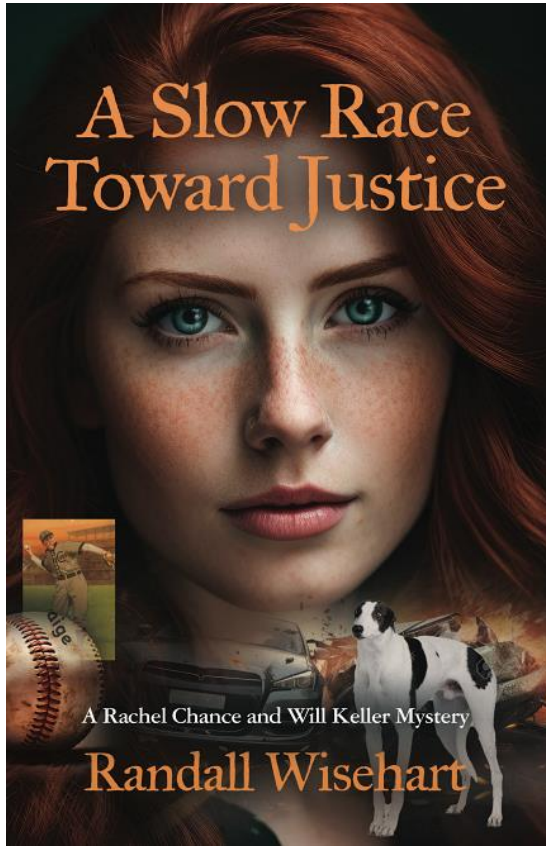




Rachel Chance is compelled to help a heartbroken grandmother find her missing granddaughter, Shelly Knight. Rachel soon realizes that the death of Shelly's roommate is the key, but searching for a killer leads to unexpected danger.

**A Slow Race Toward Justice:
A Rachel Chance and Will Keller Mystery
By Randall Wischart**

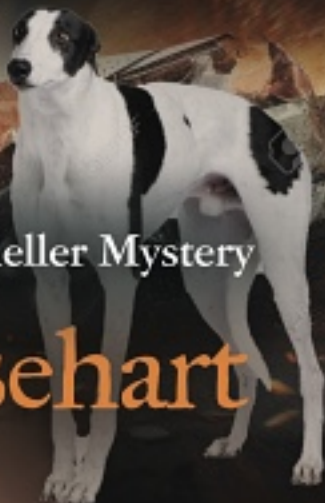
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A Slow Race Toward Justice



A Rachel Chance and Will Keller Mystery

Randall Wisheart



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Chapter One

Captain Joe Robinson sat at his desk in his freshly pressed white shirt and blue jacket. Even though it was early afternoon, Joe looked as fresh as he did at eight o'clock. Back ramrod straight, he studied the computer screen on his desk. There weren't many cold cases for Glen Falls, Indiana, but Joe felt a responsibility to review each one of them regularly. He focused on the ones that were fewer than five years old. He tapped the head of a Shohei Ohtani bobblehead as he reviewed them. An arson. A hit and run fatality. A counterfeit baseball card scam. Three missing persons. He shook his head and closed the cold case file. No new leads.

Joe took a moment to mentally bring himself back to his jobs for the day, beginning with activity and investigations for the past four weeks. He tapped the bobblehead again: burglaries and domestic violence calls were up slightly for July and so far for August as well, but that was typical.

Three loud knocks, then the door opened. A lanky police officer with brown hair cut in a military style buzz cut stepped in.

"Sorry, sir. There's a woman here, and she says she has to see you. Something about her missing granddaughter?"

Joe sighed. "That would be Mrs. Knight, correct officer?"

"Yessir."

Joe nodded. "Very well. Send her in."

Joe pulled up a file on his computer. For two years, he had kept a log of how often Priscilla Knight stopped by or called to see if any

progress had been made on the disappearance of her granddaughter, Shelly Knight. He added today's date.

A few moments later, Joe heard a tentative knocking on his door.

"Enter."

Priscilla Knight walked into the room, shut the door behind her, and went directly to the round table in the corner, bypassing the two black chairs directly in front of Joe's desk. "I'm not sitting in one of those chairs," she said, motioning to the black chairs. She tugged at the collar of her navy-blue suit. "I worked in schools my entire work life and sitting there would make me think I'm being evaluated. Or judged." She nodded to a chair on the other side of the round table. "I'd much prefer it if you'd join me here." When Joe didn't immediately answer, she cleared her throat and added, "Please?"

"Of course," said Joe. He stood and walked to the table, immediately going into detective mode. He sat and looked at Mrs. Knight's slight frame: *Subject is female. Five foot six. No more than one hundred twenty pounds. Gray hair. Streaks of brown. Age is known to be seventy. Good posture. Worked as an administrative assistant in a local school. For two years, has remained in contact with the department about her granddaughter's disappearance.*

Priscilla Knight placed her tattered blue purse in front of her almost as though it was a shield designed to protect her from bad news. She avoided looking at Joe and spoke softly. "I know I've asked you and the detectives many times, but...is there any news about my Shelly?"

