



A STORY
UNVEILED
Signettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Book 41

Book Forty-One Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD 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) 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 41 — A Story Unveiled — 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

Wake Up!

"What is that sound?" Anita asked.

He heard her speaking, but nothing made sense. Doug dragged himself up from his dream. What was going on? He'd been chasing a wolf through a forest. Twinkling lights followed him in the leaves of the trees. The more he thought about it, the faster the dream faded. "What?"

"Is that your phone?" she asked.

"My what?"

He was having a lot of trouble coming awake. "I don't know. What are you talking about?"

Anita reached across him. That woke him up. "Your phone is ringing, Doug. Wake up!"

"I'm awake, I'm awake." Doug pulled himself up and Anita handed his phone to him. The caller ID made no sense. Maybe he was still half asleep. "Terry Royer. Do you know a Terry Royer?"

"Maybe it's a wrong number. Is it local?"

The phone stopped ringing.

"No, it isn't local. We'll see if he ..."

"Or she," Anita said.

"Leaves a message."

The phone started ringing again.

"Hello?" Doug said.

"Is this Larry?"

"Larry who?" Doug asked.

"Come on, buddy. Don't do this to me, Larry. It's me. Terry."

"Who are you looking for? I'm not Larry."

"You're messing with me. Larry, I need you to help me out here."

"What do you need?"

"Made a bet with Jerry."

Anita blinked and tried to hold back her laughter. "Larry? Terry? Jerry? Where's Harry and Mary?" she asked.

Doug shook his head. "You've called a wrong number."

"Like I could call a wrong number, Larry. I know you. You have to help me. Jerry and I made a bet and you're the only person in the whole world who can settle it."

"Have you been drinking?"

"Whatever."

Anita giggled. "Play along," she whispered. "This is hilarious."

"And you're sitting at the bar with Jerry," Doug said.

"Yeah and you aren't here. Pretty lame friend, you are. I told Jerry we should just go to your place, but you don't have any of the good stuff."

"What good stuff?" Doug asked. "I have good stuff here. I have really good stuff."

"Southern Comfort is not the good stuff."

Anita made gagging gestures. Doug agreed. It had been years since he'd had anything with Southern Comfort in it. That had not been a good night and he'd sworn off that and several other alcoholic beverages after that party. Good thing he hadn't known Anita back then. She would never have put up with him. He'd been so young ... and stupid.

"Let me talk to Jerry," Doug said.

"He wants to talk to you," Terry said.

"Man, why aren't you hanging with us tonight?" Another voice asked. Must be Jerry. "Mama ground you?"

"Where are you guys?"

"You know where we are. Where we always are on a Friday night. The question is, where are you?"

"I'm at Harry's place," Doug said.

Anita buried her face in a pillow, she was laughing so hard.

"Harry's at the end of the bar flirting with some girl," Jerry said. "What do you mean you're at his place?"

"He told me to come over and hang out tonight because you guys were busy."

"We're busy? What kind of talk is that? We're hanging out here at Bloody Mary's wondering where in the world you are. Don't tell me you and Harry's dad, Gary, are drinking all his good whiskey."

"Whenever I can get my hands on good whiskey, I'll have some of that," Doug said.

Anita had rolled over on her side. Her body shook as she laughed. Then she sat back up. "Someone's pranking you."

"I don't know," Doug said. "Terry Royer with a 615 area code. Where is that, anyway?"

She took out her own phone to do the search. "Tennessee. They missed our area code by one number."

He nodded in comprehension. "That has to be it."

"Who you talking to? Gary?"

"No, I left Harry's place. Heading to Barry's house now."

"I don't know no one named Barry. Terry, you know anyone by the name of Barry?"

"Barry Goodenow?" Terry asked into the phone. "Is that who you're talking about? He's such a loser. How did you get to know him? Wait. I'll bet you worked with him, didn't you, Larry."

"Nah. You introduced me," Doug said. "Remember? At that thing with ..."

"With Perry! I remember now. I don't remember you being there, but you probably were. I was pretty drunk that night too. Remember how Perry fell in that swimming pool?"

"Right," Doug said. "With the big ..."

"That big dog jumped in to pull him out. I wonder if he still has that dog."

"I heard he does," Doug said. "What was his name?"

"Raid."

Anita's face contorted into laughter again.

"Raid? I didn't remember that," Doug said.

"Yeah, because he had that big party and the cops raided it for underage drinking. Nearly went to jail that night. Would've if Barry hadn't gotten me out of there in time."

"Your dad would have been really mad."

"Dad would like to have killed me," Terry said. "So you comin' down here tonight or not?"

"I never said I was coming," Doug replied.

"Why did you call me, then?"

Anita burst out a laugh, then bit into the pillow to stop the sound.

"You called me," Doug said.

"Why?"

"You said something about a bet with Jerry."

"I made a bet with Jerry? About what?"

"You never said."

"You're messing with me again," Terry said. "Why would you do that when you know what I've been drinking?"

"I don't know what you've been drinking."

"It's always the same thing. Who are you and what have you done with my friend?"

"I don't know about your friend, but you called me. You dialed my number and woke me out of a sound sleep," Doug said. "I don't live in Tennessee, I live in Iowa."

"Now you're just plain lying."

"I don't even sound like your friend, do I?" Doug asked. "You have a pretty thick accent. Does Larry have an accent?"

"Nah. He grew up north of the Mason-Dixon as my daddy calls it. One of them Yankees."

"I'm a Yankee, then," Doug said. "My name is Doug."

"That's a pretty boring name."

