

Murder in Pinecrest

Chapter One

Monday morning dawned with a weighty anticipation for Marcus Lee, a departure from the usual hustle and bustle at the start of the week. Today, he was awaiting the news he had been longing to hear for the past three months. The climactic meeting that would decide his future with the Pinecrest Police Department.

Exiting the police station, Marcus took deliberate steps toward Pinecrest Town Hall, its architecture mirroring the town's rich history and standing proudly next to the station. Each step seemed to echo with the gravity of the decision that awaited him. Would he continue to serve as Pinecrest's new chief of police, or did the town's leadership choose someone else?

For the last three months, Marcus had taken on the role of temporary police chief after the shocking arrest of the previous chief, Doyle Clinton. The allegations against Clinton were severe, accusing him of leading a criminal enterprise involved in drug smuggling and wild game poaching. The entire ordeal had shaken the community to its core, leaving Marcus in a precarious position of leadership and trust.

It had taken the town council the full extent of these last three months to ensure that no other member of the Pinecrest Police Department was involved in Clinton's illicit activities. Now, it seemed they were finally prepared to disclose whether Marcus would be appointed as the permanent chief. Rumors had it that two other candidates had been considered, but Marcus had been left in the dark as to their identities.

Adding to the complexity, a recent election had ushered in two new members to the Town Council. This had required time for the newcomers to familiarize themselves with the town's affairs, along with Mayor Reynolds, who had served as interim mayor and was subsequently elected to a full term.

Marcus shook off his swirling thoughts, took a steadying breath, and pushed open the heavy wooden doors of the town hall. The familiar figure of Fran Metcalf, the city clerk and secretary, greeted him from behind her cluttered desk. Fran was a grandmotherly figure with soft gray hair and twinkling blue eyes. Her warm, plump demeanor often led her to joke about her sedentary job and love for doughnuts.

“Good morning, Marcus,” Fran greeted, her eyes twinkling with her customary cheerfulness. “Mayor Reynolds is on the phone and she asked me to let you know she’ll be with you shortly. Why don’t you take a seat while you wait?”

As Marcus moved to the modest waiting area, Fran couldn’t resist a mischievous giggle. “I’m not supposed to spill the beans, but...” She paused, flashing an exaggerated wink and one of her signature grins.

Marcus felt a subtle relief. For the first time that morning, he felt his shoulders drop, tension easing from his posture. A quiet chuckle escaped him. Leave it to Fran to communicate volumes without actually saying it.

When Mayor Meredith Reynolds swung her office door open, her gaze immediately settled on Marcus. With a nod of acknowledgment, Marcus rose from his chair, his heart rate subtly quickening in anticipation of her announcement.

“Good morning, Marcus. Why don’t you come on in?” Mayor Reynolds greeted, her voice echoing the formalities of the setting.

As Marcus approached her, his thoughts wandered to this woman who was the mayor of Pinecrest. She stood at about five foot eight inches, with a shape he would describe as robust and full-figured. Her raven-black hair cascaded in a polished wave, framing a pair of deep blue eyes that often seemed to contemplate complex matters.

Stepping into her office, Marcus heard the door close behind him, muffling the background noises of the town hall and offering a sense of privacy. Mayor Reynolds moved gracefully to her leather chair behind the mahogany desk, gesturing toward the chairs arranged in front of it.

With no unnecessary preamble, she leaned forward, resting her elbows on the desk, and locked eyes with Marcus. “Well, Marcus, congratulations. You are now the official Pinecrest Chief of Police.”

A surge of pride and relief coursed through Marcus. He fought to maintain his composure but allowed himself a modest smile. “Thank you, Mayor.”

She waved a dismissive hand. “Oh Marcus, outside of council meetings, I’m just Meredith, just like I’ve always been. Okay?”

“Of course, Meredith,” Marcus replied, his voice imbued with a newfound confidence.

The atmosphere shifted subtly as Meredith's expression turned more solemn. "However, I must caution you. The decision was not unanimous. I won't divulge the details, but I believe you can deduce the only dissenting voice with little effort."

