



FINDING CONNECTIONS

Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Book 35



Book Thirty-Five 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 35 — Finding Connections — into one collection. These five short stories feature different characters from Bellingwood who get an opportunity to offer a little slice of life from their own perspective.

Vignette #1

Hanging Out

Noah nodded to the server who brought their drinks to the table. "Thank you," he said softly.

Graham Birdsong and Miles Gorren sat across the table from him. He'd never thought he would have friends like these two guys, but they were great.

"You sure you don't want pizza?" Sonny Birdsong, the cook here at Pizzazz and Graham's father stood beside their table.

"No sir," Noah said. "Mom says Lexi is making something-or-other and I need to come home hungry."

Sonny set two baskets of cheese bread on the table. "I figured as much. You won't turn these down, will you?"

Miles snagged one out of the basket and took a bite. "Whoa, hot."

"If you need anything else, just holler." Sonny patted Noah's back as he walked away.

"Does your dad cook at home?" Miles asked Graham.

"Never. Mom's the cook. Now, she says I'm old enough to learn how. It can't be that hard, can it?"

Noah shrugged. "There are a million people in my house that cook. I wonder if I'll ever have to learn."

"My mom won't let me near the kitchen," Miles said. "She says I'm a danger."

"You are," Graham acknowledged. "She's not wrong."

"I'm not the one who nearly fell off the horse."

Graham shook his head. "But I'm not the one who tripped into the manure pile."

Noah laughed out loud. That had been a sight. Miles and Graham came over to the barn with him sometimes. Eliseo liked both of them and was glad to put them to work. The guys loved being around those big horses and they also loved playing with the donkeys. Last week, Miles chased Tom around the pasture when the donkey snagged the hat off his head. Tom came to an abrupt

stop, but Miles didn't see it, he was so focused on keeping his feet out of the droppings on the ground. The next thing he knew, he bounced off Tom's back end and fell right into the edge of the manure pile.

Eliseo said that Tom knew exactly what he was doing and where he had stopped. That made it even worse. To be outsmarted by a donkey was no fun at all.

Miles was a good sport, though. He was always a good sport. Not much took him down.

"Mom told me she was never going to get that smell out of my clothes," Miles said. "That was after she told me I probably deserved it. I tell you what; I get no respect. No respect at all. So, Noah, are you thinking about taking someone to the winter dance?"

Noah frowned. "What?"

"You know, the winter dance. We should be thinking about it now. There will only be a couple of weeks after we get back from break."

"Are you taking a date?"

Miles threw his arm around Graham's shoulder. "I'm calling dibs on this one."

"No, you're not," Graham said, shrugging out from under his friend's arm. "Why are you bringing this up if you aren't taking a girl?"

"I kinda, maybe thought about asking Emmy Jackson."

"She's already got a date. Who do you think you are? Justin Bieber?"

Miles waved his hand in dismissal. "That dude is old."

"Then, who do you think you are? Ludwig von Beethoven?" Graham asked.

Noah chuckled.

"That's more like it," Miles said. "I could totally pull that off. All the girls would swoon at my feet."

"Oh, Miles," Graham said in a high-pitched voice. "You are so pretty. Play the sonata again for me, please?"

"Err, vat?" Miles used an exaggerated German accent as he put his hand to his ear. "I can't hear you. Speak up, my dear."

"You two are crazy," Noah said. "Kinda impressed that you know Beethoven wrote sonatas."

"The girls you want to marry are impressed by brains and talent, not only good looks."

Graham laughed at his friend. "Good thing. You'd never find one."

Miles punched Graham's arm. "Not nice. Not nice at all. So, Noah." He leaned forward and snagged another piece of cheese bread. "You have to be interested in one of the girls at school. Come on. Who?"

Noah shook his head. "I'm not ready to do that again. Girls are stupid."

"Mattingly was stupid. She didn't know how good she had it. Seriously, dating a Sturtz in this town? That's like a crown jewel."

Noah frowned. "What?"

"Your parents are loaded. And your mom is, like, the nicest person in the world. She'll do anything for anybody."

"She is pretty nice," Noah acknowledged. "But how do you know that?"

"Other than the nights we hang out at your place? It's like she's everywhere in Bellingwood. People talk, dude."

"Not to me, they don't."

"Only because you've got your nose stuck in a book. Pay attention once in a while, would ya?" Miles rolled his eyes at Graham. "This guy is so dense sometimes. Teachers think he's smart, but c'mon."

"I pay attention to the important stuff," Noah said.

Graham just smiled. "Not to girls, you don't."

"They're a disaster waiting to happen."

"You have to get over that," Miles said. "That is, if you ever want to get any."

Noah heaved a long sigh. "I am not talking about that with you."

"Then who are you going to talk about it with? We're, like, your best friends. We gotta have each other's six."

"Six?" Noah asked. "Been watching too much *Seal Team*?"

"At least you know what I mean. Have each other's back. And

hey, that means you watch the show, too."

Noah lifted a book out of his backpack. "I read books."

"Oh, don't get all snooty smart on me. I read, too. I just like to watch TV when Mom crashes after dinner."

It hit Noah that he *was* kind of out of it. Polly and Henry didn't like the television to be on unless it was something special. Henry watched ballgames on the TV in their room, but the one in the family room was for everyone and no way would Polly let the littles watch shows like *Seal Team*.

He shrugged. "Who are you taking if Emmy already has a date?"

Miles scooted closer to Graham. "I told you. This is my date now."

"No, I'm not." Graham pushed him away. "Get back in your own space."

"We don't have to go to the dance," Noah said. "You guys could come over to my place."

"Is that how it's going to be when we're in high school? We'll never go to any of the dances?" Miles asked.

"Who wants to do that, anyway?"

Miles cocked his head. "Girls want to do that. Duh. If we're smart, we do the things that girls want to do. That makes them like us better. You really are thick."

Graham pushed the basket of cheese bread toward Noah, who hadn't taken a piece yet. "I thought you said that girls like brains and talent. Now we have to do what they like, too? This is a long list of requirements. I might forget something."

"You already have brains and talent."

"And no girlfriend," Graham said. "I must have missed a step."

"They mess with you," Noah said quietly.