"Right?" Doug said. "It doesn't rhyme with your name at all."

"What do you mean?"

Anita snorted back a laugh.

"I mean, you all have names like Barry, Jerry, Perry, Terry, Larry and you drink at Bloody Mary's."

"Did you hear that, Jerry?" Terry asked. "He says our names rhyme."

"Uh huh. He's right. Whaddya know!"

"Never thought about it. Where you say you're from, Doug?"

"Iowa."

"Iowa? Where's that? Is that in the US of A?"

"Now *you* are messing with me."

Terry laughed. "A little bit."

"Do you remember what the bet was about?"

"Well, you kind of already took care of it. I win."

"What did you win?"

"I bet Jerry, whose real name is Ben, that I could have a great conversation with some random guy in the middle of the night who wouldn't get mad at me."

"You did what?"

Anita laughed out loud this time.

"Doug, you are a great guy. I don't know any Perry or Gary or Barry or even a Larry. But now I know a Doug from Iowa. Who's the lady in the background?"

Doug looked at Anita, asking if it was okay. She nodded, then said. "I'm Anita and I work for the local sheriff's department."

"Dang it all, Terry," Ben said. "You had to go and call someone in law enforcement."

"What do you do, Doug?" Terry asked.

"Own a comic book and gaming store."

"No way. Man, that's the coolest. What games do you play?"

"Any of them."

"Are you cool like that, Miss Anita?"

"Cooler," Anita said. "I give Doug his creds. That's how great I am."

"It's true," Doug said. "She's a rockstar. And just so you know, she's also a deadly computer hacker. By this time tomorrow, she will know everything about you. Where you live, what you do, even where you do your drinking."

"We're just good ole boys," Terry said. "Not looking to make any trouble."

"How old are you?" Anita asked.

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

"I'm thinking sixteen? Maybe seventeen?" she said.

"We didn't mean to make trouble," Ben said. "Just having some fun. You guys seemed cool."

"What kind of games do you play?" Doug asked.

"Whatever we can. Do you play *Magic*?"

"Sure. We have regular tournaments. Have you ever heard of *Sword Lords*?"

"That's the best!" Terry gushed. "The second one wasn't as great as the first, but still, really a great game."

"The release of the second was in my store. I know the guys behind the game."

Silence again on the other end of the call.

"Are. You. Kidding. Me?" Ben asked, punctuating each word.

"Nope. Not kidding."

"Wasn't there like a murder at that event? We followed the whole thing online. That was you?"

"I wasn't murdered."

"No, it was some lady from the development team or something like that. Yeah?"

"Yes."

"That was really you? Man, I want your address. If I send you money, will you send me something from your store? I don't care what it is. Just something. Anything."

"I have promo stuff left over from the release. I'd be glad to send you a poster."

"Two?" Terry asked. "One for each of us? Will you sign them?"

Doug laughed. "You want my signature?"

"Are you kidding? You are so cool. You talked to us like we were real people, even after we pranked you."

"It was a good prank," Anita said. "Give us your address. We'll send something to you." She typed the information he gave them into her phone.

"We'll send money for the postage and stuff," Terry said.

Doug laughed. "Don't worry about it."

"I feel kind of bad for waking you up in the middle of the night, now. You've been way cool about this."

"No problem. I'm going to hang up now," Doug said. "Don't call back. I have to work in the morning."

"Sorry, man. Thanks for having fun with us."

"Yeah, thanks, Doug," Ben echoed.

After they hung up, Doug looked at Anita. "That was interesting."

"It was fun."

"I feel old now, though."

"Why?"

"First, because I had to hang up so I can go to work in the morning. And second, because he kept going on about how cool I'd been about the call. That's something they'd say to an old man who doesn't kick them off their lawn for being meddling kids."

"You are going to send them posters, aren't you?"

"I'll put together a package of stuff. They were just having fun. Seemed like good kids." Doug cringed. "I did it again. I've turned into an old man. Someone save me from myself."

"How should I save you?"

"I don't know. Marry me?"

Anita blinked. "Are you messing with *me* now?"

He sighed. "Not really. Are we ready to finally do it?"

"The question is - are you ready?"

"I've always been ready. I'm just a chicken. I don't want to end up an old man yelling at kids. I don't want to have a big, fancy wedding."

"Elope with me."

"But we'd have to schedule time off. I'd have to close the store."

"We'll fly to Vegas. Do it in a day. Be back and no one will know we were gone."

"Billy and Rachel will be mad if they can't be part of it."

"They'll get over it."

"When should we go?"

"I have next weekend free. Get someone to cover for you on Saturday. We'll fly out Friday night and come back on Sunday."

"Caleb and Mr. Parker could handle it for one day. I could ask Jack to come in and help. Really?"

"Let's do it."

"I woke up in the middle of the night to a prank call and now we're talking about eloping? Are you pranking me, too?"

Anita smiled and kissed him. "This is not a drill. This is the real thing. Are you ready?"

"Don't move," Doug said. "Don't move a single muscle." He got out of bed and left the room. He had the ring. It was hidden in the

bottom of a drawer in his desk. He took it out, ran back to the bedroom, and laughed.

Anita was frozen in the position he'd left her. Rather than move her, he sidled back in front of her and produced the ring. "Will you marry me, Anita?"

She kissed him again. "I will marry you, Larry. It's about time you gave me this ring. It's been burning a hole in that desk drawer for months."

"You knew?"

"I know everything and don't you ever forget it."

"Is that a yes?"

"It's a yes. I'll buy the plane tickets tomorrow. You decide which hotel we're staying at."

