



FAMILY IS A GIFT

Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Book 31



Book Thirty-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 has been published on either the website (nammynools.com) or in the email newsletter that comes out on the twenty-fifth of each month.

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 31 — Family is a Gift — 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

Girls Stick Together

Cassidy was forever talking to her dolls, but when Rebecca walked past her room this evening, it sounded much more intense than usual. She stopped in the doorway. "Is everything okay?"

"I hate my clothes. My dolls don't understand."

Rebecca cocked her head. "I'm with them. Your clothes are wonderful. Mom bought you some really cute outfits for school this year."

"But it's hard to decide. I always get it wrong."

"What do you mean, wrong?"

"I can't ever make them match."

"Is that what you were talking to your dolls about?"

"They only have a couple of outfits and everything matches. I wish I only had two outfits."

"No you don't. That would be boring. Your clothes don't have to be matchy-matchy. Colors aren't meant to be exactly the same. If you like what you put together, that's all that counts. Look at this outfit." Rebecca gestured at herself. Today she wore a gauzy, flowy flowered skirt in a rainbow of colors, teal being the most prominent. Instead of a matching teal blouse, she'd chosen a yellow top that was close in color to one of the least dominant in the skirt. "Nothing matches, but it goes well together. My mom told me to never be afraid of color. A rainbow doesn't match, but it all goes together."

"Polly or your other mom?"

"My first mom," Rebecca said with a smile.

"Do you miss her?"

"Sometimes. A lot of times. But I don't miss her so much that I can't live because she isn't here. It's more like I wish she could meet everyone that's part of my life. I wish she could meet you. She would love you to pieces. Would you like my help putting together outfits to wear?"

The little girl's eyes lit up. "Really? You always look so pretty."

"You're gorgeous, too, Cassidy." Rebecca walked in, sat down beside her on the floor, and picked at the gorgeous black curls on Cassidy's head. "Do you have any idea how much fun you're going to have with your hair in the future?"

"It's so hard. Melanie takes forever."

Melanie Norman was a new stylist out at Mina's Place. Polly had been in a near panic after Nonni Wellman turned out to be a murderer. She'd finally found someone nearby who could help her manage black hair. She counted on the young woman to help her figure out the best way to keep her kids' hair healthy. But Mina Dendrade, the owner of the salon, went on the hunt and found Melanie, who couldn't believe that she had a built-in clientele in the small town of Bellingwood. She'd been a tremendous help to Polly this last year as Cassidy grew up. The youngest boys were very happy with nearly shaved heads, especially in the summer, but Noah was starting to experiment with longer hair. Rebecca teased him that it was because he had a crush on Melanie. It made him blush every time.

"Someday Melanie will teach you how to do your own hair, but until then, you just tell her what you want and she'll do it. The other day I saw a series of photos of a beautiful black woman who had a different hair style in every single one. In one of them she wore a beautiful 'fro. Oh, it was amazing. Then, she had it straightened in another, and in a third picture, she had braids all over. And then, she had her hair down in long ringlets all over her head. Seriously, I'm jealous of what you get to do with it someday."

Cassidy pointed at her closet.

"That's right. We're talking about clothes, not hair. But don't you ever forget that you are a gorgeous girl, no matter what your hair does or what clothes you wear." Rebecca tweaked Cassidy's nose. "You have the prettiest face, and anyway, most of a person's beauty comes from the inside."

Cassidy pulled at the neck of her shirt and looked down at herself. "Inside?"

"Not inside your clothes, inside yourself. Like your heart and your head. How you treat people and how you love them."

"You sound like Mommy."

"I've been living with her a long time, haven't I? But she's right, you know. Do you think I'm pretty?"

Cassidy nodded, her eyes wide with adoration. "Yes. You're so pretty. I think you should be in movies."

"I'm really not all that pretty."

"Yes you are."

"No, look. My hair is totally weird on the right side, I wish my legs were longer, and I don't have much for boobs. I will never be a model for a magazine. But that doesn't matter. I like who I am. Polly and Henry love me. You guys love me. Andrew loves me. My friends love me. I feel beautiful all the time because everyone tells me that I am. And it's the things that are different about me that make me unique and special. Just like you. What's the best thing about Cassidy?"

Cassidy shrugged her shoulders.

"You have the cutest lips in the world. When you smile they fill up your face. When you pout, they get all stuck together. When you're mad, your lips flatten out and it looks like you want to bite someone. Don't ever bite anyone."

"I got in trouble when I did it before."

Rebecca laughed. "I can't believe you remember that. You were very little. So, let's talk about your clothes. Which is your favorite shirt?"

