



*The* **ROAD** *to*  
**ADVENTURE**

*Signettes*

**DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR**



*Bellingwood - Book 33*





Book Thirty-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 33 — The Road to Adventure — 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

## Lights, Camera, Action

Chris Johns brushed his mouse and removed one last blemish from the image in front of him. The poor kid. His acne had blown out of control two days before his graduation photographs were scheduled and the mother had called them in a panic. Chris's wife, Debbie, assured the woman that he was a master at photo editing and young Matthias' photographs would look like the boy he really was.

He yawned and glanced at a second monitor, then clicked on the first thumbnail in the collection. Once more through the batch and editing this project was complete. He'd send the link off in the morning. They'd learned their lesson years ago to never send a link late at night. There wasn't much worse than waking up to a flood of emails from someone concerned with making changes. And besides, they were closing the shop for two days. It was time for a short break.

The last month had been busy. Dawn to dusk every single day. The two of them were a great team. Chris was an okay photographer; he could do the job. His greatest strength was behind the scenes, managing things for Debbie, making her life easier on a photo shoot, and then editing away in the quiet of his office. He loved editing. It was as if the software was part of his being.

On the other hand, Debbie was an artist. She was also bossy as heck, though somehow she managed to pull it off without angering anyone. Well, most everyone. Sometimes she came up against a parent who was pushier than her and had preconceived notions of how a photo should be taken. By the way, those photos a parent insisted on were usually the worst. Debbie managed people and her camera with seemingly little effort and created beauty with her lens, even with young men like Matthias. Someday this kid would be attractive enough, but he had hit an awkward stage in his

development, stuck between adolescence and Chris-didn't-know-what. A face full of braces and acne, it would be ruddy when he matured, but now it was just bright red. His blondish-red spiky hair was all over the place until Debbie showed the boy how to use gel to bring it under control.

Chris's wife was a master-stylist, too. She'd learned so much over the years and managed to keep it all in her head and pour it out onto their clients when necessary.

Debbie looked up from her bank of monitors. "What?"

"Just thinking about you."

"Great. Am I in trouble?"

"Why would you think that?"

"I'm tired and grumpy. We haven't done anything but edit photos for the last four hours. I'm hungry and I'm tired of people and their flaws and their demands and ... " Debbie stopped. "I'm so tired."

"It's a good thing we're taking the next two days off."

"Not off-off, just locking the door and not answering the phone, right?"

"Yeah." He nodded. They had so many projects in the hopper that they were under water. It was time to either cut back on the clients or hire someone. Since it was Memorial Day weekend, they'd already closed their sessions, hoping for an opportunity to travel away from Bellingwood. But as he watched their backlog grow, he knew he didn't dare leave town. Debbie agreed, though she didn't like it. She wasn't cut out to spend days and nights in front of a computer monitor. She breathed in people and their energy, she loved being outside, and she loved exploring new haunts to photograph. Chris was content to just be with her when he could. To be honest, he was at his happiest when they spent time together in front of their computers. Debbie could only sit still for a short time and tonight, he was fully aware of the fact that it had been a long day of shooting and a longer afternoon and evening of being closed up in front of screens.

"Close the file," he said.

"No, I'll finish this." She rolled her eyes, heaved a huge sigh, and

turned back to the task in front of her.

He laughed at the empty coffee containers and snack bags on the desk surrounding her. She didn't even notice the mess. The last real meal they'd eaten was breakfast. Chris needed to stop this and get her out of the studio. He took a few notes about where he was in his process, saved everything, and closed down his system, then stood and picked up a trash can. Scattered along the floor to her workspace were more pieces of litter, so he cleaned as he walked, then scooped her trash into the can, and set it on the ground. "Mark your progress and close it down. We're done."

A glimmer of hope shone in her eyes when she realized he might be serious. He knew that didn't happen every day. He was a terrible work-aholic, but then so was she. Debbie might even be worse. She worked at doing something she didn't enjoy because it was important. He worked at it because it was his life blood. He couldn't stop if he wanted to.

"Really?" She had pen and paper in her hand faster than the blink of an eye and made a few quick notes.

Since it was a Thursday evening, downtown Bellingwood would be busy. Debbie loved to wander through town, stop for ice cream at the General Store, chat with people on the street, take pictures of the action, and observe fascinating interactions between couples and strangers alike. His job was to ensure she didn't walk out in front of cars or bump into folks who were paying as little attention to their immediate surroundings as she did.

After she saved her work, he reached over and powered her system down, then offered his hand as Debbie pulled herself up. "Where do you want to eat?"

She shrugged. "The church food stand has pulled pork and coleslaw on the menu. The grocery store is grilling out front. Probably hot dogs and hamburgers. We'll find food."

