

WHERE THE RIVER RUNS RED

## PROLOGUE

He didn't do it. Plain and simple, it wasn't him. But there he was anyway, seventeen years old, sitting in a jam-packed courtroom, waiting for the jury to come back and render its verdict.

The trial didn't go well.

Everything moved in slow motion. Chad Greer's attorney, sitting to his left, had a dour look on his face. He wouldn't even look at Chad, he just kept sifting through his papers, apparently searching for something buried there that he hoped would magically change the outcome.

Chad was cold.

Further over, Cole Hanratty, the D.A. prosecuting him, had a victorious half-grin plastered on a pock-marked face.

Out of the corner of his eye Chad saw Sheriff Chuck Marshall staring him down. Chad blamed him as the one who railroaded him and set him up to take the fall. Someday, Chad promised to himself, he was going to make him pay.

Behind Chad, his baby sister had her head on his mom's shoulder. She dabbed tears from her eyes with a tissue. Dad wasn't there and Chad knew he couldn't give a shit. There wasn't an empty seat in the courtroom. Hushed whispers and accusing eyes burned at his back, giving him the creeps.

The door at the head of the courtroom opened and a court officer appeared.

"All rise," he said in a deep, gravelly voice. A corpulent man sporting a black robe, followed behind and moved to the bench. "Presenting the Honorable Leonard B. Markovitch." Everyone stood and the room went completely silent.

"Be seated," the Judge said, as he sat down. He eyed the court reporter, "On the record."

"Yes, Your Honor."

Peering over his glasses, he panned to the D.A., looked at Chad's lawyer, then at Chad, but he avoided Chad's glare, and said, "The jury has reached its verdict." He focused his gaze at the court officer, and gestured towards the other door, "Officer Rios, please bring them in."

Rios walked to the door on the other side of the Judge's bench, opened it, and ushered in seven men and five women who marched in lockstep. Chad looked at them, one by one, but they too avoided his eyes. As they sat, hushed voices rose again from the gallery.

"There will be no talking!" The Judge bellowed. The room went silent once more, as the jurors took their seats. He looked over to them. "I understand you have reached your verdict."

"We have, Your Honor," said the man sitting in the front row, leftmost seat.

Chad shivered.

The court officer walked over and the juror handed him a folded sheet of paper. The Judge motioned to the court officer, who passed him the paper. He unfolded it, raised his chin, and quickly

re-folded it, stared directly at Chad, this time looking directly into Chad's eyes. "Will the defendant please rise."

His lawyer turned to Chad, who was wobbly on his feet and couldn't fully stand. He took him by the arm and pulled him up.

The Judge turned back to the foreman. "Verdict please."

The man rose, and, without any emotion, said, "We the jury find the defendant, Chadwick-Steven-Greer, guilty...of murder...in the first degree."

Chad's knees weakened, and as he collapsed, he screamed out, "I didn't do it!"

## Chapter 1

### Fifteen Years Later...

Sawyer Greer, late twenties, slender, with sharp features, was conservatively dressed in a pants suit that shouted 'lawyer.' She was early, so she waited in the hallway outside Hearing Room 333, still unsure of what to expect. It had been fifteen years since her brother Chad was incarcerated, and today was his initial parole hearing. She had visited him regularly, even during her stint at law school. Now, only months into her job working for the Marion County D.A.'s office, she was hoping to be able to help with Chad's parole. She believed all along that he was innocent, and had been wrongfully convicted, and so she intended to dedicate her life, and her career, to uncovering the truth. What better way to do that than to land a job at the D.A.'s office?

At 10:00 a.m. the door to the Hearing Room opened and she walked inside. After taking her seat in the gallery, a few other people entered the room and sat down. She didn't recognize any of them, other than Anthony and Audrey Miller, the murdered girl Megan's parents. She expected them, and if they were given a chance to speak, she figured they would demand that the Parole Board keep Chad incarcerated for the rest of his life.

Chad was ushered in dressed in a suit and tie purchased by Sawyer. He looked handsome, but much thinner, and more weathered than when she saw him two months ago. He forced a smile and nodded at her.

The Hearing began and the Parole Board, consisting of three people, two men and one woman, each peppered Chad with standard questions. Finally, Hearing Officer Marsha DeMonte, a large black woman, with heavily braided brown hair, asked Chad if he had anything more to say. Chad turned and looked at Sawyer. She nodded, offering a faint smile of support.

"Thank you all for granting me this parole opportunity," said Chad. "I simply want to say I have suffered a lot. Being here, I've been beaten, stabbed, and assaulted in a way I don't like talking about. I hope you take into consideration that I never caused anybody any problems. For fifteen years I have been reading, learning, and educating myself, so that the day I walk free, I rejoin the community; hold down a proper job, be with my sister and friends from school. Fifteen years have been stolen from me for a crime I didn't commit. That's all I have to say." He wiped tears from his eyes and lowered his head.