Joe took a deep breath before speaking. "Mrs. Knight, it's been two years. There have been no leads that suggest your granddaughter is living elsewhere." Joe leaned forward and looked directly into Priscilla Knight's eyes. "The Glen Falls PD has officially closed the case.

Although I'll always review Shelly's file at least once a year, I simply can't do more than that." Joe paused, hoping the gravity of what he was saying was getting through.

"I see," said Priscilla Knight, turning and wiping away a tear.

"There comes a time when it's no longer feasible to believe someone can be," Joe forced himself to keep his face expressionless, "found alive."

"I'm neither deaf nor stupid, Captain Robinson. I heard the same from your detectives over the past few weeks...months."

Joe started to speak, but looking at Priscilla's face, decided to let her continue. The poor woman seemed to be falling apart in front of him.

Priscilla hung her head. "I'm tired, Captain Robinson. Very tired. I understand what you just said. I don't even disagree. If my Shelly were alive, she would have moved heaven and earth to get back to me. So..." She squeezed her eyes shut.

Joe walked to his desk and got a box of tissues. He set it on the table in front of Priscilla Knight. He waited as she opened her eyes and reached for a tissue. "Mrs. Knight, I'm sorry."

Priscilla wadded up the tissue, pulled herself up, and took a deep breath. "Here is what I ask of you, Captain Robinson. If you do get a lead that could reveal where her...where she..."

Joe reached over and placed his hand on hers. "If at all possible, we will return her to you so you can say goodbye."

"At this point, that is all I can ask. Maybe I should hire a private investigator. I know they're expensive, but..." Priscilla Knight patted Joe's hand and stood. She took a step toward the door.

“Private investigators can be expensive and some of them will take your money and simply charge you for Google searches until your money is gone.”

Priscilla sniffled and squeezed her eyes in concentration. Joe thought she was considering what he said about private investigators. Joe stood and cocked his head. “Wait. I have an idea.”

He went to his desk, took out a notepad, and wrote something on it. He walked to Mrs. Knight and handed her the paper. “This is the name of a lawyer: Andrew Riggins.”

Priscilla Knight nodded. “I know his mother.” She looked at Joe, her face an expressionless mask. Joe wondered if today’s meeting had extinguished the last ounce of hope in her body.

“Andrew is honest. He works with an outstanding investigator. They will charge you a fair rate. I’ll call him today and let him know to expect your call.” Joe paused. “If that’s what you want to do.”

Priscilla Knight looked at the paper and tucked it into her purse. She nodded at Joe. Clutching her purse with both hands and eyes downcast, she walked out of the room.

Joe closed the door and returned to his desk. He went to his contacts and punched in Andrew’s office number but was directed to his voicemail: “Andrew, this is Joe Robinson. Can you call me back or stop by my office this afternoon?”

Chapter Two

It was nearly five o'clock and after an afternoon of mind-numbing meetings, Joe Robinson sat at his desk, eyes focused on his computer screen. A knock on the door interrupted him. "Enter," said Joe.

A young probationary officer pushed open the door and stepped in. Joe studied him as the officer nervously looked around the sparsely decorated office. Joe remained silent as the officer's eyes focused on the four framed awards on the wall behind Joe's desk: one commemorating his promotion to captain, one noting his Man of the Year award from the local Boys and Girls Club, a degree from Miami University in Ohio, and an award for being an all-state athlete for the Glen Falls High School baseball team.

"Officer," Joe's voice was laced with impatience. "Do you need something?"

"Andrew Riggins and Will Keller said they called ahead, but I told them you were busy and couldn't see them. I can send them away." The officer turned.

"Officer?" Joe said sternly.

"Yeah. I mean, yes sir."

"Send them in."

"Of course...sir."

Joe shook his head. *What in the world is going on with him?* The officer stepped into the hallway and motioned for Andrew and Will to come in. He shut the door gently behind them.

Joe sized up Andrew and Will as they walked into the room. *Will Keller: Just over six feet tall and slender. Dark hair in need of a haircut. Wrinkled khaki slacks. A black and tan striped polo shirt. Former FBI researcher. Currently college professor. Andrew Riggins: Five feet nine with an expanding waistline. Light brown hair trimmed neatly. Navy-blue dress pants and a white shirt with a powder blue tie. Likes to play the role of jokester and is often underestimated as a lawyer.*

Joe shook each man's hand, then gestured to the two black plastic chairs in front of his desk. As he sat, he said, "I thought it was going to be just you, Andrew."

"I'm mostly here for moral support," said Will.

Joe noted that Will said "mostly" and filed that observation away. As soon as both Andrew and Will settled into the chairs, Joe spoke. "I understand that after I recommended retired Deputy Chief Linda Bonner to you, you've used her as an investigator. She's still working for you, right?"

