

When a colleague is murdered, Rachel Chance starts looking for answers. She discovers some shady business dealings as well as drama involving a proposed jazz museum. The killer is unveiled with unexpected help from Rachel's Greyhounds.

Greyhound Blues: A Rachel Chance and Will Keller Mystery

By Randall Wisheart

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The book cover features a close-up of a woman's face with striking blue eyes and freckles, her hair a rich, wavy red. The background is a dimly lit room with a grand piano on the left and a greyhound dog lying on a table in the middle ground. Another greyhound dog stands prominently in the lower right foreground. The overall mood is mysterious and elegant.

Greyhound Blues

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Chapter One

It was breakfast rush hour at Pancake Plus in Glen Falls, Indiana. It had the same U-shaped dining room it had in the 1930s, with rows of booths on each side, and a middle section where patrons could either sit at a counter or along a row of booths next to front-facing windows. A replica of an old-time juke box was playing “Singin’ the Blues” with a trumpet solo by local musician Jayson Jackson. Rachel looked around for a friendly face but saw only strangers. At two tables she saw couples with white hair, likely retired and enjoying today’s senior citizen specials. At one table two women in power suits were having what looked like a business meeting, and two other tables featured families enjoying breakfast out. Rachel picked up her cell phone and looked at the time, frowning. *Surely, she’s on her way so no point in texting her.* Rachel could feel her stress level rise. She put her cell phone down and looked up as she heard loud voices a few booths down from where she was sitting.

“That isn’t fair. I don’t want to go on a lame vacation. I want to stay here and do things with my friends,” a teenage girl said, sitting in a booth next to a boy who looked to be about ten. Rachel assumed he was a younger brother hoping his older sister would disappear. The girl was stick thin wearing a black tank top. Rachel could see a tattoo of a dragon that covered most of her arm. She had black hair in a pixie cut and black eye shadow that Rachel thought made her look like she had raccoon eyes. The one ear Rachel could see was filled with earrings that suggested at least six piercings from the top of the ear to the bottom.

The boy shoveled bites of chocolate chip pancakes into his mouth, butter and syrup running down his chin. He looked across the table at a man Rachel assumed was the father. He looked to be at least fifty pounds overweight, all in his belly and was wearing a lime green polo

shirt. He pushed his wire rimmed glasses back on his nose and leaned forward. "I saved up for this vacation for months," he hissed. "You will go, and you'll like it. Now, eat your breakfast. This is a special treat."

"Special?" The girl's voice got louder. "Talk about lame. Almost as lame as going to Gatlinburg, Tennessee for a so-called vacation."

"There are lots of interesting things to see in Gatlinburg," said the father.

"Name one," said the daughter as she crossed her arms across her chest.

Her father leaned back, struggling to meet his daughter's challenge. "There's a national park where we can go hiking. There's an aquarium." He looked in the air, trying to think of other things. "Oh, a Titanic museum and a Hollywood Star Cars museum."

"Lame. Lame. Lame and more lame. That's not a vacation." She raised her voice again. "That's child abuse!" She looked around as if she was actually enjoying the spectacle she was creating. She gently nudged her plate of blueberry pancakes toward the end of the table, staring at her father. She waited for a reaction. She nudged it again.

"Don't you dare..." Her father glared at her.

The girl smirked and gave the plate one final shove. Her father caught it just before it left the table, but blueberry syrup dripped onto his pants.

He set the plate on the table and wiped blueberry syrup off his hands. He threw the napkin onto the table. "That's it. We're leaving." The man stood and motioned to a waitress who came over immediately. He pointed to his plate of untouched eggs and pancakes. "We'll take this...this... to go," he stammered.

“Not my lame pancakes,” said the daughter as she slid out of the booth.

The man looked at the waitress. “Not the blueberry pancakes.” He looked at his son who was stuffing a large bite of pancakes into his mouth. “Put mine and whatever’s left of his in a container and I’ll meet you at the cash register.”

“I’m still eating,” said his son as he stuffed a piece of sausage into his mouth.

“Not any more you’re not. We’re going.” He pointed at his son. “Now.”

The man walked toward the front register followed by his daughter. The son plucked a piece of bacon off his sister’s plate as he slid out of the booth.

