

Secrets Lurking in Pinecrest

Chapter One

Mary Howard rushed through her cozy little mobile home, searching for her misplaced cell phone. Her frustration was building as she sighed in exasperation. In such a compact space, one would think it would be almost impossible to lose anything. But Mary had an uncanny talent for misplacing things even within these snug confines.

As she scurried about, Mary chastised herself for her lack of organization. Countless attempts at maintaining order had all failed. She had even drawn an organizational chart, intended to guide her to the location of every item in her home, but that had proven useless. She just ignored it, tossing things about instead of placing them in their proper places. Today, it was her cell phone that had fallen victim to this disorder.

After a maddening search, Mary located her phone. It was lying on the end table beside her favorite chair in the living room. She found it beneath the open book that had engrossed her the previous evening. With the phone now in hand, she dashed out the door and headed for Abby's bakery.

Her lifelong friend, Abby Douglas, opened her bakery bright and early, at six in the morning. Mary had an urgent need to speak with her before she reported to her job at the ranger station at seven.

Upon entering the bakery, she found only a few early risers seated at the counter. Abby Douglas, soon to be Abby Woods, stood behind the register, serving a customer.

Mary took a moment to observe Abby, her best friend since kindergarten. Abby Douglas was four inches shorter, standing at five feet four inches in contrast to Mary's five feet eight inches. Abby's business always kept her on the move, and Mary sometimes had trouble keeping up with her. Both women had long brown hair, but Abby's eyes were more of a hazel blend, while Mary's eyes were a simple shade of brown.

The two women knew almost everything about one another. Mary smiled at that thought. Sometimes that familiarity proved to be a little uncomfortable, but what the heck? Wasn't that what best friends were for?

Now, their relationship was transforming. Abby was marrying the new pastor at the Pinecrest Bible Church, Preston Woods. Of course, that left Mary wondering whether their lifelong friendship would endure this new

chapter in Abby's life. How would their relationship work now that Abby was engaged and Mary remained single? Would it be possible for them to stay as close as they'd always been?

She made her way up to the counter where Abby was waiting for her. Mary was glad the other customers sitting at the counter were at the other end. They were far enough away that they wouldn't be able to hear her and Abby talking as long as they didn't talk too loud.

Mary seated herself at the counter, then she shook her head and spoke. "Don't get me wrong, Abby. I'm thrilled about you and Preston getting married."

She paused, but she knew her friend, as always, was aware that a "but" was coming.

Mary released a sigh. "Now I'm feeling like I'll never find the man God intends for me to marry. Perhaps I'm going to be single for the rest of my life."

Abby reached across the counter, placing her hand over Mary's clasped hands. "Hey, girl. Don't give up on God just yet. Remember, I was at that same point until Preston came into my life."

When Mary remained silent, Abby asked, "What about Mike?"

"He's been away for almost a month, back in New Mexico," Mary replied. "He's due back today, though. I just don't know Abby. It's as if he doesn't even notice me unless we almost bump into each other or he needs to ask me a question."

Abby, now seated across the counter from Mary, regarded her with understanding. Abby's hazel eyes reflected her empathy for Mary's predicament. She expected a response from Abby, but when it didn't come, Mary frowned and continued.

"Now there's another twist to the story."

Leaning in closer, Abby inquired, "What's that, Mary?"

Abby glanced around to ensure their conversation remained private and whispered, "Well, Marcus Lee asked me out yesterday."

Abby's surprise was obvious as she responded, "What did you say?"

Mary sighed. "Well, what else could I say? I said yes."

"Marcus is a good guy, Mary. You could do a lot worse."

Mary's frown deepened as she shook her head with a sad look on her face. "Yeah. I know, but he's just not Mike."

Abby remained silent, extending a comforting hand, resting it on top of Mary's clasped ones, as Mary sighed once more.

"You know Marcus is only asking me out because his first choice is now getting married."

They both knew Marcus had been pursuing Abby for a date after an appropriate amount of time had elapsed since her divorce from Buck Taylor. Sadly for him, he had waited too long, as Abby was already in love with Preston Woods by the time Marcus had acted.