After a few minutes of silence, while the three Hearing Officers spoke quietly to one another, Ms. DeMonte addressed the room.

“Mr. Greer, you were convicted of first-degree murder, by a jury of your peers. It was only because you were convicted as a youthful offender, that you were able to get a parole hearing after only fifteen years in jail. So, the fact that you served fifteen years and suffered in prison, is not a concern of ours. Based on the evidence, it is what you deserve and where you belong. We all thought you would have come to your senses by now; fessed up for what you did. That’s what troubles us. Still, after fifteen years in prison, you continue to claim some sort of bizarre innocence. You refuse to admit the horrific crime you committed. Because of this, we have no choice but to deny your request for parole.”

Chad stood, and shouted, “I didn’t do anything to Megan.”

“She had your DNA all over her,” retorted Ms. DeMonte.

“I was her friend,” said Chad.

“You raped her, bashed in her skull, threw her in the river. That’s the kind of friend you are, because she didn’t give in to you?” asked Ms. DeMonte.

“I didn’t do any of that. I didn’t hurt her,” said Chad.

“You are a liar, Mr. Greer,” Ms. DeMonte stated dismissively.

Chad grew angry. “So, you want me to confess to a lie?”

“A word of advice, Mr. Greer. If twelve people saw you eating oats, it’s time to admit you’re horse!”

“That doesn’t even make any sense,” said Chad.

Ms. DeMonte put her hand on her hip. “I don’t believe this,” she said. “A murderer is here to lecture me on what makes sense. Maybe if you had listened to what your father taught you, you would have made better life choices.”

“For your information,” Chad said, growing angrier, “My father was a lowlife drunk. I wouldn’t listen to him to get a pardon from the Governor.”

“You don’t really mean that, do you, son?” asked Hearing Officer James Abernathy, a pale, balding, older man.

Chad thought about it for a moment, then said, conclusively, “You never met him.”

Mr. Abernathy shook his head. “Son, you haven’t learned a damned thing in these fifteen years, have you? You have a golden opportunity here to confess to the murder you clearly committed and instead you waste our time talking about being a good friend to the girl you murdered in cold blood. I don’t know why we even bothered giving you a hearing in the first place. Clearly, you are incorrigible. You deserve to rot in prison for the rest of your life.”

Chad’s temper boiled. “This whole hearing is bullshit,” he exclaimed. Extending his middle finger at them, he spit at the Board. “You can all go fuck yourselves!”

Quickly, the officer standing nearby grabbed Chad by the arm, cuffed him and dragged him out of the room.

Sawyer was mortified. She stood and approached the Hearing Officers, “Excuse me, but I have something to say on this matter, and I would like to address the Board.”

Hearing Officer Abernathy, stood and asked, “And who might you be, ma’am?”

“My name is Sawyer Greer. I am an attorney with the D.A.’s office. I am also Chad Greer’s sister.”

“D.A. or not, you have no standing in this proceeding, Ms. Greer, so save your breath,” said Abernathy. “I’m afraid this is neither the time nor the place. And, as an attorney, you should know that anything you want to say regarding this matter must be brought up in court, not at a Parole Board

Hearing. Please, see yourself out.”

With that, he and the other Board members turned and exited.

Defeated, Sawyer fell back in her seat and wept. After taking a few minutes to gather herself, she rose and left the room.

Walking through the parking lot, she was approached by a man she didn’t know, but whom she recognized from the hearing. He had been seated in the last row.

“Hello, Ms. Greer,” he said, “My name is Mason Walcott. I saw you at the hearing and would like to talk to you.”

“About?”

“Your brother and his case, of course.”

“Well, who are you?”

“I’m a journalist. I wrote articles about Chad fifteen years ago.”

Sawyer squinted, eyeing him up and down. “So, why would I want to talk to you?”

“I know some things about Chad, and I also came to a different conclusion than the jury. I also don’t believe your brother was guilty, but I didn’t have any hard evidence of that.”

“Really?” She furrowed her brow, still looking at Walcott suspiciously. “In my experience, journalists rarely concern themselves with the guilt or innocence of a suspect. More than likely, you’re simply looking for a juicy story to pin a Pulitzer on.”

“I *wish* I was working for that kind of fancy paper,” said Walcott, almost to himself.

“So, why take an interest in an old case that only the immediate families of those involved care about?” asked Sawyer. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It’s a long story. Perhaps you’d be willing to grab a cup of coffee with me, so we can talk about it?”

Looking him up and down, and noting his warm smile and demeanor, she was intrigued and reasoned that she had nothing to lose by listening to the man. After all, she was only hitting dead ends today. So, she nodded in agreement.

“There’s a Starbucks just down the road apiece,” he said, “I can meet you there in ten minutes.”

## Chapter 2

Holding a steaming cup of coffee in her hand, Sawyer took a seat across from Mason Walcott. "So, let's get right to it. What is it you want to tell me?"

