



WORDS REVEAL  
*the* HEART



*Vignettes*

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



*Bellingwood - Book 38*



# Book Thirty-Eight Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR

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Cover Design Photography: Maxim M. Muir

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THANK YOU!

## INTRODUCTION

These vignettes originally came about as a way to keep readers engaged while I was writing the next book. Talk about ravenous readers! Each short, short, short story (vignette) is published on either the website ([nammynools.com](http://nammynools.com)) or in the email newsletter that comes out on the twenty-fifth of each month.

Be sure to sign up for the newsletter so you don't miss anything, especially the latest vignette.

I realized how much fun it was to expose little bits of the background stories that happen every day in Bellingwood. Because the Bellingwood books are written from Polly's perspective, unless she is directly involved in the action or with a character, we miss activities in other people's lives. These characters have developed enough that they enjoy telling their own stories, so this is their little bit of fame.

I have compiled the vignettes relating to Book 38 — Words Reveal the Heart — into one collection. These four short stories feature different characters from Bellingwood who get an opportunity to offer a little slice of life from their own perspective.



# Vignette #1

## Life, the Universe, and Everything

"Ay Caramba!" Anita Banks waited to catch Doug's eyes before sliding down the banister of the curved staircase in the back of Boomer's Last Stand.

"What are you doing?" he yelled. "Stop it!"

She stood up from tumbling down the last steps and brushed herself off. "Stop it? I couldn't have stopped that if I tried."

"You nearly gave me a heart attack. Why would you do that? What if someone else did that?"

"The stairway has been there forever and I finally took the risk. It was fun. You should take a turn."

"I'm not an idiot."

Anita lifted his chin with her curved index finger and kissed his lips. "Where did my adorable risk-taking gamer-boy go? Have I lost him forever to sales reports and inventory lists?"

"No," he said petulantly. "I'm not that guy."

"You *are* that guy," she said. "All you ever do is work."

"What am I supposed to do? Close the shop and run off with you into the sunset?"

"If I asked, would you?"

"No," he said with a scowl. "This is my business. I'm responsible for it." Even as the words left his mouth, Doug groaned. "Who am I?"

"That's what I'm saying," she replied. "You don't host game nights with our friends, and the only time we go anywhere is if it's a comic book convention." Before he could protest, she patted his arm. "Not that those aren't fun, but it's always about business with you these days. When do you put on a brown robe and have a light-saber fight with Darth Billy."

That made him laugh. "I'll tell him you said that."

"He and Rachel aren't any better. She hasn't put color in her hair in ages and Billy is so worried about Viv that he can hardly move."

"We're growing up."

"We're growing old. There's a difference." Anita took his arm. "Now, tell me again why we're here on a Sunday morning when we could have been sleeping in, or going out to breakfast with friends, or traveling through space on an airship."

"Boxes came in on Friday and I haven't had a chance to go through them?" Doug knew that wasn't going to go over well.

"And those nerd-boys who still love to cosplay and play games and read comics and drink energy drinks wouldn't give their right arm to stock your shelves? You have loads of free help just waiting for something to do so they can justify all the time they spend here. Why are you doing it yourself?"

"Because I'd have to manage them."

"Uh huh. And Greg couldn't do that?"

Doug knew better, but he couldn't have stopped the conversation now, no matter what. He had waded in and before he knew what happened, she'd stripped his swim trunks off in the deep end. "You didn't have to come with me this morning."

"And that would have been one more day I sat home by myself, twiddling my thumbs because you're too busy to do fun things."

"I'm trying to get a business off the ground," he said. Again, he knew better. Why couldn't he just shut up? She was going to destroy him.

"I've seen your spreadsheets. I know what your bottom line is and I know how you're kicking its butt every month."

"If I didn't work so hard, it wouldn't be going so well." Moron. He was a moron. Shut your dumb mouth, Doug! He sat on a stool in front of the counter, knowing that Anita would tower over him. He was asking for it.

"What's your number?" she asked.

"My number? Forty-two?" He chuckled to himself. Spouting the answer to life, the universe and everything from *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* ought to score him a few positive points in this deadly conversation.

Anita sighed, as if with relief. "Finally, something interesting out of your mouth. But that's not the number I'm talking about. What's



the number that makes you believe you are in good shape here. Are we talking about a million dollars in sales per year? Five million? Ten million?"

He gaped at her. Those numbers were so far out in the stratosphere, they didn't even exist in his mind. "I don't know."

"You need to know. Because this, what you're doing to yourself, is unacceptable. You don't have a limit."

"I don't want there to be a limit. I want to grow exponentially."

"Why?"

"Because ..." He didn't have a good answer. At least not one that wouldn't paint him as a money-grubbing psychopath.

"If money is all you want, I can put my hands on more than you've ever seen."

Doug nodded. "I don't want your money."

"Neither do I. But is that all you can think about with this business? Money?"

"Yes sounds like the wrong answer."

"You're learning," she said, kissing his nose. "The question is a serious one, though. What's your number?"

"I'm not sure what you're asking."

"What is the number that will allow you to relax? Do you have a certain amount of money you need to have in savings? Or a specific number of employees? Or a number of daily customers and sales? What is the number, Doug?"

