



BEAUTY
is Often
DIFFERENT

Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Book 34



Book Thirty-Four
Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR

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THANK YOU!

INTRODUCTION

These vignettes originally came about as a way to keep readers engaged while I was writing the next book. Talk about ravenous readers! Each short, short, short story (vignette) is published on either the website (nammynools.com) or in the email newsletter that comes out on the twenty-fifth of each month.

Be sure to sign up for the newsletter so you don't miss anything, especially the latest vignette.

I realized how much fun it was to expose little bits of the background stories that happen every day in Bellingwood. Because the Bellingwood books are written from Polly's perspective, unless she is directly involved in the action or with a character, we miss activities in other people's lives. These characters have developed enough that they enjoy telling their own stories, so this is their little bit of fame.

I have compiled the vignettes relating to Book 34 — Beauty is Often Different — 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

Derailed

Nan Stallings stood in front of Joe's Diner, looking at the storefronts up and down the street. There were a few open bays, but she wasn't certain if she wanted her new office space to face the busy street. Her little company wasn't one that invited walk-in customers, though it would be fun to be close to all the action.

The thought of that much activity made her shudder. What was she thinking? She liked being busy, but too many people in one place made her nervous. You never knew who might do something stupid and then, wham, your entire life was changed.

If her business wasn't growing so fast, she wouldn't even consider a new location. She was safe while living and working out of Grey's house, but she needed an office. She wanted to have a conference room and a front desk for a receptionist and assistant. Sometimes she wished she wasn't quite as safe around Grey. It would be nice if he'd push her, even just a little bit.

Nan knew deep in her soul that Alistair Greyson cared for her, but after all this time, he still hadn't made a move to deepen their relationship. He was so careful. Sure, he'd watched her live through the worst time of her life, one she didn't think she'd ever be able to heal from. But here she was, thriving and finding happiness in a small town in the middle of Iowa with him just downstairs in the house they shared. Most of her happiness and contentment came from being near her closest friend. She wasn't interested in dating other men, but she felt awkward with Grey. He was years older and would never cross that boundary without permission. Changing the guidelines of their relationship would be up to her. The thing was, she felt awkward pushing past that. Sometimes life got in the way, that's for sure.

What was she worried about - that he would reject her because of the age difference? Even worse, what if he rejected her because he thought their relationship was nothing other than friendship?

She gave herself a quick shake and waved at Grey as he drove past the diner to find a parking spot. These weren't new discussions she had with herself. They happened several times a day if she gave herself over to them.

"You could have waited for me inside," Grey said, coming up beside her. He took her arm and smiled.

"It's a beautiful day," Nan replied. "I was looking at the open storefronts, trying to visualize my business in any of them."

"And?"

"No." She shook her head and put her hand on the hand he'd covered her arm with. "How were your morning sessions?"

Grey didn't often speak about the work he did, but sometimes he needed to verbalize the emotions that he'd carried away from some appointments. Since he generally worked with young people, it was often difficult separating himself from their problems. Especially those children who had no escape from the trouble they faced. He struggled with those.

He pulled the front door of the diner open and stepped back so she could enter. "The morning wasn't bad at all."

Nan turned to look into his eyes. The eyes were always his giveaway. Grey smiled. He was being honest with her.

"What about you?" he asked. "Did you find anything? I'm guessing the answer is no if you're checking out the storefronts on Washington Street."

She led him to an open booth and sent Lucy Parker a small wave to let her know they were there. Lucy was an amazing waitress and it looked like she had a new trainee working today. It didn't matter how well she trained the young woman. No one could move through a crowded restaurant like Lucy, never missing a beat, never missing an order. Lucy pointed and the young woman snagged two menus, then set them on the table for Grey and Nan.

"Coffee?" Lucy asked while approaching a nearby table with a serving tray filled with food.

Nan glanced at Grey, who nodded, and she shot Lucy a grin. "Yes, please."

"We'll be there in a few minutes." Lucy turned to the table and

shuffled plates from the tray she held, placing them in front of the patrons.

"I found a couple of possibilities," Nan said, shifting to face Grey again. "One is down the street a half block on Maple. It's on the second floor, though."

"Are there other offices up there?"

"Yes. The other is a basement level office, across the street from Sweet Beans on Elm. It would require renovation to make it work the way I want, but it's my favorite."

"Really. Basement level?"

"There's an elevator for those who need it, but the stairway is pretty cool," she said. "The steps are wooden and well-worn, but it's well-lit and someone painted beautiful murals on both walls. The stairwell is wide, too. At least three, maybe four people could walk down it at the same time."

"Interesting. What do you like most about the office space?"

"I like the stairway and the fact that there's an elevator. It's out of the way and the other two offices down there aren't busy. One is a local office for a lawyer out of Ames who's only in town once a week. The other is an accountant and her assistant who work with farmers. Most of the time they meet their clients away from the office. She takes on other work, especially during tax season."

"You met them?"

