



WHEN WE  
ARE HOME  
*Vignettes*

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



*Bellingwood - Book 43*



# Book Forty-Three 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](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 43 — When We Are Home — 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**

### **Fresh and Clean**

Joss Mikkels walked out her front door, looked for anything that might be out of place, saw that the animals were happy and content and where they should be. Her garage door was open since she'd pressed the button before leaving the house. No kids were following her or wailing in the background or fighting with each other or dumping any number of things in piles to make messes that would cause arguments about cleanup.

Peace.

Pure and utter peace and quiet.

And this was the life of a mother whose children were all in school for the first time in years. It was almost unimaginable that Mimi Rose was old enough to be in kindergarten. Surely it was only last year when she'd been born.

Freedom.

Complete freedom. At least for a few minutes.

Traci, their nanny and housecleaner, cook, friend, and all things, still worked for Joss and Nate. They couldn't let her go now. Not until she was ready to move on. The kids would be lost without her. And so would Joss for that matter. Traci picked the entire set of kids up after school while Joss and Nate were still working. She made sure they finished whatever chores they needed to do, played with them, helped them take care of the animals and their rooms and their schoolwork. She was Joss's rock. One of these days she'd likely move on, doing whatever she wanted to do next, but today was not that day.

Today was a day of celebration. It had taken the last few weeks, since the day the kids walked into that elementary school, for Traci and Joss to completely return the house to the order that Joss had envisioned when it was originally built. Rooms had been repainted, floors scrubbed, carpets cleaned, walls and windows washed, cupboards emptied, cleaned out, and then reorganized. Toys,

clothes, books, and other kid paraphernalia had all been sorted. Some packed away, some returned to where it belonged, and much had been donated.

From the attic to the basement, the interior of their home was fresh and clean. Why? Because she could. For several hours every single day of the week, the house was empty of children. Joss and Traci tore into it like two women on a mission. After the kids went to bed in the evening, Nate and Joss ripped through landscaping. They'd repainted fence and he'd even power-washed the exterior of the shop. The bug had bitten them hard. Nothing was left undone.

But today, she felt like she could finally declare it to be finished. Traci was able to sleep in again. The first time she'd been given time to do that in years. This fall, she was taking a class at the community college. It was only one college prep class. She was still trying to decide what it was she wanted to do. They'd spent hours discussing it. Traci loved being with kids and though she considered teaching, wasn't sure that she'd be strong enough to manage everything that came with that career these days. She was terrific with little kids and Joss encouraged her to look at early childhood careers, whether in a pre-school or daycare, anything. Time would tell.

Joss walked into the garage and smiled. Nate had spent several evenings in here. Once he caught the bug from Traci and Joss, he'd gone after it hard. The floor had been power washed, the cabinets along the walls were cleaned up and organized, anything that belonged in the shop was returned to its home.

"Ahhh," she said out loud. She'd been saying that a lot this morning. For the first time in weeks, she didn't have a next-step plan processing in her mind. What an amazing feeling.

She opened the door of her car and smiled. Nate had taped a note to the steering wheel. She recognized his handwriting on the envelope. Joss sat down, turned the car on, backed out, put the car back in park, and opened the note as the garage door came down.

*"Congratulations on a job well done! This coupon is good for multiple things. First, a big dinner out at the restaurant of your choice with all the kids and Traci. Second, a dinner out with just you and me. Name the place*



*and the date. Third, I set up an account at Sweet Beans for you and Traci to use whenever you feel the need. Coffee and treats are on me for the next month. And fourth, as a thank you for spurring me into action these last few weeks, I want you to take an evening at home all to yourself. I will take the kids away. I'll pack 'em up and rent a hotel room where there's a swimming pool. Not to stay the night, but to swim and have room service and do all the fun things. You schedule it, I'll plan it. I love you."*

Joss didn't know what to say. She didn't want to call him, knowing he'd be busy. Nate had been just as active as she and Traci once he realized what they were doing. She hadn't really told him that it was going to happen - it just blew up one day. But he'd jumped in and with every extra hour he had in the day, he'd worked.

She was supposed to meet Andy Saner at the coffee shop before they headed for the library, but first, Joss needed to make a quick detour. Andy had put in extra hours these last few weeks at the library when Joss had to leave to pick up supplies or if she was simply late because she desperately needed a shower prior to smiling pretty at all the people in town. With Nate's gift, she'd happily treat Andy to whatever it was the woman wanted today.

Joss pulled up in front of the grocery store, hoping they'd have what she wanted. She got out and headed for the front door, then stopped and looked around. Were there really no kids tagging along? Was she going to be able to shop at the store without someone begging for candy or treats?