A knowing nod from Marcus signaled his understanding. It was an open secret within the department that Officer Ben Foster harbored ambitions for the chief's position. One of the recent additions to the Town Council, Brian Jenkins, was a longtime friend of Foster's.

Marcus met Mayor Reynolds' gaze squarely. "I appreciate the heads-up, Meredith. I'll handle it with as much discretion and professionalism as I can."

Her lips curled into a reassuring smile. "I have no doubt you will, Marcus. Congratulations again. I believe you have a department to lead and a town to protect."

With a nod of gratitude, Marcus took his leave, his steps lighter, and his heart filled with renewed purpose.

As Marcus made his way out of Mayor Reynolds' office, Fran flashed him a thumbs up, prompting a chuckle from him. Stepping through the outside door, sunshine and bright, clear skies greeted Marcus. Though the central mountains of Arizona held a cool edge in early April, he hadn't needed a jacket for the short walk between the police station and the town hall.

Upon arriving at the police station, Marcus passed his fob in front of the reader next to the door and entered the private part of the station.

Once inside, he was met by the eager gaze of Betty Vinson, the longtime secretary, receptionist, and daytime dispatcher. Her eyes shimmered with anticipation, awaiting news of the meeting.

With a wide grin, Marcus responded, "It's official, Betty."

Her face broke into a grin, and she let out a joyful whoop. "Oh Marcus, I'm so happy for you."

"Thank you, Betty," Marcus replied, a warmth filling him at her genuine happiness.

Taking a moment to stand by her desk, Marcus observed Betty. She had been a constant presence at the Pinecrest Police Department for eighteen years, and her infectious cheerfulness endeared her to all. Despite being in her mid-forties, Betty appeared at least a decade younger. Marcus knew her

husband, served as a sergeant with the county sheriff's office, a detail she mentioned proudly whenever the occasion presented itself.

As Marcus began to speak, the shrill ring of the phone interrupted him. Given his towering height of six foot four inches, leaning over the desk to wait was an uncomfortable option. He settled instead into the chair next to her desk, patiently waiting for Betty to finish her call.

Once the call concluded, she glanced up at him expectantly. "All right, I'm all ears now. I assume there's more you need to share beyond your new status as our official police chief?"

"Yes, there is," Marcus began. "Could you please send out a text to all our officers that I'll be holding a mandatory meeting this afternoon at 1600? That should catch everyone on duty and the off-duty officers can come in at that time."

"I'll get right on it, Chief!" Betty replied, already writing down what he'd asked her to do.

Marcus chuckled, "I'm not entirely sure everyone around here will be as thrilled about this as you are."

She laughed. "They'll get over it soon enough."

With a nod of acknowledgment, he began working his way through the station's common area. Six cubicles lined the space, each set up so an officer could fill out reports on the computer. Framed glass walls sectioned off the back of the room. To the far right stood a spacious office reserved for the chief—now Marcus' domain. Directly opposite was a smaller office for the department's sole sergeant. At the heart of the room sat a conference room, its large table surrounded by eight chairs, providing a space for collaborative discussions and planning.

* * *

Rachel Wilson felt the weight of fatigue settling in. Her temples throbbed ominously, signaling the onset of another headache, and it was barely past one o'clock. The day had swiftly unraveled into a series of challenges, and the timing seemed almost too predictable—it was a Monday, after all. Rachel had long felt that if anything was going to go wrong during her week, it was bound to happen on Monday or Friday. The other weekdays seemed to unfold with relative ease, much to her relief.

She thought her students were usually either tired from their weekend on Monday or not happy for the weekend to end. Then, on Friday, they were already anticipating their weekend and ready for it to start.

With a resigned sigh, she pushed aside her lunch containers, hastily stowing them back into her tote bag. She then reached for the specific file she would need for her upcoming meeting with the father of a sixth-grade student who had been caught bullying other students.