Nan smiled. "They were both curious as to who was wandering around the space. That made me feel good, too. They keep an eye on things. And it sounds as if they're friends with each other. Poppy Walker, that's the lawyer. Anyway, I overheard Jana Westerhill, the accountant, ask if they were still on for coffee this afternoon. I think that's wonderful."

Grey smiled and then turned to Lucy. "Good day, Mrs. Parker. How are you?"

"I'm doing great." Lucy put her hand on the young woman's shoulder. "Beth Dorner, I'd like you to meet Alistair Greyson and Nan Stallings."

Beth nodded as she set the coffee pot on the table between them, "It's nice to meet you. I'm just starting but Lucy is a great teacher."

Would you like me to pour your coffee?"

"We have it," Nan said. "It's nice to meet you, too. Did you just move to Bellingwood?"

"I grew up here," Beth said. "When I got married, we moved to Boone, but we're thinking about moving back. It isn't that far for him and we'd like to raise our children in a smaller community."

"How many children do you have?" Grey asked.

Beth's eyes widened. "None! At least not yet. We've been married less than two years. I think it takes a little while to get comfortable with each other. At least it's taken me time to be comfortable with him. I wanted to know him better before I started having kids with him. He's nothing like what I was used to with my family. We're figuring it out, though."

Grey was so practiced at keeping his reactions from his face that sometimes he was hard to read. His eyes told Nan nothing about what he was thinking this time.

"Would you like more time to look at the menu?" Beth asked.

"A Cobb salad with vinaigrette for me," Nan said.

Grey closed his menu. "That sounds good, except ranch dressing on mine."

Nan frowned. She'd hoped for something fried on his plate. "Would you add an order of onion rings?"

"Perfect," Lucy said, with a soft chuckle. "We'll have those right out to you. I have pie today. Strawberry-rhubarb, cherry, and apple. There are several pieces of coconut cream, too."

"Thank you," Nan said. She winked at Grey. "We might have to split something."

The two waitresses walked away and he took in a breath. "I think that's something most people don't consider when they get excited about starting their life with another person."

"What's that?"

"How different it will be than what they're used to. Like us. Both of us are used to solitude and quiet. It would be hard to marry, knowing that we'd have to give all that up."

"Why would we have to give it up?"

"Because another person is living in the same space. Habits are

different, times that we do things are different, and the way we do things is different. I'll bet you still work in kitchen the same way your mother did."

"I suppose," she said, "but I've been on my own long enough that I've created my own kitchen habits."

"And they'd be much different than mine."

"Does that mean you want to be alone for the rest of your life because it's too difficult to learn how to blend two disparate lifestyles?" Nan scowled. "People do it every day. They work to overcome those differences."

"Or they don't," Grey said. "Then there's a divorce and no one can figure out what just happened."

"I don't think I realized how firmly you were against marriage." Nan sat back and did her best to control her breathing. They'd never gotten this deep into the conversation and now she questioned everything about her future. Until this moment, she'd hoped that one day they'd work it out.

"I'm not against marriage," he protested. Grey shook his head as he looked down. "Maybe it scares me more than I want to admit. I don't know if I'm flexible enough to overcome those differences. I'd like to think I was, but I don't want to resent my partner and I definitely don't want her to resent me because I have so many strange affectations."

"Strange affectations?" Nan gave a small huff of a laugh. "What in the world?"

"I am obsessive about matching my socks. I put my toothpaste in one place in the bathroom. I have a specific recipe for my morning coffee."

"I think those things can be overlooked."

"Not for long. I understand that they're odd. And those aren't my only oddities."

"Everyone has them," Nan said. "It's a matter of communicating with each other and then, there has to be no small amount of loving each other. Marriage is a commitment to not giving up, no matter how frustrating things become. My parents dealt with frustrations. Sometimes we heard them working those out in the wee hours of

the morning."

He chuckled. "They fought?"

"That's how they cleared the air. I'd probably fight with my husband because sometimes that's how I get everything out."

"I know that," Grey said. "I've been through a few of those intense discussions with you."

"You're not bad at ..." Nan chuckled. "... intense discussion."

"There aren't many people I'm comfortable being that honest with."

That brought her head up. She stared at him. "That means you're comfortable with me?"

"Of course. Nan, I love you. You are my best friend."

"What does that mean?"

"It's supposed to mean something?"

Lucy and Beth brought their salads and the onion rings, setting the dishes on the table. Lucy took one look at the two of them and said, "Whoops. We interrupted. I apologize. I usually pay better attention." She slid the receipt out of her pocket and tucked it under the basket of onion rings, then nudged Beth, who, though a little startled at Lucy's comment, took a bottle of ketchup out of her pocket and set it down. "We'll leave you alone," Lucy said. "Unless you need anything more. Then, just wave." Taking Beth's arm, she led the younger woman away and to another table with three women who had just walked in and seated themselves.

"That was awkward," Grey said, poking at his salad.

"Because she knew we were intensely discussing something?"

"Lucy Parker would have made a great counselor."