Since it was graduation weekend, more people than normal were in town, making Bellingwood burst at the seams. The shops in town took good advantage of Thursday evenings, staying open late and offering great deals on sidewalk items. Chris and Debbie used to set up a sidewalk studio to take snapshots and print photos

of people who wanted a memory for their summer, but they'd stopped doing that. There was no extra time or energy these days. He knew she missed the fun of it, though. Maybe they'd schedule a few pop-up shoots on Thursday evenings this summer. That is, if they ever pulled out from behind the backlog of work in the queue.

"I want to go to the gallery tonight," Debbie said. "Judy Greene something last weekend while we were out there about a new piece Reuben was showing tonight."

Judy Greene's gardens at the new bed and breakfast in town had become a popular spot for photography. She was concerned with people traipsing through her flowers and plants, so he and Debbie worked with them to set up a few safe spaces surrounded by gorgeous color and greenery. Neither of them wanted to damage the beauty that Judy brought to life. The whole place out there was perfect. That immense porch offered innumerable possibilities and Debbie took advantage of it all. Judy and Reuben were great to work with.

The one place Debbie yearned to spend more time photographing was the Bell House owned by Polly Giller and Henry Sturtz. When they'd gone there to take family photos and she saw the possibilities of that grand staircase, she had come home and couldn't stop talking the photographs she envisioned. Grand weddings and beautiful girls, all dressed in their finery, filling the steps with gorgeous dresses and flowers.

It would never happen. Polly made that clear. No one except family and close friends would be using their home for anything. That had nearly killed Debbie, but of course, it was the right thing, no matter what. They'd had fun with that immense family in preparation for holiday photos. There was almost no poor use of space possible in the foyer of the Bell House. He just hoped that when their daughter, Rebecca, was married, Polly took full advantage of the beautiful room and allowed Debbie to be part of the celebration.

She had already danced her way to the front door of the studio and was trying to be patient with him. "Head back in the game, Chris. We have to feed me soon."

"Yes, my monster." He made his way around a rather unkempt stack of props and groaned when it toppled.

"Leave it. I'll straighten things up tomorrow after I've had some sleep," Debbie said.

"We need a bigger space."

"I know."

"We can afford a second place now. Maybe we just leave this as storage."

"What are you thinking?"

"I was thinking about talking to Jeff Lindsay regarding his main floor. It's still empty."

"Yeah?" Her eyes lit up at the thought of being closer to the action downtown. "There are a lot of little rooms in there we could use for studio space and offices. We could hire a receptionist for the front and display the latest images and maybe build out a place to do quick shots for people on Thursday evenings and ..." Debbie's voice trailed off. "How long have you been thinking about this and why didn't you say anything?"

Chris laughed. "When have we even had time to talk? I like the idea of a receptionist. A lot. Someone else can take phone calls and schedule shoots for us. When customers call to complain that we haven't finished something on time, that person can field their fury. All we have to do is work. I was thinking of looking for another photographer, but you are the best I know."

"We could hire another editor, but no one can do what you do."

He held the front door open as she walked out, the flipped off the light and made sure it was locked behind him. "Plenty of desk jockeys out there. I suppose we could hire someone to do the initial work and then I can finish and polish before sending it off."

Debbie took his hand and practically skipped down the street toward the activity happening downtown. "I can't believe you want to do this. When?"

"I'll talk to Jeff and Adam next week. If they haven't found a tenant, we'll see what we can come up with."

"And a receptionist?"

"Let me talk to Martha," he replied. Martha Levert was their

financial person and while she had already told him they needed to think about investing in property, he wasn't sure if renting a building and hiring an employee was what she meant. If she thought they could swing it finally, he was going to make it happen.

Debbie had already moved on from the conversation. He'd given her enough to boost her spirits and she was ready to engage with people and the real world again. She swung her camera from her side and brought it up to her eye. Chris knew to stop and wait. She'd seen something that caught her attention. It took him a moment to track her focus, and then he saw a pair of high school girls flirting with a boy beside the coffee shop. They were shy and tentative, while the boy felt the power of their attention and blushed like a fool. It wouldn't be long before at least one of them would be in the studio for senior pictures, but right now the innocence of youth would be captured for eternity by his wife.

## **Vignette #2**

### **Best Friends**

Lydia breathed in the scent of her coffee and cut another bite of coffee cake with her fork. A perfect morning. Aaron was gone for the day, she had nothing big planned, and each one of her kids had called to check in over the last few days. They were happy in their lives, meaning she could be content. The day was hers.

She had a refrigerator filled with ingredients that would be turned into casseroles to share and meals for the week. There was something satisfying about spending the day preparing food for others. She'd delivered two of her last beef stew dishes on Friday to women-friends who had difficulty working in their kitchens. Mabel Ostrem used to be Lydia for the elderly and shut-ins around the community, but she'd had to give that up years ago after a stroke took much of her agility. A soft-spoken woman who rarely complained, Lydia knew how she hated relying on others. Even more than she hated the idea of being put away in a nursing home. She was one person who regularly got visits, treats, and meals delivered to her home. Even with her disability, the home was always neat and clean and Mabel was as properly dressed and made-up as she always had been. Lydia knew it just took longer for her to make it happen.