"Mattingly really did a number on you, didn't she?" Miles said.

"It was no big deal. We just weren't compatible. It isn't like we hate each other or anything."

"You were so cute together." Miles gave him a smarmy smile. "Playing your duets and looking all doe-eyed at each other."

Noah flicked water from his glass across the table. "Shut up."

Miles opened his mouth and Graham jabbed him in the side.

"We have each other's backs. Remember? Stop it."

"Okay. Yeah. Whatever. So, should I bring clothes tomorrow?"

Noah frowned. "To go to the barn?"

"Yeah. Is it cool?"

"It's always cool. I don't know what we're going to do."

"I really liked riding Demi," Miles said. "I want to do more of that." He put his hands up. "I know, I know. Just, whenever it happens. He's a cool horse. Tom the turkey-donkey is on my shi ..."
Miles sent furtive glances around the room. "My naughty list."

Graham laughed. "Who's going to yell at you for saying that word?"

"I don't know. There are people in town that tell my parents everything I do. Social media thinks *it's* the biggest network. Maybe for the world, but in a little town like Bellingwood, gossip and stories move faster than the speed of light. If I said that word out loud, Mom would be standing at the back door with fire in her eyes when I got home tonight."

"But it's a no-big-deal word," Graham protested.

Noah shook his head. "Not in my world, it's not. Mom sat me down one day and man, I was in trouble."

"Did she yell at you?" Miles asked. "I've never seen her yell."

"No, she doesn't yell, she just makes me feel guilty. Like I disappointed her. That's the worst."

Miles nodded. "My mom yells. And yells and yells and yells. I wish she'd swear and cuss and all that so I could get back at her, but she just yells."

"Mom and Dad don't care if I say bad words," Graham said. "Maybe they think I'm a lost cause. Dad swears all the time."

"You're not a lost cause," Noah said with a laugh. "You just like to swear. It's not like you're a druggie or an alcoholic."

"Grandma would tell him that one leads to the other," Miles said with a grin. "It's a good thing I love her. That woman is sometimes way too holy when she starts in on her lectures. Mom says we have to respect her. I can do that. I like it when she hugs me." He blushed. "Whatever."

"You boys doing okay?" Sonny Birdsong was standing at their

table again. "Have you been blabbing all this time? Eat up. You're making me look bad."

Noah took a piece from the basket. "Thank you, Mr. Birdsong."

"You're welcome, Noah. You boys need to wrap it up and get moving. Dinner crowd will start coming in soon and we need the tables. Besides, you have other responsibilities. Homework? Babysitting? Music practice?" He smiled at them. "Finish your food and get moving. Fifteen minutes, okay?"

"Yes, sir," Miles said. "Thanks for this."

"Any time. You know that."

"He's cool," Miles said as Sonny walked away.

Graham nodded. "He's okay."

Noah sank his teeth into the cheese bread. "Elijah gets mad that I get to hang out here with you. He loves this place."

"No younger siblings," Graham said. "That was our deal."

"I'm with ya," Noah replied. "Just a few minutes out of the day, I'd like to not have to put up with them. That's why this is so great."

He took a long drink and sat back. "Tomorrow at the barn?"

Graham and Miles nodded. "We're ready."

Vignette #2

Bring the Baby

Marie Sturtz knocked on the back door of her old home, thankful that it didn't feel strange to be standing on the outside waiting to be let in. Cat and Hayden had made enough changes to make the house their own home. In late September, Hayden carved out enough time to replace the storm doors and paint the trim a pale gray. She smiled at the transformation. Change was a good thing.

It had taken time, but with every passing day, the house she and Bill had built up north felt like home. The more she filled it with family, the more it became her favorite place on earth.

Her phone buzzed with a text from Cat. *"Is that you out there?"*

"Yes, should I just come on in?"

"Please!"

Marie laughed as she opened the door. "Cat? Are you in here?"

"In the living room."

The kitchen was in better shape than Marie expected. Cat's baby was more than a week late and the girl was miserable. The last weeks of Marie's pregnancies had been no fun. All she wanted was for those babies to come into the world. Late babies would have been the end of her.

"How are you doing?" Marie asked when she entered the living room. James was already moving toward her, his arms up to be hugged. She knelt and took him into her arms.

"I want to be mad and grouchy. That's how I'm doing. Thank you for coming into town to get my boy." Cat smiled at James in Marie's arms. "Hayden felt bad, but he had to get to work early this morning for something-or-other. I'm a terrible wife; I'm not even paying attention to his job any longer."

"You have other things to pay attention to."

Cat waved her hand, taking in the cluttered living room. "Not this. I can't bring myself to do anything except sit here and feel sorry for myself. I'm sorry it's such a mess. I hate letting it get this

bad, but neither of us has time." Tears came to her eyes.

Marie sat in the rocking chair and patted her lap. James clambered up and leaned against her, holding on to two of his cars. "You have nothing to be sorry about."

"Your house is always so clean. I'm embarrassed. Mrs. Merritt called and offered to bring food to us and I had to tell her no because I wasn't letting anyone into this mess."

James started clapping the cars together. Marie put her hand on top of his, stopping the noise. "Why don't you take those up to your room and play with the racetrack?"

He looked at his mother, who nodded. "That's a good idea. When Grandma is ready to go home, she'll take you with her."

After he left, Cat sighed. "I'm so tired. I know it's Saturday and you don't usually babysit, but I can't say thank you enough for taking him today."

"I have a different idea, but let me know what you think. What if I were to do some cleaning around here for you? That baby is going to show up any day and I suspect you'd rather bring it home to a house that doesn't require your attention."

"I can't do that to you." Cat rubbed her oversized belly. "And besides, I'm not sure if it's ever going to arrive."

"It will. I promise. They never stay in there forever."

"I want it over now. You shouldn't clean my house. It's too much. You can't."

"Why not?" Marie asked. "Give me one good reason why I'm not allowed to help you get ready for a new baby."

Cat tried to push herself up to a seated position and grimaced, then gave up. Marie walked over and put out her hand. Cat took it, pulled herself forward, then swung her feet to the floor. "This is ridiculous. I'm ridiculous. I'm huge and uncomfortable. Grumpy barely describes my attitude."