"That purple one." Cassidy pointed at her closet. When she'd moved in, the pole to hang clothing was normal height and Rebecca spent a lot of time helping her put her things away. Lexi was the one who recommended hanging a second pole closer to Cassidy's height. It wasn't like her clothes were so long they'd drag on the ground.

While Henry had his tools out, Rebecca asked for a pole to be hung in the lower part of her closet for pants and shirts. That had been an interesting day. He did not like spending time in her messy room and it had been such a last-minute decision that she didn't have time to clean up first. All she could do was yank everything out of her closet and pile it on her bed. If Henry'd been able to think,

he'd have sentenced her to clean a bathroom for that mess. As it was, all he did was roll his eyes and ask if she thought the extra pole was going to help. Well, it couldn't hurt, now, could it? She chuckled to herself.

"You don't like the purple shirt?"

"Oh, no, Cass. I was just thinking about Henry trying not to yell at me about my messy room."

Cassidy lifted her eyebrows. "You have a very messy room."

"I know, I know," Rebecca said, pulling her sister into a hug. "I'm a slob. Polly tells me that she used to be a terrible slob, too. Maybe there's hope for me someday."

"Mommy's not a slob."

"Not anymore. I think it changed when she had kids. Okay, get your purple shirt out of the closet. We're going to help you plan for the week." Rebecca stood and opened the pants drawer of Cassidy's dresser. She'd helped her sister fold and arrange things, she ought to be able to find what she was looking for. "Where are your black shorts?"

Cassidy pointed at the laundry basket. "I wore those already."

"Okay. Tan shorts it is. Now, I know you have some fun unicorn socks with lots of colors."

"They're in the drawer."

Hold the shirt in front of you," Rebecca said and held the shorts up against Cassidy with the socks tucked into a pocket. "Walk over in front of the mirror. What do you think about that?"

"I like it."

"See how cute you are? We'll put two of your hot pink barrettes in the pile and you're set for tomorrow. You fold your pants and I'll fold your shirt. Now, we have to think about Wednesday's outfit. Start with the shirt. Go ahead and pick one." Rebecca stacked the clothes in a neat pile and slipped it underneath Cassidy's dresser.

In just a short time there were four neatly stacked piles of clothes lined up in a row.

"What do you think?" Rebecca asked. "Will you feel good wearing those outfits this week?"

"But what happens next week? I don't know how to do this."

"You'll figure it out, just like you'll learn how to take care of your hair. Practice. But until you do, I'd love to help you. Maybe we can even add some fancy belts and things from my closet."

Her hand on a hip that jutted out, Cassidy blinked at Rebecca and in the sassiest tone she had, said, "Your closet? More like, your floor." She burst out laughing.

"Nice bit of sass, there. You know, we could use some of my scarves to make headbands for you. Wouldn't those be pretty?"

Cassidy nodded. "You'd let me wear them?"

"My clothes won't fit because you're too young. But sisters borrow things from each other all the time. We share stuff."

"I'd share my dolls with you." Even though Cassidy wanted to be generous, Rebecca knew exactly how difficult it would be for her to give up any treasure in this room. She was so much better than she had been, but whenever Cassidy received a gift, it was precious - almost sacred. The little things Rebecca brought back from trips with Beryl were lovingly placed in a home on her shelves. Cassidy would take them down and play with them, but when she finished, they went right back where they belonged. She took nothing for granted. With as much stuff as Rebecca had accumulated over the years, she didn't even know what was under the piles in her room.

"Thank you, but that isn't necessary right now. Your dolls know where they're happiest and that's right here with you."

"Like your cats."

Rebecca smiled. "I suppose you're right. They roam the whole house, but they always end up back in my room."

"Do they ever get lost in your stuff?" Cassidy smirked.

"You're getting awfully sassy. Maybe you should come to my room and help me clean."

"There isn't enough time before I have to go to sleep."

"Wow," Rebecca said, laughing. "Burn."

Cassidy rolled her right arm, trying to emulate a fist bump / handshake thing she'd seen her older brothers do. When she got frustrated and gave up, Rebecca put her hand out, palm forward. "How about a normal high-five until we come up with our own secret handshake."

"Just between us?"

"Maybe we'll let Polly and Lexi in on it, too."

"And Cat?"

"And even Grandma Marie. The girls of the Giller-Sturtz family stick together, no matter what."

After Cassidy slapped a high-five, she wrapped her arms around Rebecca, who bent enough to hold her sister close.

"We'll always believe the best about each other and we'll always stick together, Cass. Always."

Vignette #2

Geek Like Me

"Ready to go, bud?" Henry tossed his keys in the air and caught them.

Noah was on the floor, pulling on his boot. "Almost." He bent to kiss Georgia's nose as she sat beside him, patient and hopeful. "You can't go with me today."