Rachel had developed her own approach to these sensitive discussions. She preferred to have the student present during the parent-teacher conference, especially when discipline was involved. In her experience, having the student face her, seated behind her desk, often made it more challenging for them to refute or deny their actions when confronted by her and their parents.

Just as she was organizing her papers, a gentle knock on the door heralded the entrance of Darlene Douglas, the elementary school's secretary.

"Mr. Kirby is here," Darlene announced, her voice carrying a note of concern. "I've called down to Cory's classroom to have him sent up."

Rachel mustered a smile, albeit a weary one, attempting to express her appreciation. Despite the challenges of her first year at Pinecrest Elementary School, Darlene had been an unwavering source of support. Rachel knew that if she managed to stay on as principal at the school, it would be mostly because of Darlene's exceptional assistance.

"Thank you, Darlene," Rachel replied, her voice soft but appreciative. "Please ask him to wait until Cory arrives and then send them in together. I appreciate it."

Darlene nodded, offering Rachel an understanding smile before withdrawing from the office, leaving Rachel to gather her thoughts and brace herself for the challenging discussion that lay ahead.

A few minutes later, the door to Rachel's small, but organized office opened with a soft creak, revealing Darlene Douglas gesturing for Mr. Kirby and his son, Cory, to enter. Cory shuffled in, his eyes downcast, while his father entered with an air of defiance, his brows furrowed, and lips pressed into a thin line.

Rachel, seated behind her desk, glanced down at the open file that described the bullying incident, then took in the expressions of both father

and son as they settled into the chairs across from her. The room's atmosphere grew rather tense, like a storm cloud gathering, heavy with unspoken words and mounting frustrations.

Mr. Kirby was a big man with bulging biceps, as did most lumberjacks. He had what looked like a perpetual scowl on his face. She hoped that was because of working outside and not something he was about to unleash on her.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Kirby, Cory," Rachel began, striving to maintain a calm and professional demeanor despite the undercurrent of tension. "Thank you for coming in to discuss the concerns we have regarding Cory's behavior at school."

Mr. Kirby's face remained stern, unyielding. "Let's get on with it then," he said curtly.

Rachel glanced at Cory, who seemed to shrink farther into his seat, his fingers fidgeting with the hem of his shirt. Rachel then looked down at the file before her, taking a moment to gather her thoughts.

"I asked Cory to be here today because I believe it's important for him to be part of this conversation," Rachel started, her voice calm. "It often helps students understand the seriousness of their actions when they hear directly from both their teacher and their parents."

Mr. Kirby scoffed, his defensive posture becoming even more obvious. "So, you're saying my boy is guilty without even hearing his side of the story?"

Rachel felt the tension in the room escalate, but she maintained her composure. "Not at all, Mr. Kirby. I have spoken with Cory about this earlier, and he denied it. But I have documented complaints from several students who have reported being bullied by Cory. I also have two teachers who have actually witnessed his behavior."

She quickly forged on. "I think it's important for Cory to understand the impact of his actions and for us to work together to discuss and resolve this behavior."

Mr. Kirby leaned forward, his face nearing Rachel's across her desk, his eyes confrontational. "Let's get one thing straight right now."

He tilted his head toward his son. "From eight to three, he's your problem, not mine. The rest of the time, I'll take care of his behavior."

The room seemed to tighten with the tension, the atmosphere thick with confrontation. Rachel took a deep breath, trying to maintain her calm despite the escalating situation. She knew she had to bridge the gap and work together with Cory's father for the sake of the young boy's well-being.

He rose as if to leave the room.

Rachel held his gaze, refusing to back down. "To a certain extent, that is true, Mr. Kirby. But we here at the school need the support of the parents or the students will never adjust their behavior."

When he didn't move or comment, she went on, "I understand this is a sensitive issue, Mr. Kirby," Rachel continued, her tone controlled and understanding. "My goal is not to punish but to find a solution that will end the unacceptable behavior. I believe that with your cooperation, we can help Cory understand the consequences of his actions and provide a safer, more respectful environment for all students."