Rachel watched the parade to the front of the restaurant: the man nearly hyperventilating, the daughter stomping, the son shuffling. The waitress hurriedly shoved the food into a Styrofoam container and rushed after them. Rachel took a sip of coffee. *That’s a man who doesn’t know how to handle a teenage daughter.*

Rachel wiped sweat from her brow, but as she looked around, she thought she was the only person sweating. *Not a lack of air conditioning, then. I hate it when I sweat!* She picked up her cell phone, checked the time, and frowned again. She was already ten minutes late and no text message saying she was on the way. Rachel set her phone face down on the table, closed her eyes, and willed herself to take deep breaths. She could feel her heart racing. She was desperate to get herself under control. She told herself she had been in situations far more stressful than this. “Get yourself together, Chance,” she whispered.

She had dressed carefully for the morning realtor's meeting she'd be attending after breakfast—business casual, dark brown slacks, tan blouse, and tan Vionic slip-on flats so she would be comfortable during the house tours later. But she had tried on three outfits before deciding on this one. Not to please her new husband Will. Definitely not to impress anyone at the upcoming realtor's meeting.

Rachel took a sip of coffee then put her mug on the table. She fought back the impulse to take the compact from her purse and check herself in the mirror. She gathered up her shoulder-length auburn hair and clipped it with a tan and black clip. Then she removed the clip and shook her hair loose. Frowning, she casually brushed dog hair from her blouse. Giving her Greyhounds Abby and Zane one final hug before leaving the house might not have been her best decision.

She looked toward the door and saw a familiar figure walking toward her. As always, everything matched. Red nail polish meant a red purse and red shoes. Her jet-black hair was stylishly cut in a stacked long bob and silver earrings dangled from her ears. Rachel wondered if she would ever allow the gray to show. *Not a chance.*

“Hello Rachel.”

“Hi, Mom.” Rachel put her hair clip in her purse and forced a smile as her mother slid into the booth across from her.

“I'm sorry. I'm a little late,” said Sue McClure. “Now that I'm retired, I seem to be busier than I was when I was working.” She looked at what Rachel was wearing. “Going business casual, I see.”

“We're just having a meeting then checking out some houses that recently came on the market.” Rachel spoke defensively. “After that, I'm heading back to my office to make some phone calls.”

“Well, all right,” said Sue. “But you never know when a client might show up and you always want to look your best.”

Rachel bit back a second defensive reply and looked around for a waitress but could not catch anyone’s eye. “Pretty hot outside, isn’t it?” If she couldn’t flag down a waitress, at least Rachel was determined to do the next best thing: change the subject.

“You can say that again. If it’s going to be in the nineties, I’d much rather be on a beach somewhere.”

“You and Frank have a condo that’s right on the Gulf of Mexico. Why don’t you head down there for a while?”

“I’d go in a heartbeat, but Frank likes to keep it rented during the summer months. I’m already working on him to take a month off and stay there the entire month of January.” She smiled. “I’ll put up with the heat now, if it means staying there longer when it’s cold here.”

Rachel caught the eye of a waitress and waved her over. She looked to be in her forties and had short but wavy brown hair. She flashed a practiced smile and approached them with an air of confidence and efficiency.

Rachel studied the waitress. *I’m guessing she is a single mom with three kids and is used to juggling multiple schedules while getting meals ready on time.*

She placed menus in front of Rachel and her mother. “Hi, Sue,” the waitress said. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen you in here.”

“Hello, Connie. How are your kids?”

Connie’s smile widened. “Cora just started kindergarten, Billy is in fourth grade, and Evie is twelve going on sixteen.”

Sue shook her head. “I don’t know how you do it all as a single mom.”

“It’s all about being organized and keeping everyone on a schedule,” said Connie.

Rachel tried to suppress a smile. *Nailed it.*

“Ready to order or do you want to start with coffee while you look at the menu?”

“I’ll have the vegetarian omelet, no hash browns, no toast,” said Sue. “Also, coffee.” Sue noted Rachel’s raised eyebrow at her breakfast selection. “I don’t want any comment until you, too, have to avoid putting on extra weight.”

Rachel waited for Connie to look at her. “The Western omelet with a side of crisp bacon for me. One check and bring it to me when you bring the food.” Rachel raised her coffee mug. “And a refill please.”