Andrew nodded enthusiastically. "She's great. She spent much of the past two years in Jamaica doing missionary work. In the two months she's been back, I've had her mostly do background checks and witness interviews. She's done a tremendous job."

Joe nodded proudly as he remembered her many years of excellence. "She was a highly decorated detective. The first female detective to be promoted to deputy chief. She was a mentor to me and taught me much of what I know about investigating and leadership."

"When you called you said something about a possible job that would require an investigator?"

Joe nodded. “That’s right. Do you remember the case from a couple of years ago where a young woman named Brooke Peters was killed in a car crash and her roommate Shelly Knight disappeared?”

“I do,” answered Andrew. “The Peters girl had been in trouble and then crashed her car while intoxicated.”

“That doesn’t sound like something that needs to be investigated,” added Will.

“It’s the grandmother of the other girl, Shelly Knight.” Joe nodded solemnly. “That granddaughter was the world to her. The grandmother deserves some closure if at all possible.”

Will studied Joe’s somber face. “You don’t think you’ll find her alive.”

Joe leaned forward and placed his elbows on his desk. He spoke with reluctance, knowing that reciting the facts aloud made the situation seem more real. “We tracked her phone and credit cards. Her social security number. Nothing. In this electronic age it’s nearly inconceivable that she’s still alive.”

Will nodded somberly. “I worked cases like this during the short time I was with the FBI. Two years? That’s long past a time when there could be any reasonable hope that Shelly Knight is still alive.”

“What do you want from me and Linda?” asked Andrew.

“See if you can find anything that will lead to finding what happened to Shelly Knight.”

“We can do that.” Andrew took a sip of his drink. “But it’s like Will said, after two years, the chances of finding any new leads...”

Joe leaned back and sighed. “I know. However, this might be the thing that helps Mrs. Knight finally accept her loss.” Joe imagined what that would look like, bringing information to Priscilla Knight that would shatter her world.

“I’ll contact Linda as soon as we’re finished here and ask her to start taking a look at it.”

“Thanks, Andrew.”

Andrew pulled out his cell phone and started tapping. “Actually, give me just a minute. Talk about the weather or something.”

Will turned to Joe and shrugged. “Weather. It’s August, so it’s hot. Anything to add, Joe?”

Joe shook his head as he watched Andrew. The phone dinged. Andrew was now looking at his phone and Joe was certain he was reading a text. “I’ll give it another sixty seconds.”

Andrew waved his hand at Joe but kept reading then typed a response.

“Done,” said Andrew a few moments later as he shoved his cell phone into his pocket. “Linda agrees to help, and I’ve arranged for my mom to invite Mrs. Knight to her house this evening for dessert.”

“To your mom’s house?” asked Will.

“I texted Linda first. She thought I should ask some questions informally in a familiar setting where she’s around friends.” He turned to Joe. “Priscilla is a good friend of Will’s mother, Bernice.” He looked at Will. “Mom said she’d have enough strawberry rhubarb pie for you and Rachel.”

“We’ll be there,” said Will immediately.

Joe nodded. “Linda always had good instincts about how to get people to open up.” He leaned forward and again put his elbows on his desk. “When I called, you said there was something else. Information you thought I should know.”

“That’s right,” said Andrew. “It involves your friend Phillip Stewart, the former student manager of our high school baseball team. It also involves valuable baseball memorabilia and maybe an arson case from a few years ago.”

Joe raised an eyebrow but otherwise his face was impassive. “It involves Phillip?”

“Well, Phillip and his father. The family really.”

“Phillip’s father. Good man. I think he saw every baseball game and basketball game I ever played in. He even drove forty minutes to Oxford, Ohio, to watch me play college ball at Miami University.”

“It might be nothing, but...”

“I’ll be the judge of that. Tell me.” Joe leaned back in his swivel chair, hands clasped on his lap, his intense brown eyes focused on Andrew.

“It’s like this. I was talking with Phillip, and he asked for my help,” said Andrew.

Memories flashed through Joe’s mind. *Phillip’s dad tossing a baseball to him, back and forth in the backyard. Walking to the backstop behind the local middle school and Phillip’s dad throwing fast balls and breaking pitches to Joe as Phillip ran down the blasts off Joe’s bat. Feeling the supportive arm of Phillip’s dad on his shoulder in the hospital after his dad’s heart attack. Trips to Cincinnati to see major league baseball games.*

Andrew continued, and Joe shook off the memories. “Phillip came to me last week with a story. It turns out that his grandpa had baseball cards of Josh Gibson, Cool Papa Bell, Satchel Paige, and Oscar Charleston that he passed on to Phillip’s dad, and his dad will pass them on to Phillip. Phillip’s grandpa saw all four of them play in a baseball game when they were in Glen Falls in 1933.”