She wagged her tail, hearing the sound of his voice and not the words he spoke.

Noah finally got his foot into the boot and leaned back. "Whew." At his movement, Georgia jumped at him and he took her up into his arms, letting her lick his face.

"You need new boots, don't you?"

"I'll be fine."

The boy wouldn't stop growing. Henry knelt beside him and pinched the toe of his other boot. There was no space left. "You've outgrown another pair."

"I'm sorry."

Henry chuckled and rubbed Noah's shoulder. "Nothing to be sorry about. Your body is going to keep growing until it's ready to stop. It appears we'll keep buying bigger shoes and longer jeans."

Noah held his arm out and Henry laughed out loud. "Longer sleeves, too. Son, you're going to make some basketball coach very disappointed."

"Why?"

"Because your body shape is perfect for the game. The only problem is, the shape of your heart and mind don't want anything to do with it."

"Is that bad?"

"No it isn't." Henry stood and put his hand out. "You get to choose who you want to be. Your mother and I will always stand for you."

Noah put the dog on the floor, took Henry's hand, hefted himself

to a standing position and with a small grin, sidled up to Henry. He put his hand up and measured the distance between the height of their two heads.

"You're right there, you rat," Henry said, swatting the hand away. "Quit gloating. It won't be long before I'm looking up to you. Are you ready to go?"

"Just need my water bottle." Noah walked over to his cubby and snagged the bottle.

"Already filled it?"

"Yeah. Mom did before she left."

It took a few more minutes for them to make sure the dogs wouldn't follow them outside. Georgia was desperate to go with Noah. She would follow him anywhere. When that little black furball came into his life, Noah found his best friend.

Henry was beyond wondering what animal or human would be next in his life. It was just as easy to roll with the changes.

They got into Henry's truck and buckled seat belts. "Thanks for the ride," Noah said. "Eliseo said he'd pick me up, but he would have had to come all the way back in town."

"You're welcome." Henry backed out of the driveway. "Tell me what you like best about this work."

"The animals. They don't care if I screw something up."

"Does anyone else give you trouble if you make a mistake?" These words from Noah ... from any of his kids broke Henry's heart. He hated that they focused on their mistakes. He and Polly were so careful to behave as if mistakes were nothing more than that. But the boys had childhood training to overcome and he didn't know if it would ever happen. They'd been ridiculed, belittled, and bullied. When they did anything wrong, it had been even worse. They'd grown up without a strong adult in the picture, so adolescent bullies had been all they'd really known.

He glanced at Noah, who hadn't yet responded. "Noah?"

"Oh. Sorry. Not really. Eliseo is cool about it. Mrs. Johnson tells you about things, but only because she wants you to do it better the next time. It isn't like she yells or anything. I just feel so dumb."

"It's hard to learn, isn't it?" Henry asked. "But if you don't try,

you'll never get better. And we never have all the answers or know how to do things without learning."

"I wish I did know everything," Noah said. "That way I wouldn't make dumb mistakes in front of people."

"Does anyone else make mistakes or are you the only one?"

Noah shook his head. "Whatever."

"Your mother hates that word," Henry said, laughing.

"I know."

Henry heard Noah take in several breaths, each time as if he wanted to start a conversation. "What 'cha thinkin' about?"

"Am I a geek?"

"A geek? Why do you ask that?"

"Somebody called me a geek. I looked it up and it's not a good thing."

Of all the kids, Noah could be counted on to search out information. He was desperate to know everything. "Tell me what you found."

"A geek is someone who bites a head off a live chicken or snake," Noah said.

Henry laughed out loud. "That's a very old definition. You are the only person in your entire school, except maybe a few teachers who would know it. Next?"

"A smart person who doesn't fit in with anybody else. I don't want to be unsocial, Henry."

"You aren't. You can't be part of Polly Giller's family and be unsocial. How many different parties have you attended?"

Noah rolled his eyes. "A lot."

"How many different people do you know?"

"They're all adults. That's who I like talking to. Grandpa is so smart. He's always showing me clever ways to do things. I like Eliseo. He talks to me like I'm not just a kid. Mrs. Johnson is cool, even though she's, like, teaching me how to ride and show. You and Mom. And Hayden and Heath. They want to talk about important things. Sometimes I like just listening."

"Before we go on, is there another definition for geek?"

"An expert in something. Usually techie stuff. I'm not a techno

person."

"You could be. The thing about you, Noah, is that you are so smart. You can do anything you set your mind to. You learn so easily. If you read it, you know it. Other than your mother, you are the fastest reader in the house."

"Not faster than Andrew, though."