He gulped. He had opened this shop with absolutely no business background. All he knew was that the area didn't offer what he wanted when it came to games and graphic novels and all the nerdy stuff that went along with those things. "I don't know that I have a number."

"You need to identify a target. Maybe you need to identify two or three future targets. But when you achieve those things, you should celebrate. Right now, you keep working and working and that's all there is."

"If I agree with you will I escape any more trouble this morning?"

Anita pursed her lips, then said, "I'm sorry that you feel like

you're in trouble. Here's the deal. I miss you. I miss us. We don't do anything. When you come home at night, you crash with a video game or binge a television show, and you barely look at me while we eat."

"I'm sorry."

"No," she said. "That's not what I'm looking for. You can't be happy like this, can you?"

"I'm happy enough."

"Enough?"

"I knew that word wasn't going to work out so well for me. I know you're right, but I don't know how to stop. Everyone has expectations and I can't fail them."

"Everyone who?"

"You, for one."

"And what expectations have I put on you?" Anita planted her hands on her hips and glared at him.

"To be successful so we can have a successful life. You aren't depending on your family for money. If we're going to have children, I don't want them to starve."

"I make a good salary. I don't need your money to raise a family. You could be broke and working as a delivery driver and I'd still raise a family with you. Next?"

"My parents. They never thought I'd amount to much. Dad is always telling his buddies how I own a business and that I work all the time. He's so proud of me. Mom constantly tells me how proud she is. I didn't hear that much when I was bumming around with Billy playing video games and ... you know ..." His voice trailed off. This was going to bite him in the behind.

"Your parents never told you they were proud of you before?"

"Well ..."

"That's what I thought. Next?"

"Polly and Henry."

"What about them?" she asked, her glare turning into fury.

"Well, they really helped me and I don't want to disappoint them."

"What in the world could you do to disappoint them? They love

you."

"They have high expectations," he said quietly. "Mostly Polly. It's hard living up to that."

"She would bonk you upside the head if she heard you say that. Polly wants you to live your best life."

"I know. I don't want to live anything less and disappoint her," he protested.

"You dope." Anita sat beside him. "Would Polly want you to kill yourself so you can prove you're a success?"

"No."

"Did Polly tell you not to play or date or go out or do fun things so you can show off how successful you are? Is that how she lives?"

"No." This was going badly for him. Doug shook his head. "I'm so confused."

"Why?"

"Why haven't you ever mentioned any of this before?"

"I've tried," she said, taking his hand. "I guess I was too subtle."

"I'm kind of a dolt."

"You're focused. That's not always bad."

"But you're the best thing that's ever happened to me. I am a complete dolt. You're the one I should focus on. If I lost you and had a successful business, that would kill me."

"This is the boy that I love," Anita said with a smile.

"Your dad did this to your family, didn't he?"

"Not exactly, but yes, everything was more important than his family until it was gone."

"I'll never have the mega money that your family has, but I have you. I can't screw us up." He gestured back and forth between them.

"I won't let you," she said as she leaned on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For letting this place interfere with us. I haven't done anything right with you. You're too nice to me."

"So I should be meaner? More demanding?"

"At least then I'd have boundaries."

"You don't need boundaries from me. You have already created

too many of those for yourself."

Doug turned to look at her. "You know that I want to marry you, right?"

"Okay?"

"I'm screwing this up, see? Boundaries. I haven't even bought you a ring."

"Who says you have to buy me a ring? What if I found a ring that I wanted to buy. Would that mess with your mind?"

"A little."

"When have we ever done anything normal?"

"It doesn't happen very often. I don't think I've ever been normal. Mom and Dad tried, but it wasn't in me."

"Me either. What if I told you that I had my great grandmother's wedding set and wanted to wear that?"

"What?"

"I'm just asking. What if I wanted to wear a cool ring that I found at one of those conventions we go to?"

"You did?"

"I'm just asking. What if it wasn't about you spending big money on a diamond ring?"

"But ..."

"But have you ever seen me wear expensive jewelry?"

"Some of that stuff you have with your steampunk costume looks expensive."

"All paste. The necklace might have cost a couple hundred bucks, but I don't wear anything like that every day, do I?" Anita grinned at him. "Do you want an expensive diamond ring to wear? I probably have something of my granddad's lying around."

"No, thank you," Doug said. "My luck, I'd lose it or someone would break in and steal it, taking my finger, too."

"That's just gross, but I take your point."

"I'm sorry I haven't gone any further with pushing for marriage."

"We got comfortable living together, didn't we?" she said. "I like it. We don't have to hurry into marriage."

"It's just that there's so much to do to have a wedding. And your parents and grandmother would come in and make it a big

production. My mom and dad would make it a big production. Heck, Polly would make it a big production. Do you want a big production?"

"I want a small production. But let's not hurry. When we're ready for a production, we'll figure it out."

"I need to figure out how to make this business less of a production, don't I?"

"Wouldn't it be nice to do fun things without worrying about whether it will bring business to the shop?"

He nodded and this time, he leaned across the space and put his head on her shoulder. "I get all grown up and then I realize I went too fast."