"I understand. I really do. It's been a lot of years, but I remember feeling like everything was out of my control."

"I hate that. My friends always make it look so easy."

"You mean your online friends?" Marie asked.

Cat lifted a shoulder.

"The ones who want the world to think they have it all together? They're lying. Either that, or they have live-in help." Marie laughed at the thought of it.

"It's a good thing we finished the nursery a couple of months ago. Otherwise, the baby would be coming home to bare walls. I can't seem to gather enough energy to do anything other than complain."

"What does your doctor say about timing?" Marie asked.

"The baby will come when it comes. Not helpful. Not helpful at all."

Marie chuckled. "What do you think about letting me spend a few hours here with you. Or would you rather be alone?"

"I don't care whether I'm alone or not. I needed time to process on what we're going to do in the classroom this week."

"You only have three days, right?"

"Three terrible, awful days," Cat said. "All the kids will be thinking about is the holiday break. Visions of sugarplums and all that. All I will be thinking about is when this baby is planning to show its face."

Marie picked up pillows that had been tossed to the floor and returned them to their homes.

"Marie, you really don't have to clean."

"Will you be angry if I do?"

Cat sank back against a pile of pillows behind her back. "No. I'm too tired to be angry."

"What if I called Betty and invited her to help? We'd be finished in no time. Would that upset you?"

Tears filled Cat's eyes again. "I don't have it in me to be upset. I feel bad that Hayden has to do so much around here. James isn't getting enough attention from me and the house is a disaster."

"Once the baby arrives and you regain your strength and energy, you'll be back to the same Cat who somehow manages to take care of everything. A regular supermom."

"I told Hay this is the last baby."

"Really? Only two?"

"Did you want more than two?"

Marie shook her head. "No. By the time Lonnie showed up, both Bill and I were happy with our little family. They were wonderful children, but they could be a handful."

"Was Henry or Lonnie worse?"

"It depended on the day. I was a little concerned that one day Bill might come into the house and find that I'd duct-taped one or the other to the bathroom wall."

Cat laughed out loud. "Hay and I talked about how the two of us can hand James back and forth. With two little ones, we're going to have to concentrate. I don't want to be outnumbered."

"You have enough little ones to raise in your classroom."

"No kidding."

Marie took out her phone. "I'm calling Betty. She's been asking if there was anything she could do to help you get ready for the baby. This will make her very happy."

"You two are strange."

"But you love us."

"So very much." Cat hefted and pushed herself up from the sofa. "First, to the bathroom, then to the kitchen table. All of my work is out there."

"Would you rather work in here? I can bring papers to you."

Cat smiled. "If you're working in the kitchen, I'd rather be there."

"But we'll make it hard for you to concentrate."

"I usually have the TV going in the background. You two will be much more fun."

Marie nodded and stood when she placed the call. She walked toward the front door and looked out at the porch. It was a wonderfully big porch. In the summer time, it was a perfect place to wile away a few hours.

"Betty?" she said when her sister-in-law answered the phone.

"Hello, there. What are you doing on this fine Saturday morning?"

"Well, I'm standing in Cat's living room."

"Is there a baby yet?"

"Not yet. There is a very pregnant and frustrated mommy here, though. Are you free to help me do some cleaning for her? We'll

keep an eye on James and get Cat all set up for her first weeks home with a bigger family."

"She's agreeable to this?" Betty sounded excited.

"She is."

"I'll send Dick over to play with Bill and be right there. Do I need to bring anything?"

"Maybe your rubber gloves and anything else you regularly use."

"It's all in a bucket in the pantry. Marie, you've just made my day."

"Asking you to clean?"

"Making me feel useful around your grandkids. Thank you."

Marie smiled. "You are something else, Betty Mercer. If I hadn't married your brother when I did, I would have had to track him down if for no other reason than to be your sister-in-law."

"I'm not sure I followed that, but I love you too. Let me hang up, change my clothes, and I'll be right in. I have beef stew in the freezer. Should I bring it?"

"That's a wonderful idea. Thank you."

"Thank you!"

Marie turned and smiled at Cat as she pocketed her phone. "You have no idea what a gift you just gave to Betty."

"Gift?"

"She can't wait to help you. Honey, sometimes we grandmas need to feel useful when something as spectacular as a new baby comes onto the scene."

"I'll be right back." Cat shuffled out of the room.

Marie picked things up as she walked back and forth, then landed at a closet at the far end of the living room. She took out the vacuum cleaner and plugged it in, then looked up when she heard a sound.

James came around the corner into the living room. "Grandma?"

"Yes, dear."

"Where's Mommy?"

"I think she went to the bathroom. What do you need?"

"Benji and I want something to drink." He held up a stuffed

hippo.

What James really wanted was some attention. She was happy to give him both. "Aunt Betty is coming over, too."

His face lit up. "Aunt Betty?"

"She and I are going to help your mother clean the house. Do you know why?"

James shook his head, a solemn look on his face. "She's sick."

"No, she isn't sick. She is tired. I know she's talked to you about the baby that's growing inside her."

That brought life back to his face. "Baby!"

"Do you remember being a very little baby?"

He frowned at her. "No."

"Well, since you have been born, you've gotten taller and grown bigger. Did you know that?"

"My pants are short."

"Not these pants. Your mommy bought new ones for you, didn't she?"

James nodded.

"Even before babies are born, they grow. They grow inside the mommy and that takes a lot of work on the mommy's part. It makes her tired."

"The baby makes mommy tired?"

"Yes and it also makes your mommy very happy."

"Good."

"Since your mommy is helping the baby grow and she's so tired, Aunt Betty and I are going to clean the house. Would you like to help us?"

He turned up his nose at that. "I don't like to clean. Daddy makes me put my toys away."

Marie laughed and pulled him close. "You help me clean when you're at my house."

"But it's fun at your house."

"Well, Aunt Betty and I are going to have fun cleaning today at your house. You can help us or you can play in your room. It's up to you."

He smiled up at her and put his hand in hers. Marie's heart filled.

She had never expected her life to be so full of family. For years, Lonnie had expressed no interest in being married or having children. Now she had a wonderful husband with a daughter who was a gem, and they had brought a new baby into her life. Henry and Polly never ceased to surprise her with their family.