Before Abby could respond, Mary resumed. "That's me, always the second choice. That's why I'm still single at thirty."

Shaking her head, Abby disagreed. "No, Mary. You're still single because you've been waiting for Mike to return to Pinecrest. That's why."

Mary responded with a snort. "Yeah. That did me a world of good last month, and it probably won't be any different this time, either."

"But Mary," Abby countered, "Didn't you say back in August that he talked to you quite a bit that day?"

Mary shook her head and held up a finger. "Yeah. One time in the three months before he went back over to New Mexico."

Mary redirected the conversation. "Well, enough about me, Abby. What about your business now that we've got, not one but two, new restaurants opening up in the Pinecrest area?"

Mary was referring to a new pizza restaurant and a new hamburger joint, both from national chains, having recently built new restaurants on the state highway near the ranger station.

Abby's expression turned somber as she responded, "I don't know, Mary. You would think they wouldn't hurt me as much as they would The Supper Club."

"Yeah, they both serve fast food though, so maybe they won't compete much with your bakery items."

Abby appeared concerned this time as she admitted, "But I'm afraid they'll both hurt my lunch business. I'm not sure how much of that I can lose and still stay in business."

After their conversation, Abby placed a donut and cup of coffee in front of Mary, who consumed both as Abby turned to other customers as the restaurant was filling.

When Mary finished eating, she didn't know what else to say to Abby and when she paid, Abby spoke to her. "You know, Mary, if you go out with Marcus and Mike hears about it, maybe it'll get him to pay a little more attention to you."

Mary just shook her head as she left the bakery. She mulled over Abby's insight during her short drive to the ranger station.

As she arrived, she decided she would follow Abby's advice. She would try to make Mike jealous and, maybe, he'd pay more attention to her. In the meantime, she was determined to reach her goal of getting Mike to at least talk to her. Was that too much to ask for?

* * *

Mike Armstrong's body felt weighed down by exhaustion as he traveled the winding road leading to Pinecrest. The fatigue wasn't just the result of his early wake-up call at four that morning, nor was it because of the tiring four-hour drive from Albuquerque to Pinecrest. No, the last four weeks in Albuquerque had left him plagued by sleeplessness.

As the miles rolled by, Mike couldn't escape the relentless inner turmoil that had haunted him throughout his time in Albuquerque. The constant battles made him question his decision to go back to Pinecrest. Yet, his return was essential for his role as a Forest Service Law Enforcement Officer, which required the training he'd undergone.

His fiancée, Celina, had been pressing him to set a wedding date, adding to the emotional strain. Now that he was on staff at the Ranger Station in Pinecrest, Arizona, she hesitated to commit to moving to this small town. Mike understood why she was apprehensive since Celina was rooted in Albuquerque, where she had spent her entire life.

There wasn't much he could do about his current assignment, though. He'd been fortunate to have stayed in Albuquerque for the last nine years. He knew Pinecrest was often a temporary station for Law Enforcement Officers like himself, where a four-year stay would be considered long. The uncertainty troubled him.

Adding to his emotional fatigue was his ex-wife, Paula, who seemed to find endless ways to cause him trouble. He had hoped the divorce would

bring an end to all her attacks, but it had been four years since their divorce and she hadn't relented yet.

Her most recent issue was her adamant refusal to allow their six-year-old daughter, Fay, to spend her Christmas vacation with him in Pinecrest. Paula's interference had always cut short the few moments he had shared with Fay during his stay in Albuquerque.

As exhausted as he was, Mike continued to navigate the winding roads, his thoughts returning to the three women in his life. Well, only two since Paula had removed herself from his life, a fact she never let him forget.

He blew out a noisy sigh. The pressure was building: decisions needed to be made. He hoped that when the time came, Celina would choose to join him in Pinecrest, but his heart was heavy with doubt.

