



# ALWAYS *and* FOREVER

## *Vignettes*



DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



*Bellingwood - Book 40*



# Book Forty 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 40 — Always and Forever — 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**

### **Grease Under His Nails**

"Thanks for the ride, Mr. Waters," Caleb said.

"It's too cold for you to walk this morning. I appreciate having the extra help. Justin should be in today, too. We're busy."

"Because it's been so cold?"

"That might be it," Kirk said. "People travel to visit family during the holidays and want to know their cars will get them where they want to go. We also have a special truck in the shop today. I think you'll like it."

"Is it new?" Caleb asked.

"Not this truck. It's a 1973 Ford. Bright red. Mr. Landers has been taking care of it since he bought it just out of college. He's a little too old to be crawling underneath it, so we'll change the oil for him. He also brought in new headlights for us to replace."

"He doesn't have to crawl under the truck to do that, does he?" Caleb asked.

"No, but if you saw his hands, you'd see why we do it for him. He worked hard all his life and his hands are gnarled. He has trouble making them do what he wants."

"It's a cool truck?"

"One of the coolest. Mr. Lansing knows that Bruce and I are grease monkeys from way back. My dad had me working on cars as soon as I could hold a wrench."

"I wish Dad would do that for me," Caleb said.

"Your dad isn't quite the gearhead that mine was. He's got that beautiful T-bird, but he doesn't drive it enough to get it dirty. Henry has other things to focus on. That's why he talked to me about you coming to the garage. If you're interested in cars, it's time to teach you all about them."

"You think I can learn?"

Kirk glanced over at Caleb and smiled. "You can learn. I didn't get enough time with Justin because I was in the service, but even

still, he learned to love working with cars. Tell you what, we should get you some magazines to look at. You can take a few home from the front."

"Magazines?" Caleb asked. "Like paper magazines?"

Kirk laughed out loud. "You kids these days. Back when I was your age, I pored over every car magazine that came into the house. Hmm, I wonder ..."

"Wonder what, sir?"

"Wonder if Dad still has all those magazines packed in boxes out in the shed. Trust me, there are a lot of pictures in them, so they're fun to look at."

"Could I?"

"I'll give Dad a call and see what he says. Andrea will kill me if I bring them into the house." Kirk winked at Caleb. "But if I tell her that I'm letting you borrow them, maybe she'll allow me to live. That way I can look at them again, too."

"What's in the magazines that makes you want to look at them again?"

"We didn't have the internet back then, so we couldn't look up how to take care of the cars we owned. Magazines gave us hints and directions about how to do things. Articles told us about the newest cars and trucks coming out. Some of the articles were about the crazy models that carmakers came up with. Things like flying cars and vehicles that drove through water. Those types of things. We learned about the different vehicles the military used and I remember one that talked about the Mars rovers. Of course that was later, but it was still cool to see what they were doing. Who knows, maybe you could become a rocket scientist and work on a future vehicle for NASA."

"Yeah, right."

"You never know." Kirk sighed. "I remember a Hot Rod magazine that Dad ordered for me. We never built any because we didn't have the tools, but they were fun to look at. And they're really fun to see on the road. Did your dad take you to the car show this summer?"

"I looked around some, but he was busy talking to people."

"Didn't know what you were looking at, though, did you?"

"Not really. But I can learn about those things from magazines?"

"Absolutely. I'll talk to your dad. Maybe it's time for you to subscribe to one or two so you can read them at night."

"I don't read very much."

Kirk pulled into the garage parking area. He turned in his seat. "Neither did I, Caleb. I hated reading."

"But you married a professor!" Caleb's eyes were huge.

"Aren't I the lucky one? Those car magazines saved me. All that reading helped me get smart." He craned his neck to look behind him. "You know what we're going to do today?"

"Work on a 1970 Ford pickup truck?"

Kirk laughed. "Yes. We're going to do that, but afterwards, one of us is walking over to the library with you."

"The library?" Caleb frowned. That wasn't his favorite place. "Why?"

"Two reasons. We're going to see what kind of car magazines they carry, and we're going to ask Mrs. Mikkels to show you the section of books about cars and drivers. Have you ever watched a NASCAR or an Indycar race?"

Caleb nodded enthusiastically. "Not very often, but those are so cool. I like all the cars. It would be fun to watch one get built."

"Not very often?"

"Everybody else is always watching moves and stuff."

"It's a big deal at our house. Sunday afternoon racing. I'm going to have a talk with your dad about that, too. You can come over and watch with me and Nat. The girls like to watch, but they get easily bored. Andrea says it's the perfect time for a nap. All that background noise puts her right to sleep."

"That would be great! Do you think Mom will let me?"

"Your mom will think it's a good idea. Let's go inside and get to work. We have a lot to do today." Kirk grinned at Caleb. "I do have one bit of bad news for you, though."

"Oh no." Caleb's shoulders drooped. "What did I do?"

"It's what you are going to do. The bathroom hasn't been cleaned since you were here two weeks ago. It needs a good scrub down."