“He also had a baseball signed by the same four players: Josh Gibson, Cool Papa Bell, Satchel Paige, and Oscar Charleston, dated August 30, 1933,” Will added.

“Wow.” Joe’s eyes grew wide.

“Phillip even told me the story of why the baseball is so important to them. Turns out his grandpa loved the game of baseball and would drive hours to see players like Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson.”

“No doubt that a love of baseball got passed down to son and grandson,” said Joe.

“When his grandpa found out four of his favorite players were coming to Glen Falls, he got to the game early and stayed until almost all the other fans left. He walked into the dugout and there they were...” Andrew paused and looked at Joe.

“Just finish the story, Andrew,” said Joe.

“Josh Gibson, Cool Papa Bell, Satchel Paige, and Oscar Charleston. They were joking around as they packed up their equipment, and Mr. Stewart just walked up to them and handed them a baseball and asked them to sign it. Apparently, Satchel Paige draped his arm around Mr. Stewart’s shoulder and said they’d do it if he could tell them how many hits each hitter had and how many innings he pitched. His grandpa recited their statistics immediately. He even told

Satchel Paige how many off-speed pitches he threw. The group laughed and each one shook his hand.”

Joe took a moment to visualize that moment and reflected on what it would have meant to be able to meet those four legendary stars. “That is really a great story,” said Joe.

“But there’s more. Satchel Paige came back to Glen Falls in 1946, and Phillip’s grandpa walked up to him after the game. When he saw Phillip’s grandpa hanging back at the edge of a crowd, Satchel called him by name, smiled warmly, and motioned for him to come closer. ‘That baseball we signed must be worth a fortune now. You likely own half this town, right?’”

“Incredible,” said Joe.

“That’s why the baseball is so important to Phillip,” said Andrew. “Years later, Phillip’s dad bought vintage baseball cards of the four players and always planned to display them with the baseball.”

“I get it now.” Joe tapped his desk. “That baseball has to be worth a lot of money, but after hearing that story...to the family, it must be priceless.” Joe looked directly at Andrew. “However, there has to be more, or you wouldn’t be here.”

Andrew nodded. “Phillip found out that his son, Trayvon, took the baseball and cards from the basement where Phillip’s Dad stored them and showed them to a friend.”

“Go on,” said Joe cautiously, already predicting that this story would not have a happy ending.

Andrew shook his head in disgust. “The friend stole the cards and baseball and pawned them. Trayvon was embarrassed, but after a few weeks he finally told his dad.”

“In the meantime, there was a fire in the pawn shop, and they lost most of their inventory,” added Will.

Andrew nodded for Will to continue. “Phillip rushed to the owners to ask about the cards and baseball, but the owners told Phillip the baseball cards and the baseball burned up in the fire.”

“Only ashes left,” said Will. “It was part of their insurance claim.”

“Phillip and his dad must be heartbroken,” said Joe as he imagined the pain Phillip must be feeling.

Andrew leaned forward. “I’m sure he is, but here’s the thing: Phillip asked me for help finding what he called his family’s heritage. He wants to replace the cards before his dad has another heart attack.”

“That sounds like a great thing Phillip could do for his dad,” said Joe. “How can I help?”

Andrew leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Here’s where it gets interesting. I checked online and found a baseball signed by those same four players and a set of four cards, one of each of those players, all on the same site.” Andrew paused.

Joe tensed. *That is an incredible coincidence. And I do not believe in coincidences. Not of this magnitude.*

Will nudged Andrew. “Enough with the dramatic pause. “Keep going.”

“Fine. Here’s the interesting part. I made an inquiry in the chat function about what they cost and how soon they could get them to Indiana. You’ll never guess what they told me.”

Joe stared at Andrew, his face impassive. “That’s because I’m not guessing.”

Andrew ignored Joe and continued. "They said they could get them to me next day since they were shipping them from Glen Falls, Indiana."

"Which is when Andrew came to me for advice," said Will.

"I think there are two possibilities." Andrew raised his index finger. "One, it's a huge coincidence. Someone has a rare, signed baseball and four rare baseball cards that are the same as the four that burned in the fire."

"But when you add in the fact that they're located here in Glen Falls?" Will shook his head. "Very unlikely."

"Two," Andrew said. "They didn't burn in the fire, but someone collected the insurance money as though they had and is trying to double dip by selling the supposedly burned-up baseball cards."

Will turned to Joe. "What do you think, Joe?"

"Or three, it was arson and the arsonist grabbed the baseball and cards to sell later. No matter which is right, I need more information." Joe leaned forward. "If there's a crime, I'll follow up. If not, I'd like to help get replacement baseball cards for Phillip's dad. It's the least I can do after all he did for me after my dad died." *And I'm also going to go back to that counterfeit baseball card case and see if there's a connection. No need to say anything to these two unless I find a connection.*

Andrew and Will stood "I think we have work to do," said Andrew.