"What are we going to do, Grey?" Nan asked, a little disturbed that her voice sounded like a little girl pleading for a puppy.

"About what?"

"About us."

He took a deep breath, then looked up and into her eyes. "What do you want to do?"

"Nan!"

She looked up to see the realtor that she'd met with earlier this morning striding across the room toward their table.

"Hello, Mary," Nan said as she pasted on a pleasant smile.

"You're having lunch. Wonderful. Let me join you." With that, Mary Mueller sat, forcing Nan to gather her lunch and move it with her deeper into the booth. "I heard back from the property owner on that basement office space. He thinks your business would be a perfect fit and is willing to work with you on renovation costs. Would you like me to set up an appointment?" She stretched across the table with her hand out. "It's good to see you again, Mr. Greyson. How do you feel about Nan moving out and into her own place? The next thing you know, we'll be looking at houses for her."

Nan gave her head a slight shake when he looked at her in surprise. "No, we won't."

"You can't live in that upstairs apartment forever," Mary said. "Once you have room for your business to grow, it's going to explode and you'll have more money than you know what to do with. Might as well invest it in property and make yourself a beautiful home."

"We can talk about that down the road," Nan said. What had happened? The minute she finally got Grey to discuss possible futures, the conversation was derailed. She'd never get this opportunity back.

"You should see this wonderful location for Nan's business," Mary said to Grey, oblivious to their discomfort.

"Nan told me she liked it." He was as uncomfortable as Nan had seen him in a long time.

"Go ahead and eat," Mary said. "I know I interrupted lunch. I'm not terribly hungry, but if I can catch Lucy's eye, maybe she'll bring me a piece of pie and a cup for coffee."

Nan looked at Grey, who had picked up his fork again. He looked up, maybe sensing her stare. "I'm sorry," she mouthed.

He nodded, then mouthed back, "Later."

The two waitresses returned to the booth with another pot of coffee and a mug. "Are you joining Grey and Nan?" Lucy asked.

"It looks like it," Mary responded. "I'm about to put Nan into a fantastic office across from the coffee shop. Big changes are coming her way."

Vignette #2

A Mother's Love

"I'm here, can I come up?"

Charlie smiled at the text on her phone. *"Of course. I'm in the living room."*

Sylvie Donovan used her key to unlock the door to the apartment. Charlie couldn't believe they had such a good thing here. Jason walked the grounds at Sycamore House after things closed down at night and made sure the building was locked and the animals were safe in the barn. Life was pretty quiet in Bellingwood and though he took his responsibilities as nighttime caretaker seriously, there wasn't much he needed to do.

She hauled herself up from the sofa, no small feat considering that so much of her body was still healing after the accident this summer. It felt so surreal now. Had that really happened to her? Her arm was still in a sling and she needed a cane to support herself. Yes, it had happened.

She was barely standing by the time Sylvie opened the half door at the top of the steps. A new door leading to the old apartment at Sycamore House had been added at the top of the stairway, giving them access to the elevator. When Jason was still pushing her in a wheelchair, he was terrified of dumping her down the steps, so he asked Henry Sturtz if they could come up with something to make it safer. Once Charlie started walking on her own, first with a walker and then with a cane, Jason was grateful for that half door. He told her over and over that he had nightmares about coming home to find her in a crumpled heap at the bottom of the steps.

"I brought dinner," Sylvie said. "Last night I tried a Dorito Chicken casserole and since it was just me and Eliseo, I made two."

Charlie laughed. Sylvie brought dinner at least three or four times a week to them. "Thank you. It sounds wonderful. I love Doritos."

"So does Jason," Sylvie said. "Is it okay if I put it in the

refrigerator?"

Charlie gestured with her head toward the kitchen. Every time Jason's mother came over, she asked the same questions. It was really respectful. Sylvie never assumed she could walk into the apartment and take over. She always gave Charlie ownership of everything there. It was so different from her own parents. It wouldn't matter how old she was, they'd never treat her like an adult. And the accident hadn't helped, that's for sure.

She limped her way across to the kitchen. Sylvie smiled. "Can I do anything for you while I'm here?"

"You do so much already," Charlie said. "I wish I knew how I could repay you."

"Oh, my sweet girl. You love my son. That's more than enough for this mama."

"You always say that." Charlie sat at the little kitchen table. When she first moved in, she and Jason had fun decorating. They'd found a sweet table and chairs at a garage sale, brought it back, and she repainted the set. Then Rebecca painted flowers on the backs of the chairs and in the center of the table. There was even a perfect spot for a vase to sit. Charlie had spent so much time this summer recuperating, she hadn't given any thought to finishing the decorating. They were lucky to clean more than one room in a week.

"I always mean it. That boy of mine wanted nothing more than to find someone who would love him and would allow him to love them. He is such a caregiver." Sylvie took in a quick breath. "I'm sorry. I hope you don't think he's happy taking care of you." She shook her head. "I'm not saying this right at all. I hope you don't think he's happy that you had an accident so you needed him to take care of you."

