

LOVE BELIEVES

Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Book 36

Book Thirty-Six 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 36 — Love Believes — 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

Tech Girl

"What do you think?" Nan asked.

"I like it." Alistair Greyson stood in the center of her new office, admiring all she and Heath Harvey had done to make this place hers.

She hadn't allowed him to be part of the planning, not because she didn't trust him, but because she wanted to experience this moment right here. When he could stand in the middle of a design that was all hers and be proud of her.

"Nan ..." Grey stopped and took a breath. "I'm blown away." He held his hand up to stop any response. "Not that I didn't think you would do anything but amazing work, but it's even more than my expectations could dream up.

She had done most of the design for his home office, choosing the furniture and laying it out in the space they had. She'd chosen his artwork and plants, his office needs and ... well, everything. Grey's offices were warm with dark wood and jewel-colored fabric on the chairs. Muted prints and tall plants gave clients a sense of privacy while they waited to see him. Three small seating areas had been strategically placed for families to be comfortable without feeling as if they were on stage. It had been perfect.

"Let me show you the conference room. It's a small room, but it will probably be what I use most often with clients." She took him to one of three doors on the outside of the interior room.

"Were there this many offices before?"

She shook her head. "No. We ripped out everything on the inside and started from scratch." Nan opened the first door into a room that held chairs around a table, but the main focus was the large screen running along the front wall. Right now, an image of a cold snowy day was playing.

"Is that Bellingwood?" he asked. It looked very familiar.

"It's a web cam that's installed on the corner across from

Sycamore House. I called and received permission for access to its movement. It's like I have a window to the outside down here in the basement."

The wall directly opposite the one she used for the webcam feed had four screens and the wall ahead of them had two.

"What are all the screens for."

"Those are for me to display work I'm doing for the client. For instance," Nan took up a remote and clicked it four times. "This is your website. I can show four different pages at a time. Then," she clicked it twice again, "not only can I show off your digital footprint, but any physical creations we design for you as well."

"Other than the window to the world, what will you use this screen for?" Grey asked, turning back to the largest of the screens.

"Watching movies." Nan clicked another button and an old Charlie Chan black and white movie began playing. "Well, that and watching video I design for clients. You'd be surprised at how much video work there is to be had out there. It won't be long before I have to hire freelance videographers and so much more."

"You're amazing." Grey put his hand on the doorknob. "*This* is amazing. You can do anything in here."

"Pretty much. The middle room is a break room. I haven't finished it yet. I'm trying to figure out how much I want to put in there with Sweet Beans across the street. Do I need my own coffee pot?"

"You'll want one. You drink a lot of coffee and so will your clients."

She smiled and took his arm. "Let me show you the control room."

"The what?"

"I'll show you." They went past the middle door which she had identified as the break room and she stopped him. "This is my home."

"Not your home."

"When things get busy, it might be my home. Maybe you can come over and visit me."

"If you're gone too long, I will, trust me."

Nan tipped her head at him. They hadn't so much as spoken about their relationship since Christmas, but she had to take responsibility for much of that. Every spare minute had been consumed either with work or redeveloping this space. She was here more than she was at home. And since she had completely fallen in love with what she was about to show Grey, that wouldn't change any time soon.

She opened the door and flipped on the light. A standing desk on casters stood in the middle of banks and banks of monitors on the walls around the small room. Some were blank. One had a nature video running, while four others showed static images of beautiful pieces of art. This was how she decorated her walls.

"How many?" he breathed.

"Monitors? I love that they're so inexpensive. I have twenty-four. I want to increase it to at least twice that, but that's next year."

"You'll use them all?"

She took his arm. "Every single one. Nothing will go to waste. Come over and sit down."

"What?"

The sofa that Nan led him to was deep brown leather. She'd thrown colorful crocheted afghans from her apartment over the back. Pillows were arranged neatly on the cushions. Two leather recliners took up corners of the room and an elegant cherry wood desk with an old fashioned wooden office chair sat inside the door. Another small door at the back was closed.

"What are you thinking?"

"First I'm wondering about that door. Second, I love how you've managed to blend chrome and tech with wood and soft and old-fashioned."