This summer had probably tipped her over the edge, making it that much more exciting to have all her children out of the house at the same time. It felt like she or Traci was hauling someone somewhere or moving them from activity to activity every day. And the kids didn't manage to have the same things going on at the same time, so the adults played tag team as best they could.

She went inside and headed straight for the snack aisle. Nate didn't often get to eat his favorite nuts. Anything that came into the house was fair game for mouths that never seemed to fill up. A can of almonds, a jar of pistachios, and Joss was surprised to find macadamia nuts on the shelf. This little grocery store never had

those. It was a gift meant to be. She stopped for a bag of plain chocolate candies and then a gift bag and some tissue paper. Yes, she knew exactly where all that was in the house now, but she wasn't going back for it at this point.

Joss filled the gift bag and walked across the street to the pharmacy.

"Hey, Mrs. Mikkels," a young man, she thought it was Joel, said.

"How are you today?" she asked.

"You know. It's always good until it's not. Today's good. At least it isn't beastly hot outside, right?"

"At least," Joss said. She waved down an aisle at Mrs. Nederstrom and headed straight for the pharmacy counter at the back.

Nate looked up at her approach and smiled. "You're free," he said. He left the counter and came out into the main part of the store.

"Thank you for the note. We might make a few changes to your gift, but that was sweet. You worked just as hard as Traci and I did."

"Not really. I only did the things I should have taken care of all along."

Joss laughed. "You mean, like regularly washing windows and cleaning carpets? I think we all lost our minds the last several years. Do you think we'll be able to keep it together from here on out?"

"Better question. Do *you* think we will?"

"Nope. I'm afraid we're entering the most insane period of our lives yet." She held up the bag. "I brought you a treat. Don't bring this home. It's your illicit stash to keep here at the office."

He peered into the bag. "Macadamia nuts, too?"

"They had them. I bought a jar. You deserve it."

"You know they're not safe here either."

"Maybe put them in the locked refrigerator." She grinned. "Make sure everyone can see that they are there, but no one can access the nuts but you."

"What part of my gift did you want to change?"

"We should take the kids for an overnight at a hotel. You and me. They can swim, we can bask in the ..." Joss paused, "... chlorine-

filled air around the pool. We can order room service and spend the night. Traci can stay with the animals."

"She should get a vacation, too."

"I'll talk to her about it. But I don't need a night alone. I'm giddy enough at the thought of quiet mornings after they go to school."

"You find a day. I can make reservations and put the plan together." He shrugged. "Or you can. I just didn't want you to have to invest any time in it if you wanted to take the time off."

"We're in this together. I'm fine," Joss said.

"You and Traci have had an insane summer. I tried not to feel guilty about coming up here to the office where it's quiet. And, you know, heading over to the garage to hang out with the boys for coffee, and spending time in the shed with my cars."

"But you felt a little guilty?"

He chuckled. "Some. I threw it off, though. I'm a slug."

"A little bit."

"You know, if Traci ever moves on, we could hire someone to clean for us."

"The kids are getting older. If I hadn't been so all-fired worked up about getting everything done in a hurry, they'd have been involved. Traci and I talked about it. We're going to add to their list of chores."

"You could always assign bathrooms as punishment. It works for Polly."

"Lillian would be washing every bathroom in the house because of her mouth," Joss said with a chuckle. "I love that girl, but she is a sassy-pants."

"And it will serve her well."

"Keep telling me that." She looked up at the clock on the wall. "I'm going to late meeting Andy. Thanks for the account at Sweet Beans. That will be fun."

"Should have done it a long time ago." Nate drew her close ... close enough that his name tag caught her chin.

She didn't care. "You know," Joss whispered, "it won't be that long and we'll be celebrating Mimi Rose's first month of college. Everyone else will have moved on with their lives. Maybe even a

few grandchildren. What will that be like?"

"Absolute perfection," he said. "The house to ourselves, we can send the babies home with their parents and sleep without worrying about someone sneaking out or bringing snakes and frogs in. It will be weird, but we'll be together."

"I wouldn't want it any other way. Well, fewer snakes and frogs, but with you? I'll even take that."

She kissed him and heard a small noise. They turned to see Mrs. Nederstrom coming around the end of an aisle. The woman smiled. "Kiss him now," she said. "Kiss him all the time. Never stop kissing him."

When she disappeared, Joss tipped her head up and kissed her husband. "That sounds like excellent advice."

## Vignette #2

### A Fool in Love

Pat Lynch opened the front door and rattled the glass of ice water she held, hoping to wake her husband without startling him. The morning's entertainment was over and it was time for him to come inside.