Charlie laughed and pointed to the other chair. "I understand. He's good at it, though. He doesn't mind looking at my wounds and helping me change bandages and dressings. It's no big deal for me since I was trained, but when I couldn't reach or didn't have the energy, Jason just did it."

"He would." Sylvie smiled and then stood up. "Would you like

something to drink? Do you mind if I have a glass of water?"

"There's iced tea in the refrigerator and I know there's pop in there, too."

"What would you like?"

"A diet, if you don't mind," Charlie said.

"Does Jason talk much about his father?" Sylvie asked.

"Not really. He's told me enough, I guess. Whenever he talks about him, he doesn't know whether to be mad or sad."

"Anthony is one of the reasons Jason is such a good caregiver. He'll be a strong protector, too. He saw Anthony hit me when he was a little boy and it infuriated him that he couldn't do anything to stop it. I'm pretty sure Anthony went after Jason when he tried to step in, but those days have become a blur for me."

"Jason worries that he'll become abusive like his father was."

"He shouldn't worry. Anthony was a rotten man before we were married. I should never have subjected myself to his abuse, but I had Jason on the way and couldn't support a little boy all alone." Sylvie looked straight at Charlie. "If anything ever happens to Jason and you have children, know that you won't be alone. I know you have a family, but I also know it isn't easy with them. I will always be there. So will Andrew." She smiled. "And Polly and Henry and Eliseo and Jeff and everyone who knows you. This place is filled with people who will stand beside you no matter what."

"I hope nothing ever happens to him."

"You're right," Sylvie said. "I shouldn't borrow trouble. That's one of my problems. I look for the worst possible scenario and then try to solve it. Polly tells me that it stops me from just relishing the moment. She's probably right, but I still can't stop myself."

Charlie took a drink from the pop bottle that Sylvie had opened and set in front of her. "You know I love him, right?"

Sylvie smiled and nodded.

"But I worry that this is too much. Jason does everything. I mean, everything. He cooks and cleans and takes care of me. He works all the time. Sylvie, we're not even married."

"He thinks you're as good as married," Sylvie said. "Do you?"

"But it feels like I'm taking advantage of him. I don't ever want

to do that. Mom says I should move home and let him live his life."

That made Sylvie sit straight up. She glared at Charlie. "Don't let anyone ever tell you how you and Jason should live your lives together. If the two of you decide that you no longer want to be a couple, that's up to you, but a little thing like recovery from a car accident is never going to be too much for that boy of mine. He's strong, he's smart, and he loves you."

"But I'm asking a lot of him."

"One day he may ask a lot of you. Would you refuse to help him under the same circumstances?"

"No, but I'm a nurse."

"You might not be a dog or a horse or a donkey, but Jason's training is similar to yours in that he has learned to care for the physical needs of God's creatures. They might walk on four legs rather than two, but he's not afraid of blood and wounds."

"You went to school to be a nurse, right?" Charlie asked.

"For only a short time until Jason showed up. I didn't have any support and couldn't do it all by myself. But I'm not scared of a little blood either."

"It was a lot of blood." Charlie pulled back the sleeve of her shirt to expose the scars. "I don't remember anything from the accident or the life flight, but when I was in the hospital, there were times I thought they were trying to murder me."

Sylvie smiled. "Murder you?"

"It freakin' hurt when they dressed my wounds and I was so doped up that it didn't make sense. I felt pain and saw bloody bandages. I should have understood since I'd been on the other side, but those drugs screwed me up. Nurses should have to live for a week in terrible pain with those crazy drugs going through their system. They'd certainly understand their patients a little better. We used to get annoyed with post-surgical patients who babbled gibberish in their panic. It didn't matter that we knew those drugs messed people up, we couldn't figure out why a patient kept trying to get out of bed on their own, or kept calling for someone to help them, or got angry when we did things to make them more comfortable. All I wanted was for Jason to get me out of there and

take me someplace where I'd be safe."

"He wasn't leaving your side."

"When things were the worst, knowing he was close was the only thing that kept me going. I heard his voice. I smelled him, I felt his touch, and when I opened my eyes, he was who I saw." Charlie brushed away a tear. "I know I talk about this a lot to you. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Sylvie said. "That's the only way to process it all. Jason listens when you talk about your time in the hospital, doesn't he?"

"He's so patient. He also tells me stories about the good things that happened in the hospital so that I can add those to my memories. Jason doesn't want the pain to be the only thing I remember."

Sylvie reached across the table. "I'm glad you're the woman that he loves."

"Even with all this?" Charlie gestured at herself.

"Even with all that. You make him happy. Even before the accident, he told me that he'd finally found the person he loved. He could say the words out loud to me because they were finally true to him."

Tears streamed down Charlie's face. "I love him, too. I don't say it enough."

"You'll learn," Sylvie said. She moved around the table and took Charlie into her arms. "I'm sorry you have to deal with this recovery, but I'm thankful you are part of my family. You make my son happy. I love you for who you are."