"This is happening?" Doug asked.

"It had better, or I'm calling in all the Terrys and Garys and Jerrys and Barrys for help."

"What a weird, weird night," Doug said. "How am I supposed to sleep now?"

"Let me help you with that." She let him slip the ring on her finger before kissing him again.

Vignette #2

Gossip Girls

Kristen walked into the office and glanced through Stephanie's door. Where was that girl? It was lunchtime. She headed through the open door into Charlie's office and announced, "Lunch has arrived. Where's Stephanie?"

Charlie sat back in her chair. "I have no idea. I didn't see her leave. What about Rachel?"

"I haven't told her that I'm here." Kristen set the bag of food on the small table they often used for casual office meetings. When she'd first arrived, a large conference table filled this room. She couldn't remember the last time it had been used before being moved into one of the rooms across the hall. Now, the table was used all the time, by everything from Sycamore Foundation meetings, to several weekly classes. "Can I bring you something from the kitchen to drink?"

"I brought a twelve-pack of fruit juices in the other day. You can have one."

"I'll be drinking coffee," Kristen said with a laugh. "You're drinking juice?" Her eyes lit with laughter. "Are you pregnant?"

"No," Charlie said, scorn and no small amount of terror filling her voice. "No way. Don't say those things out loud."

"But fruit juice?"

"Jason is on a health-food kick. No more pop in the house."

"So you can drink pop here. He'd never know."

"Don't kid yourself," Charlie said. "The minute I open a can of pop, he'll come wandering into the building on the way to his truck."

"Poor girl, with him working here, you can't get away with anything. I'll find Rachel and juice for you. Anything else?"

"Did they give you a bunch of ranch dressing?"

"I don't know about a bunch." Kristen opened the bag and peered inside. She'd driven out to the barbecue place on the

highway. They didn't have an opportunity to eat out very often since the kitchen was generally busy. This morning nothing was going on. The rest of Rachel's employees would arrive about two o'clock to finish setting up for the evening's reception. "I see four containers."

Charlie lifted an eyebrow.

"Got it. More ranch dressing." Kristen laughed as she headed out of the office.

Jeff met her in the foyer, coming down the steps from the rooms upstairs. "You're back. What did you bring for me?"

"Uh. Air pockets? They're good with ketchup and mustard."

"Funny girl." He clutched at his chest and threw his head back in a swoon. "Don't worry about me. I find the energy to exist on nothing more than my daily protein shake."

"We have enough to share," Kristen said. She felt terrible that she hadn't picked something up for her boss. Usually, Stephanie asked him if he wanted to eat with them. He rarely sat down for a meal because he was so busy. She watched him carry his protein shakes along when he left for meetings, many of which were over the lunch hour.

"I'm kidding you," Jeff said. "I have a meeting downtown in twenty minutes. They're feeding us."

"Have you seen Steph?"

"She took off about ten minutes ago. Said she had to be somewhere."

"I haven't been gone that long. I have her lunch. Why would she leave and not say something?"

"I don't know what to tell you." Jeff shrugged. "Leave it on her desk. She'll eat later, if nothing else." He went on into the office and Kristen frowned as she walked toward the kitchen.

"Hey, Rachel," she said, aiming for the refrigerator. Sure enough, on the bottom shelf was the opened six pack of juice. "Do we have extra ranch dressing?"

"In the back on the top shelf," Rachel said. "I'll get the ladle and a bowl."

Kristen took out the immense jug of dressing and snagged a

bottle of juice. When she closed the door, she laughed. "Steph, what are you doing here? Jeff told me you left."

"I left my office to get some coffee," Stephanie said from the table along the back wall. "We haven't talked in hours. He's been upstairs in a meeting all morning. Why would he say that?"

"He must be feeling punchy," Kristen replied. She set the jug on the counter. "I need coffee, too. What are you two working on?"

"Anita's party next week and tonight's wedding reception," Rachel said. "This bride is just the stinkin' sweetest thing in the world and her groom? Oh, my goodness. If I wasn't completely in love with Billy and ten years younger, I'd throw myself at him." She laughed. "Of course, ten years ago, I would have scared the poor boy to death. He wouldn't have known what to do with my goth self."

"We aren't that old," Kristen said. "Not ten years older."

"Close enough." Rachel filled two small dishes with ranch and put the jug back in the refrigerator. Then, she tried to balance the dressing without spilling anything while picking up her mug.

"I can help," Stephanie said and took the mug with her as she walked out. "The bride's parents are really nice too. I could use about a hundred more of those types of people."

Kristen had poured her own coffee and snagged Charlie's juice as she followed the two toward the office. "Who was that man that called you at the end of the day yesterday?"

Stephanie sighed. "Someone wanting to complain because we didn't have any available rooms on Saturday. One day's notice, buddy. I can't help you. Your poor planning is not my problem. I tried to offer other options of locations here in town, but he chose to yell at me instead."

"A move that begs you to help him," Rachel said. "I had one of those a couple of weeks ago. The morning of their meeting, the two organizers thought they should change the menu. Someone had called to criticize their choices and they sucked right into it. Since they were planning a charity event for rescue animals, they should only serve vegan dishes. Uhh, I can't pull together an entirely new menu for fifty people in an hour. What were they thinking?"

"That we're a restaurant?" Kristen asked. She handed Charlie her juice and tore the paper bag down the middle. One by one, she lifted the containers out and put them around the table.

"What did you just do?" Stephanie asked.

"Getting to our food. I hate digging saucy meals out of a deep bag."