Caleb nodded. "That's okay. I don't mind doing it here. I just hate doing it when I'm in trouble."

"At least you've learned how, right?"

"Yes, sir." Caleb got out of the truck and waited.

Kirk had finally gotten a good prosthetic leg and Caleb had never seen him without it since. He only had a slight limp, but when he wore his jeans or coveralls, you'd never know.

Caleb walked with him, but hurried to hold the door open. Justin and Bruce McKenzie were already inside and Caleb smelled coffee. His mom didn't let him drink pop at home, but he wasn't about to tell the guys here that, so when Justin asked what kind he wanted, Caleb pointed to a Mountain Dew. It was his favorite. He heard his mom talk about how much she used to drink it. If she did, he could. The one time Kirk gave him one in front of her, she wasn't mad or anything, so he figured it wasn't a big deal.

"Hannah sent muffins," Bruce said. He pointed at one of the tables beside the front window. When they got here early, everyone had coffee and breakfast. Caleb liked being part of this group. They treated him like he belonged. Other than home, he'd never felt that way before.

Everyone found a place to sit and Kirk pushed a magazine in front of Caleb. "*Car and Driver*. This is a good one to read."

"Car magazines?" Bruce asked. "Man, my dad didn't like me reading those when I was in school."

"Why not?" Caleb asked. "Are they bad?"

"Not bad. He wanted me to be a farmer. I wanted to work on cars. I was fine helping with his tractors, but riding those things back and forth and then ... " He shook his head in disgust. "That was not the life for me."

"Takes a special kind of person to like farming," Kirk said. "I wasn't much for it either, but Dad knew that. He really knew it when I took off and joined the service."

Bruce laughed. "I ran away. Didn't want to join the service. I'm glad you did, though. Brought you back to Bellingwood."

"I just got to go to work," Justin said around a mouthful of muffin.

His father scowled at him. "What would your mother say?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Caleb said. "At least that's what my mom says."

Justin laughed, swallowed, and said, "Moms are all the same. I think there's a rulebook out there of things that moms say to raise their kids right. If there isn't, someone should write it all down. Wouldn't want a mother to ever forget one."

"Please and thank you," Caleb said.

"Don't hit your sister," Bruce said. "Of course, I didn't have a sister, but Hannah says it all the time. These days, Emma hits back."

"Clean the bathroom." Caleb looked at Kirk with a smile.

"I need to learn that," Bruce said. "Cleaning isn't easy at home."

Kirk put his hand on Caleb's back. "The bathroom here will be cleaned today. I hired a professional."

Justin laughed out loud, nearly spitting out another bite of muffin. "Little buddy, better you than me. It's always been my Saturday job. I couldn't believe it when you took it away from me."

"We're going to have you clean the front today, too. Okay, Caleb?" Bruce asked. "It's been a busy week and I haven't had time to get to it. Speaking of that. Justin, there's a Honda in the far bay that needs extra work today. I was supposed to have it done yesterday. Mrs. Graves was nice enough, but I want her to be happy. Should be done by noon, okay?"

"On it." Justin jammed the rest of the muffin in his mouth and stood up, taking his coffee mug with him. He swallowed and pointed out the window. "One of these days, Caleb, maybe you'll get your dad to work on his Woodie."

Caleb followed Justin's fingers and sighed. "I wonder if he'd let me drive it if we got it fixed."

"You know he would," Kirk said. "What do you have, three years before you get your license?"

"Yeah."

"If we started this winter, we should be able to have it ready for you in time. I heard your mom say she wanted to drive it."

"Oh." Caleb was disappointed. "Dad probably bought it for her, didn't he?"

"How long has it been sitting around, Bruce?" Kirk asked.

"Years. It sat at Mikkels' place before they hauled it up here. Both of those Woodies were sitting out there. Nate and Henry got started and then ran out of time, from what I hear." Bruce stood and swiped up some of the trash. "I'm pretty sure that if you put in the time on that thing, Henry would be more than glad to let you drive it around town. But we'll have to find you something newer to drive back and forth to school."

Caleb took a swig from his pop can and set it down before standing up. "I should get started on that bathroom."

"When you're done, come out to the garage," Kirk said. "I'll show you how we change the oil on that truck and you can help me with the lights. After that you can work on the front room here. Sound good?"

"Yes, sir." Caleb smiled. "Okay if I put this behind the counter?" He did it whenever he was here, but he always asked first. Seemed like the right thing to do.

"You bet." Kirk took a little longer to stand up. After he got his balance, he patted Caleb's shoulder. "You're doing good, Caleb. Appreciate your help. Keep watching and asking questions. When it comes to cars, anyone who is worth anything is happy to answer anything you ask. We all had to learn. No question is dumb. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"See you in the garage in a bit."

Caleb stood a little taller. He set his pop in its usual place under the counter, then went to the closet to get the bucket and cleaning supplies. He didn't mind cleaning this bathroom a single bit. If it meant he got to learn about cars, he'd clean the whole building.