"That's it! You see it." Nan cried, as she tugged his arm. "The door is no big deal. I'll show you." She walked with him across the tiled floor.

"No carpet?"

"Static electricity. I might look for throw rugs to add color to the lower half of the room." She opened the door onto a small bathroom.

"I worried that I might find a shower here and never see you at home."

"The shower is in another room."

Grey stared at her.

"I'm kidding you. Though if we get busy and I have a bunch of smelly geek kids working here, it's not a bad idea."

"Not all geek-boys are smelly."

"I said kids, not boys. Geek girls who get lost in their work can be just as bad."

"You don't have enough room for that many people, do you?" He chuckled. "Listen to me, thinking you don't have a plan in place."

"To be honest, I'm hoping one of the girls across the way will move out someday and then I will take over their space for an entire crew, but until then, the front room is modular. Heath and I already have a plan designed to move the reception desk and set in cubicles or open workspace or whatever makes sense at the time. I prefer privacy, so I like cubicles, but other people might want to work together.

"There's that conference room."

Nan nodded. "Exactly."

"Have you thought about who you'd like to hire as a receptionist?"

"I have no idea. I'd like to find someone who has a little tech background."

"You can train anyone to do anything, Nan." Grey looked around the room and took in a deep breath. "I am so proud of you. You took what was a little tiny project to help a few friends and turned it into this. Your business is a huge success and now you have the office space to show off and bring in the big clients."

"I hope so," she said quietly. "I'm nervous, you know."

"Why?"

"Because now that there's an office, there are bigger expectations. Can I do it?"

"Nan, I know it sounds like a platitude, but I believe in you. You can do anything. You have already done anything."

"Everything," she giggled.

Grey took her hand and led her back into the office, then sat her down on the sofa and sat beside her. "I am going to miss the heck out of you during the day."

"We never see each other during the day."

"Yes, we do. In passing. When you run to the kitchen, you always leave a sandwich there for me or extra potato salad or slices of pizza. And you leave sweet notes to tell me what I might find. I will miss that."

"I'm sorry. I thought you were ready for me to find my own space."

"I want you to be successful and you can't do that from my house." He looked around and smiled. "You will definitely be able to do that from here. I'm talking about you and me. We can't misplace or lose that."

"Grey ..."

He interrupted her. "You've been trying to force me to talk about this for months and I've done nothing but ignore you. Don't think for a minute that I wasn't doing all that ignoring on purpose. I didn't know how to handle my own emotions and thoughts and ..."

Grey took her hand. "Nan, do you understand that I love you?"

"Err, yes?" she squeaked.

"No, I love you. I love you like I haven't loved in a very long time. With you there has always been something to slow me down, though. I know how hard it is for a woman to regain her stability after a rape. And after the horrible things that you lived through, I didn't want to only be a shoulder for you."

"Then, there's the age difference," Nan said. Her heart was racing a million beats per minute and she was certain she had to be blushing from head to toe.

"The age difference. Your parents were pretty great with you coming out here because they trusted me. I didn't want to misplace that trust with them or with you. I should tell you now that I spoke with your father."

"You what?"

"I called him and talked to him about it all. Do you know what

he did?"

She slowly shook her head.

"He laughed at me. Laughed right there on the phone at me. Then he told me that he knew you loved me and he couldn't imagine why it had taken us so long to figure it out. When I told him everything I've said to you, he called me an idiot. Then he told me that if I waited any longer, he was driving out here with a shotgun."

Nan relaxed. "What do you want to do?"

"Do you love me enough to be my wife?"

Tears spurted from her eyes. She'd been doing everything in her power to hold them back, but those words sent her over the edge. "I love you more than that," she said.

He slid to a knee and pulled a box out of his pocket. "I've been carrying this around long enough that I won't know what to do without it in my pocket. Nannette Stallings, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

"Yes," she said, throwing her arms around his neck. He turned his head to her and she realized they were about to kiss each other. She'd been waiting for this moment and here it was.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Kiss me, please."

"What if I forgot how?"

"Both of us are in the same boat. We can learn together."

"There are so many things I want to do with you, Nan. Places I want to take you. Time I want to spend with you."