When he didn't move, she walked out onto their stoop, large enough for his lawn chair, but that was about it. "Albert Lynch, wake up," she said.

He blinked and lifted his head. "Just restin' my eyes."

Pat handed him the glass and leaned over to kiss his forehead. There was more now to kiss than there had been nearly sixty years ago. Had it really gone by so fast? "Come in where it's cooler. You're going to get sunstroke."

Albert frowned at her. "Woman, the sun won't get to my chair until later. I've been outside every day and you've yet to rush me to the hospital for that."

"I don't want there to be a first time. Come inside. You can sit in your recliner and watch out the window."

"Yes'm," he said.

He tried to hand the glass back to her, but she shook her head. "Drink first. Walk second."

"Did you see that gang of kids this morning?" he asked her. "More than usual, it seems."

"Same amount," Pat said. "Same amount as every day. They just keep getting bigger." She took the glass out of his hand and waited for him to lift himself up and out of the chair. "We should put an umbrella out her for you, ya old fool." She pronounced umbrella with the accent on the first syllable, which always made him smile. After this many years, she said things like that for no other reason than to see him smile.

Albert loved watching the kids in the neighborhood. During their summer break, he would spend all day on the porch, hoping

for a glimpse of children chasing each other around, or the sound of laughter and play. It didn't happen as much as it used to, what with so many young people on those infernal devices. The Sturtz kids weren't like that. The rumors Pat heard were that they had a few laptops in the house for homework, and the tablets the kids used for school work were closely monitored. The kids also had to wait until they were thirteen before they got their own phones and those were monitored as well. That meant that at least the neighborhood had some activity during the week.

The Ogdens across the street spent their days outside too, but the lot was too well-protected to see in very far. They had all sorts of animals, which made sense since Doc Ogden was a vet. And they'd put a swimming pool in, too. Just a little one, from what she'd heard. Not that anyone had invited her or Albert to come over for a look-see. But those little Ogden kids were cute in their own way. They were more shy than the Sturtz kids, who acted like they owned the neighborhood. Oh, not in a bad way. They just behaved like normal kids who laid claim to all they could see.

The newest neighbors, the Gordons, were nice people. Judy Gordon was forever sending her daughter over with a treat or a little gift that one of the children had made. Her husband, the elementary school principal was busy again. Real busy, if the rumors were true. They were building a new school and he was involved in it all. So was that Sal Ogden. All these newcomers in town. It was hard to keep up with everything.

She hadn't had a chance to get to know the other family that moved in across the street from the Bell House. Mellados or something. And a sister owned that new boutique downtown. Who'da thought? Pat remembered when the darkest color anyone had for skin in Bellingwood was a woman who married a local boy. She was Italian. Things were different now. It was probably a good thing, but she wasn't sure she liked all the changes and all the new people. She couldn't go uptown anymore and know everybody's names. That was hard on her. Back when she had family at home, she knew everybody in town. She knew their parents and their grandparents, she knew who was related to who. There were too

many new people in town.

"Did you see little Alexander this morning?" Albert asked her.

"No. I was making the bed. Why? Something wrong with him?"

"He wanted to walk with the older boys, but he had to go slow because his little brother wouldn't let go of his hand."

"That's too bad," Pat said. "If he's going to have to have a tag-along, he'll never grow up."

"Theodore is only a kindergartner," Albert said, scolding her. "It's sweet that his brother takes care of him."

"Never toughen either of them up."

She was in a mood and Albert didn't know why. He sat down in his recliner and leaned it back. If he got to just the right position, he could still see nearly everything that went on outside.

"Look at me," Pat said. She'd set the glass on a table beside his chair.

"What do you want?"

"Don't take that tone with me. We still have to talk about Florida."

"I told you what I want."

"No, you told me what you think you're going to get away with. We need to talk about this. We're not getting any younger."

Albert looked over his glasses at her. "That, my dear wife, is an obvious statement. I don't want to live in Florida year-round. I like Bellingwood. I want to come back."

"It's getting harder and harder for us to make this trip every year. You don't help me pack things anymore. I have to do it all by myself. You don't help me unpack either. You trot your hiney out to the porch and sit there while I do all the work."

"It's a lanai," he said. That wasn't going to help the situation, but it would deflect from the whole work conversation. He'd tried to help her over the years, but she was particular in the way that she did things. He was forever in her way. After a while, he just got tired of it and left the room."

"We have to start making plans. If we are moving down there for good, we'll need to sell the house. We've talked about this."

