

Backyard Bones 1

Regan's smile was too big for the occasion, but she couldn't help it. As she parked in front of the Whitlaws' tired looking house, she couldn't suppress her little-kid-about-to-open-a-birthday-present grin. Officially she was stopping by to see if her clients needed anything and to bring them a housewarming gift. Unofficially, move-in visits were a favorite part of her job, a part that always energized her and made her smile.

She noted again how much the Whitlaws' house would benefit from a little paint and some new landscaping — TLC in realtor jargon, but its downtrodden state hadn't bothered her clients when she showed them the house. They liked it right away, even though it needed work. The location was good, the house was sound, the price was right, and they thought of home improvement as a hobby.

The front door was open wide to the late warmth of an unusually long Indian summer. Regan decided not to ring the doorbell, which she remembered didn't work anyway, or rap on the door. "Knock, knock," she sang out as she poked her head through the open doorway. "Joan? Rick? Anybody home?"

Joan answered from the kitchen, where she was taking carefully packed glasses out of a box, unwrapping them, and putting them into a nearby cupboard. She responded with a returned shout. "Regan, is that you? Come on in. I'm trying to get the basics organized."

Regan walked into the house gingerly, working her way through stacked boxes and moving toward the sound of Joan's voice. The kitchen was in a similar state of heaped-box disorder, except some of the boxes were open and partly emptied. She surveyed the disarray.

"I don't envy you the next few days," Regan said as she picked her way through the clutter to reach Joan. "But I bet you've already got plans."

"Huge plans, wonderful ideas ... I just have to get through this part first. As our realtor, aren't you supposed to help me with this?" Joan quipped.

"Oh, no-no-no." Regan held her hands up defensively in front of her and shook her head. "I don't do packing, unpacking, or dump runs. I'm absolutely certain those services aren't part of my job

description,” she laughed. “But I hope this will help a bit.” She handed the new homeowner a gift certificate for Café Sparrow.

“Regan, they use tablecloths at Café Sparrow, don’t they? A civilized meal ... yum.” Joan closed her eyes and pressed the paper against her chest. “Sanity. The only problem is I’m going to need a shower and a complete makeover before they’ll let me in the door. Rick is off getting Togo’s takeout sandwiches for tonight, but you are a dear for this. Thank you. I’ll dream of sitting at a table that isn’t covered with boxes as I fall asleep tonight. Maybe tomorrow,” she sighed dramatically.

The back kitchen door crashed open as the two little Whitlaw boys rushed in. “It’s my turn to be the pegantolaguest. Give me the shovel,” Raymond yelled. “You have to be my assistant now.” The red-faced six-year-old flew at his brother who, being close to three years older and a few inches taller, managed to hold the shovel over his head and keep it just out of his little brother’s reach as he danced through the kitchen. The young would-be paleontologist wailed, “Mommy, make him give me the shovel! Tell him it’s my turn.”

“Richard, give your brother the shovel.” She hastily added, “Gently.”

Regan smiled broadly. Her sons were way beyond this stage, both were practically men, but she remembered the rough-housing of little boys, and her sons had almost the same age difference between them as the Whitlaw brothers.

“He’s so lame. He doesn’t even know how to say paleontologist. I don’t think he should ever be the lead paleontologist,” Richard complained.

“Richard,” Joan said forcefully.

“OK, Mr. pegantolaguest,” Richard taunted as he handed his brother the shovel, handle first and gently, as his mother had instructed. Possession of the shovel successfully exchanged, the two brothers dashed out the back kitchen door to the yard as quickly as they had come in.

“And don’t run with the shovel,” Joan called after them.

“What was that about?” Regan chuckled.

“Do you remember when Mrs. Fargers told us about the dog?” Joan asked.