Cat came back into the living room. "Are you helping Grandma and Aunt Betty today?"

"You are helping a baby grow," he said, patting her belly. "You are tired."

She looked at Marie who gave a small shrug. "That's why I get to clean the house. I think I've talked James into giving us a hand."

"He's a good boy," Cat said. "I'm a lucky mommy."

"I want a drink," James said, tugging on Marie's hand.

"We're going to start the day with something to drink," Marie said. "Would you like something?"

"I can do it," Cat said, following them into the kitchen.

"You should sit with your son and let me take care of both of you. That offer doesn't happen very often."

"Yes it does." Cat dropped into a chair with a plop. "And I love you for it. Thank you."

Vignette #3

Quiet Night

Skylar walked into the living room and silently groaned. She'd been doing so well.

Stephanie lay on the sofa in the near darkness, a streetlight shining in through the window. She had pulled a blanket up over her head and was curled into herself, her body shaking as she cried.

This wasn't new, and it had been a while since she'd fallen so completely apart. Stephanie refused to allow Kayla to see this side of her, but tonight Kayla was with Rebecca and the stress of the season had finally caught up.

"I'm here," he said quietly. He'd been gone most of the day, finishing last-minute Christmas shopping and taking care of errands for the hotel. Stephanie had a wedding reception earlier today and she was done until Tuesday when Sycamore House would act as host for yet more holiday parties. They were both looking forward to February. He couldn't wait to get her away from Bellingwood for a short cruise she'd scheduled. Whenever they traveled, Stephanie left everything behind. The first few times they'd gone without Kayla, she'd worried enough to call and check, but Kayla was a responsible girl, and besides, Rebecca was always around.

Stephanie had been pushing hard through these last few weeks with wedding receptions, holiday parties, and two business classes she'd taken in Boone. The girl never let herself slow down because when she did, the horrors of her past and the grief she felt over those days overwhelmed her. As she had grown into the role of mother to Kayla, assistant to Jeff Lyndsay, and manager of so much, she set herself aside. It had taken more than a year for her to allow Skylar to see the part of her that was so terribly wounded.

The first time she'd drifted into such deep melancholy, Skylar hadn't known what to think or do for her. Kayla was out of the house and Stephanie managed to tell him that he couldn't ask her

sister for help. Kayla didn't know about this. He'd stuck close, surprising Stephanie completely. She told him later that was the moment she trusted he'd never leave her.

As if he could ever leave her. He'd fallen for her hard. How could he not? She was incredible. Self-sacrifice described this girl and yet she didn't see it in herself. She was stubborn and bright, tenacious and driven. Everything Stephanie achieved, she did for herself. He was so proud of her.

Skylar couldn't imagine growing up, living as Stephanie did. Terrified of her father's abuse, terrified of what he did to her every night in the darkness of her bedroom, terrified of what he did to his wife in the light of day. She'd run, taking her sister away from that awful man before he transferred his affections, even while knowing that her mother would be punished. And the woman had paid with her life for allowing her daughters to leave. That guilt weighed on Stephanie, though she knew that her mother wanted them to go. She hadn't been strong enough to stop the abuse, but she'd take whatever he handed out to offer freedom to her daughters.

Sometimes Skylar got so angry, though. She could have given those girls up long before that man started in on Stephanie. But his anger did nothing to help Stephanie now. That story was told and finished ... in the real world. In Stephanie's mind, the story replayed itself over and over and Skylar couldn't fix it. All he could do was stay close when she fell to pieces.

When she was like this, darkness was all Stephanie could handle. The blanket over her head was there to keep light from assaulting her eyes. He walked back into the kitchen, took two candles from a shelf, lit them, and turned off the rest of the lights in the house. Carrying the candles back into the living room, he set one atop the television cabinet and the other on a table beside the rocking chair.

He sat in the rocking chair and reached over to put his hand on Stephanie's shoulder. "I'm here, Stephanie. I love you."

"Sorry," she murmured. "I can't do this." The sobbing had stopped, but she wasn't yet at peace.

He tucked a few tissues under the blanket by her head. She'd

need those when she was ready. "I know. You're okay." Skylar thought about the gifts he still needed to bring inside. He would hide hers in the basement. Christmas was still a few days away and he'd waited as long as he dared to bring it home. Stephanie was forever cleaning. There wasn't a room in the house where he could hide things. One year he'd thought about using a hotel room, but as soon as he thought of it, he realized that one of the staff members would find it. They'd ask questions at the worst time, too. Right when Stephanie walked into the room.

One thing about Stephanie that drove Skylar absolutely crazy was her insistence that she wasn't a beautiful woman. She spent hours watching videos to learn how to do her makeup and hair. She said that she hated looking at herself in the mirror for so many years, it was hard to even recognize her own face in the mornings. Stephanie used to cut her own hair, but she'd finally discovered the joy in letting a professional care for her. Her mornings at Mina Dendrade's salon were now some of her favorite experiences. She was even paying for manicures because of the attention and care they gave her.

He'd found a beautiful vanity. She never complained about the small bathroom they shared, but he wanted her to have her own space, a place where she could spread out and pamper herself when she had time. They'd have to shift a few things around in the bedroom, but there was space. He'd give up his own dresser if necessary. It shouldn't be necessary. The vanity came with a small set of drawers that would allow her even more storage for her personal items and he'd splurged on a comfortable bench with a back. He wanted her to know how beautiful he thought she was.

Skylar stood to go back to the kitchen for something to drink.

"Sky?"

He stopped in his tracks. "I'm right here."

"Don't leave."

"I was going to the kitchen. Would you like a glass of water?"

"Don't go."

He sat back down and rested his hand on the arm of the sofa. "I'm here."

"I'm sorry about this."

"You never need to apologize to me. It's okay. Did something happen at work?"

Stephanie pulled the blanket away from her face and his heart broke at the sadness that filled her eyes. "Nothing. I'm just tired. Tired of feeling like this. Tired of living in my head." She tapped at her temple with her index finger.

"I know." He understood, though he also understood that she didn't feel like this every day. She didn't live in the dark place all the time. In fact, the longer they were together, the more she'd been able to set aside the pain. But today it was the only thing present for Stephanie. He was in no hurry for her to feel better or get past this. She'd do it in her own time.