“Coming right up.” Connie came back immediately with a coffee pot and a mug. After refilling Rachel’s mug and leaving a mug of coffee for Rachel’s mother, Connie said, “Your orders shouldn’t take long.”

Rachel took a sip of the hot coffee. She could feel her heart racing as she anticipated the conversation with her mother. She inhaled for five seconds, then exhaled for five. It wasn’t working. She started to take another sip of coffee, but her hand was shaking. She waited for her mother to start.

“I’ve talked to your grandmother.” Sue McClure took a sip of coffee, then set down her coffee mug and looked around the room, waving at someone she knew.

That’s right, Mom. Draw this out as much as possible so you can enhance my suffering. Rachel knew what was coming next.

Sue turned back toward Rachel. “She was very disappointed that you eloped. You know you’re her favorite granddaughter.”

“Only granddaughter.”

Sue McClure smiled. “Which made it even more disappointing.”

Rachel took a sip of coffee. *Walked right into that one.* “When you called, you said there’s a family gathering planned for this weekend in Louisville. That should make Gramma happy.”

“But it’s not the same as being there when you’re married.”

Rachel sighed. “We’ve been over this, Mom. Will and I were both married before. We love each other very much, but we didn’t want a big event. You know I don’t like being the center of attention.”

Sue McClure looked away and smiled at another person she knew. “You could have planned a small wedding and just invited family.”

“And when people found out, we’d get requests to invite just one more person, another relative, more school friends.... You know how that works.”

Rachel’s mother sighed. “All right. No sense going on about it.” She looked around the room.

“You know, Mom, you don’t have to work a room for potential clients anymore; you’re retired.”

Rachel’s mother stood. “Being retired doesn’t mean I can’t be sociable. I’ll be right back.” She waved to two women seated on the other side of the restaurant as she moved that way.

Rachel shook her head and took another sip of coffee.

As soon as Rachel's mother returned to the table, Connie appeared with two plates of food. She placed one plate in front of Sue. "Veggie omelet for you, Sue." She placed the other plate in front of Rachel. "And Western omelet with a side of bacon, crisp, for you." She placed the check on the table next to Rachel's plate.

"Thank you, Connie." Sue picked up her fork as Rachel put a piece of bacon in her mouth, hoping they were finished talking about the elopement.

Rachel decided to try to change the subject. "You said you were busy. Anything new?" Rachel took a bite of her omelet.

"Actually, yes. I'm going back to first grade."

"First grade?"

"It's part of a new literacy program. I'm reading aloud to a student once a week." Sue spoke matter-of-factly, downplaying the statement. "Hopefully it will make a difference."

"Mom, that's great. I'm really proud of you." Rachel glanced at her cell phone and realized she didn't have much time. She ate more of her omelet.

Her mother shrugged. "A lot of people do more." Sue took another bite of her veggie omelet, then reached for her coffee mug. "What about you, Rachel? Time for anything other than work?"

"Mostly work and walking dogs. It's pretty busy at work right now. Will and I took the Greyhounds to the park and had a picnic last weekend. That was fun."

Rachel took another bite of her omelet. She was surprised her mother wasn't asking her more questions. She didn't seem to be paying attention to her at all. It was as though all the energy had been sucked

out of Sue McClure leaving a shell of the person who had been sitting there only moments ago. Sue put down her coffee cup and started twisting her wedding ring on her finger. A twist to the right. A twist to the left. Then a sip of coffee before she returned to her ring. A twist to the right. A twist to the left. She stared at her wedding ring as though it had suddenly and magically appeared. Rachel had seen this before. Whenever her mother had bad news to convey, she played with her wedding ring and stared at it.

“All right,” said Rachel. “Something’s wrong. Out with it.”

Her mother reluctantly pulled her attention away from her ring. She smiled weakly. “Actually, there’s some family drama.”

“Let me guess. My brother.” Rachel frowned. “What’s Adam done this time?”

Her mother continued. “You know it’s been hard on him, losing his first wife Valerie to cancer. Then he had to work through depression. Now, it’s his second wife, Jacklyn. She’s left him again, and this time I think it’s for good.”

Rachel took a last bite of omelet and stared at her mother. “Wow. And you kept that news under wraps and only pulled it out minutes before I had to leave for my meeting?”