Joe led them to the door and was surprised to find it slightly ajar. He opened the door and followed Andrew and Will into the hallway. He saw the probationary officer walking away. As Andrew and Will left the building Joe wondered: *What if he didn't close the door*

completely when Andrew and Will entered and he loitered in the hallway, perhaps pretending he was waiting to escort my visitors out. He might have heard our conversation. Joe shook his head and walked back to his office. Nonsense. I must be imagining things. What reason would a probationary officer have to listen in to my conversation with Andrew and Will?

Chapter Three

Rachel Chance was relaxing on her deck with the retired Greyhounds, Abby and Zane, she and her husband Will Keller had adopted. Abby, golden brown with white paws, was resting against the brown brick of the house, feet in the air. It was called roaching, a position Greyhounds often take that is reminiscent of a cockroach. Zane, a solid black Greyhound with a white stripe from his forehead to his nose, was curled up on a dog bed next to Rachel. Rachel sat in one of two Adirondack chairs, facing the fenced-in backyard, her shoulder-length auburn hair pulled back into a ponytail on this warm summer afternoon. During a hurried phone call from Will, she found out they were invited to join their neighbors, sisters Bernice and Nan, for dessert, and that they'd be joined by Bernice's son Andrew and one of Andrew's clients, Priscilla Knight.

She was listening intently to a true crime podcast through ear buds connected to her phone. The podcast, *The Truth Will Prevail*, was hosted by local retired journalist Laurel Thomas. Rachel felt just a little flattered. Previous podcasts had featured persistent detectives who had finally caught a killer, but the most recent episode was about her and Will and their involvement earlier in the summer helping solve a mystery that included a crooked realtor, a famous jazz musician, and a wacky resident of Glen Falls. Since a murderer was captured in her house, Rachel agreed to a lengthy interview with the podcaster and was anxious to hear the final version. As she listened to the podcaster's account of the interview, she frowned.

Rachel made it clear that residents of Glen Falls, Indiana, were inept and the police force was bumbling at best.

Rachel jerked up in her chair. “Wait a minute. I never said that.” Fuming, Rachel continued to listen.

Although Rachel constantly shared interesting anecdotes about her two Greyhounds, Andy and Jane, it was obvious that the Greyhounds got in the way and almost let a killer escape.

Rachel ripped the ear buds out and tossed them on the ground. She turned off the podcast and set her cell phone on the table in front of the Adirondack chairs. Abby rolled into a standing position and stretched in her version of downward facing dog. She walked toward Rachel and put her head in Rachel’s lap.

“Do you believe it, Abby? She even got your names wrong! Ugh. She got it all wrong. You didn’t let anyone escape.” She rubbed Abby’s ears. “You and Zane helped us catch a killer.”

Zane raised his head but didn’t move from the dog bed. “You’ve got the right idea, Zane. Don’t overreact.”

“Maybe we should do our own podcast and call it *Greyhounds Will Prevail* and make it about how you help us solve mysteries.” Rachel rubbed Abby behind her ears. Zane stood and stretched, then ran to Rachel and nuzzled her hand with his wet nose. “Thanks, you two. I’ll try not to let Laurel Thomas get to me.”

Rachel heard knocking that seemed to come from the front of the house. Abby and Zane dashed to the back door. “Relax, you two. It’s probably some kids selling something for a fundraiser. I’m sure they’ll be back.” She reached for the bottle of Kendall Jackson Chardonnay that rested in a bucket of ice on the table in front of the Adirondack chairs. As she poured herself another glass of Chardonnay, Rachel wondered why Will wasn’t home yet. She picked up her cell phone and sent a text:

What's your eta? Thought we were having a glass of wine before dinner.

Rachel read Will's quick response.

On my way. Was with Andrew and Joe. You remember your mom and Caitlyn are coming over?

Rachel bolted straight up in her chair, nearly dropping her wine glass. "Oh, no. I can't believe that I for—"

Rachel's phone dinged with an incoming text from Will:

I made up the front bedroom for Caitlyn this morning. I deserve extra credit.

Rachel smiled and responded.

Absolutely!!! Thank you.

Rachel heard a voice coming from the front of the house. "Hello? Anyone home?" Sue McClure, Rachel's mother, walked out the back door and breezed onto the deck followed by her granddaughter, Caitlyn, who was staring at her pink cellphone, her fingers flying as she returned texts. Abby and Zane both ran to Caitlyn and nudged her. Caitlyn put her phone in her back pocket and petted both Greyhounds.

"I hope you don't mind, but I used the spare key you gave me and came in the front." She studied Rachel's face. "You are still expecting Caitlyn to stay over tonight, right?"

"Sure," said Rachel. She put down her wine glass and stood to embrace her mother.

"Uh huh," said Sue. She pulled away and eyed Rachel suspiciously.

“I was just really engrossed in the podcast I was listening to.”