Mason grinned, "You cut right to the chase, don't you, Ms. Greer?"

"I am very busy and highly suspect. So, if you don't grab me with real information at the get-go, I will be on my way."

"Fair enough. Let me start by saying, I was there."

"There? What do you mean by 'there'?"

"At Rainbow River, where the murder occurred."

"You mean you visited the crime scene?"

"Yes...and no. What I mean is, I was there around the time the murder took place. I was part of the group of kids who were hanging out that night."

"That makes no sense. I'm an A.D.A. in the county where it happened. I've seen a list of the witnesses from the file, and your name is nowhere in it."

"Well, there's a lot that isn't in that file."

Sawyer's eyes widened. "Okay, you've got me."

"I thought that might interest you."

"It does, so tell me more."

"I knew Chad...I mean, I knew of him. We weren't friends. He didn't know me. I was in college and dating one of the girls from the high school. We went to Rainbow River that night. I knew Chad from his basketball prowess. He was an all-star point guard, and I was a fan. I thought he had the potential to play college ball, and maybe even turn pro."

"Yes, I do remember that. I was just a thirteen-year-old kid, but I went to a lot of his games. He was a good brother to me, he looked out for me and took care of me, because Mom always worked and Dad was never around."

"Seems like you share your brother's low opinion of your father," said Mason. "Sorry, maybe that was too harsh."

"No, it's fine," she said. "Go on, tell me about that night."

"Yeah, so after the game that night, a bunch of us got together; they were mostly friends of my girlfriend, Sandra. Some kid who worked at a pharmacy stole a bunch of Oxy pills and we all took them, including Chad."

"Wait, none of that is in the file either."

"Of course not. After everything hit the fan, the rest of them got together and agreed to never tell about the drugs. Everyone was drinking too, and as kids, no one wanted to get into trouble. And since the drugs didn't have anything to do with the murder, or so they thought, they figured it was best not to say anything to anyone. So, when the police interviewed them, no one mentioned that everyone was wasted."

Anger now getting the better of Sawyer, she reached across the table and grabbed Mason's wrist. "So, why didn't you own up to this when you saw that Chad had been convicted? Why did you wait fifteen years, until now, to even come and tell me this?"

"Like I said, no one wanted to get in trouble, and a pact was made. Besides, it wouldn't have mattered."

"Why not?"

"You're a lawyer. You know better than that. They had DNA evidence. It was on his face. What's the difference if everyone was high?"

"Look, I don't know. It may have had an impact, but the fact is, this is a major development. I need to speak with everyone who was there that night. Perhaps there are other things that the group withheld from the police?"

"That I don't know. But I do know that Chad was also wasted. He was drinking Vodka heavily while celebrating the victory." He took a sip of his latte.

"So then tell me, what makes you think that Chad didn't kill Megan?"

"Well, during the night I saw them together, they were all kissy-face and sloppy all over each other. And they went off into the woods. A while later, my girlfriend told me she ran into Megan and she was all alone, and I didn't see him for the rest of the night. I didn't know where he went, or what happened to him after that, so I assumed he went home."

"But he never came home that night. I remember that my dad, as much of an asshole as he was, went out looking for him. It was my mom that made him do it. She even told Dad to look by the river. Dad was quite drunk himself, but he took off, and came back a few hours later without Chad. It came out at the trial that Chad had stayed over at his friend Travis's house to sleep it off. No one knew he took OxyContin though, they just thought he was drunk. I guess by the time they took his blood, the drugs were out of his system."

"Makes sense."

"I'm going to need the names of all the people that were there that night. Can you give that to me? I'd like to match it up with the names I took from the case file. Then I'm going to track them down."

"As long as you let me tag along when you interview them."

Sawyer pushed back her seat and stood, handing him her card. "Here, take this and text me the list of names. I'll call you after I've had a chance to look at my notes."

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Sawyer sped back to her apartment, barely staying within the speed limit. Once home, she raced inside. She was only able to copy a small part of the file without getting caught, but she got the witness list, and a brief summary. She knew it was improper, but she had to start somewhere. She figured she could always go back and requisition the file from archives again when she needed to. She didn't want to raise eyebrows with her bosses after only working there for a few months. Quickly sifting through her notes, she compared the names of the kids that were interviewed. It was a short list. Mason Walcott was not on it. She wondered how he managed to stay off of it. She then matched up the names against the text she received from Mason and scratched her forehead.



She called Mason. "There are two people missing."

"What do you mean?"

"Your list, not counting you, it has two kids more than what I have in my notes."

"Really? That's strange. Who's missing?"

"There's a girl named Sandra Payne, and a boy named Winston Marshall, both of whom are on your list, but not in what I have."

"Well, they were at the river that night, I can swear to that. As I said, Sandra was my girlfriend at the time, but we broke up when I transferred to school in California and we lost touch."

"Then these two should be our first interviews."

"I agree."