She put the fork back on the plate, surprised it was still in her hand. The list of recipes she wanted to build today was on a three-by-five card and she perused it, trying to decide where to begin. Lydia smiled as she looked around her kitchen. She loved this room. Actually, she loved her whole house. No one would ever pry her out of it. The memories, the love, the parties, the joy, the agony, the pain, the fear. The terrible fear when she thought about losing Aaron. She hated that they'd passed the age where they had fifty or sixty years ahead of them. She grew frustrated when she caught herself musing about living without him or dying before he did and wondering if he'd re-marry. Those were pointless thoughts and

only served to depress her. But it was harder and harder to set those thoughts aside. Life was so fragile and so precious.

Her fingers reached across the table to a bone china rose he'd given her for their first anniversary. He couldn't afford it at the time, but had been unable to resist. Fragile and precious. She loved that rose.

Lydia frowned at the sound of her doorbell. Who in the world would bother her at this hour of the morning? Her friends had their own lives. Beryl was likely sound asleep and Andy would be madly cleaning and organizing her house after Len left for the music shop. Talk about changing a man's life for the better. He was happy and outgoing now that he had music in his life again. As much as Andy had loved him before, she was ecstatic with the man he became after that life change. His happiness echoed all over her face.

She pushed the coffee back from the edge of the table, stood and sighed. That required a few more grunts and groans than it used to, but she refused to complain. Before she got to the front door, it opened. What was going on?

"Best friend! Best friend!"

Beryl Watson had planted herself in Lydia's living room, dressed in her standard wild garb. A bright purple, pink, teal and yellow floppy hat with a flowery, flowing dress in every color of the rainbow. She had lime green leggings on and purple flats. Her big flowery tote bag was stuffed to the brim with all sorts of things, not to mention a couple of wrapped gift packages.

"What are you doing in my house?" Lydia demanded. Beryl had a key, so it was easy for her to come and go as she pleased. If there was one person who had permission to do that, it was Beryl.

"You're coming with me. We have best friend things to do."

"I'm not going anywhere." Lydia looked down at what she was wearing. She wasn't fit for man nor beast. One of Aaron's ratty old t-shirts and a pair of saggy jersey shorts that should have been replaced years ago. And ... worst of all ... no bra.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Putting on clean clothes will take five minutes. Then, you're coming with me."

Lydia looked at her friend in a challenge. "You mean this isn't



good enough?"

"It's good enough for me. Come on, then." You didn't challenge Beryl. You always lost. Nothing bothered the woman. Especially not someone's outside appearance.

"Oh, come on," Lydia whined. "This is my day to cook. I was all ready to spend the day in the kitchen." Then she looked around. "Where's Andy? Why am I your only best friend? Why aren't you bothering her?"

"Bothering her? Bothering her? I'm a bother?" Beryl stuck her lower lip out in a pout. "Today is National Best Friend Day. I wanted to do something fun with my favorite girls. Besides, I came to your house first, hoping you'd drive."

Protesting would be useless. Lydia shook her head in defeat. "Where are we going?"

"I thought we'd make a quick run to Sweet Beans and then I will treat you to a shopping holiday at the store of your dreams before our lunch reservation. We're going to Ames. The drive isn't that far."

"The store of my dreams?" Lydia had no idea what Beryl might be talking about.

"Well, shopping area of your dreams. Downtown Ames. There's a chocolaterie, a home goods store, a kitchen supply store, consignment store, everything! We never shop together and I want to have some fun. A huge deposit just hit my bank account and I have money to burn. Who better to spend it on than my best friends?"

"But I don't need anything."

"Who cares what you need? Today is all about fulfilling a bit of fantasy." Beryl pulled out a bright blue, yellow and orange floppy hat. "Match this, girlfriend. We're going to play and have fun. Please?"

Lydia couldn't help it. Beryl's enthusiasm was contagious. She snagged the hat, slapped it on her head and took off for her bedroom. Surely she had something that was a little wild and fun hiding in her closet. And then she found it. A brightly colored Hawaiian blouse she'd worn to a beach party at Sycamore several

years ago and a pair of bright blue capris. Beryl would be proud. That made her smile.

Beryl's eyes lit up when she saw Lydia prance down the steps. "Look at you! I wasn't sure if you had it in you."

"You know Andy won't participate."

"That's okay. I gave up on her years ago. She'll always be Andy and I love her no matter what."

Lydia nodded. "She's pretty loveable. Do I need anything else?"

"Just one more thing." Beryl dug back into her bag and pulled out three strands of colorful beads. "Will you wear these?"

"Why not? I've gone this far." Lydia took the hat off and dropped the beads around her neck. She snagged her purse and keys up from the side table beside the door and they headed to the basement and out the back door.