## **Vignette #2**

### **Make My Wish Come True**

Kayla collapsed on her sofa and waited for Flash to show up for snuggles. The holiday season was exhausting and she had to pull it together fast. Quentin was driving to Bellingwood to pick her up and take her to his parents' house for dinner. Christmas was hard work, that's for sure. She didn't know how she'd managed to get involved with a boy who like hanging out with his family.

That made her laugh. She liked hanging out with hers and her friends all enjoyed their own families. It would be easier if Quentin didn't have any family, though. She forced her eyes open and pushed Flash's purring, furry body away. "I don't have time for this. I barely have time for a shower."

She was supposed to have been finished working at noon, but somebody hadn't shown up and they were so busy, Kayla volunteered for the extra hours. She would always volunteer for extra hours.

It would have been too much to ask that tonight was only her and Quentin. They had barely seen each other since Thanksgiving. They didn't work the same hours and any extra time she had, she worked at the hotel. This year she wanted to buy all the Christmas gifts she'd dreamed about giving Stephanie and Skylar, Rebecca and Andrew. She'd even found a pretty ornament for Polly and another to give to Mrs. Worth. Quentin's gift had been ridiculously expensive, which was one reason she took as many hours as possible. She'd started planning for it in October. The rest of the gifts had been built into her budget since the day she got the job at the grocery store. Kayla and Stephanie had worked so hard to build a life, she wasn't about to mess that up now that she was on her own.

She hauled herself off the sofa. Her heart leaped at the sound of a knock.

"Nooo," Kayla moaned. "It's too early." She looked out the

peephole and shook her head before opening the door. "You're early," she said to Quentin.

He held up two large gift bags and smiled. "I know. It's okay. I told Mom we were going to be late."

"But she's making dinner."

"She's making soup. Dad said I wasn't supposed to worry. We can get there when we get there."

"I haven't taken a shower."

"I saw your name on the schedule at work. After the holidays, you're going to work less, right?"

Kayla hadn't moved from the door and he reached past her to set one of the bags on the floor. "Sorry," she said.

"I thought maybe there was a toll or something."

"Or something," Kayla said. Her eyes burned, she was so tired. "Give me a push."

Quentin gave her a quick kiss on the lips. "Will that let me in the door?"

"I'm sorry," Kayla repeated and stepped back.

"You really are tired." Quentin pushed the door closed, set the other bag down and knelt to scoop Flash up in his arms. "If you don't want to go, it's okay."

"That's not fair. It's Christmas."

"Kayla, stop it. Hopefully, we'll have a ton of Christmases ahead of us. We could go tomorrow afternoon if you want. Mom and Dad won't care."

"No, I'll be fine. I need a shower and a few minutes to think."

"Did you eat any lunch today?" Quentin asked as she headed for the bedroom.

"No time."

"Kayla," he scolded.

"Be back in a while," she said.

He was such a nice guy and if she let him, he would take care of her. It didn't seem right, though. She'd let everyone always take care of her. First, Stephanie, then Rebecca and Andrew. Even Polly and now Skylar, too. Sometimes it felt like they all thought she was a pitiful child.

Right now she felt like a pitiful child. Kayla put her dirty clothes into the hamper and made sure her robe was hanging on the bathroom door. She had never taken a shower while Quentin was in the apartment. It would be just her luck that she would come out of the bathroom and he'd be in her bedroom. Not that he'd really ever been in here before either.

Rebecca and Andrew messed around, but Kayla was terrified of the whole thing. She knew what had happened between Stephanie and her father and she knew that wasn't normal, but it all kind of freaked her out.

Quentin was so polite. They kissed. They kissed a lot and she loved kissing him. She loved it when he put his arms around her. He always made her feel safe and cared for. He never pushed for more either. Did he even want more? Maybe he didn't like her that way.

"Stop it," she muttered. She'd had all of these conversations with Rebecca, who told her that she was nuts. According to Rebecca and Andrew, Quentin was head over heels for Kayla.

She fondled the pendant he'd given her earlier this fall, then took it off and set it on the bathroom counter. He said the stone was the color of her eyes.

When the water had warmed up, Kayla stood under the shower and let it pour over her head. Was this what being in love felt like? She didn't know. Quentin was the first boy to ever get beyond a couple of dates with her. And he wanted to stay with her. He wasn't going anywhere.

She hurried through her shower, dried off, put her robe on and wrapped a towel around her head. It wasn't fair to leave him waiting, even though it took a lot longer than this for her to get ready to be seen in public.

"Are you done already?" Quentin called through the door. "Come out here. I have something I want to show you."

"I'm not dressed yet," Kayla called back.

"You're naked?" She heard the laughter in his voice.

"No. I have a robe on."

"Then, come out here."

Kayla opened the bedroom door and walked into the small living room. Quentin held up a beautiful red sweater. "I thought you could wear this tomorrow when we go to your sister's for Christmas."

"What about tonight at your mom and dad's?"