"Let's slow down and play a little more, then," Anita said. "Do you have to unpack comic books this morning?"

"No, what do you want to do?"

"First, I want to see you slide down the banister."

"I'll kill myself."

"Then I will call the paramedics."

"And after that?"

"A game of *Sword Lords*. Just the two of us."

"Man, you're easy." He kissed her. "Do I really have to do the stairs?"

"Show me you aren't a buttoned-up businessman."

## Vignette #2

### Weird is a Good Thing

"Do you think we'll ever slow down?" Mary Francis asked after flopping onto the sofa in the main room of the B&B. "I'm exhausted." She looked at Jill, Jack Archer's sister, who was still on her feet, now dusting the tops of the counter and straightening literature.

Jill shot her a smile. "I like being busy."

"It keeps your mind off life, that's for sure, but I'm too old for this."

"No, you aren't."

"Yes, dear, I am. Where did Judy get to?"

"I saw her head outside about a half hour ago."

"Probably back to the gardens. She never stops either." Mary stood up. "I'm going to pour a glass of lemonade. Would you like something to drink?"

"Lemonade sounds good," Jill said. "Thank you. I'll come to the kitchen as soon as I'm finished here. You don't need to bring it out to me."

Their last guests had left early this morning and everyone jumped in to clean out the rooms. More guests would be in late this afternoon, and while they weren't scheduled to be in those particular rooms, everything needed to be ready for surprises. It always seemed as if the unexpected was the norm.

Jill couldn't believe her good fortune. She had a safe place to live, jobs that kept her busy all the time, and when she had a few free moments, she actually had a friend. She'd never expected to find her brother, much less enjoy being around him. He was pretty great, even though he always tried to help her out with money. Relying on someone else was alien for Jill. Even when she'd been with her girlfriend, she always knew that it would take nothing for them to separate and her to be on her own again. She'd enjoyed the companionship, but she'd never really been in love. Maybe she

thought she had, but that couldn't have been it since it was no big deal for Jill to take off. They never talked again. That should be weird, but it just wasn't. It was the only way Jill knew to live.

It would be hard now to leave Bellingwood. That was what felt weird. She was making a connection with Jack, one that would be difficult to give up. And all these people she worked with treated her like a human being. And then there was Mrs. Worth. What was up with that lady? All Jill did was move into her upstairs apartment and the next thing she knew, the woman was treating her like she imagined a mother might treat her daughter. It was both strange and wonderful all at the same time.

For the first few months she was in Bellingwood, Jill didn't trust anyone. Just like the rest of her life, she waited for people to kick her out, or get tired of being around her, or mistrust her and be suspicious, or anything. When she had trouble paying for her car to be fixed, the garage gave her a payment plan. What in the world was that about? She didn't have any credit history, but they told her how much she needed to pay every month and had her sign a piece of paper. They trusted her.

"Jill?" Judy Greene walked in the front door carrying a large bundle of cut flowers.

"Can I take those for you?" Jill asked, dropping her cloth on the counter.

"Oh, no. I'm okay. I'm taking them to the kitchen. I think it's time for a break, don't you? We've all been working hard this morning."

"Mary's already pouring lemonade."

"A woman after my own heart. Join us. You can finish this later."

"But ..." Jill started to protest, but one look at Judy's face told her it would be useless. "Yes, ma'am."

"Reuben tells me he's seen some of the pieces Jack plans to sell at the arts festival. Your brother has talent."

"I never knew that about him." Jill shrugged. "I didn't know anything about him before I got here, but he's a good guy."

"He is. Do you have anything you'd like to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is there some craft or art that you'd like to learn? Gardening?"

Sewing? Cooking? Anything like that? Maybe you'd like to learn how to draw or paint or work with clay."

"I don't have time for any of that. When I get home at night, I spend time with Mrs. Worth because she won't let me go to bed without making sure I've had plenty to eat. Then I go upstairs and drop into bed. There's no time for fanciful things."

"I understand," Judy said. She headed for a cupboard where she kept vases of all sizes. "Could you help me and take out that pretty green vase right there?"

Jill hurried over and took out the vase Judy was looking at. She set it on the counter and Judy dropped the flowers in, then moved them around until the whole thing looked like a beautiful piece of art.

"I don't know how you do that," Mary said. "They come in looking like a bunch of flowers and in only a few minutes, you have them perfectly in place."

"Years and years of practice. Jill said you were pouring lemonade."

Mary chuckled. "I forgot. I walked into the kitchen and remembered that I had run the dishwasher, so I set about emptying it. Lemonade sounds great, though, doesn't it?"

"I can do it," Jill said.

Mary sent her a grateful look and sat back down at the table. "Judy Greene, I'm glad you hired more help. I'm dead on my feet today. How do you keep going?"

"When it comes to spending time with my fingers in dirt, nothing will stop me," Judy said. "It's almost as if I come back to life because of all the oxygen my plants put out." She winked at Jill. "It could also be that third cup of coffee I had this morning. Mary, I was asking Jill if she would ever be interested in learning an art or a craft. What about you?"

"I don't have any talent in that area," Mary said. "I'm glad to be able to help out by cleaning and doing some cooking around here. That's all I ever had time to learn how to do properly."