Charlie held on. Being hugged like this felt like she'd landed on solid ground. No one in her family was this affectionate. How did people live without feeling love like this?

"I love you, too," she mumbled into Sylvie's shirt. "Thank you."

Sylvie released her and sat back down. "Will you let me help you here?"

"We're fine," Charlie said. "It would kill Jason to think that you had to clean up after him and me. He works so hard to make sure things are nice."

"I may have a chat with my boy. You two have enough to deal with. A little help wouldn't remove his manhood."

"Is it really that bad?" Charlie looked around the kitchen.

"Not at all," Sylvie said. "I'd cook in this kitchen with no qualms. But you two have been working hard all summer - you as you recuperate and Jason as he keeps up with you. It might be time to take a short break and let some of us in."

"You talk to him," Charlie said. "He'll listen to you."

Sylvie chuckled. "Not so much, but I can make the point. Charlie, you're doing well and I'm proud of you. I hope you always know that."

"Thank you." Charlie looked at her lap, then looked at Sylvie, tears still in her eyes. "Thank you for being Jason's mom because that means I get to have you in my life, too."

Vignette #3

I Miss You

"Who was that?" Kayla asked.

Andrew frowned and looked around. "Who was who?"

"That gorgeous guy who walked past your door."

Andrew got up and walked over to the door. When he came back to the video chat, he was grinning. "I wondered why you mentioned him when you've never mentioned any of the other guys that go by. That was Dab."

"Dab?" Rebecca asked, pronouncing it as Andrew had, *Dawb*.

"He's from Yemen. Daabar Hassan. And yes, girls think he is pretty, that's for sure. They pay a lot of attention to him."

"Jealous, much?" Rebecca said.

Andrew shrugged. "I got no reason to be jealous. He's a good guy and anyway, I have you. He can have all the rest of the girls. I don't need them."

"So gross," Kayla said. "You are such a suckup."

All he could do was grin. Then he turned as someone else came into the room. "Hey, Ryan. Do you want me to take this call in the lounge?"

His roommate, Ryan Meyers, leaned over to smile at Kayla and Rebecca. "Hello, ladies."

"Hey, Ryan," Rebecca said. "Aren't you supposed to be leading a study group?"

He chuckled. "You know my schedule better than Andy, here."

Andrew rolled his eyes at the nickname. "Your schedule, your business. Are you back to study?"

"Not tonight," Ryan said. "I'm heading to the library, but need a notepad."

"A notepad?" Rebecca asked. "You take paper notes?"

"With this girl, I do. She's all about analog."

Andrew spun in his chair. "A girl? You've been here a little more than a month and you've got a girl?"

"You had one when you got here. This took too long."

"Are you a love 'em and leave 'em kind of guy?" Kayla asked.

Ryan bent down, mortified when he looked at them through the screen. "Who, me?" He smacked Andrew's back, spinning the chair back around. "Would I do that?"

"I don't know," Andrew said. "Would you? I haven't known you long enough to make a judgment."

"No. I'm definitely not that guy. Sherise is in Rhetoric with me. I've asked her out three different times. Tonight, she decided that we could go to the library together. Buh-bye, study group; I've got a girl to court. I hate to smile and run, but I need to move it. If I'm late, she might never say yes again."

Ryan could be seen moving around the room. Both Rebecca and Kayla watched from their phones.

Finally Rebecca whispered. "Do you know this Sherise?"

Andrew pointed at his chest. "Me?"

She chuckled. "I certainly didn't mean Kayla and we're all assuming that Ryan knows her."

He shook his head. "I don't think so. You know, the university is bigger than Bellingwood. Last I heard, there were more than twenty thousand undergrads. I'm supposed to know one random girl?"

"Hopefully, you'll meet her," Ryan said, bending in once more. "See you girls later. Don't keep him up too late. He's grumpy when he doesn't get enough sleep."

Andrew spun his chair again. "Have fun. Study hard."

Ryan stood in the doorway and shook his head. "Not touching that one with a ten-foot pole."

"Like you have a ten-foot ..." Rebecca started.

Kayla interrupted. "Rebecca! Be good."

"Wish me luck," Ryan said and disappeared into the hallway.

"Is this his first date since he got here?" Kayla asked.

Andrew spun back to his desk where his phone sat. "I think so, but I don't pay attention to his every move."

Kayla pointed at the screen. "Are you alone tonight, Rebecca? I haven't seen your roommate anywhere."

"I guess." Rebecca turned and looked around. "Don't know why

I'm looking. It isn't like there's room for her to hide in here. I'm a little worried. She's always here."

"I thought it was weird that we were talking in your room," Andrew said. "Everything okay?"

"Who knows?" Rebecca shrugged. "Polly tells me I have to be patient. It's not fair that you have this great roommate and do stuff with him on the weekends and I have a dud."

"At least she doesn't bring boys back to the room," Kayla said. "That would be awkward."

Andrew laughed out loud. "We can always tell when one of the guys has a girl in his room. His roommate prowls the floor begging for an extra bed."