He reached into his pocket and smiled. "I bought you something today."

"It's not Christmas."

"I know. Here." He set it on the edge of the sofa.

"What?" Stephanie put her hand over the ornament he'd laid there. It was a simple pair of lacy angel wings. Someone had set them on top of the candy in the checkout aisle. The moment he saw them, he knew they were coming home with him. "What?" she asked again.

"You'll never know how much I love you," Skylar said. "Those wings are yours. As if they were removed when you were born and showed up right where I'd see them so they'd find you again."

A hint of a smile crossed her lips and Stephanie cradled the ornament in her hands. "I'm not delicate."

"And thank goodness for that," he replied. "The world has tried to break you and you keep getting stronger. But wings are powerful, no matter how delicate they look. Just like you, they ride the air currents, but with a swoop or a twist, they choose where they will go. Wings are strong enough to lift from the ground and sensitive enough to feel each whisper of wind."

"Thank you," she whispered. Tears spurted from her eyes, but these weren't tears of pain and grief. Stephanie reached out and wrapped her arm around his. "Thank you."

"I love you, Steph."

"I'll never understand why, but I love you, too."

That was why he loved her. She loved him back with no strings or expectations. Stephanie would give everything she had for those she loved.

Skylar looked at the Christmas tree, darkened for now. He rubbed the top of the hand she'd laid on his arm. If he could fill the tree with angel wings so she understood the strength he saw in her, he'd do it.

"Merry Christmas," he said softly.

Stephanie squeezed his arm. The wings lay on the pillow beside her head. She closed her eyes and her breathing deepened as she fell asleep.

"Merry Christmas," Skylar repeated.

Vignette #4

Here Comes Santa Claus

"Have you ever seen Santa?" Cassidy sat behind the desk in the Sturtz's home office while Agnes Hill set out her travel bag and the pajamas she'd brought to spend the night. After a beautiful Christmas Eve service at church, the family drank hot cocoa in front of a fire in the living room while Polly and Henry did their best to calm the little ones down before bedtime.

Polly had found a comfortable rollaway bed and cleared out the office so Agnes would have a private place to spend the night. She couldn't imagine being anywhere else on Christmas Eve. Last year Henry had driven to her house bright and early to pick her up. She hadn't slept at all that night, knowing how early she needed to be awake, but tonight, after sending Cassidy off to bed, she hoped to sleep.

That might not work as well as she would like. The excitement in the house had been growing for days and you couldn't help but get caught up in it. From the youngest, little Gillian, to the oldest ... hmmm, that must be her, Christmas was highly anticipated. It was fun to see Gilly understand the joy that she was experiencing. The children had all written letters to Santa and given them to Agnes, after she told them he had a personal connection to her.

Agnes nodded knowingly at Cassidy. "One night a long time ago," she said. "I wasn't much older than you are right now. I saw Santa Claus." Agnes patted the soft bed. "Come sit beside me. I'll tell you all about it.

Two little boys popped into the doorway. "You saw Santa?" JaRon asked, his mouth wide open. "Really?"

"I did. If you want to hear the story, come on in. But as soon as I'm finished, the three of you have to promise you'll go to bed. No more stalling. Got it?"

She was going to miss it when the youngest of Polly's children stopped believing that Santa Claus would come down the chimney

to bring them gifts. Their little minds still imagined his reindeer magically pulling a sleigh across the heavens all through the night. It was one thing to believe in the spirit of Santa; it was a completely different thing to believe that magic could lift a sleigh from a rooftop. That imagination was something to cherish and encourage. She'd never feel guilty for that. Reality set in much too early for children these days. She would help maintain their innocent beliefs as long as she could.

Henry stepped into the doorway and grinned. "Is Mrs. Agnes about to tell you her experience with Santa?"

JaRon's eyes were big as he nodded. "You know about it?"

He smiled at Agnes. "Everyone knows. She's quite the woman. She's met many famous people. I think Santa Claus is the best one. Right, Mrs. Agnes?"

"It was certainly a wonderful experience for me," Agnes replied. She winked at Henry and nodded her thanks. That Polly-girl had caught herself a treasure with this man.

Caleb and JaRon sat on the floor beside the desk, their eyes on her, waiting to hear about her enchanted encounter with Santa Claus.

"I told your sister that I was about her age when I met Santa Claus. My mommy and daddy went to bed on Christmas Eve after they made sure we were all tucked in. I slept in the same bed with one of my sisters and we giggled and giggled, hoping that we might see Santa and his reindeer. We told each other that if we woke up and saw him, we'd make sure the other one did, too." Agnes shook her head. "I didn't tell my sister, though. Santa made me promise to keep our meeting all to myself. And you never break a promise to Santa Claus. Right?"

Three little heads bobbed up and down in agreement.

"Even though I tried my best to stay awake, I must have fallen asleep because something roused me. Maybe it was the sound of sleighbells. I remember rubbing my eyes because the moon was so bright when it came in my window. I could hardly see anything, so I waited a few seconds for my eyes to adjust. Then I snuck out from under the blankets. It was very cold and we had a lot of warm

blankets piled on top of us. The floor in our room was freezing and I didn't know where my slippers were." Agnes chuckled. "I probably took them off while I was playing and forgot to put them beside my bed. I tiptoed across the room and because I knew exactly where the creaky board was, I went the long way around it. Then I turned the door knob, hoping it wouldn't squeak like it sometimes did. If my parents found out that I was awake, they would have gotten mad at me and sent me back to bed. But I knew something special was happening and I didn't want to miss it."

She paused. "A bright light flooded in under the door, but my daddy was very strict about making sure lights were all turned off. He didn't want to spend any extra money on electricity, so after he sent us all to bed, he lit a candle and turned off the rest of the lights in the house. After I managed to open the door without making a noise, the light was almost blinding. What could be doing that?"

"Was it Santa?" JaRon asked, his voice almost a whisper.

"I crept out of my room and made sure to close the door so the light didn't wake anyone else up." Agnes sat forward. "But I didn't close it all the way, because I knew that it would make a loud noise when the latch caught. Step by very silent step, I crept down the hallway to the living room which was where that bright light was coming from. It was almost as if the sun was shining in that room and nowhere else."