Beryl babbled about the wonderful shops in downtown Ames and Lydia smiled. The woman didn't get out nearly enough. Not that she was a big shopper herself. She really had everything she needed and her kids liked to be able to buy gifts for her. Marilyn had worked her over years ago about buying things, ensuring that no one could give her gifts. So, she took stock of her belongings, realized how little she really needed after so many years of living and allowed them the joy of giving. They were generous and loving kids. That made her feel good.

That need to be generous was another reason she didn't protest too loudly when Beryl asked to do this today. The woman was desperate to share her love with her friends and neither Andy nor Lydia made it easy. They didn't need their friend to spend money on them. But in this moment, Beryl was the one who needed to do something for them and they had to allow it. Andy would likely put up more of a fuss, but she'd figure it out. She knew Beryl better than anyone.

"You stay here," Beryl said when Lydia pulled into Andy's driveway. "I'm about to beg and throw myself prostrate on the floor at her feet. I'd hate for you to have to watch the production. I thought I'd have to do that to you. You surprised me." She picked up her tote bag and headed for the front door. Without bothering

to knock, she walked in and Lydia smiled.

Taking out her phone, she texted Andy. *"Be nice. Say yes. We'll have fun."*

Andy probably wouldn't see it until she was in the car, but it was all Lydia could think to do.

Within a few minutes, Beryl opened the front door. With all the drama she could muster, she slumped her shoulders and dragged her feet as she crossed in front of Lydia's Jeep. She got in and said, "She can't go."

"What do you mean?"

"Miss Joss has to be at school with her kids today and Andy is opening the library and works all afternoon. The woman doesn't have time for her friends. How rotten is that? She's supposed to be retired. It's not fair."

Lydia reached over and patted Beryl's knee, thankful she hadn't put up too much of a protest. Beryl was disappointed in Andy "I'm still up for it all. We'll still have fun."

Beryl grinned at her. "She'll meet us at Sweet Beans for coffee before we leave. I should have asked earlier. She told me that my spontaneity gets me into trouble. I can't help myself sometimes. Ideas come to me and they must be followed through with action or I kick myself later." She pointed at her legs. "And these skinny extremities don't need any more bruises."

"I love you, crazy lady. Do we wait for her?"

She'll drive herself. She just needed to put on something other than shorts. I don't know why. She's got beautiful legs."

Lydia backed up and headed out. "We can't all be as bold and wild as you are."

"Should we try to kidnap Sylvie?" Beryl asked. "I have a reservation for three people."

"You know she can't go anywhere during the day."

"We can always ask."

"I'm not about to put her on the spot in her workplace. You know how she hates telling us she can't do things with us."

"Okay, what about Polly?"

"When I talked to her after church on Sunday, it sounded like

she was busy all week. She has kids in the elementary school too and don't forget, she has a graduating senior. Who knows what Rebecca has going on that requires Polly's involvement." Lydia stopped at the single stop sign in Bellingwood. Downtown traffic was still picking up. They might have to install another stop sign at the other end. "Am I not enough fun for you?"

Beryl dug into her bag again and came out with two kazoos. "Will you play a ditty with me?"

"Can I park first?"

"Look at you with all your rules." Beryl heaved a sigh. "I suppose. Will you play it in Sweet Beans?"

"Will that make you happy?"

"Very."

"Then, today and today only, I will play a kazoo with you in Sweet Beans."

Beryl shoved the kazoos back into the bag. "I won't make you. I just needed to know that you would."

Lydia parked along the side of Sweet Beans and before Beryl could open her door, said, "What's going on, dear? It feels like you've lost confidence in your friendships. Andy and I will always be part of your life. We couldn't live without you."

"I know that." Beryl took off her hat and turned away from Lydia.

"What's happening here?" Lydia asked, reaching over to touch Beryl's arm. "Talk to me."

When Beryl turned back, tears filled her eyes. "I don't know how I will ever live without you. My friends are the most important thing in the world to me and sometimes I get so caught up in my own creative world that I ignore you and forget to acknowledge how much your friendship means. I hate that about myself."

"But we love that about you. Your talent knows no bounds," Lydia said. "We are proud of you and understand that it takes focus and time to bring it to life. We'll always be there. I promise. No judgment, no condemnation. Only love. That's what we have for each other. Love. Right?"

Beryl took out one of the wrapped packages and handed it to

Lydia. "Might as well open it now. I'm not going inside until the tears dry up. I don't need Bellingwood gossiping about the terrible tragedy that is my life."

"And they will," Lydia said with a laugh. "They can make things up and the negative will spread like wildfire. What is this?"

"You'll never know until you open it." Beryl tapped impatiently on the package.

A four-by-six photograph of the three women along with Sylvie and Polly was in a wooden frame that had Beryl's signature painting technique all over it. She'd painted flowers and birds, buzzing bees and scampering squirrels. This was going to sit on Lydia's kitchen table.

It was her turn to cry. "This is perfect. Thank you for being my friend."

## Vignette #3

### To The Moon

"Get up, lazy bones," Marie Sturtz said.