Stephanie laughed. "I'm so thrifty. Every paper bag is another bag I use to carry my recycling to the bin."

Kristen handed the empty bag to her. "Here you go."

"Brat."

"She needs a spankin'," Charlie said.

"What did I hear about a spankin'?" Jeff asked, walking in. He took a deep breath. "That smells wonderful. I'm get to have a delicious salmon salad for lunch."

"We're eating meat." Charlie growled. "Because we're carnivores."

"You are scary," he said. "Very scary. I'll be back after three o'clock, Kristen."

"Okay. Thanks." She sat and pulled her meal closer, then whispered. "It's on the calendar, boss."

"He's such a whiner," Charlie said with a laugh.

Stephanie rolled her eyes. "You have no idea. It's a good thing Adam loves him. Now, that is a very patient man. Jeff is way high maintenance."

"Shh," Rachel said. "He might still be in the office."

"Don't worry. I tell him all the time that he's high maintenance. Does he change? No."

"Speaking of high maintenance. Did you hear that guy last week at the wedding?" Charlie asked. "What a whiner. And his brand new wife kept smiling like he was the most amazing person she'd ever met in her life. I would have been embarrassed. He whined at the DJ about playing the wrong song for their first dance. Later on, the DJ told me that the groom had specifically asked for that song when they had their meeting."

"Why would he do that?" Kristen asked.

"It was as if he was trying to prove to everyone how he was in

charge, but he wasn't."

"Oh," Kristen said. "I remember him. He wasn't very bright, but he'd been, like, some kind of athlete and thought he was in charge. Right?"

Rachel nodded. "The bride wasn't much better. I knew her older sister in high school. Kristen, do you remember Mandy Peller?"

"Not very well. She played basketball, maybe? Ran track? We weren't in the same crowd at all. She just kind of made it through her classes. Wasn't there something about her not graduating because she didn't finish her English requirement?"

"They had to hire tutors to get her through the class. Not like she was going to college. She married some guy and is having babies. But Shawna isn't any better, from what I heard. Bimbo in high school and then she married her hero."

"I hope they're happy."

"They're both too dumb to know that they aren't," Rachel said. "She seriously doesn't know what she's getting into with him. Really naive, if you ask me."

"No worse than that poor guy who married into Marilyn Welchill's family," Kristen said. "Did he not meet his mother-in-law before the wedding?"

Charlie stirred at her coleslaw. "Who?"

"Marilyn's mother is going to control those two and everything they do. Their children, where they live, what jobs he gets to take, everything." Kristen shook her head. "I don't know his family name. Maybe he wasn't from around here, but he was such a nice kid."

"They met in college," Stephanie said. "His family lives in Minneapolis or something."

"Well, he's lost to them now."

Stephanie laughed uncomfortably. "Listen to us."

"What?" Kristen asked.

"For the last few minutes all we've done is gossip about people. People we barely even know. I hope you don't think I'm being, what do you call it, pious or something. It just made me laugh."

"We could gossip about you being pious," Kristen said. Now she was a little uncomfortable since she'd started them down this path.

It was hard not to talk about all the crazies they met during the week. Some of them blindly abused the world and had no idea what they projected about themselves. Wedding planning was stressful for many reasons. By the time families got to Sycamore House they were already upset about the amount of money being spent. At the receptions, they had to deal with along with associates, friends, and family who were invited out of necessity, not always love. That rarely went well.

"Do you think people everywhere are like what we encounter all the time?" she asked her friends.

Stephanie shrugged. "But think about it. How many people do we interact with every week. Two hundred?"

"Usually more than that. Some of those wedding receptions bring in around four hundred people," Rachel said. "Why?"

"We deal with two or three difficult people out of, say, four hundred. But we focus on the nasty things they say rather than the rest of the wonderful people who are generous and helpful and kind."

"They aren't as interesting," Rachel said with a grin. "There's no story to tell."

"But that's not true," Charlie said before looking at Rachel's face. "Oh. You're kidding."

"I wish we could put a mirror in front of people when they're mean like that so they see what others see," Kristen said. "Surely they don't want be snotty and pushy and mean and nasty. Do they?"

"People have different responses to stress," Stephanie said. She looked down, then back at them. "In one of my classes, we talked about dealing with difficult customers. How to look for what is behind their behavior. Sometimes there is an obvious trigger point, but often, it's stuff we can't see and will never understand. There's always a reason."

"It just frustrates me when they think that they're completely justified in treating other people bad. They think their reasons are more important than anyone else's," Kristen said. Then she smiled. "I'm not helping, am I? My mom always told me I was the worst

gossip she'd ever known."

"Have you spent much time at Sweet Beans?" Stephanie asked. "Or the diner? Those men who have coffee at the diner in the mornings are the worst. It's so funny. Lucy calls them out on it all the time, but they never stop. And there's so much gossip that flows at Sweet Beans. One day I was in there with Skylar and a lady at one table overheard something at another table and called across the aisle to add her two cents." She laughed. "And here we go again. We should find something more important to talk about."

"Like what?" Kristen asked. "I work here and then go home and listen to Ava tell me all about her third grade classmates. Not a big high-falutin' life I'm living. I'm definitely not changing the world."

"You change the world just by being in it," Charlie said. "That's important to me. I'd be missing out on something if I didn't know you. But maybe we should read books and talk about what we learn."

"I'm reading enough for my classes," Stephanie said.

"Maybe you should teach us some of the things you learn," Kristen said. She huffed. "Maybe I should take a class. If my mind was occupied with learning, it might not be focused on annoying customers."