"And does that mean you haven't had any contact with Sandra lately?"

"No, I haven't spoken to her in about fourteen years. Do you think you can use the resources of your office to track them down?"

"That I can't do. I have to be very careful. If there's a reason these two were left off the witness list, I don't want to alert the D.A. that I'm investigating."

"Good point."

"And while we're on the subject," Sawyer said, a distinct edge to her voice, "How did *you* manage to stay off the witness list?"

Mason mulled that over for a few seconds. "I recall being interviewed by Chad's attorney, but the prosecution never spoke to me."

"Strange. You'd think they'd have wanted to talk to everyone."

"I guess, but it was long ago and I don't really remember why they didn't."

"Ok, well, right now I need to start a Facebook search for these two. And maybe you can help with your journalistic prowess and try to find them as well. Why don't you look for Winston Marshall on Facebook." Sawyer sat down at her computer and started tapping the keyboard. "I'll look for Sandra Payne. Let's touch base in an hour and see what we've come up with."

## Chapter 3

Mason tossed his phone on the table, shook his mouse and opened Facebook. Aside from the musician Winston Marshall, who, of course, came up first, there were many Winston Marshalls, so he tried to narrow it down more locally, hoping that Mr. Marshall didn't stray too far from home over the past fifteen years. The search was tedious but after a time he was able to find who he was looking for, and as it turned out, the boy became a man and remained in Marion County. While there was no address, his public Facebook page contained pictures of him with friends at local hot spots very close to Rainbow River. Mason was familiar with the places and reasoned it wouldn't be too hard to get an actual home address.

He headed for the fridge, grabbed a Corona, popped the tab with a bottle opener, and took a long swig. He ran his fingers through his thick, dark hair, looked around the room and thought, *I can't bring Sawyer to my place with it looking like this*. He didn't know exactly why he was thinking about her this way. He hadn't been on a date in a while, and this strange attraction to her was making him uneasy. He hadn't felt this way in *forever* and he didn't know if it was good or bad, nor did he have any idea if Sawyer would have any interest in him, but he liked the thought of it.

Sitting back to his computer with renewed energy, he felt that he needed to impress Sawyer. So, he kept digging until he located an address for Marshall. He jotted it down, then started cleaning up his apartment, tossing the clothes he had lying on the couch into a basket. Taking the dirty dishes from the table he placed them in the dishwasher.

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Sawyer dug in quickly and, of course, there were dozens of Sandra Paynes on Facebook. She breezed through the first thirty or so until she came upon one entitled 'Sandra Payne Memorial' which was about a girl who was killed fourteen years ago at the age of nineteen. Her bio fit the basic description of the Sandra Payne she was looking for and as she read further, she learned that Ms. Payne died a resident of Rainbow River, Florida. The circumstances of her death were suspect, and for a time the police couldn't commit to suicide or murder. So, with no suspects and questionable facts, the case was left open and unsolved. There had been no activity in the past twelve years. Sawyer logged on to her office account to get the official record but was unable to access records from Tallahassee where the death occurred. A cold case to be sure; over a full decade cold. Sawyer got up, walked over and stared through the kitchen window thinking that maybe this wasn't just a coincidence. One of the things that made Sawyer a good, young attorney was that she was suspicious by nature, so when her gut told her she smelled a rat, she knew that there must be one close by.

She wandered around her apartment, her mind in hamster-wheel mode, and then she sat back down and began a Facebook search for Mason Walcott. He was much easier to find because he wanted to be seen. Pictures of him without a shirt revealed a firm physique with just the right amount of body hair, and, coupled with a solid, muscular build, he looked just her type. A faint tingle between her thighs was quickly suppressed when she hit on another picture of him in a hospital bed bandaged around his chest and head. It was a newspaper clip, and beneath it was a short caption: ‘Local Marine Severely Injured in Afghanistan, Returns Home.’

Continuing on, she learned he wrote a few articles for a small circulation war correspondent magazine called “The Actual Facts.” The articles he wrote were anti-government and anti-war pieces that almost got him a D.D., more commonly known as a Dishonorable Discharge, but the injury apparently saved him because the military didn’t want any bad press over a wounded warrior.

Sawyer also found articles he wrote more locally, some from before he went overseas and a few since. She couldn’t find anything about Chad’s murder conviction so she switched over to Google and did a name search. After eliminating other Mason Walcott’s, she was able to find that he wrote for a now out of business local rag called “The RR Post.” Most of the articles were from fifteen or so years ago that were primarily sports related. Some contained stories about Chad S. Greer, a local high school basketball player who showed promise but was brought down by a criminal conviction for murder. There were no details about the crime, just references that he missed a golden opportunity to play college ball and perhaps even pro ball. She continued digging but found nothing more and when all related searches turned up dead end, she began to wonder about Mason.

As she finished a glass of Cabernet, Sawyer’s cell rang. “Hello Mason.”