Her husband lifted his upper lip at her. "I've had a busy day. Can't it wait until this weekend?"

"You know better than that. If we don't take care of it now, Henry will enlist help and come out here and take care of it for us."

"Let him. He's a good son."

"Bill Sturtz, all you have to do is sit on a mower and drive around the yard. I'm going to do the trimming. I have the hard job."

"But ... " It came out as a whine.

"I have beef stroganoff for dinner. It won't be ready until we're finished with the yard."

"That's perfect. I could get a nap."

"And then you'll be awake all night." Marie stepped in front of him, put her foot on the footrest of the recliner and pushed.

Bill sat forward. "That wasn't very nice."

"It's who I am. You should know that by now."

He put out his hand and she took it, then pulled, stepping back, bringing him to his feet. "You're going to feel better once this is complete. I promise."

"Says you."

"And who's the boss?"

He grinned at her. "You."

"Such a smart man."

"We need those boys to spend more time out here," Bill said.

"What boys?"

"Our grandsons. Those boys. They would be great yard workers. I'd pay them, you know."

Marie nodded. "I miss them, too. When summer vacation begins they'll be able to visit more often. Noah and Elijah are busy boys, though."

"They should be helping family, not the rest of the world."

"I'm going to have to scold you again,"

"Why?" Bill asked.

"Why are you being so obstinate? You know those boys love what they do. Noah is in love with animals and Elijah is an incredible musician and should grab every opportunity to learn and make connections."

"He should want to connect with us. We're his grandparents. He used to love visiting us. Now, he wants to spend time with everyone else."

Marie stopped and stepped in front of her husband. "You stop that right now."

"Stop what?"

"Feeling sorry for yourself and making any of this about you. Elijah is a little boy who is enjoying his childhood. He is not responsible to you. In fact, it's the exact opposite. We are responsible to make sure that he is exposed to everything in order that he, his brothers and sisters have the fullest life possible. Do you understand what I'm saying? Where in the world did this come from, anyway?"

Bill had taken a step back when she started in on him. He walked around her.

"Where are you going?" Marie asked.

"I have a lawn to mow. Isn't that what you want from me? I can't do anything right."

"Come on," she said. "What has gotten under your skin?"

"I don't know what you mean. First, you tell me to get moving and do yard work and then you tell me I'm a terrible grandfather. What's next? I'm running Henry's business into the ground? I don't know how to take care of my family?"

Marie shook her head in exasperation. "What are you talking about? How has this whole thing turned around so you're a pathetic loser?"

"That's what you're trying to tell me, isn't it?"

She laughed and pushed at his chest. "Are you pulling all of this so that you can get out of mowing the lawn? None of this sounds like you."

He harrumphed. "I still think it would be nice of those boys spent more time visiting us. I kinda miss having them around."

"So do I," Marie agreed. She took his arm and led him out the door. As they walked to the shed, she squeezed him and said, "I was so excited to move into this house, but it gets lonely sometimes, doesn't it? I got used to being able to run downtown and see my friends. When people came to the shop, it was as much social as it was business. I know we're only a couple of miles out of town, but it's like we are on the moon. The only people who show up regularly are Dick and Betty. When Henry visits, he doesn't stick around. He does his business and heads back out. Jack and Jessie are focused on their jobs. Ben Bowen and Doug Shaffer have their own families."

"Maybe we should invite them to dinner sometimes," he said. He opened the door to the shed. "I need to check the fuel on the mower."

"You know that it's ready to go. You took care of it last week. You never put the mower away without making sure it's ready for the next time. No more excuses."

"I have plenty of excuses," Bill said with a grin. "I really don't want to do this tonight."

Marie batted her eyes at him. "I can make it worth your time."

"Woman, I love you, but I'm an old man. That flirty thing doesn't work as well as it did fifty years ago."

"Oh yeah?" She pulled her t-shirt off her shoulder and shimmied. "Nothing?"

"Always something. I promise you that. It's one thing I like about being out here on the moon. No one is around to interrupt us."

"Except me and my insistence that we finish the lawn work."

Bill rolled his eyes. "You are a task master."

"That's me. You live such a terrible life with me."

"So far, it's been pretty good. I ain't got no complaints." He sat on the seat of the mower and patted his lap. "Come here, sweetheart."

"I don't think so. You're still stalling."

"You're the one who tipped her bare naked shoulder at me." He



patted his lap again. "It isn't like anyone will bother us. And who cares when we eat dinner?"

"The beef stroganoff will care."

"When should we invite Bowens to dinner?"

Marie gave her head a quick shake. "I can hardly keep up with you. You're all over the place."

"I could focus if you'd give me a good reason." He reached out and pulled her close, then leaned in to kiss her.

"You are a cad, Bill Sturtz," Marie complained.

He took his phone out and started typing.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm asking Jack to stay a little late tomorrow and mow the yard."