"Remember, they are one or two out of four hundred," Rachel said. "I'm not doing the math, but that doesn't even equal one percent."

"I'm sorry," Kristen said.

Stephanie laughed. "I should be the one to apologize. When I pointed out what we were doing ... what I was doing, I felt like a heel. Sometimes I don't know when to keep my mouth shut. But maybe we should try to stop talking about our customers. That's another thing I learned. If we see them all as a problem, then that's all we see."

"If we quit talking about them I'll never learn anything about anyone," Kristen said with a laugh. She put her hands up. "Just kidding. I'll try."

"Billy will wonder what happens if I don't talk about all the crazy brides and their mothers, but I'm in," Rachel said. "Charlie?"

"I'm in. I still think we should read a book and talk about it. Stephanie, what are you studying now?"

"Principles of Macroeconomics," Stephanie said with a laugh. "You don't want to study that. Charlie, why don't you look for a book. Buy four copies and we'll read it together. It doesn't matter what it is. I'll find time for it." She lifted her upper lip in a mock snarl. "When did I become the reasonable old lady leader of this group?"

"We're pretty sure it happened when you crossed into your thirties." Rachel poked her. "You keep Jeff on his toes and keep us from crossing to the dark side."

"Ahhh, the responsibilities." Stephanie leaned back and patted her stomach. "I can't eat another thing. Did we buy any of their brownies? They're the best."

Vignette #3

Best Day Ever

Cassidy knocked on Agnes Hill's door before opening it. She stood inside the doorway and called out, "Mrs. Agnes, I'm here!"

Agnes came around the corner from the kitchen with a grin on her face. "Look at you, all prettied up for a day with me. Talk about making an old lady feel special."

"You aren't old," Cassidy said, beaming with joy. She gave her best friend a hug. "What's the secret thing we're doing today?"

"After you help me finish cleaning the kitchen, I thought we'd look at knitting patterns. Once you decide what to make for your Mother's Day gift, we'll head to Craft Corner and pick out the yarn."

"No one else will make the same thing I'm making for Mommy," Cassidy said. "That makes it special, right?"

Agnes smiled and put her hand on the girl's back to guide her into the kitchen. "That does make it special, but remember, when you give someone a gift, you aren't competing with anyone else. The present is between you and the receiver. And who is the most important in a gift exchange?"

"The person who receives the gift?" Cassidy asked.

"Right-o, my young friend. Why are you giving this present to your mother?"

"Because I love her and she's my Mommy and it's Mother's Day." Cassidy paused. "That makes it all about her."

"Perfect. How do you feel when someone gives you a present?"

"I feel special."

"We should give each other presents to make them feel special all the time, shouldn't we," Agnes said with a laugh.

"That would get really expensive."

"Not really. Not all presents cost money. Do you know what a gift it is when you spend time with me?"

Cassidy frowned in confusion. "So, time is a gift?"

"One of the most important gifts we can give someone. You love it when you get to play with Missy."

"She's not around this week. I miss her."

Agnes handed Cassidy a dish towel. "You dry. So, think about it. Is the time you spend with Missy a gift?"

"I never thought about it that way." Cassidy looked at the pile of dishes in the sink. "You're only one person. How could you have so many dirty dishes?"

"I cooked and baked this morning before you got here. What is your favorite meal?"

"I don't know. I like a lot of things."

"Do you like my tomato soup?"

"Yes! Did you make tomato soup?"

"We'll have some for lunch with grilled cheese sandwiches."

"Your soup is the best. You should give Lexi the recipe."

"Maybe I should make a whole book of recipes." Agnes set a plate in the strainer.

"I could help you." Cassidy turned and spotted the box of recipe cards. She set the towel on the counter and ran over to it. "I love looking through this. We should pick out the best ones. If you made a book, you could sell it. Didn't you used to run a restaurant? All the people who ate there would buy your book."

"They've all forgotten me by now," Agnes said, "but I do want you to have my recipes when you grow up."

"Missy and Lara and Abby and Rose. Everybody will want that book."

"Then I will give them a copy when we finish it. Let's finish the dishes first."

Cassidy dried the plates and neatly stacked things on the counter. When she plucked the muffin tin from the strainer, she held it out. "What did you make in here?"

"Wait and see."

"I hate waiting and seeing. I want to know now."

"Patience, my dear girl. Patience."

"I hear that all the time. Do you think I'll ever learn?"

"To be patient? Let me tell you, Cass," Agnes said. "You will have so much practice over your lifetime that by the time you are my age, you will be able to wait for nearly anything. Do you remember

that day you and your mother found me on the ground?"

"The first time I met you?"

"That's the one. I knew that I needed to be patient. Someone would find me and help me. I could have screamed and thrown a fit, but what good would that have done?"

"Maybe somebody else would have heard you."

"But, what did my patience do for me?"

"Us." Cassidy nodded. "Sometimes we have to wait for the best things to happen, right?"

"And if I'd been screaming and throwing a fit when you found me, I might not have had much of a voice left. I wouldn't have been able to tell you my name."

"When do I get to know what you baked in here?" Cassidy asked with a smirk on her lips.

Agnes shook her head. "Do you want a treat right now?"

"I think so."

"You go on over to the table," Agnes said. "There is a stack of knitting patterns for you to look through. Find one or two you think you could make before Mother's Day."

"How long is it until then?"

"Let's see. It's the middle of March right now. Mother's day is always in the middle of May. How long is that?"

Cassidy had to think through the months one by one, so she said them out loud and tapped her fingertips as she went. "January, February, March, April, May. Two months?"