Henry lifted his eyebrows in acknowledgment. "You're right. He's a good person to emulate. What do you think of those definitions?"

"I'm not a geek."

"But if you wanted to be one, would you be proud?"

"Not if I'm biting the head off chickens."

"I doubt that will ever come up. Let me ask one more thing about those parties we have. Would you rather be in the library reading?" Henry heard a rumble of laughter beside him.

"Yeah."

"Do you sometimes have to work hard to be social with people."

"Yeah."

"Own it, Noah. Just own it. You don't have to be like your brother. He loves hanging out with everyone. He is outgoing and enjoys people. It would kill him to be stuck in a library for hours with nothing to do other than read."

"That's, like, my dream day." Noah pointed out the window. "Except when I get to go to Sycamore House or up to Mrs. Johnson's place."

"But you'd rather sit on the back of a horse than talk to Mrs. Johnson's kids, wouldn't you?"

"Definitely."

"Horses don't make you talk to them. They understand you even when you're silent."

"That's what Eliseo says, too. It's why he likes them so much. He doesn't have to say anything and they understand what he means. I never thought about it before he told me. That's the way it is with Georgia. She just likes being with me. Mom says I should talk to her."

"That's so she hears your voice and is comfortable with you. I'll

bet Eliseo has told you to talk out loud to the horses, too."

Noah nodded.

"It's okay to be a geek, Noah. Someday, you'll understand that. You are special and unique. You make your mother and me proud, even when you make mistakes. Especially when you make those. That means you're learning new things. It's okay that you don't feel like you fit in with everybody else. Trust me when I tell you that someday you will find friends who think you are awesome. You know how to be social, right?"

"Yes."

"Sometimes all you can do is put on a happy face, and be nice and gracious to people. It might wear you out and you'll need to spend extra time in the library with your books, but it's important for you to know how to be part of a group. Polly and I will always expect you to join in the activities, but when you are ready to escape, you come talk to me. Tell me that you're done. If you're honest with me, I'll help liberate you."

Noah chuckled. "Liberate me. It's like I'm being held prisoner."

"I hope it's never that bad," Henry said. "When you get home tonight, why don't you look up the difference between an extrovert and an introvert. Do some research."

"Why?"

"Because when we adopted you and Elijah, we had no idea how very different you were from each other. You each relied on the other one to exist. As you've continued to grow, you've developed such interesting personalities, quite different from each other. I'll put a note beside the computer in the office with those two words on it. When you get time, do the reading. Maybe you could look for books at the library. I think you'll find it fascinating."

"I'm an introvert, aren't I?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I like being in my head. Intro. Inside."

"Good for you."

"Elijah is an extrovert. Extro. That's like outside. He likes being with people on the outside of himself."

"Pretty profound there, young man."

Noah beamed. "I have another question, then."

"Okay?"

"Can we put up a basketball hoop?"

Henry laughed out loud. "Of course we can. I should have done it a long time ago."

"Will you teach me?"

"I'd be glad to, but there's a better person around than me."

"Who?"

"Hayden. You know he went to college on a basketball scholarship, right?"

Noah's eyes grew wide. "Really? I didn't know he could play like that."

"I think Hay would love to teach you how to play the game. And I know for certain that there's a hoop already up at his place. Dad put it up for me years ago. We'll have to buy a new net, but we can do that."

"That would be so cool. Would he teach Elijah and Caleb and JaRon, too?"

"We'll ask. If I know Hayden, he'll think it's the best thing you ever asked him to do."

Noah sat back. When Henry glanced over at him, he was smiling to himself.

Vignette #3

Easy Friday Night

Rebecca wiggled her feet.

"What do you want now?" Andrew asked, looking at his lap.

She'd propped her feet on his leg, stretching out on the sofa.

"Nothing. Just saying hi."

"Hi."

"What are you doing?"

He glared at her. "You know what I'm doing. What are you doing?"

Rebecca waved her sketchbook at him. "Drawing you. You're kind of cute, you know. Are you writing about me because I'm so adorable?"

"I suppose."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I suppose my main character is you. She's strong and doesn't put up with much."

"We're weird," Rebecca said.

"Your mom would say that isn't new information." Andrew shrugged. "Sorry. I meant Polly."

"You know I don't care. She's my mom. I just don't call her that. It would feel funny to change now."

"Like me calling Mom by her first name." He laughed. "Hi, Sylvie. Welcome to my room. Yes, Sylvie, I'm getting out of bed now. Stop yelling at me, Sylvie."

Rebecca giggled. "Too weird. So, what do you think everyone else is doing now?"

"Drinking and carousing."

"I told you we were weird."

"I like this, though," he said. "Tonight was fun, but I like coming back here and hanging out with you."