He turned into the Ranger Station on Highway 260. He enjoyed the fresh scent of pine that filled the air. Taking a deep breath, he resolved to set aside his problems for now, determined to deal with them later. His focus needed to be sharp as he reported back to his new Ranger, Bruce Williams. After spending only three months at the Pinecrest Ranger Station, he had returned to Albuquerque for training, which had been scheduled before his transfer to Pinecrest.

Williams had been gone for much of those first three months. So, Mike hadn't gotten a good idea of what working under Williams would be like. Mike had spent most of those first three months traveling the district to get familiar with the highways and Forest Service roads.

Since it was already nine o'clock on a Monday, Mike drove straight to the Ranger Station in his POV. He'd worry about going to get his duty truck at home later. Home, ha! It was a far cry from his previous life in Albuquerque, where he had just sold a comfortable three-bedroom home. The two-bedroom trailer he rented in Pinecrest felt cramped in comparison, and the transition from city to small-town life was also challenging, even though he'd grown up in Pinecrest.

Pinecrest held many memories of his high school years. Coming back had been quite familiar, but he couldn't help feeling somewhat constrained after over a decade of city living. It wasn't quite home to him anymore. His parents still had their home in Pinecrest, but they also had a winter home in the Phoenix area, three hours away.

Upon entering the Ranger Station's front office, the first person he encountered was Mary Howard, their receptionist and secretary. They had been part of the same high school circle, which included Mary's best friend, Abby Douglas. Mike had never been all that close to Mary.

After high school, he'd attended Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, then joined the Forest Service after graduation. His return to Pinecrest marked the end of a thirteen-year absence.

As he glanced at Mary while approaching her desk, he noticed a transformation. Why hadn't he noticed this when he was here before? The slender girl he remembered from high school had developed into a tall, attractive woman with long brown hair cascading down her back. It was an unexpected change, and it sparked a moment of surprise, but Mike pushed such thoughts aside. He was engaged to Celina, a beautiful woman in Albuquerque, and he couldn't afford to entertain such inappropriate thoughts.

Now, that was the problem. Celina was in New Mexico, and he was now in Pinecrest, two different worlds. She had no intention of leaving her beloved Albuquerque, not for what she considered a backwoods town four hundred miles away from her family.

Well, he was standing in front of Mary's desk and he needed to get his mind on the here and now.

"Good morning Mike. Welcome back!"

Mary's cheerful and somewhat bubbly demeanor reminded him of their high school days. He remembered her frequent giggles.

"Good morning Mary. Is Ranger Williams in?"

She chuckled, "Oh, Mike, you don't have to be so formal with Burce. He's just like one of us." She snickered this time. "Well, of course, unless we mess up for any reason."

Mike smiled back at her and was about to repeat his question when she responded.

"Yes, he's here, and he told me to send you right in when you got here." She gestured toward the enclosed office behind and to her left.

With another smile directed at Mary, Mike made his way to the door she'd pointed out, trying to cast aside thoughts of Albuquerque and the three women in his life.

He gave a soft rap on the door, yet with enough force to be heard. A voice called out, "Enter."

Upon entering the office, Mike found Bruce Williams rising from his desk to greet him with a warm smile on his face. Mike reminisced about his first day at the Pinecrest Ranger Station when Ranger Williams had extended the same hearty welcome. Mary might be right; Williams seemed just like any of the other employees.

Mike shook off the memories and took a moment to assess his new boss. Bruce Williams was a towering figure at six feet four inches but only about 180 pounds, making Mike feel rather short in comparison. Mike was four inches shorter and about the same weight. When they shook hands, Williams didn't crush Mike's hand, a common occurrence when dealing with larger men. Good!

Williams motioned toward a chair in front of his desk before returning to his seat behind it.

Bruce Williams settled into his chair, his gaze focused on Mike, with an expression of genuine interest on his face. "It must have been quite the transition, going back to Albuquerque for a month after being here for three."

Mike leaned back in his chair, a faint grin on his face. "It was worse for my daughter and fiancée."

Williams nodded his understanding of the complexities of such transitions.