"That should give you plenty of time."

A small stack of patterns was at Cassidy's place at the table. She picked the first one up and looked through the pages, then set it aside. "Do you think Mommy would wear a shawl?"

"Probably not," Agnes said. "There are more interesting patterns in there. Keep looking."

Cassidy picked up another and then another. She tried to pay attention both to the patterns and to what Mrs. Agnes was doing, but she'd been given a task and before long was deep into the magazines, pattern books, and printed patterns. "I found one!"

"Find three," Agnes said as she turned on the mixer.

"What are you doing over there? Can I help?"

"Making frosting. You stay there and keep at it. Find three patterns."

Cassidy heaved a big sigh and went back to her task. She enjoyed looking through patterns. Agnes told her stories about going to the fabric store and sitting at the pattern book counter while her mother looked for something special to sew. She learned about fashion by looking at the clothes and she got ideas for stuffed toys and decorations for her room. Mrs. Agnes told her about the catalogs that used to come out from stores Cassidy had never heard of. She called them Christmas wish books. When she moved into her new house, Mrs. Agnes found an old Christmas catalog in a box and let Cassidy and her friends look through it.

There were clothes and kitchen appliances, tools and jewelry, and then they found the toys. Cassidy couldn't stop looking at the dolls. She saw dolls when she went to the store, but these were old-fashioned and she liked them a lot.

One of the patterns Cassidy found in the stack was a wash cloth. Somehow it had a pattern that read, "My Mom, My Friend." How would she do that?

"Mrs. Agnes? Will you show me how to do this pattern? I think it would be perfect for Mommy."

Agnes walked over with a plate filled with chocolate cupcakes.

"Cupcakes?"

"Would you like a glass of milk?"

"Yes, please. I can get it, though. Would you like one, too?"

"No, honey. I'll drink my coffee instead. Which pattern are you interested in?"

Cassidy took it from the top of the pile and set it to the side. "This one. How do you do that?"

Agnes smiled. "That will be a perfect pattern for you to learn. You don't need to do anything other than knit and purl. Go ahead and pour yourself a glass of milk."

Cassidy liked Agnes's kitchen. She'd asked Henry to paint it a pale green and then had purchased curtains with colorful flowers on them. Her dishes were cream-colored with flowers on the edges

and she told the girls that she might ask them to paint pictures of flowers for her to hang up. All of her dish towels and wash clothes were flowery and the old-fashioned set of canisters on the counter had flowers on the sides and a green rim on the lid.

"Is there another pattern you'd like to make for Polly?" Agnes asked when Cassidy returned to the table.

"That one means something," Cassidy said. "Am I good enough to knit it?"

Agnes flipped the pages. "You certainly are. Look at the instructions. Read it through and tell me what you see."

Cassidy read through it quickly. "I don't know what I'm looking for."

"Look again while glancing at the photograph. Start at row fourteen."

"Knit-three, purl-two, knit-two, purl-six, knit-two, purl-two, knit-four, purl-two ..." Cassidy looked up. "What is it making?"

"What do you think?"

"Oh!" Cassidy said. Her eyes lit up as the lightbulb went off in her mind. "Those are the letters in the words. Because the purl makes a bump in the row."

"Good girl." Agnes pushed the plate of cupcakes between them and with a grin, said, "Try one."

"I love chocolate. Do they have chocolate chips in them?" Cassidy asked.

"Better than chocolate chips."

"What could be better than chocolate chips?"

"Take a bite and you'll see." Agnes slowly peeled away the cupcake wrapper on one, waiting for Cassidy to get to hers first.

Cassidy could hardly wait and once she had the wrapper peeled back halfway, took a bite. When the cream filling filled her mouth, her eyes went wide. She knew better than to talk with her mouth full. Mrs. Agnes always had something to say about that. After swallowing, then licking her lips, she said, "How did you do that? You snuck cream in the middle of the cupcake." She dropped the rest of the wrapper onto the plate, then looked closely at the body of the cake. "You didn't cut it in half. How did you do that?"

"I left a few for us to finish. That way I could surprise you and show you how to do it at the same time."

"You gave me a gift!" Cassidy said with a smile. She took another bite. "These are the best. Is that recipe in your box?"

"Yes, it is," Agnes said. She patted Cassidy's arm. "I love sharing fun things with you."

Cassidy looked at the cupcakes and then the stack of patterns. She took a drink of milk and sat back in her chair. "You give me a lot of gifts," she said quietly. "I don't say thank you enough. Mommy says I need to be better about saying thank you."

"Your mommy is right, but you know what's even better?"

"What?"

"When you tell me that you love me. When you smile at me and I know how much you enjoy spending time with me. When you pick flowers and bring them to me. When you allow me to share my life with you and are interested in the things I talk about. The days that I spend with you are the best days in my life."

"They're the best days for me, too," Cassidy said. "You teach me a lot. Mommy says that she would never be able to teach me how to knit because she doesn't know how."

Agnes opened her arms and Cassidy left the chair and walked into them, wrapping her own around Agnes as the two held on to each other.

"Thank you," Cassidy said. "I love you."

"Oh, sweet girl. I love you, too."

When Cassidy sat back down, she picked up the pattern. "What should we do first? Look at recipes, get yarn, or teach me how you made these cupcakes?"

"We have all day," Agnes said. "We have all day."

Vignette #4

Do the Hard Things

Rebecca watched Polly leave and groaned. "I'm really going to have to do this, aren't I?"

"Look for a job?" Lexi asked.

"I said I would, so now I have to."

"You don't have much time left in your spring break to find one."