"An extra bed in your dorm room?" Rebecca frowned. "All the beds on our floor are occupied."

"On the weekends," Andrew said. "When people go home."

"I would never let someone else sleep in my bed." Rebecca turned and looked at her bed. "But if they made it up the next morning how would I ever know? Talk about gross. All those dirty germs hanging out just waiting to jump all over me."

"Isn't it bad enough that a hundred other people have slept on that mattress?" Kayla asked.

With a shudder, Rebecca grimaced. "That's why we bought a bag for it. All it took was for Henry to say that one time and I couldn't get it out of my head."

"Did you get one, too?" Kayla asked Andrew.

He laughed. "Of course I did. Mom and Polly talked about those things. Whatever was good enough for Rebecca was good enough for me."

"When are you guys coming home again?" Kayla asked. "It is so boring around here without you."

Rebecca smiled at her. "It's only been two days."

"I know, but I miss you."

"You talk to us every night," Andrew said.

"Like this." Kayla gestured back and forth with her hand. "I'd rather see you in person. And eat pizza and have a movie on or something. I'd even rather clean your room, Rebecca."

"Someday you should take a weekend off work and come down," Rebecca said. "Maybe Andrew could come, too. I'll even try to find you a date so we can all go out."

"Have you met many dateable guys?" Andrew asked, his eyebrows rising into his forehead.

She grinned, tipped her head and fluffed her hair. "Of course I have. I'm cute."

"That doesn't fill me with confidence."

"Like you have anything to worry about," Kayla said. "She'll never leave you. Remember, you're the one that did the leaving."

He dropped his head. "Don't remind me. Worst summer of my life. I don't know what I was thinking."

"That I was dull and boring," Rebecca said.

"You'll never be dull and boring," Andrew replied. "You're too smart to be boring. No, I was an idiot." He stared at the screen. "I thought we'd quit talking about that summer."

Kayla smiled. "Sorry. I shouldn't have said anything. Will you really find me a date, Rebecca?"

"Why not? There are a ton of great guys here. Maybe you'll meet one and want to come to Drake next year or even next semester."

That blew the smile off Kayla's face. "I'm not smart enough for Drake. They'd never accept me and I couldn't afford it anyway."

"You should at least take classes at the community college," Andrew said. "And you could afford to come to Iowa. If you did that, maybe Rebecca would come visit both of us. At least I'd get more of a chance to see her."

"I have as much trouble getting to Iowa City as you do getting to Des Moines," Rebecca said. "When I have a car here, I'll be a lot more independent. Until then, I'm stuck."

"You could always ride the bus."

"Have you ever ridden on one of those buses, Kayla?" Rebecca asked. "They're dirty and the people are scary looking and I'd never do that by myself."

"Maybe I'll come to Des Moines and we can ride the bus to Iowa City together."

Rebecca smiled. "I think she misses us, Andrew. Speaking of that

- Andy? He calls you Andy?"

"Only to embarrass me. Usually I call him Ry-Ry when he does, but I wasn't thinking."

"Because we're so distracting," Kayla declared. "I have to go back to the front desk. My break is over."

"When are you going to leave the hotel and get your own place?" Andrew asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know. I wish I did. Someone needs to tell me what to do with my life."

"Rebecca's good at that."

"Hey," Rebecca said. Then she grinned. "Yeah. I am bossy. Isn't that what you always say, Kayla?"

Kayla glanced away. "I have to go now. Talk to you guys tomorrow."

After she clicked off the call, Rebecca laughed. "She didn't want to walk into that one."

"What's up with your roommate?" Andrew asked.

She blew out a frustrated breath. "I have no idea. When do I start worrying? She should have been back two hours ago. It's not like her schedule changes. Ever. If she doesn't follow every single detail on that thing, she cries."

"No way."

"It isn't always crying, but she gets really down on herself if she misses something. Like the world is going to end."

"It might for her."

"She is so uptight."

"You've said that. Have you asked whether anyone has seen her around?"

Rebecca shook her head. "No. I'll give her another hour and if she doesn't show up, I'll talk to my RA. I'll probably call Polly, too. Maybe she'll know what I should do."

"Wouldn't you hate it if people worried about you because you did one thing out of the ordinary, just for one night? You'd be mad at us if we called around and got everyone upset."

"Yeah, but I'm not uptight and stuck to one schedule. I roll with the flow. This girl? There ain't nothing that flows with her in it."

"How long are you going to live with her?"

"Polly says I need to wait through the semester. If things are still awkward and strange, then I can ask about moving in with a different roommate. Who in the world thought it was a good idea for people who have never met each other to move in together?"

"Ryan and I are doing great. It's been really fun."

"Whatever. That isn't helpful."

"Sorry."

With a big sigh, Rebecca said, "I should let you go. We both have to study. I'll call Polly a little later."

"Call me back, too."

"I always call you before I fall asleep."