“Hey Sawyer, I’ve got some good intel on Winston Marshall.”

“Great, let’s hear it.”

“Let’s meet and take a drive. I’ll explain as we go.”

“Where are we going?”

“I’ve got Marshall’s address. I think we should go visit him. He lives nearby. Maybe we can get him to talk.”

“Oh, so you actually found him *and* his address? I’m impressed.”

“You should be...so how about you, Sawyer? Did you find Sandra?”

She bit her lower lip. “Yes, and no.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“We can talk about it when I see you. I’ll text you my address. Come and pick me up in a half hour. I need a few minutes to get ready.”

## Chapter 4

Mason picked up Sawyer in his black 2015 Land Rover wearing a red t-shirt with black jeans and grey high-top Sorel sneakers. Grinning, he looked at Sawyer from head to toe. “Well, you dress down quite nicely.”

Sawyer blushed behind her Aviator sunglasses. She wore a loose-fitting light-blue top and blue jeans. White sneakers finished off the ensemble. “I’m glad you approve,” she said, as she placed a white baseball cap over her long blonde hair. “So, where are we headed?”

“Winston Marshall lives in Silver Springs. It’ll take about twenty minutes.”

“Good job. So, what else can you tell me about him?”

“Well, for starters, he seems like a redneck from the photos. And he’s quite enamored of himself. I only had access to his public page and there are shots of him flexing for the camera, posing on a horse, posing at a shooting range, and he’s got one with a cap on that says ‘Sheriff’ across the top, so I think he’s a cop.”

“Just great, another civil servant to deal with.”

“Yeah, this should be fun,” he said, sarcastically. “So, what did’ya find out about my ex, Sandra?”

Sawyer let that question hang in the air for a moment. Mason turned to her and pulled his sunglasses down to the tip of his nose. “Sawyer?”

“Not good news, I’m afraid.”

“Why, what is it?”

“Uh, well, she died, about fourteen years ago...under suspicious circumstances.”

Mason sighed and dropped his shoulders. “Oh no, are you sure? That can’t be right. And what do you mean by suspicious circumstances?”

“Trust me, it’s her. And from what I was able to uncover, she was found hanged in her dorm room at Florida State University. And they were never able to determine if it was murder or suicide. The case is still open, but has obviously gone cold. No suicide note, but no evidence to suggest homicide either.”

His eyes flashed with anger. “I don’t believe this! We didn’t date for too long, but I knew her fairly well. And frankly, she didn’t seem like the type who would take her own life.” Mason frowned. “She was bright and had a spark to her. She was always smiling, too. This really stinks to me.”

“It sounds suspicious to me, too. Is there anything else you can tell me about that night at Rainbow River?”

“I’ve told you everything I remember. But suicide? Seriously? Less than a year after Megan’s

murder? And *before* Chad was convicted. Smells fishy to me.”

“I know, and I’m just speculating. But it’s too coincidental. Let’s hope Marshall is willing to be more forthcoming about the events of that night, and anything he might know about Sandra.”

“I wouldn’t get my hopes up.”

They fell silent for a time as Mason fiddled absentmindedly with the radio unsure what he was searching for. Sawyer looked out the side window deep in thought as her mind raced. Finally, she turned back and said, “So, you were in the military?”

That caught Mason off guard. “How’d you find that out?”

“It wasn’t hard. You do have a Facebook page. So tell me, what happened over in Afghanistan that made you write those articles vilifying the government? And how did you get wounded over there?”

“Let’s save that for another time. We’re about to arrive and we need to figure out how to approach this guy.”

“Fair enough, but you *are* going to tell me.”

“When the time is right.” Mason eyeballed his cell phone GPS and turned off the main road. “I think you should wait in the car while I try to talk to Marshall alone. I’ll tell him I’m a journalist and I’m writing a story about Chad and how his parole was denied and ask him if he has any comments about it.”

“What if he recognizes you from that night?”

“He won’t. I barely had two words with any of the guys. They were all hanging around a campfire and I was off in the near woods with Sandra. I could see them and hear the laughter but couldn’t quite make out what they were talking about. I was more interested in making out with my girlfriend.”

“And if that doesn’t get you anywhere?”

“I’ll text you and you come around and play little sister A.D.A. looking to get the truth to set your brother free.”

“I don’t know. I think we should both approach him together and be up front from the get-go. Assuming he’s a cop, he’s going to have his guard up and be suspicious anyway. And with your tactic he might just tell us to take a hike.”

“I suppose,” he said, pulling the car to a stop at the curb. “I guess we can try it your way.”

Sawyer pointed with her chin. “Is this the place?”

“Over there,” Mason fingered a weathered-looking, grey house with a black front door. A security camera pointed down the driveway, while another stood sentry at the front door. “Looks like this guy is either very cautious, or paranoid.” He pointed to the cameras.

