smiled at her. "It's okay Abby. My hand takes a little getting used to."

He held it up. "It's a prosthesis. But I'm able to do most things either with it or with the hook that I usually only use at home."

"You lost your arm?"

Now that was a dumb question. She'd better straighten up quickly.

He only nodded and watched her as she finally found her wits, placed his meal on the table in front of him, and walked away as fast as she could.

When she made it to the safety of the kitchen, she glanced back at him to see if he was laughing at her. But no. He was giving her a warm smile that she had to look away from. There was no way she was ready for any man to look at her like that.

Then he bowed his head and must have been praying before he started eating his burger.

Well, he not only finished his third pounder, but he ate every one of his fries too. Wow! Where did he put it all?

When he approached the counter to pay, Abby rang up his order, and he handed her the money with a smile. "Thank you for such a delicious meal. If your pastries are this good, I can't wait to come back in the morning to try them."

Abby looked into his eyes and was sure he was serious. She couldn't help but give him a smile in return. "You're welcome. I'm glad you enjoyed it."

Then, before she thought better of it, she went on, "And my pastries are much better. I'm really a baker, not a short-order cook."

He was half-way to the door when he turned slightly. "Then I'll be here at six in the morning. I don't want to miss out on my favorites."

When the preacher finally left the bakery, Abby let out a sigh of relief, feeling proud of herself for maintaining her distance. She knew she needed time to heal and did not want to get involved with another man, no matter how kind and respectful he was. And for sure, not a preacher.

As she watched him leave, she couldn't help but feel a flicker of curiosity about him. She wondered how he lost his arm. Could he possibly have been in the military? He sure didn't look the type.

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