Reaching for a substantial folder resting on his desk, Williams continued, "In your absence, the state Game and Fish Department has reached out to us. They've discovered signs of elk poaching in the area and are seeking your help."

He handed the file to Mike. "They sent this over to get you up to speed on their operations and how they'd like your help."

Mike took the folder and placed it on his lap, the weight of the situation settling in.

Mike perused the folder, and Williams spoke again. "All I ask is that you keep me updated daily on your operations."

Mike nodded. "Of course."

Williams chuckled. "No time to ease in. It seems they've requested a meeting with you this afternoon."

The conversation veered to ongoing affairs within the Ranger Station and after about twenty minutes, Mike left the office, satisfied that he had a competent supervisor in Bruce Williams.

Of course, being the Law Enforcement Officer for the district, Mike expected to spend most of his time out in the field, which would minimize direct interactions with his boss. Mike reminded himself that Williams remained his superior, and he would need to keep that in mind.

As Mike left the station, he carried with him not only the weight of his impending assignment but also the memory of Mary's cheerful smile, etching a distinct impression on his mind.

* * *

Mary, while engrossed in typing up reports on her computer, heard the soft tap of the keyboard accompanying the hum in the office when the door to Bruce's office creaked open. She expected Mike to stride past her the way he had done when he'd been there before. She knew he needed to go home to change and collect his duty truck, which was a higher priority. Yet, to her pleasant surprise, he halted right in front of her desk, and she could feel his expectant gaze upon her.

"Well, Mary, now that I'm back here to stay for a while, how have things been for you and the old gang from high school?" His tone was warm and inviting, laced with curiosity.

The question caught Mary off guard, and for a moment, she struggled to gather her thoughts. Then a genuine smile curved her lips as she met his eyes, her surprise turning into delight. "I suppose you had little time to get reacquainted with everyone when you breezed through here last month."

He nodded. "True, with learning the lay of the land in my new patrol area, I didn't have the time to catch up with any of the old gang from high school."

Mary considered what to share with him, and his gentle prompting encouraged her to open up.

"How about Abby and some others? I spent some time with Marcus Lee last month since he's with the PD here. My job requires me to get acquainted with all the local law enforcement agencies."

She grinned back at him. “Speaking of Abby, I’ll start with her. She’s getting married in less than two weeks, on the twenty-third.”

His brows furrowed in curiosity. “Who is she marrying? Didn’t I hear she was married to Buck Taylor?”

Mary’s expression grew solemn. “Yes, Buck was Abby’s husband, but he abused her, and they got divorced almost three years ago.”

Mike raised an eyebrow, his interest piqued. “So, who’s the lucky man this time?”

Mary’s face lit up with joy. “Oh, Mike. Abby is marrying such a wonderful man. Preston Woods is the new pastor at the church.”

“A pastor?” Mike chuckled, a hint of disbelief in his voice. “Well, after Buck Taylor, I guess any man would be a huge improvement. But a pastor?”

Mary spent a few minutes bringing Mike up to speed on some of their other high school friends, sharing anecdotes and memories they had endured over the years. Their conversation was brief, but she cherished their trip down memory lane.

Mike departed to go get his duty truck, while Mary sat at her desk with a goofy grin on her face.

Bruce interrupted her whimsical daydream when he appeared in front of her desk. Panic darted through Mary. Had Bruce been trying to engage her in conversation? Had she been ignoring him?

Bruce let out a hearty laugh as if he’d caught her in some secret, which, in a way, he had. “Well, Mary, do I get the feeling there used to be something between you and our new Law Enforcement Officer?”

Her cheeks flushed a bright crimson, and she shook her head. “No, Bruce. We were part of a group of kids back in high school.”

Bruce scrutinized her with a knowing look. “Is there a ‘but’ in there somewhere? Were you wishing for something more?”

Feeling transparent under Bruce’s perceptive gaze, Mary knew that trying to mislead him was futile. With a reluctant nod, she averted her eyes, conceding her feelings.