Albert turned back to the window. He didn't want to talk about

it. They'd lived in this house their entire lives. He'd painted the outside of it more times than he wanted to remember. He'd painted inside walls whenever Pat wanted to freshen things up. There used to be a day they had a big garden out back, but they hadn't done anything with that in years. They'd raised their family in this house. They'd entertained friends and he'd gotten to know the neighbors. The neighborhood block parties that happened over the summer were a lot of fun. And most of the kids made sure to wave and say hello on their way past. This was their home.

"No," he said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, no. We're not moving to Florida full-time. You wanted to winter down there and I agreed because you were right. Winters are hard in Iowa and we're too old to fight the snow and cold. I don't want to sell this house. I don't want to leave our family behind."

"They don't live in Bellingwood."

"I will not agree with you. This is not the year. Next year might not be the year."

"When will be the year?"

"Maybe never." He glared at her. "Why are you so all-fired up to leave Bellingwood for good?"

Pat couldn't bring herself to tell him that all these new people in town scared her. She could hardly admit it to herself. Things were changing too fast and she was too old to keep up with those changes. "Because it's time. We know plenty of people down there and we'll get to know even more."

"Old people," he scoffed. "Everyone is old."

"We're old, Albert. You're going to have to accept that."

"Not so old that I'm ready to give up our life here." He pointed out the window. "Mrs. Ogden is going to work. You can tell because she's dressed up."

"She's always dressed up."

"No, today's she's in business dress. She's trying to make Bellingwood a better place. You'd think she was a snooty Easterner who was too good to be a normal Iowan, but she has four happy



little children and she's doing it without a nanny."

"She has Mrs. Doble in there all the time."

"And has Mrs. Doble ever said a mean thing about the Ogdens?"

Pat shrugged. "She says they're pretty nice and the children are well-behaved."

"There, see? Good neighbors. When things happen around here, are we left out?"

"Sometimes."

He chuckled. "Only when we want to know personal and private things. The Gordons treat us good, don't they?"

"It's like they're patting us on the head."

"No, it's not. Mrs. Gordon is a nice lady and her kids are sweet to us. You're the one that started it."

"Started what?"

"You took them a pie. Remember? You opened the door. And now because she wants to be neighborly, she sends her children over with little presents. You know you like it. We both do."

"I don't see Henry Sturtz or Polly that much anymore. It's like they're too busy for us."

"They're just plain busy," he said. "Henry's building that school and the community center. And you know what they're going to have at the community center?"

"I know. I know. They'll have old people parties. Just what we need."

He put out his hand and when she moved hers away, he sat forward and grabbed it anyway. "You and I belong in Bellingwood. I want to live here until they drop my ashes in the plot we've already purchase right down there." Albert pointed to the east where the cemetery was. "I don't want to be planted in a Florida swamp. I want to watch these kids grow up. They're nice kids. This is a good neighborhood. Even you have to agree that it's gotten nicer over the years since Sturtz bought that big old house."

Pat nodded. He wasn't going to let her get away with this, she could tell. "You're still an old fool."

"I'm a fool in love," he said. "Don't dance much anymore. Don't

get around well anymore, but you're stuck with me."

"That makes me a fool in love, too, I guess."

"Do we have any of that Danish pastry left?" Albert asked. "I could use another cup of coffee, too."

"Get up and get it yourself."

When he started to move, she laughed and shook her head. "I'll do it. Keep watch on your neighborhood."

"It's a good neighborhood."

Pat couldn't disagree. "You're right."

"I always am."

She walked out to the kitchen and heard him muttering. "My fool always has to have the last word."

"I heard that!" Albert said.

## Vignette #3

### Yes, Sir

"What are you two doing?" Henry shook his head as he walked across the yard. His father and his Uncle Dick were rolling an immense wooden spool / reel toward the shop.

The two men looked up at him. Bill's face was guilty; Dick's a bit chagrined.

"Why?" Bill asked. "Who's asking?"

"Me," Henry said. "I'm asking. Where did you get that thing?"

"Found it online." Bill turned back and with a gesture, motioned for Dick to continue rolling it with him.

Henry hurried forward and put his hand on the spool. "Where are you taking this thing?"

"Into the shop. What's it to you?" Bill asked.

"How did you get it here?"

"Paid a guy."

"Dad," Henry said. "What's going on?"

"I wanted it. I found it. I bought it. I hired a guy to bring it to me. Now, I'm going to take it into the shop, clean it up, and use it."

"Use it for what?"

"Nunya."

Dick laughed. "As in, nunya bi-ness?"

"Exactly," Bill said.

"Mom would have your head if she knew the two of you were out here rolling this around," Henry said. "Let me help."

"What your mother doesn't know won't hurt me," Bill said. He did back away and allow Henry to take his place. "I'm not an invalid."