Mr. Kirby stepped toward the door this time. "Like I said. He's not my problem when he's here. You take care of it any way you see fit, and don't be bothering me about it again."

With that, he stomped out of the room, leaving Cory sitting in his chair with a smirk on his face.

Rachel felt the weight of her headache return, throbbing insistently. But she pushed the discomfort aside, focusing on the immediate task at hand. She would have to reach Cory without his father's help.

Rachel watched as Mr. Kirby, with a last lingering glare, stepped out of her office, leaving the door wide open. She turned her attention back to Cory, who had been following his father with his gaze and only now looked back at her, his eyes wide with a mix of apprehension and defiance.

The dim lighting of her office cast soft shadows on the walls, giving the room an intimate, enclosed feel. Papers and files were laid out across her desk, evidence of a busy day filled with meetings, paperwork, and the usual challenges of school administration. The soft hum of the heat was the only sound breaking the silence that hung between Rachel and Cory.

"Okay, Cory, it looks like the decision on your punishment is totally up to me," Rachel began, trying to keep her tone firm yet compassionate. She noticed Cory's eyes darting toward the closed outer door, likely thinking about his father's stern demeanor.

Allowing for Mr. Kirby's time frame, Rachel decided to set Cory's detention within the regular school hours. "Considering your father's concerns, your detention will be held here in the office during your recess for the next two weeks."

"But..." Cory started, his eyes pleading.

Rachel raised a hand to silence him, maintaining her stance. "That's final, Cory. This detention will give you a chance to think about your behavior. I hope it will also encourage you to think twice before bullying anyone in the future."

Standing up, Rachel felt the weight of the day settling in her bones, her earlier headache still nagging at the edges of her consciousness. "That's all for now, Cory. Please report to the office during both of your recesses, starting tomorrow."

She noticed Cory's expression darken, his mouth twisting as if he were about to shoot her a defiant glare. However, after a moment's hesitation, he simply turned on his heel and left, his shoulders slumped.

Rachel felt a mixture of relief and concern as she watched him leave the room. She hoped the detention would serve as a learning experience for Cory, a chance for him to understand the gravity of his actions and their impact on others.

She glanced up to see Darlene rising from her desk, ready to escort Cory back to his classroom. Rachel was grateful for Darlene's supportive presence, especially on challenging days like this one. With a heavy sigh, she began tidying up her desk, preparing for the next task, awaiting her attention.

* * *

Marcus spent the rest of the day sequestered in his familiar old office, wanting to avoid any speculation or probing questions about his new status. The room reflected his years on the force: worn but comfortable furniture, framed commendations lining the walls, and a faint aroma of stale coffee that seemed to have seeped into the very walls. As he sat at his desk, he was reminded of the task he now faced—appointing a new sergeant to take his place.

His thoughts wandered down the list of officers on the force, and it didn't take him long to identify the most suitable candidate. Emma Rodriguez stood out, not only for her decade of service but also for her dedication, competence, and ability to interact positively with the public. She carried herself with a level of professionalism that Marcus believed would make her an excellent sergeant.

On the other hand, there was Ben Foster. Although Foster had been on the force longer—fifteen years, to be exact, Marcus had serious reservations about his suitability for a leadership position. Ben had a tendency to be lackadaisical in his duties, often doing just the bare minimum required. His interpersonal skills were lacking, and he sometimes struggled to maintain good relations with the community. To put it bluntly, Ben was a complacent officer who seemed to exert effort only when it suited him.

The decision seemed clear to Marcus, but he wasn't blind to the potential repercussions of choosing Emma over Foster. The guy had his circle of allies, mainly among his drinking buddies at Shady's Place, one of the town's two bars. Marcus knew that overlooking Foster for the promotion would likely lead to a chorus of complaints and grumblings, not just from Foster himself, but from his supporters, too.

As Marcus pondered this dilemma, he couldn't help but feel the weight of his new responsibilities. His decision wouldn't just affect the dynamics within the police department; it would also send a message about the values and priorities of the Pinecrest law enforcement community. With the looming meeting just hours away, Marcus realized he needed to make the choice that reflected not only his judgment but also the standards of excellence he believed the department should uphold.