Sue sat on an Adirondack chair. “I’m sure it was engrossing.” She poured herself a glass of wine.

Rachel stepped over Abby and Zane and gave Caitlyn a hug. “It’s great to see you again, Caitlyn.”

“Nice to see you, too, Aunt Rachel.” Caitlyn knelt and petted Zane as Abby licked her face.

“Would you like something to drink? Water? Diet Coke?”

“No thanks,” said Caitlyn as she pulled Abby close for a hug. Zane returned to the dog bed, pawed at it, then lay down, his head resting on his paw.

“Do you need help bringing in anything from the car?”

“Already done,” interjected Sue. She took a sip of wine.

“All right then,” said Rachel.

“I’m actually getting a little hungry,” suggested Caitlyn.

Rachel smiled. “I can take a hint.” Rachel picked up the bucket of ice and Chardonnay. “Mom, let’s head inside and I’ll get dinner started. I’ve got the bucket and bottle of wine if you can grab my wine glass.”

“I’ve got it,” said Sue. She stood and picked up Rachel’s wine glass.

“I’m going to my room to read about that computer workshop Uncle Will signed me up for.”

“I think you’re going to enjoy it,” said Rachel. “Sounds like it will have lots of information about AI.”

Caitlyn pulled out her phone. “Yeah, thanks. Sounds like it won’t be too lame.” Caitlyn scrolled on her phone as she walked to the back door.

“Abby. Zane. Want to go in and show Caitlyn to her room?” Rachel cradled the ice bucket in one hand and opened the back door with the other. “Front bedroom is already made up for you, Caitlyn.” Both dogs dashed into the house, followed by Caitlyn.

Sue looked at Rachel for a long moment, then let a small smile cross her face. A wine glass in each hand, she walked slowly past Rachel into the house.

Sue McClure’s look reminded Rachel of times in her past when her mother had caught her coming home after curfew or going on a date with a boy Sue McClure did not approve of. *She knows I forgot. She hasn’t lost her touch.*

Rachel followed Sue into the kitchen. After pouring a glass of wine for Sue, Rachel put the ice bucket and wine on the white table in the breakfast nook. The kitchen was small but functional. Rachel walked past the oven on the right and dishwasher and kitchen sink on the left. She glanced appreciatively at the four windows behind the island that brightened the kitchen.

Rachel walked by the refrigerator and stepped into the dining room. She heard the front bedroom door click and smiled. She turned to her mother and walked back into the kitchen. “I guess a teenage girl needs her privacy.”

Sue sat on a stool at the counter on the back of the island. “The last few days with Caitlyn have been,” she handed Rachel her wine, “challenging to say the least. I’m glad she’ll be doing that computer

thing next week. This week she's spent most of the day texting her friends and swimming in the web."

Rachel leaned back against the counter next to the stove and took a drink of her wine. "That's surfing the web, Mother."

Sue waved a hand at Rachel dismissively. "Swimming. Surfing. Whatever. The point is that with her father in rehab dealing with his drinking problem brought on by his loser of an ex-wife, there has been far too much pressure on your grandmother."

"I agree, Mom, but—"

"There was simply no choice but to bring Caitlyn here to Glen Falls to give your grandmother a much-needed break. We'll take her back when school starts."

"Mom—" Rachel began.

"Caitlyn needs to be with someone younger. Your grandma—Caitlyn's great grandmother for heaven's sake—simply cannot keep up with a teenager and now, I realize, neither can I." Sue looked at Rachel as though for affirmation.

"I agree. Grammas in her eighties. She needs to focus on enjoying her golden years." Rachel put water in a pan, turned on the back burner, and set the pan on it.

Sue nodded her head curtly and took a sip of wine. "I'm not getting any younger either, you know. I'm sure my blood pressure is going up."

"Why don't you just relax while I work on dinner," said Rachel.

A long-haired gray cat jumped onto the counter in front of Rachel. She scooped him up and hugged him. "I love you Dancer, but I don't

need help fixing dinner.” Rachel set him on the floor, and he scampered into the dining room.

Sue took another sip of wine. “Besides, a grandmother shouldn’t be the one to set down rules and enforce them.” She smiled. “My focus should be on spoiling her.”

Rachel took a drink of wine so she wouldn’t say something that would get her into trouble. She knew what was coming. She pulled a box of angel hair pasta out of the cupboard next to the refrigerator.

Sue set her wine glass on the counter. “I’ve said this before, Rachel. Caitlyn needs a strong female in her life. Ever since Jacklyn left so she could do whatever it is she’s doing in California, Caitlyn has been a mess.”

Rachel opened the box of angel hair pasta and put it on the counter. “It’s rough when you’re just entering your teen years and your mom leaves you to find a job two thousand miles away,” said Rachel. She took another drink of Chardonnay.

“Good mothers, or stepmothers, don’t abandon their daughters.” Sue crossed her arms.