He smiled and tapped the screen. "It's so nice that we get to do that. I can't wait until we're in the same house and can go to bed together. I want to hold you all night and wake up with your hair in my face."

That all sounded horrible to Rebecca, but she knew he was trying to be romantic, so she didn't say anything. "I love you, too, Andy."

"Righto, Becky."

"Yeah. That's gross, too. I love you, Andrew. Thanks for being a good friend to Kayla, too. I love that the three of us can hang out together when she takes a break."

"What is she going to do with herself?"

"I don't know, but someday she'll figure it out. I don't even know what I'm going to do."

"But at least you're being productive and learning while you decide."

"Sometimes it feels like I'm spending money I shouldn't spend."

"Man, not me. Everything I learn is something I didn't know before. You used to be like that."

"College is hard. If you were here and we could study together and talk about all the things we're learning like we used to, it would be way better. I really miss you."

"I miss you, too. Okay, you go. Study. Don't worry and when you do, call me back. I'll be right here."

"Talk to you later, Andrew. I'm so glad I can say that."
"Me too."

Vignette #4

Go Team

"You're going to have to have a long talk with your dad, Noah."

Noah frowned in confusion. "About what?"

Mark Ogden laughed and clapped his back. "About which Iowa team you are going to root for. He needs to buy you some swag. At least a t-shirt for days like this."

Noah nodded, still a little confused. Henry shook his head and smiled. "Don't listen to him, Noah. We're Switzerland at our house. Unless of course, Drake is involved."

"Heath and Hayden are both Iowa State grads," Mark said.

Noah tried to smile. "Andrew is at the University of Iowa. He's practically family."

"Aye. There's the rub," Mark replied. "*Practically* family. You don't have to support his school until he actually marries Rebecca."

Henry coughed. "We are in no hurry for that. The kids have plenty of time. Noah, you can root for whatever school you want."

Mark laughed. "Noah hasn't made a choice yet, has he?"

"About college?" Noah shook his head. "I don't know yet, sir. I don't even know what I want to do."

"Well, if you tend toward Iowa State, come talk to me. I'll steer you right, my boy."

This was more attention than Noah wanted today, so he nodded and smiled, pleading with his eyes for Henry to rescue him.

Henry was busy filling a plate with the food and paid no attention to Noah's desperation.

They were at Mark Ogden's house for the big Iowa - Iowa State game this afternoon. Noah had thought all he was doing today was sitting in front of a television. Evidently, there was more to it. Why did people always want to talk to him? It wasn't like he had anything interesting to say. Nobody wanted to know what spun around in his head. Sometimes it was a weird song and sometimes it was what he'd learned in school. Other times he would replay the

dialog from a book he was reading, trying out different voices on the characters. The weirdest times were when the voices in his head used strange accents. He'd never learned another language, although he really wanted to when he got to high school. The only thing he could think was that he heard accents in movies and his brain was trying to reproduce them.

He was comfortable in the Ogden's home, since he spent so much time babysitting their three children - Alexander, Theodore, and sweet little Betsy-Kate. She adored him. At least that's what it felt like to Noah. When he walked in the door, Betsy-Kate attached herself to him and wouldn't let go until he put her into her crib for the night. He still had no idea what to do with that much attention, but he liked it.

Noah turned to the spread on the island. Polly would never let them eat this much junk food. He smiled. It was awesome. "What are these?" he whispered to Henry, pointing at a dish.

"Little Smokies," Henry said. "Tiny little hot dogs in barbecue sauce. And these?" He pointed toward another crock pot filled with a brown sauce over meatballs. "Swedish meatballs."

"We never get food like this. Is it because Sal's from Boston?"

Henry laughed. "No, son. It's because your mother and Lexi haven't gotten around to them yet. I think we had Swedish meatballs once, and Lexi served them over noodles."

Noah nodded. Whatever it was, he was trying everything on the table. Salsa and cheesy dips, crackers and chips, and a bunch of dessert things from Sweet Beans. At the end of one of the counters, a cooler was filled with ice and soda pop. He glanced at Henry, who grinned. "Drink what you want. Today we party."

Sal came in from the kids' bedroom area with her three, all dressed in crimson and gold. Theodore and Alexander wore Iowa State sweatshirts and Betsy-Kate had the cutest ISU cheerleader dress on, her tiny little curls caught up into pigtails with red and yellow ribbon.

"That's my family," Mark said. "Another generation heard from." At a knock at the door, Sal took off.

"Boys, what would you like to eat?" Mark asked.

"All of it," Alexander declared, his eyes wide as he climbed up on a stool. He pointed at the vegetable tray. "No celery, please, but everything else."

Theodore followed his brother and landed in front of a fruit tray. He stuck his little hand out and snagged a grape.

"Let's fill your plate," Mark said.

Noah set his plate on the counter. "I can help."

"How about you take care of Little Miss?"

Sounds of greeting echoed as Nat and Kirk Waters came in, both sporting black and gold, the University of Iowa Hawkeyes logo on their sweatshirts.