It came back to Regan. About a week before the sale was recorded, they had done a walkthrough with the sellers, the Fargers. Everything was in perfect order and the walkthrough quickly became an introduction to the workings of the house. Mr. Fargers and Joan’s husband, Rick, headed off to discuss the location of shut-off valves and how to run the sprinklers. Mrs. Fargers offered to show Joan the garden. Since the garden was more interesting to Regan than mechanical things, she joined that tour.

Mrs. Fargers was referring to a hand-drawn map, pointing out each of the fruit trees, most of which were leafless in late October, and explaining where the dormant spring bulbs were in the backyard flower beds, when she suddenly became very flustered.

“Oh, dear,” she said. “I believe we’ve overlooked a disclosure. I hope it’s not going to disrupt the sale. Honestly, we weren’t trying to hide anything. We just forgot until now. We buried a dog in the backyard just under the peach tree. Roscoe was a large dog, a Great Dane. I wouldn’t want the children to accidentally come across him and be frightened.”

The Whitlaw boys had been assigned to accompany their mother on the garden part of the tour so they wouldn’t interrupt the consequential discussion between their father and Mr. Fargers. The boys hadn’t been paying attention to the flora, but they suddenly became very interested when a buried dog was mentioned.

“Where is he?” the oldest boy, Richard, asked.

“Well, let’s see now ...” Mrs. Fargers hesitated for a moment. “I believe he should be just about here.” She drew an imaginary line above the ground on the left side of a leafless tree. “It’s been several years — twelve, fifteen, oh my, more than that. But yes, if this is the peach tree, that seems about right.”

The younger boy, Raymond, jumped up and down and eagerly asked, “Can we see him?”

“As you can tell, a buried dog isn’t a cause of distress for our family,” Joan laughed to Regan and Mrs. Fargers. Then she quietly promised the boys they would talk about the dog later and whispered to

Regan, “but not in front of Mrs. Fargers, in case she’d be upset at the idea of her pet being disinterred.”

A smile crossed Regan’s face as she recalled that whispered end of the conversation with Mrs. Fargers. “Oh yes, the dog buried in the backyard,” Regan said.

“I thought the boys might have forgotten about the dog by now, but we hadn’t been here twenty minutes,” Joan said, “when they demanded a shovel so they could begin digging for that animal. We have more than one shovel but, with all the moving confusion, we’ve only been able to find one, so they are supposed to take turns being the lead paleontologist and the assistant. We’ve resorted to a timer, can you believe it, and we have a serious and ever growing hole in the backyard,” she smiled and shook her head.

Wild shouts returned to the kitchen. “We found him, we found him,” shrieked Raymond as he raced through.

“I told you he was lame. We didn’t find the dog; he just thinks we did,” Richard brought the women up to date with all the older-brother disparagement he could manage.

Both boys returned to the yard with an earsplitting slap of the back door.

“Regan, my manners are terrible. Would you like some coffee?” Joan offered. “I’ve succeeded in finding the coffee pot and put our dishes and cups away in the cupboard. We may have to stir in sugar and milk with wooden spoons though — the silverware has eluded me thus far.”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll get out of your way and let you get back to work.”

“I was afraid you were going to say something like that.” Joan dropped her head to her chest. “Work,” she said with a pretended sob. She took another glass out of its box and began unwrapping it. “As a realtor, I’m sure you’ve seen homes in this condition many times before. Please promise me I’ll get through all this and everything will find a place.”

“I can definitely promise you that, and with your sense of organization, I bet it won’t take long,

either.”

The back door opened again with what was becoming routine suddenness. There stood a beaming Raymond, his little hands holding a skull up for his mother’s approval. “See Mommy, we found him,” he screeched. “He has teeth and everything.”

“I told you he was lame,” Richard announced. “That’s not a dog skull. It doesn’t look anything like a dog skull. Where are the big pointy teeth, little brother?”

Joan dropped the glass she was holding. Its loud shattering on the tile floor barely registered with her or with Regan. The skull Raymond so proudly held up for his mother wasn’t a dog skull. It was human.