Bruce’s voice carried a tone of empathy. “Oh, Mary. I regret being the bearer of this news, but Mike is engaged to a woman back in Albuquerque.”

The revelation hit Mary like a tidal wave, stealing her breath away.

Before she could think of a way to respond, Bruce continued. “I’m very sorry, Mary.”

Without another word, Bruce retreated to the back of the building, leaving Mary to grapple with the profound disappointment that was settling upon her.

The rest of Mary's day whizzed by in a blur. The work reports she had typed up seemed a jumble of letters and numbers. She suspected she might need to redo some of them, but that concern could wait until tomorrow. At that moment, all she yearned for was the comforting embrace of a bubble-filled bath and another heartfelt conversation with her dearest friend, Abby.

Envisioning this soothing plan, Mary wasn't all that attentive as she unlocked the door of her cozy trailer. She couldn't help but notice a small envelope tumbling to the floor as she swung the door open.

Once inside her trailer, with the door shut, Mary sank onto the couch and examined the mysterious envelope. She gingerly slid out a single sheet of paper, her curiosity piqued.

The words etched on it left her confused.

"You look great today, Mary!"

What? She picked up the envelope that had fallen to the floor and turned it over, but it was bare, devoid of any name or message.

What on earth should she make of this? While it contained no overt threats, it was still unsettling, leaving her unsure how to proceed. Reporting it to the police seemed to be an overreaction.

So, her thoughts turned to Abby! She needed her friend's comforting presence. With a rush of determination, Mary retrieved her cell phone from her purse, and with trembling fingers, she speed-dialed Abby's number.

When Abby's voice came through the line, Mary got straight to the point. "Are you home?"

Abby chuckled. "Well, hello to you too."

When Mary waited, Abby went on. "Yes, I'm home."

Before Abby could respond further, Mary interjected, "I'll be right there."

With that, Mary ended the call and placed her cell phone back in her purse. Clutching the mysterious envelope and its bewildering message, she dashed out of her trailer.

Mary and Abby both lived in the same aging trailer park situated a few blocks to the east of the church. It only took Mary a couple of minutes before she was standing in front of Abby's door.

Before she could even knock, the door swung open and Abby, with an amused grin, gestured for Mary to enter. She didn't need an invitation. She barged right in, plopping herself onto Abby's couch, the perplexing note and envelope still clutched in her trembling hand.

Abby settled herself on the couch next to Mary, who stretched out her hand, proffering the mysterious envelope along with the message concealed within. "I found this stuck in my door just now."

Abby took the envelope from Mary's hand, noticing the utter absence of any writing on its surface. Curiosity piqued, she reached for the note Mary held in her trembling grip.

As Abby read the brief message, her eyes darted up to look into Mary's eyes. "You don't know who sent this?"

Mary shook her head in disbelief. "No, Abby. I can't even guess who might have left it on my door."

The two friends thought in silence, their minds racing to identify a possible sender. Then Abby turned to Mary, her expression contemplative. "Maybe we shouldn't take it to the police just yet, since there's no threat in the note."

Mary nodded, her face etched with concern. "I considered that too, but it doesn't seem right to bother the police with this."

Abby's face brightened with the hint of a brilliant idea. "Wait a minute. Didn't you mention that Mike Armstrong was supposed to return from New Mexico today?"

Mary's face lit up, but then it turned into a frown. "Oh, Abby. He stopped and talked to me, which he never did the last time he was here. He even asked about you and all the rest of the high school gang."

A concerned hush fell over them as they both contemplated the implications. Then Abby sighed and said, "That's great news, Mary! So, what's wrong?"

Mary shook her head, her face bearing a mixture of emotions. "Bruce told me Mike is engaged to a woman back in Albuquerque."

Abby frowned. "Oh, no."

In the weighty silence that followed, Abby shifted her gaze back to Mary. "Okay, here's what I was going to suggest. Show the note to Mike. He's in law enforcement and should be able to tell you whether there's anything to be concerned about."

Mary's eyes lit up with the promise of a solution. "That's a great idea, Abby. I'll do that tomorrow."

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