They'd been to a concert at the ball fields tonight. It was loads of fun. Dancing in front of the stage with their friends was something

they'd never had a chance to do before and that made it one of those nights Rebecca never wanted to forget. She couldn't believe it when Polly let her come over to Andrew's after the concert was over. She didn't ask any questions, didn't argue. She just said yes.

"Can I read what you're writing?"

Andrew glanced her way. "Maybe later. I'm trying to work this out in my head.

"Do you want to see what I'm working on?"

He nodded absentmindedly. Rebecca knew better than to bother him when he was in the middle of writing. He'd stop to pay attention to her, but it always cost him focus. But tonight had been so much fun. She didn't expect to come back and spend the last hours of the day with him hovering over a laptop.

She flipped backward through her sketchpad and bit her lip. It was her own fault. This was why he'd dropped into writing mode. As soon as they walked in the door, she kicked off her shoes, grabbed up the pad and sat down, only looking up to nod when he asked her if she wanted a pop. She had desperately wanted to capture memories of the concert, so while he set everything up and made sure she had pillows to lean back on, a blanket over her lap and arranged her stuff on the coffee table, Rebecca sketched.

They were only quick drawings, but it was enough to give her something to work on later. There was Cilla and her new boyfriend. He was preening, she was dancing. That wasn't going to last. Then Deirdre and Kayla were in the next sketch. It wasn't often that Rebecca caught Kayla completely relaxed and free. Her arms were up in the air, clapping and enjoying herself. Rebecca added more smokey details around her two friends. She wished Deirdre would see herself as everyone else saw her. The girl was gorgeous. She never talked about her last school. Never. She was happier now than when she first got to Bellingwood, but somebody had hurt her and Rebecca was running out of time to get her to talk about it. Maybe she never would.

She sketched the big crowd in the bleachers. Polly and Henry and the kids were up there somewhere, but with the big lights on the field and the number of people, she never did find them.

Once Andrew settled in with his laptop, Rebecca finished up the quick sketches and settled back to watch him work. He was so intense when he wrote stories. And he was really good. He wrote short stories sometimes and let everybody read them, but these days he said he had a bigger story to tell. Any spare time he could find went into writing. That was one reason they were so good together. He got her. He was just like her.

They *were* weird. The concert was awesome, but coming back here to sit beside each other while they worked on their favorite things was amazing. No one would ever understand that. It was nice to have Sylvie and Eliseo out of the house, too.

Rebecca shook her head. Polly and Henry would probably think that she liked having the adults gone so she and Andrew could mess around. That wasn't it at all, though if she could distract Andrew with a little messing around, that would be just fine. They had fun at her house, but there were so many people everywhere. It was great, but whenever Rebecca wanted to work, she had to shut the door to her bedroom. Even then, those littles were always knocking, wanting her to do something or other.

She flipped to a blank page and started drawing. The other night, when Andrew was at the house, Caleb and JaRon dragged him to their bedroom where they'd built a fort with blankets and pillows. When she went up, he was lying on the floor between their beds holding a big stuffed dinosaur, and growling as he protected the castle from the two little boys who darted toward him, hoping to get past him.

Her pencil flew across the page and she smiled at the faces of her brothers as they came alive. They had so much fun with Andrew.

Rebecca wiggled her foot on his leg again. She couldn't help it.

"Just a few more minutes," he said.

"Sorry. Just thinking about how awesome you are. Keep working."

"I'm almost done with the scene."

She closed her eyes and listened to his fingers tap on the keyboard. He pause and she opened her eyes. But he was only thinking. She could tell because he closed his eyes. That was how

he shut out the world to think about the next few lines. Then, he was back at it. His eyes closed again and she flipped to a fresh page. She was going to have a lot of things to finish up the next few days.

Andrew sat back. "There. Done."

"A whole chapter?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Just that scene. I'll finish the rest later."

"Because I'm bothering you, right?"

"Yeah."

Rebecca burst out a laugh. "Not gonna sugarcoat it, are you?"

"No, Rebecca, you are never a bother. When you are by my side, I can move mountains and write ten thousand words an hour." Andrew rolled his eyes.

She swung her legs to the floor and leaned in to kiss him. "I knew you were the best guy in the world."

He kissed her back and pulled his arm out from between them so he could hold her close. She ended up draped across his lap.

Then he laughed.

"What?" Rebecca asked.

"Is that your pencil or are you just happy to see me?"

She pulled away and looked down between their bodies. She was still holding her sketchpad, and her pencil was poking him in the stomach. Laughing, she moved back to sit on the couch beside him. "Sorry about that."

"It just made the kiss more exciting."

Rebecca looked at him. "Weirdo."