"I just talked to Mom. She said that we're supposed to come over tomorrow night. She and Dad are going to church with some friends."

"What? Why? Because I worked too late?"

"Because I asked if it would be okay. Are you mad at me?"

She sagged. "Not at all. That's amazing. You're sure?"

"We've all worked," Quentin said. "I can't tell you how many meals and holidays and events we've rescheduled because of work commitments. It's no big deal."

"I don't have to go anywhere tonight? I don't have to dress up?"

"Nope."

"I love you!" In a burst of emotion, Kayla threw her arms around him. Then, she realized what she'd done and what she'd said. She stopped, backed up, and headed for the bedroom.

"Where are you going?"

"Just a minute. I'm sorry."

Quentin caught her before she closed the bedroom door. He pushed it open and walked in. "You just said that you loved me. Did you mean it?"

Tears spurted to Kayla's eyes. She was absolutely terrified of this conversation. "I don't know."

"Because I love you," he said softly, taking her hand. "I really do."

"That makes no sense to me. I don't even know if I know what it means when you say that." Kayla started to cry. "I'm sorry. I wish Rebecca was here."

"I'm glad she's not," Quentin said. "Talk to me instead, would you?"

"I don't know what to say." Kayla sat on the edge of the bed, then readjusted her robe so she wasn't sharing anything she shouldn't. "I don't know how to talk about this stuff."

"Neither do I, Kayla. But we're supposed to be best friends."

"We've hardly talked to each other in a month."

"Because it's been busy. Right? Not because you didn't want to be with me."

Kayla couldn't look up. Was he really as unsure about her as she was about him? That would be crazy. Quentin was liked at work. His managers liked him. The people he supervised liked him. Cathy Costa liked him. She shook her head.

"What?"

"What what?" Kayla asked.

"You shook your head. Do you not want to be with me?"

That made her giggle. "I was thinking about how Cathy Costa flirts with you all the time at work."

"She flirts with everyone. I don't care about that. I care about you. Kayla, I love you."

"Do you really? Because I have never loved a boy before. Rebecca has only ever loved Andrew. Is this what love really is?"

"I don't know. What do you think it is?"

Kayla shrugged. "I have no idea. Patience, wanting to be with someone, feeling good when they're around, wanting to make them happy."

"Patience?"

"I need someone with a lot of patience. Sometimes I do dumb things."

"Like run away after you tell me you love me?" He smiled at her. "You're not dumb, Kayla."

She shrugged again. This wasn't a conversation that she enjoyed having with anyone. Rebecca kept trying to tell her the same thing. Stephanie and Skylar were always telling her that she wasn't dumb, but dang it, school had been hard work and she never had the grades that Rebecca and Andrew had. Heck, if they hadn't been there to explain some things to her, she might not have even graduated.

"It makes me mad that someone ever made you think you were dumb," Quentin said. He put an arm around her shoulders. "Look at you. You have your own place. You did it all by yourself. My dad had to put up my first month's rent."

"Because you were paying for college. I don't want to go to college."

"So what? That doesn't mean you're dumb."

"It means I'll be uneducated."

"That you believe that means you're pretty smart. If you ever want to get a college degree, you can do it. You sure don't have to do it right away."

"Everyone else does."

"Because it's part of their long-term plan." He chuckled. "Some of my friends went to college because they didn't know what else they wanted to do."

"I don't know that either." She slumped away from him. "I don't even know if I want to be a career girl. What if I want to get married and be a mom?"

"Then, we'll get married and have kids."

She slowly turned to him. "What?"

"Not right now," he said. "We're not ready. But why not?"

"Because ..." Kayla's voice trailed off. She really wished Rebecca was here. She needed help with this.

"You're the planner," Quentin said. "Even more than me. You know that we aren't ready right now, but maybe someday." He smiled at her. "Maybe I can get you to tell me that you love me a few more times before I buy a ring."

"How are we even talking about this?" Kayla asked.

"I want to talk about everything with you, Kayla. How many kids do you want? Where do you want to live? Do you want to work after the kids are in school? When do you want them to start pre-school? Maybe you want to start your own pre-school. Who knows? If we figure things out together, we can do anything."

She dropped back on the bed, then remembered to tug her robe closed around her. Quentin dropped back beside her. He reached over to take her hand.

"Do you think you love me?" he asked.

Kayla nodded, then turned to face him. "I think so."

"Can we stay up late tonight? I'll sleep on the couch. Then we can go over to your sister's place in the morning."

"You want to stay here?"

"If I could get away with it, I'd move in, but we're not there yet either, are we?"

"I don't know."

Quentin sat straight up. "Maybe?"

"I don't know," Kayla said. She used his strength as leverage to pull herself back up. The towel from her head had fallen off and wet hair draped around her face. "I'm a mess."

"You're perfect," he said and kissed her lips.

"Merry Christmas," Kayla said breathily. "You're really staying tonight?"

"Sure. I'll even make dinner. I know you have food in the place."

"You're really staying?"

"Is it okay?"