"Hush," Nan whispered and leaned forward. She put her lips on his and felt his touch hers. This was home. This was where she belonged. This was what she had waited for her entire life. "I love you," she whispered.

Vignette #2

Snippets of Love

"What is this?" Judy Greene opened the door of her greenhouse to find her husband, Reuben, standing there with a sly grin on his face. "You've never knocked before."

"Come out here, please."

This was different.

"Happy Valentine's Day," Reuben said as he turned her to face the front of the greenhouse. "What do you think?"

"You are a nut," Judy said, putting her arm around his waist. "Happy Valentine's Day to you."

He'd gotten up early and was out of the apartment by the time she started moving this morning. When she got to the main house, she saw that the doors to the forge were open, which meant he'd been working. Guests from the weekend were gone and the place was quiet. Neither Mary Francis nor Alison Francisco would be in to work today. The house was clean and Mary would be back on Wednesday to help prepare for the next sets of guests to arrive Thursday evening.

Today and tomorrow were all hers and she planned to spend as much time as she could digging in dirt and soil. A friend from California had sent her a bag of lemon seeds that she'd harvested from her own lemon tree. That was on the agenda today. She would love to have a California lemon tree here in the middle of Iowa.

Sometimes Judy missed the easy weather of California. No snowstorms or hailstorms or tornadoes. She didn't miss wildfires and water rationing and earthquakes, though. Every region had its issues; you had to decide which you could live with. For now, she was happy back in the Midwest. But a lemon tree would be a wonderful treat.

"Will you leave them up?" Reuben asked her.

"Of course. This is the sweetest thing. I want people to see how much you love me." Judy stepped forward and touched the metal

heart he'd created. He'd put a single heart on each side of the door frame. Not big hearts, they were small enough to fit. On the door itself, he'd created a double heart with an "R" in one side and a "J" in the other.

She turned back to him and stepped into his arms. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I've been thinking on these for days. Last night I finally saw how I wanted to make them."

"That's why you were up so early."

"It was either that or wake you up."

"You could have done that, too." She winked at him and tipped her head back.

"Oh my," Reuben said. He kissed her and said, "We really have no one showing up out here for two days?"

"Delivery drivers."

"But no one that needs us to pay attention to them?"

"Two days, Reuben. Two days to ourselves."

"Happy Valentine's Day to us."

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"What is this?" Lexi asked.

Gillian had come around the island bearing a large manilla envelope. She handed it to her mother, beaming from ear to ear. "Happy Valtines."

"Happy Valentine's Day to you, sweet girl. Where did this come from?"

Gillian pointed down the hallway and Lexi looked up. No one was home except the two of them. At least that's what she thought. The kids were all in school, Polly was at Sycamore House, Jack and Henry were at work.

"Thank you, sweetheart. Do you know what Valentine's Day is all about?"

Gillian stood on her tiptoes and Lexi bent down.

"Love," the little girl whispered in her ear.

"That's right. It's all about love. Do you know that I love you?"

"Love mama."



Lexi squatted and then just sat on the floor. It was easier and who knew how long this would take. "Should I open this?"

"Open it, Mama" Gillian put her hands on the card as if she might help. Lexi let her and the two of them ripped the envelope flap.

Lexi withdrew a piece of paper with hand-drawn hearts, some colored red, others colored purples and pinks. None of them were colored perfectly. Outside the lines that someone much older than Gillian had drawn for her.

"This is beautiful. Did you color it?" Lexi asked.

Gillian nodded and pointed at the card. "Open it."

Obedying her daughter, Lexi opened the card and found more hand-drawn hearts and then her own heart skipped a beat when she saw the impression of lips and a rough-looking letter G on the right panel of the paper.

"Are these your lips?"

"I kissed it."

"Who helped you?"

"Cassidy and Mrs. Agnes." Gillian was so proud.

"Did you make the G letter?"

"G is for Gillian. That's me." She pointed at her chest and then her lips. "Lipstick."

"Mrs. Agnes put lipstick on so you could kiss the card?"

"Because I love my mama."

"Oh, sweet Gillian," Lexi said and pulled her daughter into her arms. "Mama loves you, too. Thank you. This is the best Valentine's Day present."