"When you were in elementary school, did you enjoy art class?" Judy asked.



"Not really. Gluing egg shells to pieces of paper seemed like a terrible waste of time. I did enjoy home economics. I was terrible at sewing, but the rest of it wasn't bad."

"What about you, Jill? Anything when you were in school?"

Jill handed Mary a glass filled with ice and lemonade. She smiled when Mary pressed it against her forehead. It was warm today, but they'd been working hard. They'd cool down in a few minutes. "I don't remember. Most of it is a blur and I skipped as much school as I could. I hated it."

Judy set the vase on a trivet in the center of the table. "You'd think I wouldn't spill so much water everywhere, but no matter what, I can make a mess of it. Jill, sit and relax. You've worked hard and it's time to take a break."

"Yes, ma'am," Jill said. She sat on the edge of her chair, ready to move at a moment's notice. It was difficult for her to relax around people. The only time she really relaxed was when she was asleep and even then, she often woke up with her shoulders pulled up around her neck. If she had a couple of drinks before she went to sleep, she could relax, but Jill knew better than to rely on that. There were alcoholics in her family and she'd seen too many of them in the bars and restaurants where she worked.

"I want you two to come up with something that you'd like to create," Judy said.

Jill glanced at Mary, who seemed as taken aback by the comment as she was.

"Like an assignment?" Jill asked. She gave a strained laugh. "I'm not in school anymore."

Judy smiled her calm, peaceful smile. "It can be as simple as baking a cake or whipping up a pasta dish, but even still, if you came up with something more creative than cooking, I'd love to see what you can do."

"Why?" Mary asked.

"Because I believe in the power of being creative," Judy said. "Maybe you want to take photographs. Phones these days have wonderful lenses and you can capture the world in amazing ways. If you want to knit or crochet, sing or dance ..." That brought

laughter from both Jill and Mary.

"I'll never sing," Jill said. "I sound like a scratchy screech owl."

"Me, too," Mary echoed. "Only it's more like a hyena in heat."

"There's a fifty dollar bonus in it," Judy said.

"What do you plan to do with whatever we come up with," Jill asked.

"Nothing. Unless you want me to do something with it. I just want you to look at the world and see beauty. If you need paints or ingredients, let me know. I have friends. If you would like to do something and want some lessons, let me know. I have even more friends."

"You're very odd," Mary said.

"You both are special to me," Judy replied. "It's too easy to get caught up in how hard life is. We work all the time and forget that creation is also part of life."

Jill frowned. She could take pictures with her phone. She was always taking pictures of Jack's dogs. One time he asked her to forward him a picture of Rico racing through his back yard. She'd caught the dog in mid-air and he looked as if he was flying. "I'll try to take some pictures," she said quietly.

"That's a wonderful idea. When you have one or two that you are proud of, I'd like to see them if you'll share."

"I still don't understand why I have to do this."

"Let's leave it at - because I asked you," Judy said. "If you really don't want to, I'm not going to complain or fire you or anything like that. You're always working. When you're here, you hate taking breaks. You've left no time for yourself. I want you to take a few minutes to do something that is all yours, that you can be proud of. If you want to wander through my gardens and take pictures of the plants or the trees or the creek or any of Reuben's sculptures, feel free. Look at the world as if it is interesting. You'll find plenty no matter where you are. We'll keep talking about it if you like."

"I'll try," Jill said. They turned to Mary who threw her hands up in the air.

"I have no idea," Mary said. "I have kids at home, meals to cook, clothes to wash and there's no time to be creative."

"There's always time if you want to find it," Judy said quietly. "I won't push you, but let's keep thinking about it."

Jill took her empty lemonade glass to the sink and rinsed it out. "I should get back to work. I'm going downstairs to make sure it's all back together. Mary, you don't have to worry about that today."

"Thanks, hon," Mary said.

As Jill walked down the stairs, she took out her phone and opened the camera app. How had she gotten involved with people who thought she should be creative now? She didn't have time for this, but fifty dollars was fifty dollars. She saw light reflected on the wall and noticed the pattern it made from the window. Was that interesting enough? One click of the camera and she looked at what she'd done. It could be better. Jill took several more pictures and was entranced at the way the light moved during the time she was there.

Then she saw a jigsaw puzzle piece on the floor. Before she picked it up, she realized that if she moved in closer, the shape against the carpet was interesting. It looked like a dark cloud in a light sky. That made her wonder at shapes of clouds and how they changed with the wind.

She shook herself and tucked the phone back into her pocket. Work first. Then she could play with her phone.

The people in this town were strange. They seemed to really care about her. She still didn't know what to do with that. She sent off a text. *"Hey. Can you come over with Rico and Sonny tonight. Maybe we could go to a park or something. I want to take pictures of them. I'll tell you about it later."*

Jack replied right away. *"That would be fun. You take great pictures. I want to blow up that picture you took of Rico flying. I also think I could turn it into a cut for the laser cutter. Wouldn't that be cool?"*

Weird. Her life had gotten weird.