The two walked up the drive and over to the front door. Before they could knock, it opened, and Winston Marshall came out. No uniform, just jeans, a brown checked flannel shirt, gun belt, gun and holster by his side, along with a cowboy hat and boots to finish off the look. “Who the hell are you two?” He demanded, in a heavy southern drawl. He pursed his lips, scratched the week-old stubble on his chin, and closed the door behind him, leaving the three of them standing on his porch.

Sawyer spoke first. “Good afternoon, you must be Winston Marshall?”

“That I am. And again, who the hell are you?”

“My name is Sawyer Greer. I’m with the Marion County D.A.’s office.” She showed her badge.

"Greer...Greer," he repeated the name while removing his hat. That sounds familiar."

"You knew my brother, Chad Greer, back in high school."

"Yeah, that's right." He hesitated, as if in thought. "The kid they got for murder at the river way back when."

"That's right," said Mason.

Marshall turned to him. "And who might you be, Mister?"

"My name's Mason Walcott."

"Don't sound familiar." Marshall spat a wad of tobacco juice onto the ground.

"You wouldn't know me."

Sawyer interjected. "We're here to talk about my brother. We were at his parole hearing this morning and it didn't go well."

"I wouldn't suspect that it would, ma'am. I was there, and I'm sorry to say, but the boy was guilty as sin. Killin' his own girlfriend that night. Damned if I knew what he was thinking."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Marshall, but there are facts that have come to light which suggest he didn't commit the murder." She stretched the truth. "That's why we're here."

"And this is coming from the D.A.'s office?"

Sawyer hesitated. "In a manner of speaking."

"A manner of speaking? What the hell izzat supposed to mean?"

"I'm conducting a preliminary investigation at this time. And if it proves fruitful, it will become a full-blown matter with the D.A."

"Sounds a little hokey to me."

"Look, you're a cop. If an injustice was done, wouldn't you want to help correct it?"

"Excuse me, ma'am. Did you say I was a cop?"

"Yes, I thought..."

"I ain't no cop," he said with disdain. "Where'd you get an idea like that?"

Sawyer's eyes widened, "My apologies, I just thought that...well, with that gun on your hip, it made me think you were a cop."

Marshall growled. "Well, like I said, I ain't no cop. I got me a carry permit. So, don't be confusing me with no lawman. You got that?"

Taken aback by his hostility, she said, "I'm sorry, but let's not get off the subject. We were wondering if you knew anything about that night at Rainbow River? You weren't on the witness list, and just a minute ago you said you were there. Is there any reason why you weren't questioned?"

"Frankly, ma'am, I don't remember much about that night. We was all drinking heavily after that basketball game."

"Yes, I'm aware of that. Which brings me to my next question. Do you know anything about drugs at the river that night."

Marshall put his hat back on, averted her eyes, and took a step back. "Drugs? Wha'dya mean drugs?"

"I've been informed that everyone at the river had taken pills, OxyContin to be specific."

Marshall looked down at his boots. "Well that just ain't true." He hesitated, took his hat off again and looked up at the sky. "I don't know nuthin' bout no pills like that. Someone be tellin' you a story, ma'am...so if that's all, I need to git goin'. I'm already late for the afternoon shift."

"Please, Mr. Marshall. Just a few more questions. This is my brother we're talking about and anything you know may help me."

“Look, in my eyes that boy was guilty. So, why should I help you with anything?” He started walking towards his truck.”

Mason cut in. “I’m sorry, Winston, but you’re lying. You see, I was there that night, and I know everyone, including you, took those Oxy pills, so don’t try denying it now.”

“Bullshit, you weren’t there! I’d a known if you were. I ain’t never seen you before in my life.”

“Well, I *was* there. I was with Sandra that night. Sandra Payne.”

Marshall straightened up and put his hat on again. “Well now, there’s a name I haven’t heard in a long time. Pretty little Sandra P. Now her I remember. Cute young thing. Very sad about her suicide though.”

“Yes, that was awful,” said Sawyer.

“What a waste of a pretty face,” said Marshall, reflecting on the thought of Sandra. Sawyer paused, feeling the strangeness of Winston’s statement.

“Hey, don’t avoid the subject, Mr. Marshall. Mason was there. So, why are you lying about the drugs?”

“You know what? I think I’ve said about all I’m gonna say on the matter. I’ve got to git back to work.” Marshall pulled open the door to his truck, hopped in and drove off, leaving Mason and Sawyer with mouths agape.

“That didn’t go so well,” said Mason.

“No, it didn’t. But did you see how evasive Marshall got when I asked him about the drugs?”

“Yes, it was quite obvious he was rattled.”

“The man clearly knows something and is hiding it. And we need to find out what it is. Let’s get back to my place. I want to have another look at my notes. I know there’s something I’m missing. I can feel it in my bones.”

## Chapter 5

Three blocks from his home, Winston Marshall took out his cell phone and made a call.

“Hey Pops, you ain’t gonna believe this, but a chick from the Marion County D.A.’s office came to talk to me.”