"My eyes, my eyes!" Mark exclaimed covering them with his hand. "What sacrilege are you bringing into my house?"

Nat laughed. "Mom said you'd get a kick out of this. She got them for us last weekend when she went over to see Cilla."

"But Cilla doesn't go to Iowa," Noah protested.

"Close enough. We also have Grinnell sweatshirts." Nat looked at the two little boy who were spreading their sweatshirts so he could see what they were wearing.

"Iowa State," Kirk said. "Guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Who's going to win today?"

Alexander pointed at his chest. "We are!" He beamed at the laughter.

"This looks great, Sal," Kirk said.

She raised her eyebrows and chuckled, then pointed at Mark. "I am not the wife in this family. At least not in the kitchen. I didn't even make it to the grocery store to pick things up. This is all on Mark."

"You bought the sweet treats," Mark said.

"That's right," she said with a laugh, swinging Betsy-Kate up to her hip. "I pointed at the display case. I'm very good at that."

He waggled his eyebrows. "You're good at a lot of things."

The doorbell rang again and she handed Betsy-Kate off to Noah. Sal really didn't have any other option. The little girl reached for him and was prepared to fall out of her mother's arms in order to get to her favorite boy.

"I guess you're on," Sal said. "Thank you."

"Anything I should know for her plate?"

"Not today," Sal said. "Whatever she points to, she gets to try."

As she passed the refrigerator, she opened it and took out a bottle filled with juice. "This is for her. Boys, do you want a juice box?"

Mark walked past and hip-checked her. "No worries. I'll get the door."

"I'm sorry. Noah distracted me." Sal shot Noah an evil grin. "Always blame it on someone else. Boys? Juice?"

"Yes, please, Mommy," Alexander said. He turned to his brother, who nodded and repeated Alexander's words.

"I'll carry your plates into the television room," Sal said. "Have you made all your choices?"

Mark came back in with Dave Evans, the husband of Mark's assistant, Marnie. He looked around and said, "No Seth?"

Seth Jackson was the other veterinarian in the office.

"He's working today," Mark said. "I bet the game will be on in the office."

"You should have brought Marnie with you," Sal said, picking up the two plates her boys had filled. She'd tucked the two juice boxes into her arm and even though she looked awkward, she still was smooth as anything. Noah wondered if he would ever feel as confident as that.

"She's cleaning today," Dave replied. "It's better if I run away when she gets like this. I don't dare sit down, not even for a minute. There is always something else she needs me to do." He nodded at Noah and Nat. "Good to see you boys. How's school?"

Noah nodded and turned to Nat who started off on a monolog about all he'd been doing this fall. Everything from ball games to going to Homecoming and then, some of his classes. How was it that he could talk so much? That would give Noah a heart attack.

Jack quietly stepped up to Noah. "Do you want me to take your plate in while you handle Betsy-Kate?"

"Thanks," Noah said. He pointed at the soda cooler. "Anything in there would be fine."

"They like to talk, don't they?"

Noah widened his eyes. "I know! I feel like a loser."

"Me too," Jack said with a nod.

Sal came up behind the two boys and took her little girl's hand in her own. "You boys should never feel bad about not fitting in with extroverts. You're different, not losers. I learned a lot by living with Polly in college. She made me realize that as big-mouthed and sassy as I am, not everyone is like me and that's a good thing."

"I didn't know you were listening," Noah said.

She grinned. "My children have taught me how to silently listen. I learn everything that way. They think I have eyes on the back of my head, but what I have is highly effective hearing. Now, go relax and don't worry. The big mouths in there will try to engage with you, but they'll soon get involved and let you watch the game in peace. If you need a break, come on out to the kitchen. Act like you're getting something else to eat. They won't pay any attention to you at all."

"Thank you," Noah said.

Jack nodded.

She slid an arm around Noah's waist. "I know you hate hugs, but you are such a great kid. Both of you are. Let yourselves be who you are."

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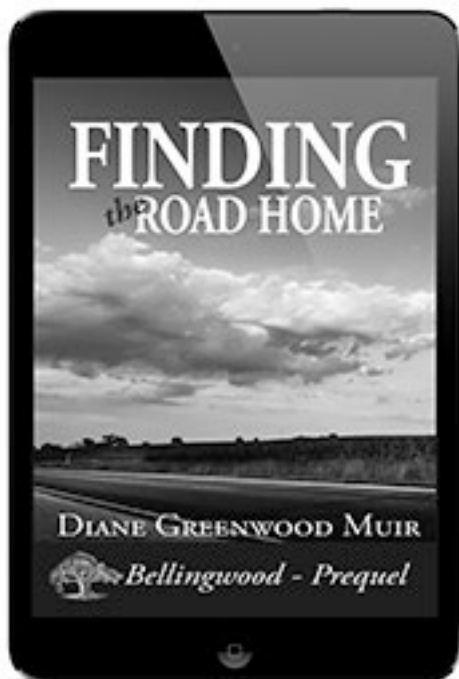
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# THANK YOU!



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*