She nodded. "Is this really love?"

"I hope so. Because I love you."

## **Vignette #3**

### **Family Gifts**

Reuben Greene set the pizza boxes on the table in the main dining room.

"In here, please," Judy said, pointing to the kitchen counter.

She'd set out a glittery table cloth, candles were lit, and had confetti poppers at each place setting. The decorations for the New Year's Eve party were festive with a large 2023 banner hanging from the window shade, party hats on the table, and a photo booth with props off to the side. While his wife had agreed to paper plates and plastic champagne glasses, they were the fanciest paper plates and plastic champagne glasses he'd ever seen.

He carried the pizza boxes into the kitchen. "Are you planning to use the good china for pizza platters?"

"Put those in the oven. It's warm. We're early."

"Of course we're early. You are always over-prepared."

She looked up from the cheese ball she was shaping and gave him an eye-roll.

"When do you expect people to show up?"

"Any minute now. Would you hit that button?" She pointed at the wall where the sound and intercom system had been installed.

"You have it pre-programmed, don't you?"

"You ask such obvious questions. Just hit the button."

He did and the Christmas music that had been playing throughout the building for the last three weeks came on.

The bed and breakfast's New Year's Eve celebration was happening three days early because Judy wanted everyone to enjoy an evening of fun without guests in the building. None of them would likely be out at big parties on New Year's Eve, but Judy couldn't stand the idea of taking the opportunity from them. Besides, both she and Reuben were looking forward to an evening of peace and quiet. They hadn't scheduled any guests for this weekend except one and he'd be busy elsewhere.

"Hello!" Alison Francisco walked into the kitchen. She held up a

platter. "I made cookies. Lots of cookies."

"Post-Christmas cookies?" Reuben asked.

She laughed. "It's crazy, right? None of us need any more cookies, but Mom had a party to attend and I had this, so we went crazy."

"You didn't need to bring anything at all. This party is for you," Judy said.

"Then you get to keep the cookies."

Judy scowled at her. "Not on your life. Whatever we don't eat goes home with you or Mary or Jill."

Mary Francis walked in next. "What's going home with me?"

"Any of Alison's uneaten cookies. You have kids that will eat them." Judy peered behind her. "You didn't bring them with you?"

"No. Libby was in a snit and it was easier to assign her to babysitting duty. The others were busy with their phones. Can't get those kids to be interested in things outside their virtual worlds."

This conversation had taken place many times before and Judy avoided it. Mary did her best raising her kids alone, and if allowing them to be attached to their phones was what kept her sane, it wasn't Judy's place to judge.

"Where would you like me to put this?" Mary asked, holding out a tray.

"What did you bring?" Judy shook her head. "I told you all that you didn't need to bring anything."

"It's my mother's favorite dip," Mary said. "I cut up vegetables. You didn't do that, did you?"

"No." Judy had, but the vegetables were in the refrigerator and she'd find a way to hide them. "I have a cheese ball that will add to the fun."

"Hello?" Jill's voice came from the front of the building.

"Back here," Mary called out. "Did you bring Jack?"

Jill walked in carrying a casserole dish. "I'm sorry. I couldn't come empty-handed. Mrs. Worth and I made stuffed mushrooms. Is that okay?"

"That's perfect," Judy said. "Reuben, would you get one of the trivets for her?" She pointed at the drawer where he'd find them.

"No Jack?" Mary asked.

"He's working late tonight," Jill said. "Helping Doug Shaffer finish some last minute gifts."

"Looks like you're the only in the room with testosterone," Mary said to Reuben as he slipped past her to the table. She opened her eyes wide. "I'm sorry. That was rude."

Reuben chuckled. "You're right, though. I have more of that than any of the rest of you. Jill, do you need me to put that in the oven to warm up?"

She looked relieved at his question. "Yes, please. Thank you."

He tapped the dish to ensure it wasn't too hot. Jill had her winter gloves on. Though warm, he could hold the edges. Reuben set it on the stovetop, opened the first oven and wanted to kick himself. He was the one who had put the pizzas in here to stay warm. He put the dish in the upper oven and turned it on.

"Find a place to sit," Judy said. "I'm glad you came out tonight. The three of you have no idea how important you are to me. When I took this job, I was excited about the gardens and the greenhouse. The thought of washing dishes and laundry and cleaning and guests was in the back of my mind, but only as a secondary connection."

Jill shrugged out of her coat, then stood beside Mary, waiting to take hers.

"Thanks," Mary said.

Reuben hurried over to take the coats from Jill. "It's on me, tonight," he said. "I'm the testosterone-filled manservant."

His words elicited uncomfortable laughter.

"You ladies are going to have to loosen up," he said. "Judy, how about some of that champagne?"

"None for me," Jill said.

"Or me," Mary echoed.

Alison looked at the two of them as if they were crazy. "I know both of you drink alcohol. Do you not like champagne?"

"Not if I have to drive home."

"One glass with dinner," Alison said. "We're celebrating a year of good work, right?" She looked to Reuben for agreement.