"No, you're a dumb old man who has a host of strong young-uns around who would do whatever you asked them to do." Henry scowled at Dick, forcing the other man to back away. "Don't touch this, either of you."

"Don't boss me, boy. You're still my son," Bill said, his voice low and angry.

"And I want to be your son for many more years. Neither of you are wearing gloves, and look there," Henry said, pointing to the direction they were rolling the wooden reel. "That hill doesn't look like much, but it could have taken you down in a flash. I certainly don't intend to roll this thing by myself. Where's Jack?"

"Workin'," Bill said with a sulky tone. "Which is what we'd've been doin' if you hadn't showed up."

"Pigeon English, Dad?" Henry asked with a laugh. "Do you think that sounding like a redneck will intimidate me?"

"I'm not feeble and I don't appreciate you taking that tone with me."

"I apologize for my tone. You aren't feeble," Henry said. "But think about this for a minute. Who would have been rolling this reel into the shop twenty years ago? You? The two of you?"

"Darn-tootin'," Bill said.

"Nope. You would have made me do it, and you wouldn't have let me do it by myself. You would have made me get my buddies to help. That thing weighs a lot. And today, I don't plan to do it by myself either. I don't have to do dumb things to prove to anyone that I'm still young enough to get away with it. I'm not." Henry tipped the reel over so it could no longer roll. The thing was immense. Nearly five feet in diameter and four feet tall. He'd never seen one of these this big. When he tipped it, the weight of the thing made a loud thud as it hit the ground.

"What did you do that for?" Bill asked. "You already yelled at me. I wasn't going to do anything more with it."

Henry took in a long breath. He thought it was hard with ten kids in the house. They were nothing like dealing with a recalcitrant father. One who still deserved his respect, but at the same time, made him nuts. "I'm going to get help. No, I'm going to get the loader."

"I could have done that," Bill grumbled.

"Should have done that," Dick agreed.

Henry walked away before he said anything that might make this more difficult for his father. He walked into the shop and caught Jack's eye.

"Hey," Jack said, spinning down the lathe where he'd been at work.

"Did Dad say anything to you about a big wooden reel coming in?"

Jack frowned. "No, sir. He didn't."

"Do you have a minute?"

Jack glanced at the piece still on the lathe, then nodded. "Sure. What do you need?"

"The big loader."

That made Jack's eyebrows shoot up. "How big is this thing?"

"Big enough for the big loader. Would you mind bringing it out of the shed?" Henry pointed. "We're right out there. I need to find out where Dad wants it."

"What is he ..." Jack stopped when Henry put his hand up.

"Only he knows. Thanks." Henry looked around the shop while Jack took off at a jog. Where was his father planning to put that thing? They could get it in here by opening the overhead door, but it would take up a lot of usable space. He shook his head again and walked back out.

Dick and Bill were both sitting atop the spool. Dick had found a blade of grass and was picking his teeth with it. Hicks. They were Hicks. And if Betty or his Mom saw them, those two men would have their hides tanned. They didn't act like this around anyone else.

"Jack's bringing the loader. Where do you want this thing to end up?"

"Back side of the house," Bill said. "But first we're going to stain it so it don't ..." Henry looked at him. "So the wood doesn't rot. We'll take it inside."

"How about we just put it into place now?" Henry asked.

"Because I want it to be protected before I leave it out in the elements. Didn't you hear me, boy?"

"Dad," Henry said patiently. "The forecast is clear for the next week."

"You cain't never be sure with 'dem forecasters. They don't know nothing." Bill shot him a defiant grin. The man was worse than

Delia.

Jack drove the loader over to them and soon, the reel was on the scoop. "Where we going with it, boss?" Jack asked, looking straight at Bill. He was a smart young man. Bill was in charge of the shop.

Bill looked at Henry, rolled his eyes, and pointed down the hill behind the house. "Go that way. Wait until I'm there and I'll show you where I want it. Can't take it into the shop so we'll do it his way."

"Dad ..." Henry started.

"You're probably right. Got no room for it in there if we get busy. And you keep us busy." Bill stalked off with Dick trailing behind him.

Jack shot Henry a questioning look and all Henry could do was wave him on. He followed the crowd to the back of the house. They hadn't finished this area yet. Mostly because Bill and Marie couldn't decide what they wanted out here. It had been several years and they were still talking about it. Marie had given up. She really didn't care. She mostly just wanted something out there so she and the kids had a nice place to play. A deck, a patio, even a tent would have been fine. Bill couldn't make a decision.

The men flounced around the lower patio area outside the basement of the house until Dick finally pointed at a location and Bill shrugged as if to say that would work. Once the reel was unloaded, Jack got down to wait for more instructions. There were always more instructions.