“I just wanted to give you a heads up before we go to Louisville this weekend.”

Right, thought Rachel. And see my reaction so you’ll know whether you have an ally or not regarding Adam. Rachel did not have much sympathy for her brother. He had sometimes struggled with raising Caitlyn, and the stepmother thing never worked out.

“But what about Caitlyn?”

Sue scowled and some of her former energy returned. “That’s what the hussy should have thought about before she left her stepdaughter. A fifteen-year-old needs a female in her life.”

Rachel raised an eyebrow. *Now we know the real reason we’re here today. Wait for it...*

“You know we’ve talked in the past about the possibility that you’d be a better role model for Caitlyn than her stepmother will ever be.”

“Mom, I just got married. I can’t even think about this right now.” Rachel pulled out her cell phone and looked at the time. “I don’t have time for this today. I need to get to my meeting.”

Sue let the silence stretch out as she moved the remnants of her veggie omelet around her plate. After a few moments, Sue continued. “Jaelyn told Adam this time she is heading to Los Angeles to pursue her dream. Whatever that means. Your grandmother will be helping your brother for now.”

“But Mom, that isn’t fair to Gramma. She’s eighty-two. She shouldn’t have to deal with a teenager.”

“That’s why I said, ‘for now’ earlier.” Sue took another sip of coffee. “Your grandmother is fine with helping out for now, but there will be a time when you and I will need to step up and help out.”

“You can say that again,” said Rachel. She again glanced at her cell phone. “Sorry, Mom, but I really have to go.” She picked up the check and slid out of the booth.

“Of course, dear. I just wanted to let you know what you’ll be walking into this weekend. Besides the disappointment of your grandmother about not being able to attend the wedding of her only granddaughter.”

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Rachel winced, then stood and kissed her mother lightly on the cheek. “Bye, Mom. I’ll see you this weekend at Grandma’s house.” Rachel walked to the cash register wondering how in the world she would tell Will, her husband of less than a month, that her mother’s plan might involve a fifteen-year-old girl, likely filled with anger and resentment, moving in with them. *If only it were another Greyhound. Or two or three. That would be so much easier than a fifteen-year-old human.*

Chapter Two

Rachel Chance drove her black Del Sol convertible into the front parking lot of McClure Realty, owned by her stepfather, Frank McClure. She was just in time to see her colleague Darla Lake, clad in a tan suit from Talbots, white blouse, and tan Jimmy Choo heels, rush out the front door into the parking lot, her face flushed with anger. Darla stomped to the end of the parking lot and jammed her hands onto the hood of a parked car. She bent over, gasping for breath, her wispy black bangs in her eyes.

Rachel got out of her car and approached Darla from behind. Darla's breathing slowed and she stood up straight. Rachel spoke softly. "Darla?"

Darla stiffened and turned around. She wiped tears from her eyes and leaned back against the car. As she forced a smile, she said, "My mascara is running. My eyes must be a mess."

"Nothing two minutes in front of a mirror won't fix," said Rachel.

Darla looked at Rachel with a jaundiced eye.

Rachel could tell what she was thinking; she'd heard it before. The suggestion that she needed to dress more formally in order to make an impression on clients. *Not going to happen*, thought Rachel. *Comfort first*.

Darla was about to say something when she looked toward the front door of McClure Realty. She stiffened; a scowl frozen on her face.

Rachel turned and saw what Darla saw: a man standing at the front door. He was slight of build and skinny, like a jockey. Even from a

distance, Rachel could tell his brown suit was expensive. She recognized him. It was Greg Norton, a colleague at McClure Realty.

Darla tugged at Rachel's arm. "Let's walk away. I don't want to be anywhere close to that loser. Just looking at him makes me want to..."

Rachel looked over her shoulder as Darla pulled her. She saw Norton pull out his cell phone as he walked toward the parking lot. Darla pulled Rachel across the street. "Have you ever had any dealings with Greg Norton?"

Rachel shook her head. "Not officially. Remember that I've only been selling houses for less than a year. I was just doing property management before that." She watched as Norton got into his car, his cell phone pressed to his ear.

"But you know how it works. As realtors, we work together. We represent different clients but at the end of the day, we all want the deal to get done so we all make our money."