"No you aren't." She snatched the phone out of his hand. He really had sent the text. "I can't believe you did that."

"We're too old to do lawn work."

"No, we aren't."

"Yes, honey, we are," Bill insisted. "We have the money to pay for the work to be done. There is no good reason for us to waste our time tidying up lawns. Especially when we have better things we could be doing." He wagged his eyebrows at her. "Much better things. Besides, Jack would rather work to make good money and like you said, it's our job to ensure all of our grandkids have great futures."

"Rotten stinker."

"Me?"

"Using my words against me. Do you think Jack wants to do this?"

"He wants to make good money so he can be independent."

"Jack doesn't want to live with Polly and Henry?"

"Marie, he's twenty. He wants to find his own way in the world. He'd like his own apartment and he wants to find a girlfriend. The boy wants a family someday."

"You talk about this while you're teaching him the ropes in the shop?"

"We talk about a lot of things. None of it too deep. You know, we're men. But Jack is a hard worker and he'll do whatever it takes

to keep moving forward."

"Does he talk about his past?"

"No." Bill shook his head and climbed off the mower. He put his hand out and she returned the phone to him. "He says it's like the past is a fuzzy movie. He has memories of his mother, but he blocked out most of it."

"Does he remember school friends or anything like that?"

"Not that he's said." Bill tapped his phone, then showed her the text. "See? He wants to do the work."

"Will you ask him about letting the boys help?"

"Really?"

"There are things that even JaRon and Caleb can learn to do."

"What about Cassidy? Equal opportunity?"

"When she comes out, she can learn to work in the yard and in the garden. Polly doesn't have a garden."

Bill chuckled. "She is good at so many things, but she doesn't like flowers and vegetables, does she?"

"She likes them when they're delivered to her door. Not so much when she has to pull weeds. Polly believes she kills things just by going near them. She won't touch the trees that Henry has planted in the back yard and if Eliseo didn't keep an eye on her landscaping, they'd have nothing."

"We all have our foibles." Bill closed the door to the shed and put his arm out.

"Yours is that you don't want to do yard work. I was looking forward to working with you tonight."

"I'll work with you," he said with a wink and a nod toward the house.

"Good heavens."

"How long until the stroganoff is ready?"

"At least an hour."

"Then we have an hour. I can make it worth your time."

Marie ran to the door and caught herself giggling. She went into the kitchen and checked the time on the stroganoff. Slow cookers were amazing. She opened the pantry and took out a bottle of wine, then put it in the refrigerator.

Her phone rang. Why was Betty calling?

"Hello?"

"Hi there. Dick and I were wondering what your plans were for dinner. I just made up a big salad and I have a fresh watermelon. Did you really put that stroganoff in the slow cooker? We can be over in ten minutes."

Marie looked at Bill, who had just walked into the kitchen. "Your sister is bringing a salad and watermelon over to join us for dinner."

"What the hell?" he asked.

She glared at him.

"What did that mean?" Betty asked on the other end of the call.

"Nothing. Bill is grumpy."

"Then he needs some fun in his evening. Maybe we could play pinochle after we eat."

Marie gave her husband a helpless shrug. He rolled his eyes. Then he pointed at her and back at himself. "You're mine tonight," he said quietly.

"We'll see you in a bit," Marie said to Betty. "I was just telling Bill how lonely it can get out here on the moon."

"On the moon?"

"Just an exaggeration. I'll set the table. We're having wine."

"No drinking and driving for us," Betty said with a laugh. "We're on our way."

Marie ended the call and turned on her husband. "I'm sorry. I didn't know what else to say."

"No problem. My sister always did have the worst timing. Haven't had dinner with them for weeks and she chooses tonight to invite herself over."

"At least you aren't mowing the lawn."

He grinned. "At least there's that."

## Vignette #4

### Commencing Countdown

"How is this all going to fit in there?" Kayla asked. Of the four of them, she was carrying the least. Only one small tote bag of things from her locker.

Rebecca stood in front of the open trunk of her car. She'd jammed it as tightly as she could and they'd really only begun to pack everyone else's things that had come out of lockers and from the band room and the closets off the stage. And of course, the girls' shared lockers off the gym.

"We should have started this at the beginning of the week," Andrew moaned. "I wasn't even thinking."

"You can fit more in the trunk if you don't use the box," Kayla said. "Don't tell me you're worried about mixing your stuff up with Rebecca's. I'm always finding your crap in her room."

"It's not crap," he said, acting offended. Then he grinned. "I think she steals my t-shirts to keep my smell next to her when she sleeps at night."

A bag that had been hooked around Cilla's little finger dropped to the ground. "That's gross," she said, bending to try to pick it up. When she realized it was futile, she flicked her hand and let everything fall. "Mom is going to kill me when I walk into the house with all of this." Cilla drew her finger across her throat. "Kill me dead. If you try to reach me and I'm nowhere to be found, dig up the backyard. I no longer live and she buried my body."