Cassidy had taken Agnes's hand and she drew it back and rubbed the little girl's back.

"The blinding light made it difficult to see what was happening in the room. When I finally peered through the brightness, I saw that the Christmas lights had been turned on and the star at the top of the tree was beaming. That was where the light came from."

"The star," Caleb breathed out.

"I was so entranced by the light of the star that it wasn't until a branch on the Christmas tree moved and two ornaments jangled together that I realized someone else was in the room. I peered through the branches and there he was."

Cassidy made a noise. "Santa!"

"He was dressed in a red velvet suit with white fuzzy trim. He

had a beautiful white beard and a red hat on his head. His white gloves were pristine and his black boots shone. The gold belt buckle glittered in the light and he had the happiest smile. I worried that I might be in trouble because you aren't supposed to get out of bed on Christmas Eve. Instead of scolding me, Santa Claus went down on one knee and beckoned me to come closer." Agnes made a 'come here' gesture with her hand and the boys leaned toward her.

"I couldn't believe he was inviting me to come to him and I practically skipped across the room." She laughed. "It's been a long time since I skipped, but that night I couldn't help it. My heart was so happy, I skipped. Santa patted his knee and I sat down on it. His smile was so lovely." Agnes's eyes filled with tears. "I could feel his great love for me and I hugged him. He put those big arms around me and hugged me so tight. It was one of those hugs that you never want to let go of."

"Like Mommy's," JaRon said.

"Exactly like your mommy's hugs," Agnes replied with a nod. "A hug that tells you exactly how much you are loved."

"Did he say anything?" Cassidy asked.

"He said 'Merry Christmas' and he called me by name. Santa Claus knew my name!"

Caleb shook his head in wonder. "What did you say back?"

"I didn't know what to say. I'd never met anyone like him before and he knew my name! It was the most amazing thing I'd ever experienced. Then he told me that I couldn't tell anybody else that I saw him."

"Why not?" Caleb asked. "Are you going to get in trouble for telling us?"

Agnes smiled. "No, honey. I knew that he meant I couldn't tell any of my family that year because they would feel bad that they missed out. He didn't have time to stay; he had to hurry away to the next house."

"Did he go up the chimney when he left?" JaRon was fully engaged in the story.

"We didn't have a chimney in that house," Agnes replied. "One minute he was patting me on the head telling me that I was such a

good girl and he was glad to have a friend like me, and the next minute I was standing in the dark living room by myself. Except ..."

She winked at all of them. "For the light from the star. It wasn't shining nearly as brightly after he left, and as I walked back toward my room, it slowly dimmed. But Santa left me enough light to walk down the hallway and head back to bed."

"Did you hear the reindeer on the roof?" Cassidy took Agnes's hand again. "Did you look out the window to see him fly away?"

Agnes shook her head. "I was only thinking about that hug and that he knew my name. For the rest of my life, I've known that he loved me. That night I climbed back under the covers and waited for my cold feet to warm up. I thought about putting them on my sister's legs, but after what Santa did for me, that didn't feel very loving, so I just waited. Pretty soon, they were warm and I fell back to sleep. I dreamed all night about Santa. The next morning, we got up early and when I ran to the living room, I watched my father turn the Christmas tree lights on. He turned on the star last of all. It didn't shine like it had when Santa was in the house, but that was okay. I remembered what it looked like."

"What happened to the star?" Cassidy asked.

"You've seen it," Agnes said with a smile. She patted Cassidy's knee. "It's on top of my Christmas tree at home."

"That's the same star?" Cassidy's eyes grew wide with wonder. "The one that lit up when Santa visited your house?"

"The very same star. Whenever I turn it on, I remember that night." Agnes stood up. "Now, it's time for the three of you to go to bed. Tomorrow morning, when you come downstairs, the one thing you will know is how very much you are loved."

"Because Santa loves us?" JaRon asked.

"There are so many people who love you kids. Now skedaddle. You promised. And don't think about staying awake to wait for Santa. Remember, he only comes after everyone has gone to sleep. It was because of a little bit of luck that I woke up that night. It never happened again."

Caleb stood up and Agnes smiled at him. "Would you let me show you how Santa hugged me?" Caleb was the one who had the

hardest time with physical affection. He threw his arms around her and she held on tight to him. "I love you, Caleb Sturtz," she said. "Don't ever forget it." Then she waited until he pulled away. It was the first time he'd ever hugged her and she wasn't going to be the one who stopped first.

After he backed up, JaRon came in for a long, tight hug. "If you see Santa, tell him that I love him, too," JaRon whispered.

"He hears you even if you can't see him," Agnes said. "Tell him and he'll know it."

Cassidy waited until her brothers were gone. "I wish I could meet Santa. The real Santa."

"I know you do, sweetheart. I tell you what, though. When you say goodnight to your Mommy and Daddy, you hug them just like you would hug Santa. They give you love every single day of your life."

"Just like you," Cassidy said. "I love you, Mrs. Agnes."

"And I love you. I love you so much that I want to hug you forever."

Cassidy giggled. "I'd never get to go to school."

"I guess that would be a problem, wouldn't it?" Agnes wrapped her arms around the little girl. "I can't wait to see you in the morning. Sweet dreams."

"Good night. Sweet dreams. It's fun having you spend the night with us."

Agnes nodded and walked to the door with Cassidy. She smiled at Henry and Polly, who were standing in the hall outside the office.

"Goodnight, Cass," Polly said. "We'll be up in a minute to tuck you in."

Cassidy ran for the kitchen as Polly hugged Agnes. "Thank you for that story tonight. You gave the kids a perfect end to their evening." She sighed. "If only it were true."

Agnes grinned at her. "What makes you think it isn't?"

Vignette #5

Ring Out the Old

Simon Gardner ran his hand down the back of his cat, Crystal. Bending over wasn't quite as easy as it had been when he was younger, and he was proud to be able to do it at all, even if it did require a few moans and groans he'd never made before.

Crystal arched her back and purred as he ran his hand up her tail. "Soon, baby girl," he said. Simon stood back up and nudged a piece of Wedgewood china to sit better on the shelf. "It's been a good year, don't you think?"