"Of course. That's pretty basic," said Rachel.

"Until it's not." Darla scowled.

Rachel flashed back to when her mother was helping her transition into property management and real estate: Greg Norton had approached them one day, a practiced smile on his face. He had tried to convince them to get one of Rachel's new clients to take a low-ball offer on a house. Rachel's mother had quickly sent him away. They didn't trust him then, and Rachel didn't trust him now.

Rachel watched Norton peel out of the parking lot, tires screeching. She glanced at Darla who exhaled as soon as Norton's car was out of sight, Rachel walked with Darla into McClure Realty.

“I’m going to grab some coffee,” said Darla. “I’ll see you at the meeting.” Darla walked away.

“Okay,” said Rachel. “See you then.” Rachel wondered why she was so upset with Greg Norton. Rachel then turned right and walked down the hall and into Frank’s office. She saw Frank looking out the front window. Frank was tall and showed signs of losing his battle trying to keep his weight down. He wore his usual gray suit and Rachel noted that his once brown hair was now mostly gray.

Frank shook his head and turned toward Rachel. “I saw Greg Norton race out of the parking lot after we argued. He’ll be lucky if he doesn’t kill someone,” Frank mumbled.

“What were you arguing about?”

“It wasn’t much of an argument. He’s been trying to take sales away from his colleagues and pretend that the buyer contacted him first.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised,” said Rachel.

“Actually, I don’t think he was angry at all. He just likes to always have the last word and screeching out of the parking lot like that was his way of letting me know he’d have the last word one way or the other.”

“I say good riddance and maybe he won’t come back.”

“He won’t. He just quit.”

“What? He just quit on the spot?”

Frank picked up a pen and started twirling it in his fingers. A nervous habit he’d had for many years that Rachel recognized. “Actually, I got the feeling he had been planning this. He said another agency had already contacted him.” Frank stopped twirling the pen.

“He also had a strange reaction when I reminded him that he’d signed a contract agreeing not to take any customers with him.”

“No surprise there. That’s pretty standard.”

Frank started twirling the pen again. “He said sure he’d leave all his clients—that were listed as clients in the database. Then he smirked and rushed out.”

Rachel frowned. “I don’t get it.”

Frank stopped twirling. “Dunno. Maybe he’s been keeping contacts with some of his clients off the record figuring he was on the outs.” Frank winced. “Can’t say for sure.”

Frank stopped twirling and smiled at Rachel. “Thanks for agreeing to help with raising funds for the new jazz museum and coming to the luncheon today.”

“I’m happy to help. I’m looking forward to learning more about the role Glen Falls played in the history of jazz.”

Frank was staring out the window, deep in thought. The twirling began again.

“Are you calm enough to run the meeting?” Rachel reached out and touched his arm. “I can go in and say you were in the middle of something and need a minute.”

Frank shook his head. “I’m fine. There’s no way I’d give Norton the satisfaction of finding out that I delayed the start of a meeting because he’d upset me.”

“Okay. Cool. Let’s go then.”

“Right behind you,” said Frank.

After the meeting, Rachel looked over the notes they'd been given about newly listed houses and marked which ones might be a fit for some of her clients. She headed out of the large conference room to join the other realtors on the house tours when she saw Darla at the end of the hallway motioning to her. Confused, Rachel glanced at the realtors heading in the other direction and walked toward Darla.

“Darla, we’re going to be late for—”

Darla grabbed Rachel’s arm and pulled her into a small conference room.

“Darla, what in the world?”

“Hush.” Darla yanked Rachel into the room and after looking both ways, shut the door.

Rachel glared at Darla, arms crossed, right foot tapping the floor.

Darla put her purse on the table that took up most of the space in the small conference room. “Rachel, I’m sorry for the drama, but I don’t know who to trust. Please sit.”

Rachel looked at Darla’s face. She seemed worried. Rachel was curious so she sat. “What do you mean you don’t know who to trust, Darla? Trust about what exactly?”

Darla took a deep breath, then leaned forward putting her elbows on the conference room table. “It’s the rumors.”

“Rumors? What rumors?” Rachel sat forward and listened intently.