*"Let me know when you get off work,"* she sent back. *"Maybe we could make dinner."*

*"Yep. I'll call."*

Really weird. And the weirdest thing? She was having fun. It had been forever since that was real.

## Vignette #3

### Oh, Brother

“Come to bed,” Mark stood at the kitchen counter. He’d just filled it with multiple glasses and even a few forks and spoons that he’d retrieved after putting the kids to bed. He knew he should put everything into the dishwasher, but not tonight. Tomorrow morning would be soon enough.

Sal looked up from her laptop. “Not yet. I have two more things to deal with tonight.”

“Will leaving them topple your plan for tomorrow?” he asked.

“Maybe,” she said. “Go on without me. You get up earlier than I do. Thank you for putting the boys to bed.”

He watched her focus return to the laptop screen. Sal worked non-stop preparing for the arts festival. She wasn’t doing the work alone; plenty of others were on the committees, yet the woman was wearing herself out. He opened the cupboard, took down two wine glasses and before thinking too hard about it, filled both of them.

When he walked through the living room to where she was tucked in on the sofa, two dogs lying on either side of her, he coughed to get her attention.

“What?” she asked. “What time is it?”

“Nine thirty.” He handed her a glass of wine.

“Thank you. What’s this for?”

“I’m about to find out if I’m coming out of this evening dead or alive,” he said and closed the lid of her laptop. “Dead yet?”

“Not even a little.” Sal leaned forward, set the laptop on the coffee table and then handed the glass back to him. He was confused until she picked up Felix and moved him to the other side. Oscar growled at the disturbance but the two curled in on each other.

Mark sat beside her and handed the glass back.

“What’s up with the glass of wine?” Sal smiled. Her smile and her eyes were weary, but that was just another of the familiar looks that he loved.

"I miss you."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"That's not what I mean. I'm selfish. I want a little time with my wife. No children, no phone calls, no laptop, no interruptions. And no one's going to call at this hour."

"Don't jinx us," she said and turned enough to throw her long legs over his lap. "I'm sorry to have been so distracted lately. You're a rock star."

"I know." He touched his glass to hers. "That's why you married me."

"No, I married you because you're gorgeous. I couldn't let anyone else have the most beautiful man I'd ever seen in my life."

"I thought that's why I married you."

"Aren't we a pair," she said and sighed as he put his arm up on the back of the sofa so she could lean against him. "When the arts festival is over, we should take a weekend. Maybe we could drop the kids at your mother's house and find a quiet cabin on a lake in northern Minnesota."

Mark made a valiant attempt to not laugh at his wife, but couldn't help himself. "You want to spend time in a cabin?"

"They have running water, don't they?"

"Sure."

"And restaurants nearby?"

"Honey, no restaurants."

"Scratch the cabin on a lake, then."

"If I catch fish, I could fry it up for us," Mark said.

That made Sal laugh. "You'd have to catch fish every day. I can't imagine trying to figure out how to cook enough meals for us when I'm supposed to be relaxing. How about a fancy hotel in downtown Minneapolis?" Sal smiled. "I'd like a hotel room and you'd like a cabin on a lake. How are we still together?"

"We live in Bellingwood. Close enough to cities for you and close enough to rural life for me."

"We should buy a cabin on a lake that's close enough to civilization I can gather food for us."

He shook his head. "There isn't much in the area that would be

quiet and solitary. The lakefronts fill up with fancy homes. I'm happy here in our nice house."

"But wouldn't you like a spot where you can go fishing?"

"I can go fishing without owning a cabin. People do it all the time."

"It sounds romantic, though."

"A cabin on a lake?"

"Or a river. Something tucked away from the rest of the world. Where no one can find us. Cell phones don't work, no internet, nothing but us and nature."

"Who are you and what have you done with my metropolitan-loving wife?"

"Maybe I'm only tired."

"You must be very tired if you are romanticizing a rustic cabin."

"I see flannel blankets on the beds and rag rugs on the floor. Overstuffed rocking chairs and beds that wrap you up. A fireplace at one end of the big open, room, and flickering candlelight in sconces on the wall."

"And the bathroom?"

"I'd need running water."

"And how do you plan to feed your family?"

"Hot dogs cooked in the fireplace. Cooking will always be my Waterloo, won't it?" Sal asked with a laugh. "I love you for not believing I should be a gourmet chef and spend my time planning and cooking meals. The idea of that makes me shudder."

"We feed our family. That's all that matters."

"Your mother is such a wonderful cook. I wish I cared enough to be like her."

"Sal Ogden, you care about everything else. Our kids are loved. They learn new things every day. They are curious and love to explore. They aren't afraid of life. You love me and even make me learn new things."

"You make me learn new things," Sal said with a giggle. "Mother would never have believed that I'd end up in a stall with a colicky horse, worried sick over the poor beast."

"I should have taken a picture as proof that you were really

there.”

“And I’m collecting eggs and playing with goats. Mark, you’ve turned this Boston girl into a farmgirl.”

“Not quite, but you’re getting there. You don’t regret it, do you?”

“Do you regret life with me?” Sal retorted.

“Not for anything.” He paused, leaned to kiss her, then said, “Okay. Some of these committees you keep putting me on are tiresome, but ...”