She meowed in response before wandering over to look out the windowpane of the front door. Simon followed her. The weather had turned grumpy today, but he was still going to try to make Polly's New Year's Eve party at the Bell House. The worst of the bad weather was coming in tomorrow and he planned to stay home all day with a good book, a big blanket, maybe a glass of wine or two, and Crystal. He didn't need anything else, no matter what his sister-in-law thought. That woman never sat down and she worried when he preferred quiet times alone. She needed to stop worrying about him.

That thought made him chuckle. Jean had been part of his life for nearly forty-five years and nothing had ever changed. She was still the same wonderful worrywart she'd always been.

He glanced outside again and decided he might as well close the shop. No one was shopping for antiques today. They had better things to do than to dig through knick knacks and ancient treasures.

As he walked away from the door, he was surprised to hear its familiar bells ring. Simon turned and smiled. "Hello there."

A young man shivered and said, "I'm sorry to bother you, but I just need to warm up for a minute."

"Certainly," Simon replied. "Come on in."

The young man looked back over his shoulder and shivered again. "It's so cold today."

Simon nodded. "It is. Are you from around here?"

"No, sir." He looked out the door again.

"Is everything okay?" Simon asked.

"I'm sorry to ask, but my car broke down and I left my wife with it."

"Go get her right now," Simon said. "Bring her in where it's warm. I'll make a pot of tea and we'll figure out how to get you on your way. What brought you into Bellingwood?" He shook his head. "Don't answer. Go get your wife."

"And my dog?" The man gave him a worried look.

"Bring your dog, too. Hurry. Bring what you need to make them both comfortable."

"I wouldn't bother you, but you're about the only shop still open."

Simon shooed him off. "Go. Hurry back. We'll take care of you."

As the man walked out, Simon picked Crystal up from the floor and cuddled her into his arms. "I wonder what adventure we're about to have this evening." He set her on his glass countertop and she made her way to the soft bed he'd set up for her there. Crystal liked being part of the business of the shop. When customers stopped to chat with him, she wanted them all to know that she was the queen of his castle and deserved as many pets as they would give.

"A dog," Simon said. "That won't be terribly new for you. No hissing or flat-eared stares, okay? I'm sure it's a very nice puppy."

She didn't deign to look at him, just watched out the front door.

"Independent little thing, aren't you?"

A few minutes later, the young man returned with a girl about his age and a short-legged blond dog.

"Is that a Corgi?" Simon asked.

The young woman smiled and nodded. "Yes, she's our Sasha. Thank you for your kindness. We had heat in the car, but I'm not sure how long that would have lasted. I don't know what we're going to do."

"Where are you parked?" Simon walked to the door and popped it open, thinking he might see the vehicle parked down the street.

"Around the corner," the young man said. "I heard it acting up and managed to pull off the highway before it died."

"It's in a parking space, though?"

Both nodded.

"Then you're in a good place. Now, let's get you three warmed up. I have tea in the back."

"Are any garages in town open this evening?" the young man asked.

"I doubt it, but I will make a couple of calls." Simon put out his hand. "My name is Simon Gardner. This is Crystal." The cat was standing on the edge of the counter staring at the dog who had yet to notice her.

"I'm sorry," the young man said. "My name is Ted Linder. This is my wife, Annie, and you've met Sasha."

"Welcome to Bellingwood. Come on back to my office. You need to get warmed up."

He led them through the store and smiled as Annie Linder's eyes flitted across room. Simon knew it was a lot to take in. He designed it to be that way. The best way to find the perfect treasure in an antique shop was to discover it among everything else. True treasures jumped out to let you know they belonged to you.

"Sit, sit." Simon said, gesturing to the chairs around a small table. "If I'm lucky, there will be a few leftover goodies in the refrigerator. Sylvie Donovan and her crew at the coffee shop make the best sweets. I'm a bit of an aficionado." He took out a wrapped plate. "Sometimes I eat everything that I bring back. Other times I bring back too much for one man to eat in a single sitting." Simon uncovered the plate and set it on the table. For some reason, he'd purchased more than usual this morning. From brownies to scones and muffins, he had plenty here. He had too much. Even if he went nowhere for the next three days, he couldn't have finished all this without putting some in the freezer. As the young couple looked at the plate, he now knew why he'd purchased so much. "I prefer tea, so I'm sorry that I don't have coffee or soda." Simon filled a pot with water and turned on the heat.

"Thank you," Annie said. "This is so kind. We're supposed to be

in Cedar Rapids. I wanted to take the scenic route and Ted was kind enough to let me make the decision for us. We should have stayed on the interstate. We'd be there by now."

"Or we'd be stranded on the interstate," Ted said. "I need to call Doug."

Annie nodded. "His brother. We were planning to spend several days. We knew snow was coming in tomorrow, but we were sure we'd get there before it all started. Now, what are we going to do?"

Ted took out his phone and groaned. "It's dead."

"Mr. Gardner," Annie said, digging in her purse, "would it be too much to ask to use one of your outlets?"

Simon chuckled. "I can't imagine living without my phone. Isn't it amazing how quickly we adapted to those things to keep us connected to the world?"

She handed her husband a cord and Simon pointed to an outlet on the wall behind the table. "Where are you folks from?" he asked.

"Near Joliet," Tim said. "Illinois. We traveled to Kansas City to spend Christmas with Annie's family. At least we don't have to be at work on Monday."

Annie started to reach for a treat from the plate, but took her hand back. Simon pushed it closer to her. "Trust me, this is the best you'll ever taste. It's addicting."

"You're so kind."

Ted had plugged in his phone and sighed with relief when it powered on. "I'll give it a few minutes to charge. Annie, what do you want to do tonight?"

"I don't know. Does Bellingwood have a hotel?"

Simon lifted his index finger. "A very nice hotel. I'd be glad to take you over there, but let me call them first to ensure they have rooms available."

She huffed out a noise of frustration. "Probably not. It's a holiday. That would just be our luck, wouldn't it, Ted? What an awful way to end this year."

Ted nodded.

"My phone is up front," Simon said. "I'll be back in a moment. If the water starts to boil, would you turn off the heat?"

It was Ted who walked over to Simon's burner. "This button here?"