“About what?”

“When I tell you her name, I think you’ll figure it out. Sawyer Greer.”

“Greer?” He thought for a moment. “You mean the kid from high school?”

“Yeah, Chad’s sister.”

“The fuck does she want?”

“Sounds like she’s trying to reopen the murder.”

“Are you shitting me?”

“No, I ain’t, Pops. She thinks he’s innocent and she’s diggin’ for answers. And she was with some guy named Mason Walcott; says he was there that night.”

“Seems like this bitch is getting too big for her britches. I’ll tell you what, I still got friends at the D.A. Imma make some calls.”

“But, pops, the evidence all pointed to Greer. Why would anyone think he didn’t do it?”

“That’s right, Boy. I put that son-a-bitch away, and I don’t want no female lawyer twisting my words round, trying to make me look bad. Her brother got what he deserved.”

“I agree, pops, but you should know I may have slipped and said I was there that night. And that Greer girl asked me why I wasn’t in the file as a witness. And the guy she was with, Walcott, he says he was there that night, too, and he saw me.”

“Don’t worry, Win. I’ll handle it. You just keep your mouth shut and your nose clean.”

“You think you can do something?” asked Winston. You hasn’t been Sheriff in over five years.”

“Winston,” Marshall Senior said, sternly, “There ain’t no *been* in Sheriff.”

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Chuck Marshall made a call to his good ole’ boy, former D.A. Cole Hanratty. He picked up on the first ring. “Hey Chuck, it’s been a while. How ya been?”

“All good, Cole, until today.”

“Why? Wha’dya mean?”

“I just heard from Winston. He tells me that some new A.D.A. from your old office is reopening the Megan Miller murder from back in the day.”

Hanratty scratched his head and looked around the room as if wondering who might be spying on him. “A new A.D.A.? Who is she, and why would she be looking into an old case like that?”



"As to who she is, get this, her name's Sawyer Greer. She's Chad Greer's sister, and she's trying to clear her brother and get him out of jail."

"That's crazy, I remember the case. The boy did it. You got me all the evidence I needed to bring him to justice."

"I did, and I left the Sheriff's office with a stellar reputation and nothing's gonna fuck up my legacy. You got me?"

"I hear you, Chuck. So how do you want me to handle this?"

"You gotta head this one off. You're still in touch with D.A. Crenshaw, aren't you?"

"I am. That boy owes me big time, I taught him everything he knows."

"Well then, make a call and tell him to get that nosy little bitch off the case, or better yet, have him fire her."

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea, Chuck. In my experience when you do something like that it only makes things worse. My guess is she'll feel like something's up if we try to shut her down. Then she'll go all gang busters. There's gotta be a better way."

"Look, make the call. See if Crenshaw will get on board. And while you're at it, see what he knows about the investigation and what new evidence they've got."

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Arthur Crenshaw's office phone rang. Cole Hanratty was on the other end. "Crenshaw, it's me, Cole. How ya doing?"

"Hey Cole, nice to hear from you. What's up?"

Dispensing with the pleasantries, Cole cut right to it. "I need some info and some help with a situation."

"Go on."

"You know that new girl you got working for you. Greer. Sawyer Greer?"

"Yeah, what about her? She's a good kid, sharp, works hard."

"Well, you've got her working on her brother's case, and that ain't good."

"What are you talking about? She's not working on anything like that. She's a newbie. I've just got her working on routine matters."

"Huh, then maybe she's gone rogue on you Arthur? You see, I just got a call from Chuck Marshall. He told me she just visited with his son Winston and told him she was looking into the case and believes her brother is innocent. She started asking all kinds of questions."

"Frankly, I don't know anything about it. She's got the day off today. I do know she was going to attend her brother's parole hearing, but that's it. I'll have to have a talk with her."

"You better. I think you know that just from the appearance of it, that's a conflict of interest. You can't have a member of the D.A.'s office looking to overturn a conviction, especially the sister of the convict."

"I'm well aware, Cole. I'll get on it right away. Let me see what she has to say, and I'll get back to you."

"Much appreciated. And when you do, find out what kind of new evidence she's got. Marshall told me she's been looking at the file."

"Absolutely. Give me 'til Monday to sort this out. I'll get some answers."

## Chapter 6

Sawyer took out her notes and the few pages she was able to copy and spread them out on the table. Because of the circumstances surrounding her requisitioning the file, she didn't have the time to copy it, and she didn't want to invite any suspicion at the D.A.'s office, so there really wasn't much to it.

Mason had his hands on his hips and shook his head. "What exactly are you looking for?"  
"If I knew that, we'd have the case solved."

Sawyer started sifting through them and in no time she found a page of notes with a summary of witness interviews. She slapped the table. "I knew it! The name sounded so familiar."

"Who?"

"Marshall, that's who. Chuck Marshall was the Sheriff who investigated the murder. Winston must be his son. He looked to be mid-thirties, which would have made him around eighteen at the time of the murder."