"I have sparkling grape juice," Judy said. "Let's have a seat."

Reuben held the chair for Mary and then scooted to Jill's seat to grab hers. She looked at him in surprise. By the time he got to Alison, she'd seated herself, but he held a chair for his wife, then sat beside her.

Judy looked at him and nodded.

"Because the three of you are here," Reuben said, "I don't have to do all of those tasks that Judy spoke of earlier, leaving me free to create. Maybe you look at this as nothing more than a job, but we see you as family."

"You are our family," Judy echoed. She reached under her chair and pulled out a gift bag, then set it in front of Reuben. "If I were to do this, I'd end up crying, so tough-boy has offered to be my mouthpiece."

He chuckled and flexed his muscles. He wore a bright red sweatshirt and you couldn't see the muscles, but since he'd gotten to Bellingwood and opened his foundry, he had built up more muscle than he'd ever imagined.

"Focus," she whispered.

He gave her a side-eyed glance. How did she always know?

Reuben set the bag in his lap so he could see what he was doing. Start with the large envelopes. He pulled out three and as he read the names on the front, handed them to each of the women at the table, standing so he could reach across to Mary.

"Mary," he said. "You have had a difficult year and we are grateful you are still with us. Judy knew the day you chose to move from the gallery to the B&B that you would be her right hand. You have given so much of yourself to us and to this place.

She opened the card, looked at what was inside and gasped. "What? That's two thousand dollars."

"You can do whatever you want with the money," Judy said. "It's yours from Sycamore Enterprises."

Jill and Alison both opened their envelopes and returned looks of shock when they saw the same amount on a pay stub.

"I haven't been here that long," Jill said. "Mine should be a lot less than this."

"And that's why it isn't," Reuben replied. "You give of yourself sacrificially to everyone you come in contact with. We see how hard you work throughout the Sycamore system. And to top it off, you offer your time to Doug Shaffer because he needs someone to be at home when his kids arrive.

"This is too much." Jill pushed it toward Judy. "I can't accept it."

"It's in your bank account already," Judy said. "That's just the pay report. And Alison, the day you came to work for me, we both thought it would be for only a few hours on the weekends. Suddenly, you were here before you went to work at the Alehouse because we needed more help this fall. You didn't wait to be asked, you showed up. You have taken over more and more in the kitchen, leaving me free to do the things I love to do."

"I can move out," Alison whispered. "I can get my own place now. Thank you."

"We have two more gifts for each of you," Reuben said. "These come directly from us and can't be refused." He glared at Jill, who looked away. "The first is a gift certificate to the dress boutique downtown. I know you think I'm crazy, but this Sunday is the big Sycamore House Ten Year Anniversary. It's a formal affair. We'd like you all to be there, but understand that formal dresses are likely not your thing. This is from us. Miss Gutierrez is aware of who you are and brought clothing in that you might enjoy wearing more than once." He passed out those gift cards.

Alison would have no problem finding a formal dress in the boutique, but neither Jill nor Mary would likely have any experience with a fancy dress shop.

"I'll go with you," Alison said to Jill. "I've seen some of her clothes and they're fun."

Judy smiled at Mary. "The four of us should go together. How about tomorrow afternoon?"

"I have to work," Jill said.

Judy and Alison both gave her a look. "Where?" Alison asked.

She didn't have a response. The Shaffer kids weren't in school this week and unless she'd taken extra hours at the Alehouse, she was free.

"Jack would love it if you found something nice, wouldn't he?" Alison asked.

"Fine."

"The last gift card is silliness," Judy said. "They handed these out to every employee at the Christmas party ..."

Reuben interrupted. "That you didn't attend."

Jill frowned. "I was there."

"But you didn't take it," Judy said. "I watched."

Sweet Beans gift cards had been handed out to nearly everyone at the party. Judy snagged three to share with her team.

Mary and Jill turned to Alison.

"I guess I'm the mouthy one of the employees," Alison said. She nodded at Mary, who handed an envelope she'd been sitting on to Reuben. "While we can't afford to buy your plane tickets ..."

"We could now," Jill said.

"Right?" Alison went on. "This certificate declares that all you have to do is give us enough time to make sure we're available and we will work extra hours and do whatever it takes so you can go to California and spend time with your kids. If you want to do it in the middle of the summer, we'll be fine. If you want to go be warm while it's freezing here, we'll be fine. But you have to go. Just like we have to use these gifts that you've given us, you must use the one we give you. I talked to Mr. Lyndsay and he agreed that this is important."

Judy took Reuben's hand. He couldn't help it. Tears leaked from his eyes when he saw hers glisten.

"This is what family does," Judy said. "Thank you for being part of ours."

## **Vignette #4**

### **Happy New Year?**

"I'm too old for this," Bill Sturtz complained.

Betty Mercer slapped her cards on the table and said, "Gin. You're never too old to be beaten at gin rummy by your sister. What else do you have to complain about?"

"Why are you still here in my house?" he asked her.