Rachel opened the refrigerator and took out green and yellow peppers, an onion, and carrots. She grabbed a head of garlic from a basket next to her refrigerator and put them all on the counter next to the kitchen sink. Then she set the oven to preheat.

“She still hasn’t signed the divorce papers. Adam says he has tried to find her, and he’s gotten a few random phone calls.” Sue shook her head and reached for her wine glass. “I think Adam is living in a fantasy that she’ll come back to him a changed woman and they can live happily ever after.” Sue poured more wine into her glass.

Rachel heard the water boil and put in the pasta. She got out a skillet, put in some olive oil, and set it next to the sink. She got a cutting board from under the sink and started cutting up the peppers, onion, carrots, and garlic. Rachel looked at her mother who was staring into her wine glass, her eyes unfocused. When she saw the oven hit 350, she grabbed a loaf of garlic bread from the freezer, put it in the oven, and set the timer.

As Rachel worked on dinner, a memory came roaring back. She and her mother had gone to Louisville to visit Adam and Caitlyn a few weeks ago.

Adam stumbled into the living room where Rachel was talking to her mother.

“Hey Mom. Hey Shish...” He giggled. “Sis.”

“Adam, keep your voice down. Caitlyn is sleeping,” Rachel hissed.

“Anyone wanna drink?” Adam grabbed onto the back of a wingback chair to steady himself, then walked into the kitchen.

Adam slammed several doors shut then came to the doorway between the kitchen and living room and put an arm against the wall for support. “Where’s sa beer? There wush beer here when I left.”

“Adam sit down,” said Sue. “We need to talk.”

“Beer firshst.” Adam staggered back into the kitchen and slammed open more doors.

Rachel walked to the doorway and pointed an accusing finger at Adam. “You didn’t leave any food for Caitlyn before you left to go out drinking.”

“I dinnnt? Thought I did.”

Rachel took a step into the kitchen. “Adam, listen to me. We took the beer away.”

“Took away?” Adam stumbled forward and Rachel helped him into the living room and onto the sofa next to Sue. Rachel pulled the wingback chair forward so it was directly in front of Adam.

Sue spoke softly but firmly. “Adam, you need to get over yourself and take care of Caitlyn. Lots of people have gone through the death of a spouse then a divorce in a second marriage. You can get through it.”

Adam shook his head. “Can’t...”

“Adam,” Rachel snapped. “Mom and I have talked. You need to go to rehab.”

“Rehab? I need rehab?”

Rachel leaned forward. “Two choices, brother. You either let us drop you off at rehab or I kick your rear all the way there.”

Adam hung his head. “Kay.”

Rachel looked at her mother. “Let’s get him there before he changes his mind. I’ll stay here with Caitlyn if you can get him to the rehab facility.”

Sue stood. “Help me load him in the car. One way or the other, he’s going to rehab tonight. I don’t care how late it is.”

“Rachel?” Sue looked at Rachel with concern.

Rachel shook her head and filed the memory away. “Sorry, Mom. My mind took an unexpected field trip.” She emptied the remainder of the Chardonnay into her wine glass and took a drink. “Do we know when Adam will be finishing his treatment?”

Rachel took a package out of the refrigerator, strips from a chicken breast she had cut up earlier. She put the skillet on the stove, turned it on medium, and dumped the chicken strips in. She opened a drawer under the stove, pulled out a glass top, and set it on the counter.

Sue looked at her for a long moment before answering. "His program is up next week. Hopefully, he'll be able to come home then." Sue looked at Rachel again but continued. "However, Caitlyn needs more than her dad; she needs a strong female in her life and her absentee stepmother, wherever she is, isn't the answer. She needs you, Rachel."

Rachel turned the strips of chicken as she talked. "Mom, we've talked about this. Will and I aren't equipped to handle a teenage girl. We're still getting used to being married. I absolutely want to help. As a loving and supportive aunt. Not as a substitute mother." Rachel took another sip of wine.

"She needs more than an aunt who takes her shopping and has her over for an occasional weekend sleepover. She needs consistency. She needs to see a successful female who can hold down a job and be a loving wife...and deal with a teenage girl."

Rachel looked nervously at the doorway. She was hoping Caitlyn would stay in her room so she couldn't hear the conversation. At the same time, she hoped Caitlyn would walk in saving her from continuing this conversation. "You're thinking after next week, Caitlyn is going home? To live with her dad?" asked Rachel tentatively.

"No guarantees, but that's the plan."

Rachel checked to make sure the chicken was cooked through and scraped the peppers, onions, carrots, and garlic into the pan with the

chicken. She opened a can of chicken broth and added some to the skillet.

“That’s a lot of garlic, dear.”

“Normally I’d put in two heads. I toned it down for you and Caitlyn,”

Rachel stirred the chicken and veggies. “We’d just planned on her staying here tonight, but I guess we could host her for a week. Will can drive her to campus the days she’s signed up for the computer camp.”