“I need you on those committees,” Sal said. “You have the respect of nearly every farmer and pet owner in the area. When I start pushing for something and you are there to back me up, they hear my words as coming from a reasonable person, not an outsider.”

“That annoys me.”

“What? I don’t mean to be annoying. I appreciate you more than I ever say.”

“No, I’m annoyed that you aren’t respected on your own. That you even need me to run interference. You are the brightest, most creative woman I know and if anyone would like to challenge me on that, I’ll beat ‘em up.”

“That’s my macho man.”

Sal’s phone rang and she scowled at the coffee table. “See. You jinxed it. I wonder what the problem is now.”

“Don’t answer it,” Mark said. “It’s ten o’clock. We should be in bed.”

She reached over, picked it up, and smiling, said, “Good evening, Kathryn.”

His eyes grew wide. “Mom?” he mouthed.

Sal nodded. She swiped the speaker on and said, “Mark is here, too. How are you this evening?”

While Lila Kahane sent Sal’s blood pressure through the roof, Mark’s mother was such a calming influence it felt like a nice glass of wine coursing through her veins.

“I’m fine, dears. I was thinking about you and the excitement you’re about to have in a couple of weeks. Are you ready?”

"Not yet," Sal said, "but I will be when it arrives. Things are lining up."

"Dad and I wondered if you'd mind a visit over Labor Day weekend." Kathryn chuckled. "Dad tells me I'm saying it wrong. Would you mind if we took over your house and kicked you out for the weekend? You could go anywhere you wanted. Mark, will you take the time off so you can treat your wife to a getaway?"

"You're amazing, Mom. How did you know?" Mark asked.

"Know what, dear?"

"That Sal and I need time alone."

"It's not that big of a leap. She's been working like a fiend all summer long. You always work hard."

"Aren't you getting ready for dance class season?" Sal asked. "You don't have time for this."

"Mark Ogden," his mother scolded.

He flinched. "Uh oh."

"What uh oh?" Sal asked.

"Mom retired. She sold the dance studio."

"You did what?" Sal asked. "When?"

"After last season. I've been quietly putting things into place and as soon as I was able, I signed the papers, turned over the keys, and came home to put my feet up."

"But it's your life," Sal protested. "You love teaching dance."

"You're right. I do. I'm not stopping completely. I will continue to teach a few classes for the new owners. It's time for us to see the world and spend more time with our children and grandchildren. Who knows what we'll do next."

"How long have you known about this, Mark?" Sal demanded.

He lowered his head in shame. "A month or so. But ..."

She swatted his chest. "Don't you say another word. Kathryn, we would love to have you visit over Labor Day weekend, but you don't need to take care of the children. You can just come visit."

"No, no, no. We want to do this for you. Mark, make a plan. Sal is busy making plans for her entire community. You can come up with a nice vacation spot for her."

"How long will you be here, Mom?" he asked.



"As long as you'll let us stay. Now, I know it's late so I won't keep you. We'll talk again after the arts festival is over. Good luck with it all, Sal. I'm proud of you. Good night."

She was gone before Sal could reply.

"How does she do that?" Sal asked Mark.

"Do what?"

"Know the perfect gift to give."

"With Mom, it's always been her time. Like she said, it's no secret how hard you're working."

"She retired? I don't know what to think about that. I have a hard time imagining your mother at retirement age."

"She'll appreciate that. We were all surprised." He shrugged. "Not really. Mom loved the studio, but she never wanted it to encompass her entire life. It will be nice for her to have more freedom."

Sal leaned against him. "Where should we go?"

"Boston?"

She sat up and swatted his chest. "That's not funny."

"I'm not being funny. Why don't we go and you can show me all your favorite haunts?"

"Because I don't want to see my mother on the one weekend that I have to spend with you. If we're flying across the country, we go west."

"San Francisco? San Diego? Wherever you want to go."

"Is it sad that I'm ready for the arts festival to be over so we can make plans to take a trip somewhere?"

"Mom said I'm supposed to plan it."

"Go ahead," Sal said with a laugh. "I'll fix whatever I don't like."

## Vignette #4

### Love of My Life

Sticky Messes

A short Bellingwood vignette

"What did you do?" When Jody Gordon walked into the kitchen, not only did her two children, Missy and Brandon, look at her in shock, but her husband was just as surprised to see her.

"Why are you home?" he retorted.

"We finished early and I wanted to spend time with my family before they went to bed. Is everyone fully aware of how much cleanup you have ahead of you?"

Rick lifted his eyebrows at the two children. "I told you so."

"It's Daddy's fault," Missy said. "He said you said that we could have anything we wanted."

"So you did this." Jody wetted a clean dish cloth and approached her son. He ducked out of her reach and in doing so, fell off his chair, planting his hands on the floor.

She closed her eyes and took in a breath. "I just washed that floor this morning."

"Sorry, Mommy," Brandon said.

"Sorry, Mommy," Rick repeated. "We'll clean it up."

"Of all the things to eat in Bellingwood, why did you serve our children barbecue wings this evening?"

"They sounded good, Mommy," Missy said. "There are leftovers. Do you want some?"