Gillian let her mother hug her, then took the card away and solemnly walked over to the refrigerator. She pulled a magnet off and put the card there, covering other pieces of artwork, then set the magnet on it, holding it in place. "Valentine's."

"Happy Valentine's Day, Gillian." Lexi stood up. "You are my very favorite daughter."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

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"What is this?" Eliseo stood in the center aisle of the barn early Valentine's morning and looked at six heart-shaped boxes on the benches between the stalls. The horses were ready for him. Even Demi had thrown off his feline attachments and stood at the stall door. It was as if they knew something awaited.

He opened the first and smiled. A bright red apple was nestled in the center of the box filled with grain. Three other identical boxes sat beside the horses' stalls.

Two smaller boxes sat at the back of the benches and when he opened them, he discovered grain for the donkeys and baggies filled with carrot chunks.

"Who did this?" he asked Nan as he rubbed her head. She was always the first to ask for his attention. "I'll be right back."

He went into the feed room and found four more boxes. One had his name on it, one had Jason's name on it, one was filled with cat treats and toys, and the last was for his dogs. Eliseo sat in his chair and opened the box with his name, then smiled. He'd mentioned once long ago to Noah that he really liked chocolate covered caramels and the boy had found some.

Eliseo opened the card and felt his lips pull against the scars on his face as he smiled even bigger.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Eliseo. We made presents for everyone. Thanks for letting us hang out with the big boys and the crazy kids. Miles, Graham, and Noah."

Those boys. He'd had fun with Jason and his friends while they were in high school and now, here he was with another set of kids who enjoyed time with him and the animals. He couldn't imagine a time in his life when he'd been happier.

Tonight, he was taking Sylvie to dinner in Webster City. He'd pick up flowers later in the day. She'd become everything to him, but his days working with the horses and the boys here were more fun than he could express.

He brushed a tear from his cheek, surprised that he even felt it drop.

Plastic covered the caramels. Maybe he'd take those home tonight and share them with Sylvie. She wasn't a big fan of receiving chocolate for Valentine's Day. The woman spent enough time around sweet treats all day. But she'd certainly share his.

Scuffling at a door reminded him that the animals wanted his attention. They'd been inside all night and the sun was up. It was time to get moving. He might as well let the donkeys into the barn from their stall. In a few minutes, they'd make more noise than he wanted to hear if he didn't. First, though, the gifts in here needed to be put up out of reach. Those donkey-noses found everything. He'd let them eat their carrots and grain for breakfast while he fed the horses and gave them their own Valentine's Day treats.

He took out his phone and sent a text. Since it was Monday, Polly would be in her office today. Maybe she'd come down and he could show her what a wonderful kid she was raising. Noah's two friends were pretty wonderful, too.

Eliseo opened the boxes for the donkeys and set them on the floor, unbagging the carrots. He tucked the bags into his pocket and opened their stall door. "Good morning, Tom and Huck," he said when they pushed at him for attention. It only took a minute for them to realize that food was available.

"I love you, too," he said. "You can thank your young friends for the Valentine's Day treat. Those are good boys."

One by one, he opened the horses' boxes and then their stalls. What a great way to start the day.

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"What is this?" Adam walked into the kitchen and sniffed.

Jeff Lyndsay laughed. "Breakfast."

"I'm sorry, what?" Adam laughed out loud. "Since when do you cook breakfast?"

"Since it's Valentine's Day and I don't have to work."

"You don't work on a lot of Mondays and you've never made breakfast before," Adam said. "You've never gotten up this early either. You're making me a little nervous. Are you feeling okay?"

He crossed the room and put his hand on Jeff's forehead.

Jeff brushed his hand away. "If you aren't good, I'll burn your pancakes."

"Pancakes," Adam said. "You're making pancakes."

"Look. Heart-shaped even."

"You're making heart-shaped pancakes." Adam put his hand to his own forehead as if swooning and dropped onto a chair at the table. "Be still my heart."

"You're being awfully dramatic."

"Seriously. I love you, but you have never cooked breakfast in all the years we've been together. What in the world? How do you even know what you're doing?"

"I watch the Food Network."

"I know you watch it, but I figured you were trying to decide which of Guy's Diners or Dives we would look for the next time we went on a trip."