“Caitlyn likes your dogs. I bet she’ll enjoy helping walk them. You could even give her some jobs so she can—”

Rachel held up her hand. “Hold it. Caitlyn can stay with us, but I’m drawing the line at being more than an aunt.”

Sue stood and drained the last of her Chardonnay. “Maybe I’ll just quit while I’m ahead.”

“Good idea, Mother.” Rachel dumped the angel hair pasta into the skillet with the chicken and veggies and stirred. She added parsley and flakes of parmesan cheese.

Sue set down her empty wine glass. “Don’t forget what I said, though. Caitlyn needs to see a female who is strong, who is confident, who can deal with issues without falling apart, who can—”

Rachel crossed her legs and leaned forward. “I thought I heard someone say something that sounded like ‘I’ll just quit while I’m ahead.’”

Sue smiled wryly. “Sounds like it’s a good time for me to check on Caitlyn. Let us know when it’s time for dinner.”

Before Sue could get to the doorway, Caitlyn appeared, followed by Abby and Zane. “Something smells good. Is it time for dinner?” Rachel watched as Caitlyn peered hopefully at the stove.

Rachel put a glass lid on the skillet and turned to Caitlyn. “I’ll tell you what. If you feed Abby and Zane while I finish up in the kitchen, it should be about time to eat.”

“No problem, Aunt Rachel.” Caitlyn rushed through the kitchen and snatched the dog bowls from the elevated feeding station at the back door before heading to the basement.

Abby and Zane looked at Rachel. “I know that look, you two. Don’t worry. Caitlyn knows where your food is and she’ll be right back.” Rachel waved her hands toward her Greyhounds. “Now scoot. I need room in the kitchen.”

The dogs scurried around the corner. Sue took a step into the dining room and peered into the hallway. “Looks like they’ll be waiting for Caitlyn at the top of the basement steps.”

Rachel took the glass lid off the skillet with one hand and stirred the pasta with the other using a wooden spoon. She traded the wooden spoon for a fork she used to snag a piece of pasta. “Pasta’s ready. As soon as the garlic bread—” The timer on the stove dinged. “Great timing. Mom, can you get the garlic bread out, please?” asked Rachel.

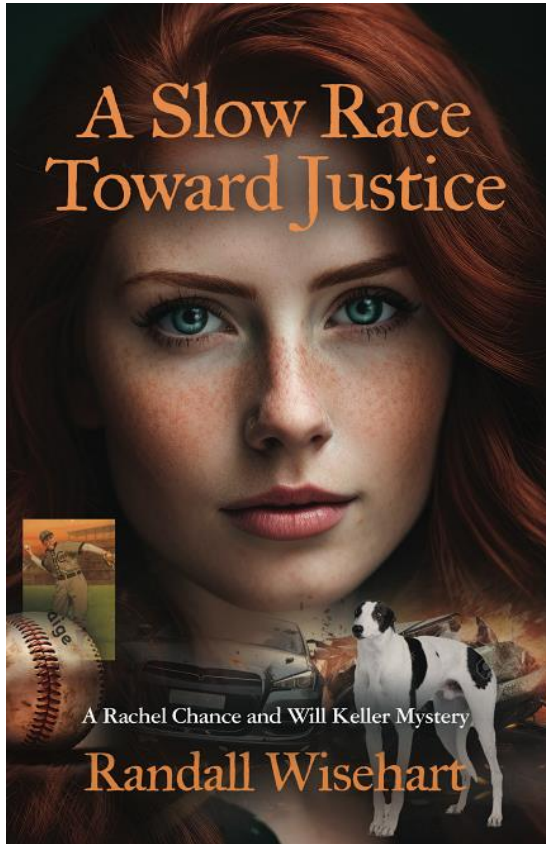
Sue stood. “I can do that.”

Rachel took dishes out of the cabinet and took them to the dining room. Caitlyn was holding two bowls of dog food shoulder high to keep them away from Abby and Zane, who were both trying to get to their bowls.

Rachel put the plates on the dining room table and snapped her fingers. “Abby! Zane! You know better than that. Let Caitlyn through.” Rachel followed Caitlyn into the kitchen. She watched as Caitlyn put the bowls into the elevated stands and the Greyhounds immediately attacked their food.

Rachel sighed and leaned against the wall next to the refrigerator. She tilted her head back and looked to the ceiling. *Why am I convinced this won't be the last time my mother tries to get me more involved in Caitlyn's life? On top of the things I want to do for her. As an aunt. Rachel frowned. And I need to listen to the rest of that podcast and see if there are any other falsehoods. Plus, now I'm worrying about my grandma and my brother.* Rachel blew out a deep breath and got out a large bowl for the pasta in.

Will walked in the back door and tiptoed past Abby and Zane who were still devouring their food. “Hi Sue. Hey Caitlyn.” He kissed Rachel on the cheek. “Did I miss anything?”



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