Darla looked into Rachel’s eyes and spoke tentatively. “Rumors that sometimes deals fell through and Greg Norton was there to swoop in and make a sale or capitalize on a sale that didn’t get made.” Darla

hesitated. “Can I trust you? I mean really trust you? Frank can’t know about this until I have proof. I have medical bills from when my second husband died...” Darla choked back a sob. “If Frank thinks I’m lying to make Greg Norton look bad, he’ll fire me.” Darla wiped a tear from her cheek.

Rachel reached out and put her hand on Darla’s arm. “I promise I won’t say anything, but you don’t have to worry about Greg Norton any longer. He just quit.”

“He did?” Darla frowned. “But there are still issues that won’t go away just because he quit.”

“What issues?” asked Rachel.

“A few months ago, I thought I had a sale in the bag, a nice house on the west side down the road from a Family Dollar store. Then suddenly, the sellers told me they’d talked to two different potential buyers who told them they’d heard there were issues with the roof and also with mold.”

“I remember that now,” said Rachel. “Didn’t that deal fall through?”

Darla shook her head in disgust. “You bet it did.” Darla stood and started pacing back and forth angrily in the small conference room. “The sellers balked and as soon as their contract with me expired, they accepted a much lower offer from a corporation. Then the corporation ended up buying the houses on either side as well. They tore down the houses and put in a little strip mall with two stores and a sandwich shop.”

Rachel watched Darla pace and tried to process what Darla was saying. “And you think there was something shady about this?”

Darla stopped pacing and sat across from Rachel. “Greg Norton. I can’t prove it, but I’m sure he made a bundle.”

“Did you hear him say anything?”

“No. He’s way too slick for that. I did approach him, but he said all the right things. Said he hadn’t done anything wrong. Said he had no idea there had been other offers on the house.”

“Why do I get the feeling there’s more?”

Darla got up and put her ear to the door listening, then yanked it open. She looked both ways, then closed the door and sat down. “I know. It looks like I’m being paranoid, doesn’t it?”

“Well...”

“Here’s why. I knew I needed proof, so I made some phone calls and sent some emails.” Darla paused—her mouth open like the words were stuck.

“And?”

“And that’s when I knew I was in over my head.” Darla looked at the door again. “After I’d made the calls and sent the emails, I started getting phone calls and immediate hangups. Then I’m sure I was followed, a dark sedan, but the one time I slammed on my brakes and tried to see the driver, the car did a quick U-turn and sped away.” She shuddered. “It had to be Greg Norton or someone he sent.”

“Have you told the police?”

Darla looked at Rachel skeptically. “And tell them what? Where’s my proof that this is more than just my imagination?”

Rachel sighed. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“There’s one more thing.” Darla looked down.

“What is it?” asked Rachel.

“I’m finally seeing someone again. But we don’t want anyone to know. It’s complicated and I can’t let anything ruin that for me.” Darla’s cell phone buzzed. She pulled the phone out of her purse and looked at the text. “The others are wondering where we are.” She quickly texted back and put the cell phone back in her purse. “Let’s go. I don’t want to make anyone suspicious.”

“But Darla...”

“We can talk later.” Darla rushed from the room, leaving Rachel behind.

Rachel shook her head and whispered to herself. “Darla, have you gotten yourself into a mess or is this just your imagination working overtime?”

Rachel left the conference room and saw that Frank was still in his office. She stopped in the doorway. He was shuffling papers into a briefcase.

“Hey, Frank.”

“Rachel. Are you okay? Why aren’t you with the others?”

“I’m fine. Something came up, and I wasn’t sure how to handle it.”

Frank resumed putting papers into his briefcase. “I’m sure you’ll handle it just fine.” He finished packing his suitcase and stood. “Was there something else?”

Rachel started to say more about what Darla had told her, then stopped. *It might be nothing. No need to bother Frank with this.* “No.”

She backed out of the doorway. “I need to catch up with the others. See you at the luncheon, Frank.”

Rachel walked out the front door and headed toward her Del Sol, thinking about what Darla had told her. As she drove away, top off her Del Sol, her auburn hair blowing in the wind, Rachel wondered aloud, “So, is Greg Norton just a jerk, or has he been doing things that are unethical, maybe even illegal?”