Rebecca laughed. "I don't have any time left. It isn't like I didn't know ..." She shook her head in disgust. "I want someone to think that I'm the most amazing person in the world and throw tons of money at me. I'll work hard."

"They don't know that you want them to throw money at you."

"They should."

Lexi shook her head. "I would if I had any. You could always help me carry extra pantry stuff down to the room under the garage."

"You're telling me that I can either do that or get my act together and hit the streets looking for a job."

"I wouldn't be quite that direct, but sure. That sounds about right."

"Fine. Have fun with your reorganization party. I'm going to clean myself up so I look good while begging people to hire my helpless self."

Lexi smiled as she headed into the pantry.

Rebecca sighed all the way up the steps. She had done this to herself, but it had been a wonderfully lazy week. No responsibilities, no stress. Oh, there was all that anxiety associated with Polly and her activities, but anymore, that was normal. Rebecca had taken the week off in a big way. Even if she wanted to blame everyone else, it was her fault that her last full day at home would be spent pounding the streets.

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First on her list of places to visit was Sweet Beans. Andrew was working and she could use a dose of his positivity.

He and Gayla were busy behind the counter and the line was long. She didn't want to wait, but Andrew saw her, smiled and waved, then pointed to the far end of the baked goods display. He tapped Gayla's shoulder as she talked to the next customer in line. "What are you doing up here so early?" he asked Rebecca.

"I have to find a job."

"Do you want me to ask Mom if you can work in the bakery?"

"No. I don't want to work here. I came in for some encouragement." She smiled at the takeout cup he held out. "Liquid encouragement is a good start."

"Where are you going to look?"

"Everywhere. I'm nervous, though."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to hear that I'm not needed for this job or that job. Everything has fallen into my lap in the past."

"You could work at Sycamore House. No one there would tell you that you aren't needed."

"I could. That would be easy, but I don't think that easy is what I want." She grimaced. "No, what I don't want to do is work for Polly's employees. I really don't want to slop food. And I really don't want to give up my weekends."

He smiled. "Any one would be lucky to have you work for them. Remember that. You're the most amazing person I know." Andrew leaned forward and said in a low voice. "And I love you."

"I love you, too," Rebecca said. "Gayla needs help. I'll come back after I've met with ..." She pursed her lips in thought. "Five different people. If I don't have any prospects by then, you might need to give me a kiss or something."

"I'm always good for a kiss or something. Good luck. I hope you find exactly what you're looking for."

Rebecca nodded. She held up the coffee. "Thanks for this."

He touched her hand and turned back to the counter as she walked out the front door. She went to her car, sat down, and took a long drink of coffee. There was no reason not to check with Nan

Stallings first thing.

Her heart sank. It was Saturday and Nan worked office hours, not retail. Besides, the very part time work she'd done for Nan last summer was fine, but not nearly enough.

She turned the car on, backed out, drove a half block, then parked across from Simon Gardner's antique shop. He wasn't advertising that he needed an employee, but it wouldn't hurt to hear what he had to say.

She took another drink, hoping to gird her loins for battle, then laughed. That phrase came from spending time with Andrew. Sometimes he got all literary in their conversations. It was one of the things she loved about him, and sometimes it rubbed off on her.

The bell dinged as she walked into the shop. Mr. Gardner's cat, Crystal, jumped up onto the counter looking for attention.

"Hello, Crystal," Rebecca said. The cat rubbed against her hand.

"Miss Rebecca," Simon said as he came around the corner of an aisle. His hands were filled with a stack of plates. "How can I help you this morning?"

"I ... I ..." Rebecca stammered, embarrassed. She had to spit it out as fast as possible or she'd end up buying something dumb and running away. "I'm looking for a job for this summer and thought I'd talk to you. Do you know of any jobs that are available?"

He set the plates in a space that didn't look safe before walking over to her. "College kids have been haunting the shops downtown. Spring break and they're ready to see what the summer will bring."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to ask you for a job." See, she couldn't even admit the truth about this search. She wanted it to be easier than this. Her stomach was in a knot and her heart raced. "I kind of hoped that you might have heard if anyone was looking for a hard worker."

He put his hand on top of Crystal's head and rubbed her ears. "The thing is, none of those kids thought to ask me. I wouldn't be able to give you many hours, but I'd certainly appreciate a young person's take on this old place."

Rebecca nodded. "How many hours?" She shouldn't have come here first. If she found a full-time job, she'd hate to turn it down

because she'd committed to Mr. Gardner.

"Tell you what," he said. "Go next door to Paul Bradford. Tell him I sent you."

"The hardware store?"

Simon grinned and said, "You're Henry Sturtz's girl. You should know about tools and hardware."

"I don't, though," Rebecca protested.

"But you should. If I know people and I think I do, your future husband will spend more time writing stories than he will fixing toilets."

Rebecca laughed. "No kidding. Andrew's worst days are when Eliseo asks him to help with a project at the house. He always says that we'll hire that work to be done. We'll be too busy to worry about it."

"You should worry about it, Miss Rebecca. Now, Paul is losing one of his employees next month. He hasn't started to advertise, but he'll need help by the time you come home from college. Tell him I said you should have the job."

"I don't know anything, though. I would drive him crazy."

"You know how to be helpful. You understand technology, so you can run the register. You are pleasant and kind. You can learn. Right?"

"Really? You think I should work in a hardware store?"

"You tell Paul that I will hire you for any hours up to forty that he can't afford."

Rebecca blinked.