Marie swatted his arm. "What?"

"It's ten o'clock on a Saturday night and we're still awake. I'm in bed by ten o'clock."

"Not true," Marie said. She pointed at the recliner in the living room. "You might be snoring like a freight train, but you aren't in bed."

"Tonight, I'm not even doing that." He gathered the cards into a stack and shuffled them once, twice, a third time and set them down. "Anyone feel the need to cut?"

Dick tapped the top of the deck and said, "Deal."

"What are you wearing tomorrow, Marie?" Betty asked.

Marie smiled. "I have that dress I wore to Lonnie's wedding. What about you?"

"Same," Betty said with a grin. "That's the last time we dressed up all fancy? I'm sad for us."

Her husband looked at her. "You're sad about not dressing up in our fancy duds? Crazy woman." He grinned at Bill. "I'm pulling out my best work boots. Gonna polish them and make 'em shine."

"He's not," Betty assured Bill and Dick. "Not if he wants me to feed him for the next week."

"They're black," Dick protested. "They'll fit with my suit."

"It's a good thing these parties don't happen too often," Bill said. "All this dressing up and being nice to people and smiling and greeting. I'm too old for it."

"What has gotten all up in your craw?" his sister asked. "You're a curmudgeon tonight. Bill Sturtz, this is the end of one year and tomorrow starts a new one. Why are you being so grumpy?"

"Don't like change."

"You mean like a calendar change?" Betty asked.

"Don't like change. And I'm tired and I don't like dressing up and I should be in bed and she won't even let me have champagne." He pointed at Marie.

"We have sparkling grape juice," Marie said.

"Like I said."

"Do you want us to leave?" Betty asked.

Marie's head shot up and she glared at her husband. "Don't you dare. We stay up late one night in a year. We don't go out and party, we don't invite huge groups of people over. We're in our own home with your sister, whom you love, and your best friend. I will bruise your legs if you don't stop acting like a whiny baby."

Dick chuckled. "And this woman knows what whiny babies act like."

"I think they're what make me so tired all the time," Bill said. "I want a nap in the afternoon and there are babies everywhere. On my bed, on my sofa, on my recliner, in my kitchen."

Marie raised her eyebrows.

Bill smirked. "I'm getting myself into so much trouble."

When Marie stood, she bumped his shoulder with her hip and walked out of the room. "Anyone else want something to drink?" she asked.

"Am I supposed to follow her?" Bill asked Dick and Betty.

"You'd be a fool not to," Dick said.

"I tend toward that on a regular basis," Bill retorted. He pushed his chair back and headed for the kitchen. "Can I help you, dear?"

"Don't you dear me, you wretched brat."

"That's a new one."

"You're presenting new behavior. What is wrong with you?"

"I'm tired. This has been a hard week and with kids showing up early every morning and both shops busy and boys wanting to work on the trains, I haven't had a minute's peace."

"And what do you think is going to happen Monday morning?"

"What do you mean?"

"Monday morning. What will happen then?"

"I don't know."

"We won't see anyone. No kids, no employees, no family, no one."

"Yay?"

"Right. You can nap and be a sloth and scratch your butt and pick your nose for all I care, but tonight, you be nice. I would like to kiss you at midnight to wish you a Happy New Year, but if you don't straighten up, I'm kissing Betty instead."

"That leaves me with ..." His lower lip went out in a pout.

"Yes. Dick. Betty says he's a good kisser. You're about to find out."

"I'll kiss Jangles instead." Bill gave his head a quick shake. He'd just heard what she said. "You and Betty talk about what kind of kissers we are?"

She looked down at the dog that had followed them to the kitchen, hoping for a treat. "Jangles can kiss both of you."

"Answer my question, wife."

"Bite me, husband." Marie handed him a pitcher of iced lemonade. "Put that on the buffet. I'm bringing the rest."

"You still didn't answer my question."

"It was a dumb question."

"Why?"

"Because the answer is obvious. If I told you that Betty said her husband is a good kisser, that means at some point we discussed kissing. Why did you feel the need to ask a question you already had an answer to?"

"You are a hard woman to get along with."

Marie put her hand on the pitcher to ensure it stayed balanced, then lifted on her toes and kissed his lips. "That's what you love about me."

"That's what I put up with you. The good food and clean house are what I love about you."

"Really." Marie reached into a container, took out three small dog treats, crushed them in her hands, then let the crumbles fall to the floor.

He stared at her. "What did you just do?"

"I'm about to put you to a test. I wondered what I was going to resolve to do this new year. You helped me find it."

"What?"

"I'm not going to clean the house and we'll just see if that's the reason you love me."

"A dirty house won't make me love you more."

The two watched Jangles lap at the floor, catching every last crumb of the dog treats.

"Will it make you love me less?" Marie asked.

Bill opened his mouth, then shut it. He thought for a moment, opened it to speak, and then shut it again.

Marie left the meat, cheese and crackers tray on the counter beside the glasses and walked back into the dining room.