Chapter Three

Jayson “JJ” Jackson sat at a table at the Glen Falls Bob Evans restaurant with his manager, Lawrence Rogers, finishing a late breakfast. He was thinking about when he’d be able to fit in time to practice. He’d already missed playing his trumpet once this week when he and his manager Lawrence Rogers flew from Los Angeles to Indianapolis then drove the rental to Glen Falls. With performances coming up soon, he had to keep his chops in shape. He took a drink of coffee and grimaced. Lawrence looked at him, a question in his eyes.

“I need real coffee, not this generic swill.”

Lawrence nodded. “I’m finished with breakfast.” He pushed his empty plate to the side. “I just need to run to the bathroom, then we can leave. I think I saw a Starbucks down the road.” He got up and walked to the back of the restaurant.

JJ pushed away his plate with the remnants of his biscuit and gravy breakfast and ran a hand over his closely shaven head. His skin was like light brown chocolate—his features soft, which had caused more than one potential bully to challenge him when he was growing up. JJ had taken his lumps as a kid but had usually given more punishment than he had taken. He liked to think that he had mellowed over the years and no longer had anger management issues as he was approaching forty-five. He shook his head. *Wishful thinking*. Just a few weeks ago, he had gotten into a shouting match with an over-zealous fan who had approached his table in a nice Italian restaurant in Los Angeles and asked for an autograph, then a selfie, then a second autograph, then another selfie. When the man leaned next to him to take the second selfie without permission, JJ had almost punched him. *No. Not much mellowing at all*, he thought.

JJ picked up the briefcase he had set on the floor and took out several sheets of paper. He leafed through the papers, some including facts about jazz musicians of the early twentieth century and other facts about the recording studio that had been located here, on the eastern edge of Indiana. In the days when so many musicians traveled by train, it would have been easy for them to hop a train in Chicago or New Orleans and be here in a matter of hours. JJ thought about how much he appreciated being able to memorialize these jazz legends, and for that reason he jumped at the chance to work with his manager and friend Lawrence Rogers on a documentary about the history of jazz in the United States. So here JJ was: back in Glen Falls, Indiana, revisiting the unexpected role this small town of about thirty thousand people played in the history of jazz.

He couldn't believe how many famous musicians had made the trip down from Chicago or up from New Orleans to record here in this small town. Louis Armstrong. King Creole. Jelly Roll Morton. What an honor it was going to be to talk about them in the documentary. He smiled. Being able to compose some tunes for a soundtrack of a major motion picture in addition to the documentary would propel his career in ways he had only dreamed of before now.

JJ took a drink of coffee as Lawrence approached the table. Lawrence slid in the booth: "Good news. I just saw an email from the rep from the movie studio. They really like the music you composed for the soundtrack for their new movie, the one that's set in the New Orleans jazz scene of the 1920s."

"Not exactly a surprise, right? First the documentary, now the soundtrack. Good news all around." JJ picked up the coffee cup but put it down without taking a drink. "Let's head to that Starbucks." He gathered up the papers.

Lawrence nodded his head vigorously. “No. No surprise, but it’s nice to have it in writing. He said we could schedule a phone call for early next week.”

JJ started to shuffle through the papers but looked up and saw Lawrence staring at his cell phone intensely. “Now what?” JJ put the papers on the table and waited for Lawrence to speak.

“Social media is a great thing when you can use it to your advantage.” He smiled and set his cell phone on the table. “This is it, JJ. Your new album is going viral. This is the break we’ve been waiting for. The hard work you’ve put in the last twenty years is about to pay off big time. Between the album, the documentary, and the exposure you’ll get from the movie...” Lawrence leaned back and smiled. “Give it a few weeks and you’ll be a household name.”

JJ didn’t respond. He was used to Lawrence being overly optimistic about his sales and bookings. But this time did feel different. Maybe Lawrence was right. Maybe this was his time. He started to stuff the papers back into the briefcase. “Let’s go. If I don’t get some real coffee soon, I’m going to be all kinds of cranky. I’m thinking a Caramel Macchiato.”

JJ threw the briefcase in the back seat of the black rental sedan and hopped into the passenger seat while Lawrence got in the driver’s side. After a moment, JJ looked over at Lawrence. “Is there a reason we’re sitting here and not going to Starbucks?” JJ’s voice was calm, but the anger was just under the surface.

“We need to talk.” Lawrence sounded almost apologetic.