"What do you think, Dad?" Henry asked. "Will this work? We can put it anywhere." Now that the reel was on the cement pad, he and Jack could shift the thing until it was exactly where Bill wanted it to end up.

"Gonna have to work. Really wish it could have been in the shop, though," Bill said. He shrugged again. "Guess I'll do what needs to be done out here."

"What are you planning to do with it?" Henry asked.

"It was going to be a surprise, but you've stuck your nose in it." Bill trailed his fingers across the top table of the reel. "And I'll probably have to ask for your help later on because you won't let

me get away with the rest of what I want to do. Dagnab it!" he exclaimed.

"What's up, Dad?" Henry stepped in next to his father.

"Now I have to haul my tools and everything down here. Would have been easier in the shop."

"Tell me what you're thinking."

"Fine." Bill slapped the top. "See that center post underneath? I thought JaRon and I might make a curvy train track up from the bottom. We'll create scenes along the wall of the post. You know, winter and hills, all of it. Then, I will cut a hole for the train to come out the top and run around the base of a big old pine tree for Christmas. But I need my tools."

"We can strap a tool chest to the four-wheeler," Jack said. "Fill it up with what you want and if you don't want to move it back and forth every day, I'll do it. This sounds really fun. Will you let me help?"

Bill's face lit up. "What are you thinking, Jack?"

"I don't know. Maybe I could cut out some, like, pine trees on the CNC and little houses and stuff. The boys could paint them. I'd paint them if they had other things they wanted to make." Jack pointed at the center of the table. "You're thinking a big pine tree here? We should build a framework for the tree's base. And what color are you thinking about painting this thing?"

Dick joined them and the three men walked around and around the reel, pointing out where they'd put things. Bill knelt and showed what he thought might happen with the path of the tracks.

"You know, Dad," Henry said. Everyone stopped and looked at him. "If you're worried about working out here in the elements, you have those tarps. We could set them up on posts. Give you a little protection."

Bill nodded. "That would work. I was trying to think how we could maybe use a tent or something, but the ones we have aren't tall enough or big enough to work in. Tarps would work. Thanks."

"Have you sketched this out yet?" Jack asked.

"Nope," Bill said. "Didn't have all the proper dimensions. I will in about an hour, though." He patted his belt, then patted it again.

"Where is that danged tape measure? Those things are always running away."

Henry pulled his off his own belt. During the day, he was rarely without one. "Take mine. I'll get another from the shop."

Marie walked out of the basement door. She stopped and looked at the four men, who didn't have the decency to look ashamed at all. "You did it, didn't you."

"Yes, ma'am, I did," Bill said with no small amount of pride.

"About time." She turned to Henry. "He's been looking at that thing online for the last two weeks. Plotting and planning how to make it do what he wants. Now it's here. The kids and I will have to bring him meals, because we'll never see him inside again. Dick, your wife has been trying to call you. Did you turn your phone off?"

Dick patted his pockets, then in confusion, he turned on Bill. "My phone must be with your tape measure. Where did we leave those things?"

Bill chuckled. "Up on the porch while we were waiting for the delivery."

"I'll go," Jack said. "After I take the loader back. That okay?"

Dick nodded. "Betty will tan *my* hide later."

"Did he call you for help?" Marie asked Henry.

He looked at his father, who shrugged again. That man was enough to make a sane person crazy. "I was here at the right time."

"I told him to call, that you'd make sure it ended up where it needed to be without anyone getting hurt."

"I'm not an imbecile," Bill said.

"You certainly are not," Marie acknowledged. "But you're stubborn and don't like to ask for help."

"He helped me," Bill said. "Even when I didn't ask."

She chuckled. "Because that's how we taught him to behave. Now, as Polly would say, are you planning to be grumpy about it all day?"

"Yes," Bill said, a sly smile on his face. "It's my day. I'll be grumpy if I want."

Jack ran back down the hill. He handed Dick's phone over and then handed Bill his tape measure, wallet, and phone. "Here you



go, sir."

"See," Bill said, handing Henry's tape measure back. "That's how you treat the elder statesman. You call them sir."

"Yes, sir," Henry said. "Would you like me to bow and kiss your ring finger as I prepare to leave your presence?"

"Smart-mouthed boy." Bill held out his hand. "But, yes, please."

## Vignette #4

### Secrets

Lyndi pointed at the clock on the wall. "It's almost time."

Rachel laughed. "It isn't like this is an organized thing."

"You might think that, but no one is ever late."

Rather than argue about it, Rachel took a platter out of the cupboard, then loaded it with leftover breakfast items from one of their morning meetings. "Are you going to stop working and sit with us today?"

"Someone has to keep things moving around here," Lyndi said.