Mason interjected. "So that's how he was able to keep his name out of all this. Dear old dad didn't want his son involved, so he made him disappear."

"The question is why? What was he hiding? We really need to speak to all of the kids that were there that night."

The two spent the evening checking Facebook and Google to try to locate all of the kids that were there that night. Mason kept looking over at Sawyer, impressed by her spunk and wondering if she was available. Sawyer caught him eyeing her a couple of times and tried to hide her blush. She too had been wondering about Mason but now was not the time to get involved. She had a mission to complete and romance would have to wait.

Mason exhaled. "I need a break. I think we need some food. What have you got to eat around here?"

"Actually, I haven't gotten around to shopping for a bit, so there's not much here."

"Well what do you say we go out and pick something up then?"

"Honestly," Sawyer said, brushing her hair off her forehead, "I'd rather keep going. We could order some pizza and have it delivered. And I've got a bottle of wine over in the kitchen."

"That'll work for me."

"Great. I'll make the call, you get the wine."

Mason went into the kitchen, found the wine, made himself at home and started opening cabinets looking for glasses.

Sawyer covered the phone and called out, "Left cabinet at the top."

Finding the glasses, he brought everything back to the table and poured.

Sawyer watched him from behind and after she finished ordering she hung up the phone and said, "I just want to thank you, Mason. I mean, we've only just met and we really know very little about one another, but I'm very grateful that you're helping me out here. I usually do everything on my own and it's nice to have someone else to share the workload."

"Think nothing of it. I want to help." He moved over to the couch and sat down. "I didn't do a good job of it fifteen years ago and maybe this is my way of trying to make up for it."

Following him with her gaze, she said sternly, "Don't think for a second that I'm letting you off the hook. There's still a lot you need to tell me." Sawyer took her glass from the table, thought for a moment, as she tried to decide where she wanted to sit. Thinking it too forward to sit next to him, she moved over to the easy chair cornering the couch. "So, tell me, was it really an exercise in altruism showing up at the hearing today? Or were you simply looking for a story?"

"How long before the pizza gets here?"

"Don't change the subject, Mason. Answer my question."

He took a sip of wine, leaned over and placed the glass on the coffee table. Sitting back he said, "To be honest with you, I came today with mixed intentions. I was hoping that Chad would make parole, because that would have let me off the hook for not doing the right thing back then. I also wanted to write an article about it, but after his parole was denied, and I met you, I realized that a story in the paper would be a disaster."

She looked at him earnestly, "Wise decision."

"And now, after starting to get to know you," he grinned, "I wouldn't want to incur your wrath."

Sawyer laughed out loud. "You *are* getting to know me, I see."

"So, where do we go from here?"

"I beg your pardon," she said, sounding flustered.

Mason quickly realized that she misunderstood. "I mean, with the investigation. When do you plan on going to speak to the witnesses?"

Blushing, she said, "Oh, yes, as soon as possible. Tomorrow is Saturday, so I have all day. I'll need to make the best of the whole weekend, then it's back to work on Monday."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Does that mean you'll be joining me?"

"It does. I want to get to the bottom of this for my own reasons." The doorbell rang. "That'll be the pizza!"

Mason said, "Let me get that."

"I guess that means chivalry isn't dead."

They munched on the pizza and continued bantering until the bottle of wine was empty. Standing by the couch and now a little tipsy, Mason thought he'd play a card. "You know, I may have had a bit too much to drink. I'm not sure if I should be driving home right now."

She looked at him with an expression that spoke volumes. "I'm not that easy, fella. You can call an Uber if you don't think you can drive."

He grabbed his heart with both hands and said sarcastically, "Shot with an arrow at close range." He fell back on the couch in mock death.

Sawyer laughed from deep inside, and it made her feel good. She was happy, not sure exactly why, or what Mason had to do with it, but despite the despair she felt over Chad, she was actually having fun. Then she started feeling guilty.

“Thank you again for everything today, but I really feel like I shouldn’t be enjoying myself so much. I mean, Chad is wasting away in jail for a crime he didn’t commit. I shouldn’t be having any fun right now.”

“C’mon Sawyer, give yourself a break. You’re doing...we’re doing... the best we can under the circumstances. I’m sure he’d understand. You still have a life to live, don’t you?”

“Not until Chad is out of jail I don’t. I promised my mom before she died.”

“Oh my God, I had no idea. Why didn’t you tell me that earlier?”

“Well, it’s not something I wanted to lead with, but yeah, she passed away two years ago. She’d had it very rough after Chad went to jail and my dad left. I still don’t know where he is, and frankly, I couldn’t care less. He can go rot in Hell.”

“Hey, I’m sorry. I didn’t want to ruin the mood we had going on.”

“It’s okay, I do that to myself a lot. Whenever things start looking up, I always find a way to bring myself down.”