Simon smiled at her. "Tell him I said that and he'll laugh. The truth is, Miss Rebecca, I could use your artistic eye. You'd do a world of good in that old hardware store, too. Tell him I said that."

"I don't know," Rebecca said. This didn't sound like anything she'd be good at doing. In all the years she'd lived with Henry and Polly, never once had she been interested in Henry's tools. Never once.

"What makes you question it?" Simon asked.

Rebecca looked away. "It's not anything I've ever thought about."



"Sometimes it's important to learn new things in life." Simon put up a finger, telling her to wait a moment, and walked away.

She waited, frowning when he disappeared into an aisle. Crystal had curled up in a small box left on the counter. There was a soft cat bed in the windowsill, but that was where the cat wanted to be.

He returned with a framed painting. "I knew this was hiding back there. I kept it for the frame. The painting is worth nothing, but I want you to take a look at it."

Rebecca nodded. "Okay."

"What do you see?"

"In the painting? It's just a painting of a house. The artist did a nice job with the trees and that little stream over there."

"But not so much with the house, right?" he asked.

"It's poorly done. Not just because it's an ugly little house, it's not very well represented."

"Because the artist understood nothing about the structure of the building. Now, I'm certain that you will take art classes to reinforce your knowledge of perspective and angles, balance, and other things, but what if you understood how a carpenter used the Pythagorean theorem to find angles, or a level to ensure that each piece is perfectly in line. How they use their knowledge of the sizes of boards and standard frames. Would every window in a house like this be the same size? What types of windows are used in bedrooms or kitchens or in a living room?"

She blinked. "I have no idea about any of that."

"But what if you learned those things by listening to Paul's customers. Do you know why I understand any of it?"

"No," she said, shaking her head.

"I have coffee with those fellas. They love to talk about their craft. And it's a craft as much as painting or writing."

"Heath and Jack make beautiful pieces at the shop," Rebecca said. "I never thought about how Henry builds beautiful houses and that's a craft."

"Do you understand how Heath and Jack make those beautiful candlesticks and bowls?"

"No."

"Would understanding that change how you perceived those pieces?"

"Huh," she mused. "Probably. I never thought about it that way."

"If you were sketching a pretty wooden box, would you know about the different types of joinery that could be used?"

"I don't even know what that word means," Rebecca said with a laugh.

"I know people," Simon said. "If you want to be an artist, and I would recommend the same thing for your friend, Andrew, as a writer, you need to see deeper into the things that you paint or he writes about. You need to have background that helps you understand people and places. You need to have different experiences throughout your life."

"Taking trips to great places is like that," Rebecca said, understanding setting in. "I see people and places that are so different than what I know. It changes me. Makes me bigger." She tapped her forehead. "Up here."

"Here's advice from an old man who has been around. Do interesting things outside your comfort zone. Outside what you normally would choose. Not the easy things. Not the fun things. Learn different trades. Even if you only spend a short amount of time on them."

"The easy thing would be for me to work at the library or sell comic books or sit in an office," Rebecca said. "But I know how to do all of that. It all makes sense to me. Working in a hardware store ..." She nodded. "That would teach me something new."

"Take risks while you're still young. Make yourself uncomfortable. The older you get, the less courage you have. It takes more gumption to push yourself into discomfort."

"You make me wonder if I should take different types of classes in college," Rebecca said.

"Anything that will stretch your mind."

"Will Mr. Bradford think it's strange that I want to work for him?"

"Does it matter?" Simon asked.

"I'm nervous about asking him for a job because I'm not like his

usual employees. I have no experience."

"Paul will think you know things because of who your father is." Simon laughed. "Be as confident as you were with me."

"I wasn't confident. I almost didn't ask."

"Be sure to tell him that I sent you. If he has any questions, he should give me a call." Simon tapped the cell phone lying on the counter beside the box holding Crystal. "I'll let you start the ball rolling, but, Miss Rebecca, this could be fun for all of us."

"Henry will think I've lost my mind."

"Remind him that employees get a ten percent discount." He reached across the counter and took her hand. "I'm glad you stopped in. You have such a big life ahead of you and I would enjoy spending a summer watching you prepare for it. If I didn't think you should talk to Paul on your own, I'd walk with you and demand that he hire you."

"If I come in here in tears because I don't know what kind of wrench somebody needs, you'll have to calm me down."

"If some person has made you cry about a wrench, I will be quite irate. Then I will serve you tea and we'll look up wrenches online."

"Thank you, Mr. Gardner," Rebecca said. "I kind of hope this works out."

"It will. You'll see."

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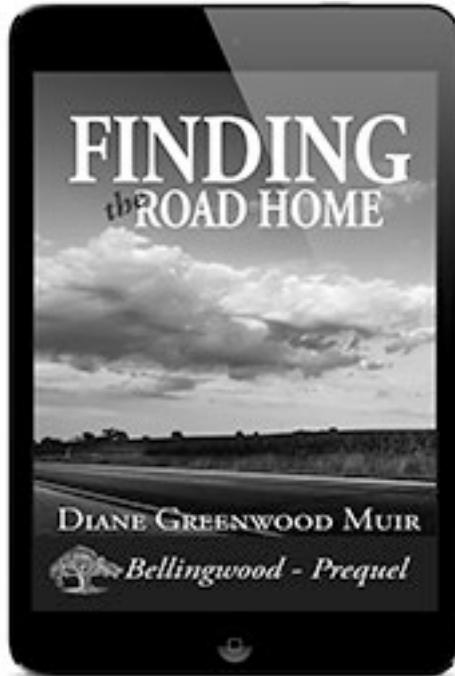
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