"So is that a yes or no on joining us?"

"I'll be there. I'm always there." Lyndi usually took a moment to sit at the back table with them during their break, but she was the one who jumped up if one of their guests needed help.

The clock ticked over to 9:58 and Stephanie walked into the kitchen. "I need more coffee. Right now." She draped herself dramatically across the counter in front of the coffee machine, reaching across as if she could barely make it to the spigot.

"That bad this early?" Rachel asked.

"Not bad. Just busy."

"Yes, it is," Rachel said. "It's as if everyone sent their kids back to school and finally remembered that they needed to organize the rest of their lives. Maybe they don't understand that our schedules fill up early in the year."

Stephanie stood and refilled her coffee mug, then leaned on the counter. "Do you remember when they didn't? When there were only a few people in the building at a time? I remember wondering how Polly and Jeff thought they could possibly keep a business going with only wedding receptions on the weekends."

"And then ..." Lyndi said.

"Dun-dun-dun ..." Rachel sang out.

"Everything changed," Stephanie said. "Now, I feel guilty when I don't have space available for each person who calls, asking for a party room or meeting facility."

"Maybe we should tell Polly to build on," Lyndi said. "Wouldn't that be funny?"

"Hilarious." Everyone looked up to see Sal Ogden walk in carrying her mug. "Polly would think it was the best idea ever, though," Sal said. "It would give her something to do."

"Like she doesn't have enough going on," Stephanie said. "We hardly ever see her in the office anymore."

Kristen walked in with her own mug and looked around. "Are you talking about Polly?"

"Not really, but kind of," Sal said.

"Does that girl ever relax?"

Sal chuckled. "A glass of wine, a cool breeze, with a group of friends on her gazebo gets you a relaxed Polly. Especially after the kids have all gone to bed."

"She is pretty chill, but can you imagine keeping that house clean and feeding all those kids? And now that they're older, they are all in programs and contests and events. And then she keeps up with everything going on here and at the hotel and at the B&B." Rachel looked around. "Am I missing anything?"

"You mean, like finding dead bodies and taking on rescue projects?" Stephanie asked. She smiled. "I think about how my life changed because of her. I never saw me finishing a college degree or holding down a great job, much less a real life. When I lived in that trailer park with Kayla, I assumed I would have to struggle to make ends meet for the rest of my life."

"It's like, even if she isn't in the office, she doesn't miss much," Kristen said. "And it's the little things, too. I talked to her about Ava one day and even though it was no big deal, she straightened me out."

Sal cackled. "Polly straightened you out?"

"She doesn't hold back," Kristen said, her head down. "I don't know what I'm going to do with it, but I can't ignore what she said."

"What did she say?" Rachel asked.

"Nothing." Kristen shook her head, obviously not wanting to talk about it. "I have some things to work out. But the thing with Polly is, she, like, knows stuff. Even though she's always got some

place to be, she takes a few minutes to act like you're the most important person."

Sal pointed at the goodies on the platter that Rachel had arranged. "Are those for us?"

"Usually we sit at the back table," Rachel said. "You should join us."

"Not if I have to sit there and listen to you adore Polly." Sal winked. "She is normal, you know."

Rachel picked up the platter and headed to the back. "What do you mean, normal? Of course she's normal. She's just, well, chill."

"She wets her pants because she waits too long," Sal said.

"No way," Stephanie said. "Is there a story?"

Sal rolled her eyes. "If you tell her I told you this, I'm coming after every one of you." She pointed at each of them after making eye contact. "I'm not kidding. I will haunt you until the day you die, then I will haunt you wherever you end up."

Kristen crossed herself and said, "I swear to never tell."

"Okay, I wasn't there. Well, not the first time."

"There was more than once?" Stephanie asked, uncomfortable laughter burbling from her lips.

"Probably more than twice, but I know of two specific stories. Both of them happened because Polly couldn't be bothered to just stop and go to the bathroom somewhere. She was sure that she'd make it. She didn't."

Lyndi leaned forward. They were all invested now. "The first one?"

Sal took a long drink from her coffee mug, leaned back in the chair, and smiled, before starting her story. "The summer between her freshman and sophomore year in college. She was back here in Iowa. She and one of her high school friends had gone out for the evening. They'd eaten pizza and went to a movie. After that, they just drove around. I didn't know people did that."

"It's a thing," Rachel said. "A small town thing. Don't you see the kids cruising back and forth up town? It's probably even worse in Boone."

"It is," Kristen said. "Go on."

"She took her friend home and was wiggling in the driver's seat. When her friend asked if she needed to go into the house and use the bathroom, Polly blew her off. She only had a mile or so before she'd be home. She could make it."