Jody dropped the dish cloth to the floor and said, "Wipe, little boy. Wipe." Then, she went back over to the counter and picked up her phone. "I want you to see what I see." She took pictures of both of her children with barbecue sauce covering their cheeks, their chins, and their fingers. Missy even had sauce on her nose.

The table was covered in dirty paper towels, cups of ranch dressing, sauce-covered glasses of milk, and takeout containers.

"You weren't supposed to be home for another hour," Rick said.

"We'd have had this cleaned up by then."

"Brandon," Jody said. "You have sauce on your elbow!"

Her five-year-old twisted his arm to see what she was talking about.

"Other elbow," Missy said.

That brought on more twists and turns until Brandon gave up. He plopped down on the floor. "It's everywhere," he said.

Jody laughed out loud. "The only good thing is that you managed to contain the worst of the mess to the table."

Rick stood up and as he headed for the sink, she put her hand up to stop him. "What?" he asked. "I'm going to start the cleanup."

"Don't move."

"Daddy has sauce on his butt," Missy crowed.

Brandon walked around to look at his father's behind. "Daddy! She's right." He poked his dad in the sauce.

Rick craned his head, then tugged his shorts, trying to see the spot. "Who is going to explain how I did that?"

Missy lifted her shoulders, then pointed at the chair where he'd been sitting. "There's a big spot on the chair you sat on."

He turned on his daughter with a wicked grin and ignoring Jody's warning look, flicked a dab of sauce from the closest wing container at Missy.

"Rick!" Jody said. When Missy stuck her finger in the container beside her, Jody let out a screech. "No! Don't you dare."

Missy brought her finger up, curled it into her thumb and prepared to flick it.

"I'm warning you, little girl," Jody said. "You will be cleaning a bathroom if you do that."

That stopped the movement. "A bathroom? That's what Cassidy has to do when she's in trouble."

"It works for them, it works for me. Wipe off your finger."

"Daddy should have to clean a bathroom," Brandon said quietly.

"Daddy is going to clean a kitchen," Jody replied. "And the two of you are going to help him."

"Why?" Missy complained. "We didn't do anything wrong. We just ate supper."

"I believe the your mother would like us to know that we don't make messes and leave them for someone else to clean up," Rick said. He bent over to pick up the dish cloth that Brandon had left on the floor.

Jody swatted his bottom. "You're gonna want to remember there's a mess on your hiney before you sit on the sofa tonight."

"Tell me why you're home early," he said.

"Everyone had something better to do, so there was none of the regular long-winded discussions. We laid out the projects, assigned tasks, and left. Sal was glad for a night off. That woman has been working all hours of the day getting ready for the arts festival. You're lucky to have her on the planning committee for the new elementary school."

He shook his head as he headed for the porch. "That building can't happen fast enough. Hopefully, the board will entertain bids pretty soon." Coming back with the trash can, he plopped it in front of the table. "Missy. Start dumping. Don't worry about your hands. We'll clean up when the trash is managed."

Missy rubbed her saucy hands together and held them up so her mother could see them. "I'm sticky."

"I should leave the room," Jody said, "but I'm hungry."

"Wings right here, Mom," Brandon said. He started to pick up the container and she shook her head. "Don't touch those."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want your germy germs all over my wings."

"My germy germs aren't germy," he said.

Jody snagged a wet cloth from Rick's hands, wiped down a chair before sitting, and picked up a chicken wing. She tapped it back into the container. "These are really saucy."

"That's right," Missy said. "See why there's a mess?"

"They are also really good."

Rick handed another wet cloth to Brandon and said, "Wash your hands, then go upstairs. You are taking the first bath."

"I don't want to take a bath tonight," Brandon whined. "I just took one last night."

"Oh, the horrors," Jody said, her mouth full of chicken.

"You aren't supposed to talk with your mouth full," Missy said. Jody swallowed. "You're right. I should be punished."

"Make her clean up the rest of the kitchen, Daddy," Missy said.

Rick took in a sharp breath, waiting for the hammer to fall. When Jody continued to eat, he chuckled. "Those must be miracle wings."

"Nope," Jody said. "I clean all the time. If Missy wants to challenge me, I'll match her cleaning time for cleaning time."

"Sorry, Mommy."

Jody nodded at her daughter and passed off the wet cloth as Missy stuffed more paper towels into the trash can. "No fries or cole slaw or any other sides?"

"Did you want something? Once we started eating the wings, we were glad we hadn't ordered more food," Rick said. "What would you like to drink?"

"Water would be nice."

"I'll get it," Missy said.

Rick laughed. "Wash your hands first. And you might want to wash your face, too. Brandon. Go. It's bathtime for Bonzo."

"But ..."

"But nothing. You can come back downstairs when you're sparking clean, but not before. Missy. When he's finished, it's your turn. Both of you had better make sure your clothes are in the hamper and not on the floor."

Jody sat back and watched the kitchen get cleaned up. When Brandon came back from his bath, everything was nearly back to normal.

Missy was sent on her way and Rick sat down at the table. "Sorry about the mess."

"I was mostly kidding, but it was a bit surprising to see barbecue sauce covering our children."