"I didn't know if I was going to live or die. Maybe you'd have to take me to the hospital because you poked the pencil through my belly and my guts poured out all over your drawings. Of course, maybe there was the whole drawing with blood thing and that's what you wanted to do. Open me up, soak the pencil in blood, and draw death."

"You've been writing way too long tonight."

"Or not long enough. All these ideas are floating around up there."

"Maybe I should just go home so no one is here to bother you."

Polly would kill her for being passive aggressive. She hated that. Rebecca shot him a smile.

"No," he said. "I'm sorry."

"I'm kidding."

"Can I see your sketches now?"

"May I," Rebecca said with a laugh.

Andrew tried to take her sketchpad from her lap. "I can never win with you people. May I see your sketches?"

She opened to the first page.

"Kayla was having fun tonight," he said. "Did you see that one guy trying to dance with her?"

"What guy?"

"I don't know. It wasn't anyone we know from school. Probably one of the people in town for the game release. Kayla didn't see him either. It was like she was all up in the music."

"What are we going to do with her?" Rebecca asked.

"With Kayla? Why do we have to do something?"

"Andrew, she is innocent. Everyone takes care of her."

"Like you?"

"Well, yes. She isn't going to college with us next year and I'm afraid that she'll get herself in some stupid kind of trouble. I won't be there to bail her out."

"She'll be fine. Maybe she'll do even better without you. That girl has to figure it out."

"I'm just scared that she'll get hurt."

"Like how you hurt when your Mom died? You have to let her do this someday."

"It's different than Mom dying. At least I had Polly and Henry."

"And Kayla had Stephanie."

"I told her that she wasn't allowed to date any boy until you and I met him and approved."

"We're going to drive back to Bellingwood so we can approve of her dates."

"Do you have a problem with that?"

Andrew laughed. "I guess not, but I don't see me as a bouncer-type. You'd be lots better at that than me."

"I need you around for backup."

"Because I'm such a tough guy."

"You're scrappy." Rebecca flipped the sketchpad to the first one she'd done of him hunched over his laptop. "In a scholarly way."

"I'll write you into my story and bonk you on the head."

She scooted closer to him.

Andrew wrapped his arm around her and kissed her forehead.

"We are weird, aren't we?"

"You know there's no one else I want to spend time with, don't you? Even if all we do is sit on your couch while you write and I draw."

"Maybe we should go to exotic places and sit beside each other."

Rebecca leaned into his shoulder. "Like Paris and Rome?"

"I was thinking about your gazebo or the lobby at the hotel."

"You don't want to see the world with me?"

"Of course I do, but you'll see it first with Beryl."

"Maybe you and I will move to London and she can come visit us."

Andrew laughed out loud. "You leave Polly and Henry? That will never happen." When Rebecca opened her mouth to protest, he put a finger on her lips. "Don't even. We'll go wherever you want, but this will always be home."

Padme barked from where she lay on the other side of Andrew.

"What?" he asked the dog. He looked down at his laptop. "Oh no. She's going to kill me."

"Who?"

"Polly. It's midnight. You're supposed to be home."

Rebecca scrambled off the sofa. "I have to go." She jammed her pen and sketchbook into her backpack. "I still can't believe she didn't even argue or ask any questions."

"We're seniors."

"I know, but if I screw this up ... no, I can't screw this up." She slammed her feet into her shoes. "Gotta go, gotta go."

Andrew followed her to the back door, then took her hand. "Good night, Rebecca. Text me when you walk in the back door."

"Text you. Text Polly. I will. I promise." She went up on her

tiptoes and kissed his cheek, then took in a breath. "Sorry. I love you." Rebecca kissed him on the lips and wrapped her free arm around his waist. "Thanks for this. It was nice. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Then she ran out to her car. Hopefully Polly was already in bed.

Vignette #4

Mud Pies

Mark Ogden pressed the button to open his garage door. As he waited for the door to rise, he glanced into the yard and saw the garden hose stretched as far as it could go. Little piles of brightly colored clothing were scattered around it. That wasn't normal. He parked his truck, then wandered over to see if he could figure out what had happened before he went inside. A clothing explosion didn't signal good things.

He laughed to himself. Fun for the boys, maybe, but he was curious about Sal's reaction. It probably wasn't good.

A pair of shorts, a t-shirt. Another pair of shorts and another t-shirt. Two pairs of tennies and socks, none of them near each other. Then he saw something that gave him pause. One of his wife's shirts lay in a pile. Dear heavens, what had happened here?