Rebecca shook her head. "No, she wouldn't. You know Polly would figure out some reason to dig back there and find you. Then your mom would go to prison and the little kids wouldn't have a big sister *or* a mother to take care of them. Your mom isn't that dumb."

"We're still not getting this car packed," Andrew said, pointing to the piles of things that had landed on the ground around the trunk of the car.

"You'll have to hold things in your laps," Rebecca said. "We can keep jamming stuff into the trunk, but if I take more than this into my house, Polly and Lexi will kill *me* dead." She pointed at Kayla. "And you made me take home a pile of stuff before spring break." In an aside to Andrew and Cilla, she said, "Because Kayla was certain I'd be killed overseas."

"I did not say that. I didn't even imply it," Kayla protested. "But I did make you take stuff home. Your locker barely closed. I have no idea how you accumulated this much more in the last two months."

Rebecca picked up a skirt. "This is from last fall. Remember that day when I had to change for dress rehearsal?"

"This is from then?" Kayla held the skirt out and wrinkled her nose. "That's disgusting."

"It's not disgusting. It isn't like I dunked it in ranch dressing and then left it in the drama room."

"Ranch dressing?" Andrew asked. "Where did that come from?"

"I don't know," Rebecca said with a shrug. "I had to come up with something and I wasn't going to talk about pooping myself. I stopped doing that when I was a little girl." She poked at the clothing she had stuffed into the trunk. "Do you know how many loads of laundry are in here? I wondered where everything was."

"Your closet is worse than mine," Cilla said. "I've never seen so many clothes. That has to be worth a small fortune."

"You don't shop like we do." Kayla picked up the skirt that Rebecca had been talking about. "This cost two dollars at a thrift store in Boone. I remember when we got it. She spent twenty dollars and got two skirts, three tops, a pair of shorts and those cool black pants you wear with the purple sweater."

"Why don't you ever take me on these shopping excursions?" Cilla asked. "I'd spend twenty dollars on lots of cool clothes."

"You're always too busy," Rebecca muttered. "It's no big deal. I guess that's why I don't worry about where my clothes are, though. I have so many that I forget what I own."

Andrew shook his head. "I'm glad I don't have that problem. No wonder you never know what you want to wear. Too many

decisions. Give me a couple of pairs of blue jeans, some nice pants, a pile of t-shirts and a dress shirt and maybe a sweater."

"You own more than that." Rebecca pointed at the boxes and bags he'd carried out. "What's in those?"

He shrugged. "Mostly books. Some notebooks and journals. Stuff that I did through the last four years. Teachers pulled all of my work that I turned in and gave it back to me."

"Just today?" Kayla's eyes were big. "That wasn't fair."

"You'd think it was just today," Rebecca said. "He's been collecting this for two weeks. I told him to start taking it home, but he kept shoving it in his locker. Bit by bit, it accumulated. Just like my stuff."

"When you two get married, you're going to need me to come in every month and go through your crap to clean you up," Kayla said. "I'll charge big money, too, because you'll be so rich you can afford it. Andrew won't even notice because he'll be in his study writing stories and screenplays." She poked at him. "You are going to write screenplays so your stories can be on television and you get all famous. Maybe you could write a *Star Wars* story."

"I don't think so," he said with a grin. "I wouldn't mind the rich and famous part of it, but I'd rather write what's in my head."

"You don't think *Star Wars* could be in your head?" Cilla asked.

"It's always in my head, but that's someone else's story. Other people come up with those characters. I like telling stories about my own characters."

"You mean us," Cilla replied. "Or love stories about you and Rebecca."

"Those are good stories," he said.

"I know, but the characters aren't that unique."

Rebecca lifted her eyebrows. "Excuse me? I'm very unique."

"I know," Cilla said, putting her hands up. "That's not what I meant. I just meant that he isn't making people up, he's telling stories using people that already exist."

"What exactly do you mean by that?" Andrew asked. "Is that a bad thing? I hope you aren't about to tell me that I'm wrong in basing my characters off people I know."

"No," Cilla said, her voice going up in range. "I'm saying it all wrong. You guys always misinterpret my words."

"Maybe because you don't use good words when you talk about us. It sounds like you're always being judgmental. Like Andrew isn't a good writer when he uses a character who is like me in his stories." Rebecca scowled at her friend.

"I was only stating a fact," Cilla said. Her shoulders drooped. "No one ever understands me. At least you two create stuff. I only interpret other people's words."

"At least you are creative when you interpret," Kayla said. "I only clean and organize."

"I need you to clean and organize," Rebecca said with a laugh. "Okay, we have get out of here. It's embarrassing."

"Not like the rest of the seniors aren't doing the same thing," Andrew said. He waved across the parking lot at some friends.

"It's still embarrassing." Rebecca pointed at the inside of the car. "Cilla, I think your stuff will fit in the back seat with you and Kayla."

Cilla laughed. "Because she only has one little bag. I'm sorry, Kayla. You're going to have to put up with my junk."