"I should have taken them out to the back yard."

"Stop it," she said. "Look. It's all over. How was the rest of your day?"

Rick shrugged. "Two new families registered their children for school. Our classrooms are filling up. If we don't get this new building passed, we're going to have to beg, borrow, and steal to

have enough room to hold everyone.

"I know you didn't expect to deal with overcrowding when you took this job. Are you still glad we moved here?"

He smiled. "I knew that a second elementary school was around the corner. Until we get there, things will be difficult. It will be a long couple of years, but I'm glad to be in Bellingwood. What about you?"

"I don't know that I could have asked for a better neighborhood. Everyone simply assumed that I was going to be their friend even before we moved in. I kind of like it."

"Can I tell you a secret?" Rick asked, lowering his voice to a quiet murmur.

"Sure?"

"I cheated."

"What do you mean?" Jody laughed at him. He was much too serious.

"I deliberately put Brandon in Cat Harvey's classroom."

"That's cheating?"

"How often am I going to be able to make sure that he has the best teacher available before someone accuses me of nepotism?"

"Will she be intimidated by the fact that he's the principal's son?"

"Not at all," Rick said.

"Would other teachers try to suck up to you by giving him a break?"

He shrugged.

"Then you put that boy where he'll be challenged. If Cat isn't afraid of you, that's where he belongs."

"Missy will be with Maude Wallers."

"I like that woman," Jody said. "I haven't gotten to know her well, but that will change this year. From what I hear, she doesn't put up with much from kids or their parents."

"I wasn't sure if it was a good idea to let Missy be in the same classroom with Cassidy, but after talking with Maude, she assured me it wouldn't be a problem."

"Polly and I will help her make sure it isn't a problem," Jody asserted. "If you hear a hint that there is anything going on, don't

hesitate to tell me."

"Those poor kids of ours won't get away with much."

"And they shouldn't. Not on my watch."

"What are we doing tonight?" Brandon asked, coming into the kitchen. He blinked as he looked around. "This is really clean."

"You owe me, bud," Rick said.

"But you're the one who sent me upstairs. So, what are we going to do?"

"What do you want to do?" Jody asked.

"Watch a movie?" Brandon asked hopefully.

"Nope."

"Eat ice cream?"

She glanced at Rick, who nodded.

"I can't believe you want to eat more food," Jody said. "How are you not stuffed to the rafters?"

He waved his hand over the top of his head and she laughed out loud.

"What? Those are the rafters. I have room."

"No," she said, taking his arm. "How in the world did you manage to not wash your elbow? You still have sauce there."

"I couldn't see it."

Jody stood up, guided him to the sink, opened the drawer and laughed out loud when she discovered there wasn't a single clean dish cloth left. She swiped down a paper towel, wet it and scrubbed at Brandon's elbow. "What else did you miss?" Jody swiped at his ears, another spot that was rarely cleaned. "How about this?" She rubbed the wet paper towel across his lips.

"That was gross," he said.

"Germy germs?"

Missy pranced into the kitchen in her pink night shirt and shorts. "Did I hear ice cream?"

"Where were you?" Rick asked.

"Looking for a movie just in case. I scrubbed behind my ears, Mommy."

"Good for you. What about a game? You pick tonight."

"But we get ice cream, too, right?" Missy asked.

Jody couldn't imagine eating one more thing, but why not? Summer didn't last all year long and before they knew it, school would start, curfews would go into effect, and evenings would be all too short. "Ice cream, too. We're going to try to be a little less sticky, though."

Brandon followed his sister to the shelf where the games resided and Rick took the dirty paper towel from his wife's hands. "I'm glad you came home early tonight. We don't do this often enough."

"It's only going to get worse as they grow older," Jody said. "Missy is much too busy with her friends. Once Brandon makes a few more, we'll never see him either. I'm just going to hold on as long as I can."

"Chocolate sauce?" he asked, heading for the cupboard.

"And the chopped nuts. Might as well go all out."

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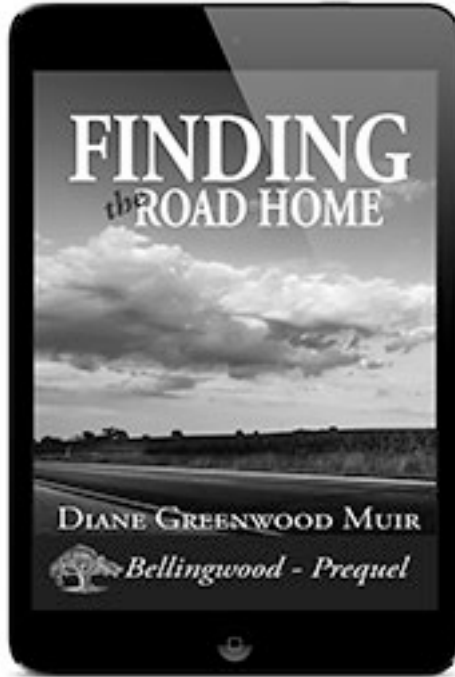


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I'm so glad you enjoy these stories about Polly Giller and her friends. There are many ways to stay in touch with Diane and the Bellingwood community.

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