He picked up his wife's soaking wet bright red shirt. The woman did look good in red and she knew it. Heck, she looked good in just about anything. Except mustard. And grays above the waist. Gray skirts and slacks were fine, but she hated wearing anything gray as a blouse. Why did he know that? Because Sal complained about it when she looked through catalogs. She always laughed at herself because she hated to be thought of as vain, but she still complained when she saw something she wanted to wear and found it was only available in one of her off colors.

Mark turned the wet shirt right-side out. He hadn't thought to hold it away from him and blanched at the smell since it was close to his nose. What had happened out here? He stopped immediately and left the shirt inside out. Then he walked around the yard and picked up the other items of clothing. Everything was wet. With each additional piece, the smell got worse. He finally gave up and left the shoes where they were.

"Sal?" he called out when he went inside. He dropped the horrible smelling clothes in front of the washing machine and

headed for the kitchen sink to wash his hands. Sure, he was a veterinarian and dealt with smells that came from places in animals no one else ever experienced, but he didn't expect to come home to it. "Sal? Where are you?"

"Right here." Those two words took too long to signify happiness and joy.

He spun, his hands still wet. His gorgeous, always-put-together wife stood in the dining room dressed in one of his ratty old t-shirts, a pair of his sweats that had been cut off to hang at his knees, with a tie from one of her fancy robes holding them up. Sal's hair was a mess, strands falling in her face, some of it plastered to her head. The t-shirt was wet, the shorts were wet. And she was glaring at him.

"Who are you and what did you do with my Sal?"

"Your Sal? Your Sal? This is your Sal tonight. Welcome home. The boys are in the bathtub on their third rinse. Since you are home, it is now your turn to check and see if they are finally clean. I'm done. Betsy-Kate is in our bedroom. By the way? Any day that you want to find those goats a brand new home is okay with me." Her lips were flattened and pursed together, barely opening as she spoke.

Mark knew he shouldn't laugh, but he wanted to. Oh, he desperately wanted to laugh. Instead, he bit his tongue. "Will you tell me what happened?"

Sal shot a side-eyed, furious glance toward the bathroom. "Your sons. Do you hear me? Your sons decided that those cute little pellets of goat poop would make wonderful pies. You know. Mud pies?"

"No-o-o-o-o," he said, a shudder running through his body. "Please don't tell me."

"Oh, I'm telling you," she said. "It didn't occur to me to ask when Alexander came in for a mixing bowl. They play all the time in dirt and mud. It didn't occur to me to ask when Theodore came in for the toy pie plates. Betsy-Kate and I were reading stories. Pretty little stories about unicorns and rainbows. We were having a wonderful time. I thought the boys were having a wonderful time."

"Oh dear."

"It did, however, occur to me to ask what they were doing when Alexander came back inside and walked over to show me his creation. He smelled like ..." Sal's eyes grew large and she whispered. "... hell. It was worse than some of the terrible diapers I've changed. Did I have any help from my loved ones? No, not at all. The dogs were as happy as I've seen them. They sniffed and sniffed, wagging their tails in joy. Betsy-Kate giggled at my very loud gasp. I didn't want to scream, because no one needed to hear that."

"What did you do?" By now, Mark was caught up in the story and reliving the horror of it with Sal. He couldn't laugh, all he could do was cringe.

Sal used her happy, I'm-not-going-to-kill-you voice as she told the next part of the story. "I asked Alexander to run back outside with it and I'd be there to help them. He had no idea that I was about to unleash a torrent of cold water on the whole party. I stayed as calm as I possibly could, took Betsy-Kate back to the playpen, and left her there with her toys and a pillow. Then I calmly went outside, pulled the hose out and asked them where they had gotten their mud." She glared at him.

"What did they say?"

"Theodore told me that they found berries to make the pie. Then he showed me one of the berries. They'd found them in the goat's pen." Sal tilted her head.

Mark nearly lost it. He couldn't even gulp back the laughter this time. "Just. No."

"Yes. They had mixed them with their sweet little hands, and then they wiped those cute little hands on their clothing. Their clothing, Mark. They wiped their hands on their shorts and their shirts and even on their socks."

"At least it wasn't on one of the good towels?"

"You think you're funny."

"Sorry. How long do you think it will be before you can laugh at this? Because it is kind of funny."

"Years, Mark. Years. Now, march your hiney into that bathroom

and sniff your boys."

"Sniff my boys? That sounds a little ..." He waggled his eyes at her.

"Don't even," she said, putting her hand up. "I've had it up to here with male-types in my life thinking they're adorable."

He gulped. She really wasn't seeing the humor in this yet. As he walked past her, he took a sniff and flinched. "You need a shower."

"You think?" Sal gestured down at herself. "Feeling all sexy tonight, are you? Want some of this?"

Mark bit his lip.

"How about we go out back and roll around in the mud and have a little nookie." She bared her teeth at him. "I'm on top."