Rebecca shook her head. "You can put a bag or two on your lap and some in between your legs. Andrew, you need to see if that box will fit between your legs in the front seat. It's only a short trip home."

"Good thing, because it's gonna be uncomfortable," Andrew said with a laugh. He hefted the box he'd been sitting on and carried it to the front seat. "This will work," he called back at them. "I can put my other stuff on my lap."

"I can squeeze over by the door." Kayla picked up two of Cilla's bags. "We should see how much we can jam in there."

By the time they were driving north out of Boone for Bellingwood, the four of them had already laughed themselves silly at the spectacle.

"We should have taken pictures in the parking lot," Cilla said.

Rebecca shook her head. "I didn't even think of that."

"I got some of the back seat," Andrew said, turning around with his phone in hand. "Wave at the camera, girls."

Kayla and Cilla stuck their tongues out at him. Cilla had bags of things piled up around her and on top of her while Kayla was pushed clear to the other side of the back seat, jammed there by the junk pushing at her.

Andrew groaned when he faced forward again. "That was a bit of a strain. No room for any of my body parts."

"I'm taking you home first," Rebecca said.

"That's cool. I need to get this stuff inside before Mom comes home. If she sees it, she'll never let me back out tonight."

"Are you guys going to the party?" Cilla asked.

Rebecca glanced in the rearview mirror as she nodded. "Yeah. You?"

"I don't think so."

"I don't know if I care all that much," Rebecca said. "But this is one of the last parties with our class."

"Except all the graduation parties," Kayla said. "We'll see everyone at all of those."

"And at our party, too," Andrew said. "I heard a ton of people are showing up. I like that we're all having it together."

Cilla shook her head. "I don't even know why we're having this. It's no big deal. So we graduate from high school. Everyone does that."

"Stop it," Rebecca said. "It's not like getting married or having children or getting your first job, but it *is* a big deal. We've been going to school for thirteen years to get to this point and we all got here. Even with the crazy stuff that happened in our lives. Polly would have my head if she thought I didn't want to celebrate this milestone."

"I want to celebrate," Kayla said quietly. "It's a big deal to me. I don't have all the awards and the top grades like you guys, but it's still important. Stephanie and I worked hard."

"That's right you did," Rebecca said. "No one can take that away from you either. I'm proud of all of us."

"I did it again," Cilla said. "I didn't mean anything bad. I just hate ..." her voice trailed off. "I don't know what it is about all this. It feels weird to me. I'm just getting started and this feels like we're



celebrating the end of it all."

"It's called commencement for a reason," Andrew said. "We're commencing ... starting our new lives. It's going to be an adventure, right, girls?"

"That's right," Rebecca said. She grinned at him as she pulled into his driveway. "Do you need help?"

He shook his head. "I'm just going to put it all out here and drag it inside piece by piece."

"Don't get lost reading one of your stories," she said. "Keep working until your stuff is put away."

"Got it. I'll talk to you later." Andrew opened the door and lifted a bag to the ground. He gingerly moved his legs out from around the box on the floor and put another bag plus a smaller box on the ground before reaching in for the big box. "You girls be good. I'll see you later."

"Happy end of school," Kayla said.

He peered into the car. "The best part is that we'll still be friends. Right?"

Rebecca smiled at him. "Only friends?"

"Whatever. See you later."

"Can't believe he didn't kiss you," Kayla said. "Not even a peck."

Rebecca rolled her car window down after smiling at Kayla. Andrew had walked around to the driver's side. He leaned in and the two kissed.

"That's better, isn't it," Cilla said. "Break it up, you two. We have to get home before dark."

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*(Turn the page for links and more information.*

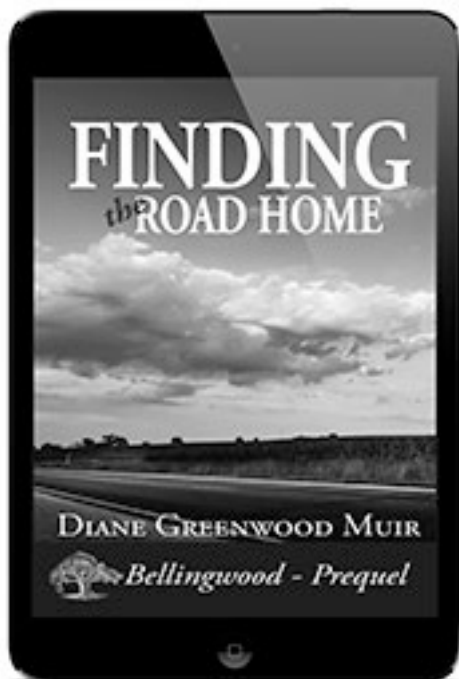
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# THANK YOU!



I'm so glad you enjoy these stories about Polly Giller and her friends. There are many ways to stay in touch with Diane and the Bellingwood community.

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*Finis*