Shortly before 1600, Marcus took a deep, steadying breath as he sat alone in the conference room, meticulously planning for the pivotal meeting that lay ahead. He was acutely aware of the importance of establishing his authority from the beginning, especially with the threat of Ben Foster's potential insubordination hanging over him. Determined to prove his worthiness for the role and earn the respect of his team, Marcus rehearsed his opening lines in his head, striving for a tone that was both commanding and cordial.

When the moment arrived, Marcus positioned himself at the far end of the polished wooden conference table, awaiting the arrival of his officers.

As they filed into the room, their faces were a tapestry of curiosity, skepticism, and guarded interest. Undeterred, Marcus locked eyes with each one, his own gaze imbued with unwavering determination.

Notably, Ben Foster avoided his eyes, choosing instead to direct his gaze elsewhere. Marcus wasn't surprised; news of his permanent promotion must have already made the rounds, and Foster's disappointment was likely common knowledge by now. It wouldn't be just that Marcus had overlooked him for the sergeant's position; Foster had harbored aspirations of becoming the new chief himself.

Once everyone had taken their seats—Marcus at the head of the table, Betty positioned discreetly in a chair against the wall—he scanned the faces before him. It was time to lighten the mood.

“Thank you all for being here,” Marcus began, projecting his voice with a firmness that brooked no argument. “As most of you may already know, the town council has appointed me as the new chief.”

The room fell silent, save for a barely audible scoff emanating from Foster's direction. Marcus ignored it, refusing to be thrown off course.

“First, I have some good news to share. The council has given me permission to hire two additional officers.”

A ripple of smiles and approving murmurs spread across the room. Marcus felt a glimmer of satisfaction. It was always wise to start a meeting with news that the group would receive well.

“Now, on to the next order of business: the appointment of a new sergeant to fill my old position.”

As his eyes swept the room again, they met Foster's defiant glare. The challenge was unmistakable: Pick me, or face the consequences.

“As per department policy, an officer must have a minimum of five years on the force to qualify for the sergeant position,” Marcus continued, letting the tension build for a moment before delivering the verdict. “This requirement narrows it down considerably.”

He paused for emphasis before dropping the bombshell. “So, I've chosen Officer Rodriguez to be our new sergeant.”

The air seemed to thicken instantly. Foster sprang up from his chair so abruptly that it toppled over and hit the floor with a resounding crash. Without a word, he stormed out of the meeting, his exit a potent threat to Marcus' leadership.

As the door slammed shut behind Foster, Marcus felt a mixture of relief and apprehension. He had made his choice, and now he had to deal with the consequences now facing him. With the room still buzzing from the aftershock of his decision, Marcus realized this was just the beginning of many challenges he would face as Pinecrest's new police chief.

The rest of the meeting unfolded swiftly, marked by a lack of further changes or disruptions—thankfully. With the formalities concluded and the air still charged from Foster's abrupt departure, Marcus wasted no time in ending the meeting.

As he strode purposefully toward his new office, each step seemed to echo with the gravity of his new position. The weight of responsibility settled on his shoulders like a tangible mantle, urging him to rise to the occasion.

Pushing open the door to his office, Marcus paused to take in the much larger room. It was a marked upgrade from his previous, more cramped quarters on the other side of the conference room. Sunlight streamed in through the large window positioned behind the imposing desk, offering a commanding view of the bustling town square outside. The room itself was tastefully trimmed with dark wood furnishings, lending an air of respectability befitting his new role.

Moving to the leather chair behind the desk, Marcus allowed himself a moment to soak it all in. A swell of pride mingled with a profound sense of responsibility as he settled into the seat. He knew that being the chief of police in Pinecrest came with its own set of challenges and heightened expectations. But rather than feel daunted, Marcus felt invigorated, ready to confront these challenges head-on and prove himself worthy of the trust placed in him.

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