“What’s so important that it can’t wait until I get my Caramel Macchiato?”

“We got another letter.” Lawrence let the words hang between them, like a hand grenade with the pin pulled.

JJ tensed and stared at Lawrence. “What do they want? Money?”

Lawrence shook his head. “They don’t say. They just say they know about the fight and that you’re a killer and if they let the public know—”

JJ interrupted. “What were their exact words?” He spoke slowly, his voice filled with barely controlled rage.

Lawrence leaned back in the seat and recited from memory: “We know about the fight, and we know you were there. It was over your lame attempt to cover up your affair with a woman young enough to be your daughter and her father threatened you, so you killed him. If we let the public know, your career is finished. Think about that. Next time we’ll tell you what you can do to make it go away.”

JJ slammed his fist against the console so violently that Lawrence jumped and covered against the door. “It’s a lie. I didn’t kill anyone, and I wasn’t with another woman. I...” JJ drew back his fist, ready to slam the console again, but instead leaned his head back and screamed.

“Keep it together, JJ. I got this. This movie deal will push you over the top and you’ll be able to pick and choose. Concerts. Albums. All your hard work is finally paying off.”

JJ grunted. “Yeah, right.” He hung his head in defeat. “But it means nothing if someone leaks these lies. You know how people are. They’ll be anxious to believe yet another would-be celebrity has crashed and burned.”

“Not gonna happen. When we get the next letter, I’ll take care of it.”

“How, Lawrence? How are you going to take care of this?”

Lawrence turned on the ignition and started to back out of the parking spot. “Depends on what they ask for.” He pulled out of the parking lot and turned left. “Let’s get you your Caramel Macchiato. Then we’ll work on the details about the movie soundtrack until it’s time to go to that lunch with local funders for the new jazz museum.” As he pulled up to a stoplight, he turned to JJ. “Until we get the next letter, we go on as though nothing has happened.”

JJ opened his mouth to respond, then shut it and leaned back, squeezing his eyes shut. “You’re right. Thanks, man. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You just focus on the soundtrack for now. This is your hometown. Everyone here thinks you’re a rock star.”

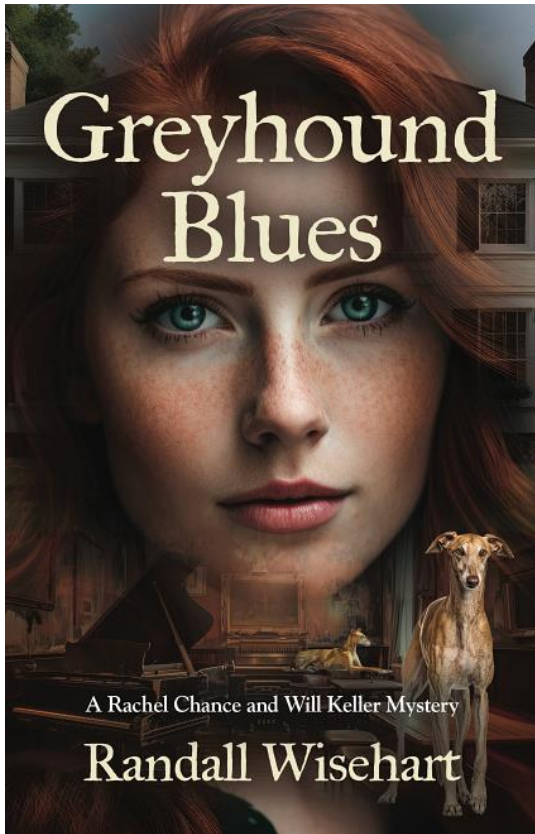
“Everyone, Lawrence?” JJ turned toward Lawrence. “What was the postmark on the letter?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t...”

“Bull. Of course, you did. The first one was postmarked Glen Falls, Indiana.”

Lawrence kept driving, gripping the steering wheel tightly but didn’t respond.

“That’s what I thought,” JJ replied, leaning back and staring out the window. “Seems not everyone in Glen Falls thinks I’m a rock star.”



When a colleague is murdered, Rachel Chance starts looking for answers. She discovers some shady business dealings as well as drama involving a proposed jazz museum. The killer is unveiled with unexpected help from Rachel's Greyhounds.

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