"That's the one, son. Thank you." Simon patted his back and left the room. He might as well close the store. He couldn't imagine another person needing his assistance this evening. He flipped the sign and locked the door, then picked up his phone. Crystal was curled up in her bed, ignoring the fact that they had guests. He placed the call.

"Sycamore Inn, how may I help you?"

"Hi, this is Simon Gardner at the antique shop. You don't happen to have a room available this evening, do you?"

"It's me, June Livengood."

Simon smiled. A friend. "Happy New Year, June. Do you have a room?"

"For you?"

"No, I have a young couple in my shop who are stranded. If you have a room, I'm bringing them to you."

"Aren't you the nicest man? I suspect you're serving them tea right now. Am I right?"

"The water is boiling." Simon liked her, but June would rather chat than anything else. A conversation with her required no small amount of patience.

"We have a room. It's only one bed, but you said they are a couple?"

"Yes, and they have a dog."

"Not a big one, I hope," June said.

"It's a Corgi. Will you reserve the room for Ted and Annie Linder?"

"That's their names?"

More than a little patience. "Yes. I'm not sure when we'll get there, but it won't be terribly late."

"I have it in the system. I may not be here. Nick is coming in soon. Polly invited me to her New Year's Eve party. If the weather isn't terrible, I'd like to go."

"I'd like to go as well," Simon said. "Maybe I'll see you there."

June giggled. He wasn't even going to ask why. "One way or the

other I'll see you this evening then. Happy New Year."

"Thank you, June." Simon ended the call and scowled at Crystal. "If she thinks I'm kissing her at midnight, she has another think coming. I might just skedaddle out of there early so I can come home and kiss your lovely face."

The cat looked up at him, yawned, and tucked her head back into her chest.

When he got back to the office, Ted had stepped out and was on his phone. "I have a room for you at Sycamore Inn," Simon said to Annie. "It only has one bed. I hope that's okay."

She smiled. "At this point, a twin bed would be enough. Thank you. I still can't believe this year ended on such a crappy note. I sure hope that this isn't a sign of things to come in the next year."

Simon just smiled and walked over to his tea kettle. He took three mugs off the mug tree that he kept on the counter and put them on a tray with a basket of various teas. Then he poured the water into a teapot and set it on the tray as well.

"I do like a warm cup of tea when it's cold out," he said as he set it on the table. "Please, help yourself."

She smiled and flipped through the variety of teas. "I'm so sorry that we're intruding on your evening. You shouldn't have to put up with strangers in your space. Not only are we having a bad end of the year, we're messing with yours."

"Strangers have a funny way of becoming friends," Simon replied. He poured water over her tea bag, filling the mug. They both looked up when Ted walked back in.

"Doug says he'll hold Christmas until we get there. What did you find out about the hotel?"

"We have a room," Annie said. "I guess that's one good thing."

"My car is out back." Simon pointed toward the back of the shop. "When you're ready, I'll take you to your car and you can gather what you need. I'll give you the name and phone number of the garage. I don't know if he's open tomorrow, but he'll take care of you."

Ted shook his head in disbelief. "What a nice little town."

"We try," Simon replied. "Tea?"

"Thank you," Ted said. He patted his wife's shoulder. "I know you think that this is a terrible way to end the year, but Doug was pretty impressed."

"With what?" she asked.

"That we found someone who would help us. He said that's the truth of it."

"Truth?"

"Good people are everywhere. We can look at this as if it's the worst experience ever, or we can see that Mr. Gardner was here to help us and remember that instead."

Annie shrugged. "That makes me sound negative and grumpy. I apologize, Mr. Gardner. You've been sweet and kind and helpful and all I could do was focus on our problems."

"That's the thing about life," Simon said. "Our emotions are easily swayed by our circumstances. We have to learn how to focus on the goodness that comes our way."

"My brother said nearly the same thing." Ted took his wife's hand. "We'll be fine. We're safe and warm and it will all work out."

"You're right. This isn't what I planned, but maybe it will be a fun adventure." Annie chuckled. "It will definitely be an interesting memory for our first New Year's Eve as husband and wife."

"You're newlyweds?" Simon asked.

"We were married in April, but we've experienced a lot of new things together this year," Ted said. "I told Annie that if we can get through all that we've dealt with this year and still find ways to laugh and love, we're going to be fine for the rest of our lives."

Simon nodded. "That's a wonderful way to celebrate the upcoming new year. Just a moment." He leaned back to open a cabinet. "It isn't champagne, but would you take this bottle of wine for tonight?"

Annie looked at her husband and he grinned. "Thank you. That would be wonderful."

"Then Happy New Year to you."

"Thank you, Mr. Gardner," Annie said. She lifted her mug. "Happy New Year to all of us."

They joined her in the toast and sipped tea together. Simon

smiled. What a great way to end this year. He still didn't intend to kiss June Livengood at midnight, though.

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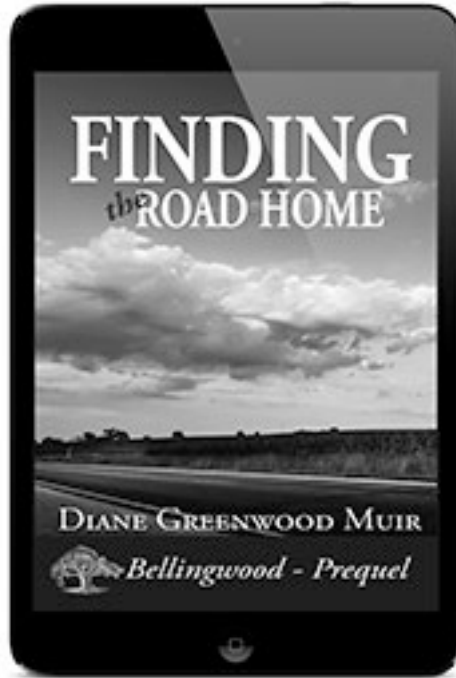


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# THANK YOU!



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.

You can find more details about Sycamore House and Bellingwood at the website: <http://nammynools.com/>

Join the Bellingwood Facebook page:  
<https://www.facebook.com/pollygiller>  
for news about upcoming books, conversations while I'm writing and you're reading, and a continued look at life in a small town.

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*Finis*