He couldn't help himself and snorted back a laugh. "I still love you."

"It's a good thing. It's a darned good thing. You brought those goats into our lives. This is your fault."

"I was sure that it would be."

"Don't get smart-mouthed with me, Doctor Hottie. I know where your undies live."

Mark wasn't too concerned with that. Sal wouldn't be able to put up with the smell in her house even to prank him. But where had she come up with that nickname? "Doctor Hottie?"

"Yeah, right? Back in the early days, you know, six hours ago, when life was pleasant and smelled like a beautiful summer day, Polly and I were talking about the early years. You know, back when there were no dirty little boys in my house and I was living the life of Riley out in Boston."

"Does this mean you're ready to move back home?"

Sal shoved him toward the bathroom. "Not on your life. Go clean up your boys. What do you want for dinner tonight?"

"Definitely not pie."

"Good answer."

"I'll pick up dinner. You choose the place," he said desperately. He started to touch her arm, but she pulled back. "What?"

"Are you kidding me? I stink."

"I found your shirt outside. How ...? What ...? I don't know what

to ask."

Sal cackled at that one. "I'm just glad Albert Lynch across the street doesn't walk the neighborhood. If anyone had come into the yard, they would have gotten an eyeful." Her eyes grew wide. "I didn't even think about UPS or FedEx. All I could think was that I had to get that awful smell off of me. Because, while I hosed the boys down, they were having fun."

"Uh oh."

"Alexander got excited and wanted to hug his mother. Then Theodore wanted to hug me and before you know it, I was on the ground being hugged by two filthy, smelly boys. Mark, I couldn't even be angry with them. So, I've chosen to be angry with you and your goats instead. That sounds fair, right?"

"Maybe."

"I finally stopped the hugging fun and made them take off their clothes. They loved that. I thought I was going to have to chase them around the yard, they were so happy to be nearly naked outside. Alexander pointed at my shirt and it was covered in filth. I took it off and hosed us all down one more time before I dragged them inside."

"These boys had the best day ever, didn't they?"

She managed a chuckle. "I tried really hard not to be a shrew about it, Mark. Mother would have been screaming the entire time. But they're boys." Sal jabbed him in the chest. "They're your boys."

"What if Betsy-Kate is just as bad?"

"She will be," Sal said. "I wouldn't be so lucky as to have a girly-girl to dress up."

"Maybe we'll have one yet."

Her eyes lit up and she lifted a shoulder. "Maybe. So, you want some of this?"

He laughed out loud. "Shower first?"

"Clean your boys and they can watch while you hose down the yard. You might need a shovel. I don't want any of that mud to make its way into the house."

"Yes, ma'am. But I brought the clothes in."

Sal swallowed. "I hate to tell you that I was just going to put

them in the garbage."

"Do I have to get rid of the goats?"

"No, but you might need to buy me a pair of workboots and a pink-handled shovel so I can scoop poop before it turns to mud in the hands of our talented little chefs."

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her lips. "This is why I love you, Sal Kahane."

"Stop it. I stink." She tried to push him away.

"Not enough to stop me from telling you how amazing you are. I'll get the boys out of the tub and clean up the yard. Then the three of us will pick up pizza for dinner. Go shower now before I head outside. I'll keep an eye on Betsy-Kate while you're there."

Sal kissed him back. "I'm not really mad about it. Tomorrow I'll think it's funny."

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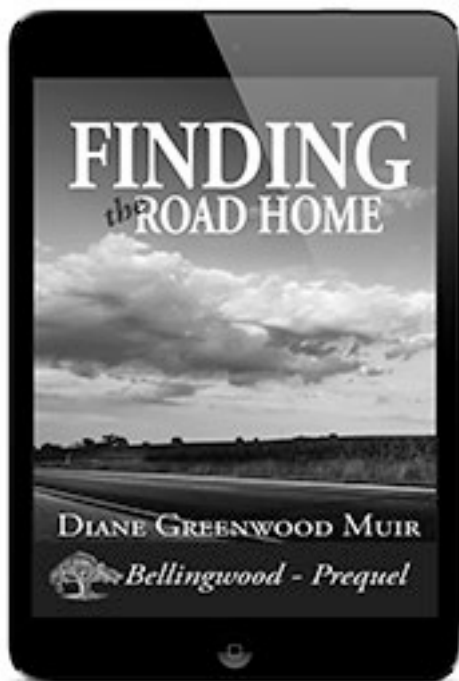
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for news about upcoming books, conversations while I'm writing and you're reading, and a continued look at life in a small town. Diane Greenwood Muir's [Amazon Author Page](#) is a great place to watch for new releases.

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