"Nooooo," Stephanie groaned.

"Oh, she made it," Sal said. "Into the driveway. Then it was all over. She couldn't believe it, but she also couldn't leave the mess in her dad's truck. Good thing for her the seats were vinyl and not cloth. She had to go in and tell him what had happened because she couldn't figure out any other way to explain a bucket full of soapy water. Her dad followed her back outside, laughing like a loon while she cleaned up after herself."

"And her pants would have still been wet. How embarrassing!" Lyndi said. They were all laughing.

"What was the other one?" Rachel asked. "Or should you tell us. This feels wrong."

"She never told me that it needed to be a secret. Polly was laughing through the whole thing. The second time was quite a few years later. By this time Polly was out on her own, working at the library. She had her own car at this point."

"She wet herself in the car again?" Lyndi asked.

"Well, not quite." Sal had an audience and she was loving it. "A bunch of us planned to meet at a music festival. Polly didn't want to go, but she also didn't want to be left out. She wasn't going to get out of work early enough to go with all of us, so we told her which gate to meet us at and we set a time. You know, because not everyone had cell phones back in those days.

"She had to dress up for work that day for some reason or other and left in a skirt, but she'd brought clothes to change into, figuring she could just do it in the back seat of her car. Again, it didn't occur to her to go to the bathroom before she left work, so she was heading our way when it hit her that she really needed to pee. But traffic was terrible and she was going to be late, and we would be waiting, so she just kept going."

"This is why I tell Ava that we always have to go to the bathroom before we leave the house," Kristen said.

"Bah," Rachel said. "Do you know how many times I get home and have to push everyone out of the way so I can get to the toilet? It's a thing for me. Not like I don't know it, but when I'm ready to leave, that's all I can think about doing. Leaving. Not going to the bathroom. I'm sorry. Go on, Sal."

"Polly found the festival grounds, but she couldn't find the right gate. She drove into one and realized it was wrong. She went on and drove into another. Wrong. A third gate. Wrong. By now, she was completely panicked. She had no way to reach any of us, dusk was coming, and she was a little agitated over her personal situation."

"This is so bad," Stephanie said. "So bad."

"She finally found the right gate. I'd sent one of the guys we knew out to hold a parking spot for her. But then, all of us thought we should just go, too. The band that was playing wasn't a big deal, so we all took off. We saw Polly drive in, waved her down, and she aimed for the parking place. Then she sat there. I couldn't figure out what was going on. Why wasn't she getting out of the car? I pounded on her door. She opened it and when she got out, I stepped back, but then, I hugged her."

"Noooooo," Stephanie moaned again.

"I had no idea what was happening in the moment," Sal said. "She told me later that she just gave up and peed on the ground with all of us standing nearby. Her skirt was long enough that we wouldn't have necessarily noticed since it was getting darker. It didn't occur to me that she'd spread her legs out so it wouldn't run down them. Yep. Right there. Then, she made everyone else go away so she could change clothes in the back seat of her car. Except she didn't have any extra underpants. The rest of the night was fun, and no one knew but me. And now you."

Stephanie shook her head. "Moral of the story. Always pee before you leave a building. Always carry extra underwear. I think I'm going to hide extras in my trunk."

Rachel pointed at Sal. "Another moral of the story - never tell your secrets, even to your best friend."

"I'm a horrible person," Sal said. "Horrible, horrible, horrible."

And if you ever feel the need to ask Polly about her little excursions, be sure that I'm standing there so I can watch."

"She'll hurt you. Then you'll haunt us," Lyndi said.

"And it will be worth it to see her face."

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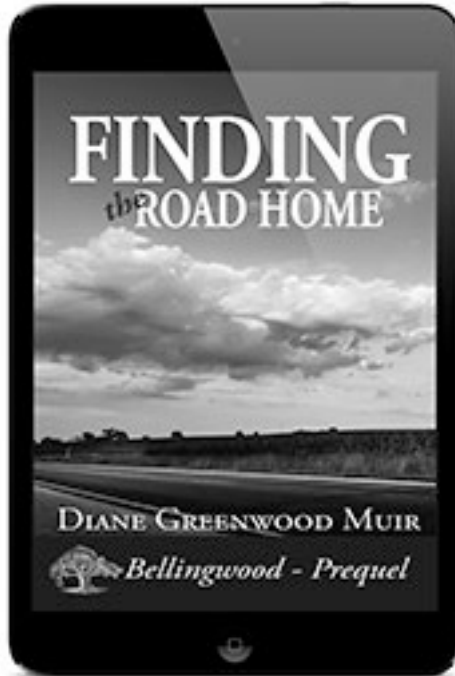
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