"What's happening?" Bill asked. He set the pitcher on the buffet. "Betty, I need your help in the kitchen, please."

When Betty looked at her sister-in-law for guidance, Marie shrugged and smiled. So, she pushed back her chair and followed Bill into the kitchen.

"I've done screwed up," Bill said. "You'd think after all these years, we'd quit fighting each other, but that woman out there doesn't make it easy."

"You idiotic, grumpy, whiny, old man," Betty said, jamming her finger in his chest. "That wife of yours does everything to make your life wonderful. Are you ever romantic with her?"

He knew his own deer-in-the-headlights look and realized it was on his face. "Sometimes."

"When was the last time?"

"I don't remember."

"You've whined and complained all evening. She didn't make you go to a family gathering today. She didn't bring people to your house other than your beloved sister and brother-in-law."

"We'll see," he said.

"She prepared a wonderful dinner and cleaned the house, set up snacks, and what did you do today?"

"I ..." He hesitated. "I ..."

"You went out to chat with the buddies who showed up in the

shop. You didn't have any work to do, you just sat there and chatted with them."

"I did a little sweeping."

"Uh huh. You are a self-centered grump. And tonight, rather than appreciate your wife, you whined about your own rough life. Tonight, she was hoping for one single sweet moment at midnight. A chance to be kissed by the man she loves."

"I kiss her other times."

"It's New Year's Eve," Betty said. "One moment of romance. Are you up for it or are you about to do something really dumb and screw up the beginning of this next year."

"Is it too late?"

"You'd better hope not. I don't want you moving into our house."

"I don't want to live with you. Marie takes better care of me."

Betty narrowed her eyes at him. "Then, figure it out, brother-mine. If you end up at my house, you're living in the dungeon and you'll receive gruel three times a day. If you complain, it will only come down twice a day."

Bill picked up the tray and pointed at the glasses. "Would you take those?"

She turned without touching them and went back into the dining room.

"I'm in trouble with everyone," he muttered to Jangles, who was hoping for another treat. He carried the tray out and set it on the buffet, trailed his fingers across Marie's back as he returned to the kitchen, and picked up the tray of glasses.

Since Bill was the next dealer, he was at a loss. "Should I serve or deal the cards?"

No one spoke to help him. He tried to think about what Marie would do, then picked up glasses and set them in front of each person. He brought the lemonade to the table and set it in front of his wife before taking his seat again. "No cutting, right?"

Dick grinned and nodded. Betty and Marie remained silent.

"Fine," he said with a big sigh. "I'm sorry for being a grumpy, whiny old man. No excuses, no justification. Just - I'm sorry."

"You forgot idiotic," Betty said.

"And wretched," Marie said.

Betty's eyebrows went up. "I like that."

"Help me out, Dick," Bill said.

"When I'm an idiotic wretch, I have to take my lumps. I don't mind watching you take yours."

"I love you all the time, Marie." Bill reached for her hand and was a little surprised that she let him take it. "Not because you do things, but because you are Marie."

"He learns!" Betty said. "Mama said you were smart, but I always wondered how long it would take until your brains showed up."

Bill dealt the cards and smiled at Marie when she poured lemonade into his glass. "I'm sorry. I mean it."

"I know."

"I don't want to kiss Dick or Jangles or anyone else at midnight. You're my favorite kissing partner." Before she could retort, he put up a hand. "You're my only kissing partner. Except when slobber dog gets out of control."

Marie smiled and pushed the pitcher to Dick, who handed it to his wife. She nodded at him and poured for them both.

"You two might need to leave early," Bill said to Betty.

"What?"

"If I'm kissing this wife of mine at midnight, I might not be able to stop."

"Huh," Marie said with a smile. "Things are looking up."

"We can be home in five minutes," Dick said to Betty. "Will you let me kiss you like that, too?"

"I don't want to know," Bill said. "Play the game."

Betty patted her husband's shoulder. "You always do, baby. You always do."

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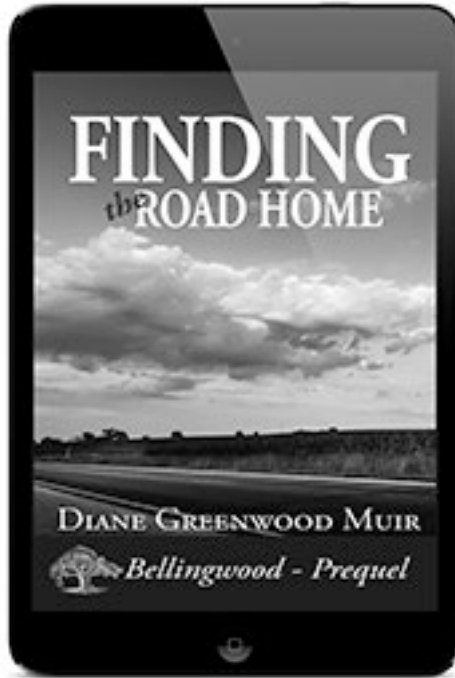
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