"There are other shows."

"Uh huh." Adam put his hand on top of Luna's head. "Did he make breakfast for you, too?"

She wagged her tail and sat so she could take all the attention he might offer.

"I fed her and took her outside," Jeff said.

"Who are you and what did you do with the love of my life?" Adam asked. He glanced around the kitchen. "Are there cameras? Am I about to be surprised with the real Jeff? No wait. You're a robot all done up to look like my Jeff. The real Jeff is going to beam back in from a spaceship and I'll wake up from the dream I'm having."

Jeff set two plates on the table. He opened the refrigerator and took out two bowls of strawberries and two glasses of orange juice. Then he brought the coffee pot to the table, filled a mug for Adam and another for himself. "Butter, syrup, fruit, juice, coffee. Do you need anything else?"

"This is, wow," Adam said.

"That's right, wow. It may never happen again, but this morning I thought I'd show you that I love you enough to try something

new. Try the pancakes."

Adam took a small bite.

"Oh, come on," Jeff said. "They aren't terrible. You can do better than that."

"If it was awful, I wanted to be prepared."

"And?"

"Very good. I'm impressed."

Jeff brushed flour dust off his apron. "There has to be a mix that is easier to make than this."

"Pancakes are easy," Adam said.

"How come you never made them for me?"

"You're always on a diet. I figured you'd kill me."

"I probably would. Are you sure you have to work today?"

Adam put his hand on top of Jeff's. "Not all day. I have two accounts that need some babysitting. I'll be home early and then we can go out for dinner. I made reservations."

"Just us?"

"Just us. Happy Valentine's Day, Jeff. I'm glad we found each other."

Luna put her head on Jeff's knee.

"Happy Valentine's Day," Jeff said. "We have a pretty wonderful family, don't we?"

## **Vignette #3**

### **Just Us Girls**

"Come on, little girl, we're going out." Gillian walked out of their apartment and Lexi stopped in front of her.

"Where, Mommy?"

"I don't know. We can go shopping and out to eat or go to a park." Lexi shivered. "Maybe not that. It's too cold to play in a park."

It had been a tough week for little Gillian. With all the kids and their friends at home over spring break, her happy little world had been disrupted and she hadn't received nearly the amount of attention she was used to receiving.

"Nobody else, right?"

"Do you want to take someone else with us?"

Gillian crossed her arms in front of her and stamped a foot down. "No. I don't like them."

"That's no way to behave." Lexi crouched. "You know that's bad behavior. You're a good girl."

"I'm not good right now."

"No, sweetie, you aren't," Lexi said. "Would you prefer it if I asked Polly to babysit you while I went out by myself?"

Her daughter harrumphed out a disgusted snort and turned to go back into the apartment. Evidently, the week had been harder on Gillian than Lexi realized. They'd had more than their share of tiffs and sulky behavior. Polly always reminded Lexi that in the long run, Gillian's headstrong attitude would be a good thing. At this age, it was infuriating.

When Lexi got to Gillian's bedroom, she found her daughter pulling clothes out of the bottom drawer of the dresser and creating piles on the floor. "What are you doing?"

"I am not dressed right."

"Does this mean you want to go out to dinner with me?"

Gillian picked up a pair of green pants from a pile. "I need a shirt."

"Are you ignoring my questions?"

"No, Mommy," Gillian said, shaking her head. "Find my clothes first. Get mad at me later."

Lexi did her best to hold back a laugh. How had she raised such a smart-mouthed child? Which of Polly's kids taught Gillian this behavior? She was worried that Gillian had made it up all on her own. She wasn't much of a follower. The little girl preferred bossing the rest of the world around. It was fun to watch her interact with Cassidy, another strong willed child.

Cassidy thought that she should be the boss because she was older and bigger than Gillian. It seemed that every day, the two girls crossed each other with their different ideas. But they also loved each other. Gillian thought the world of Cassidy, though right now she was insanely jealous of Cass taking off with her friends and leaving Gillian behind.

Lexi stepped into the mess of clothing and opened the next drawer up where they kept Gillian's tops. "How about this pretty green sweater?"

Gillian rolled her eyes. "Not the same color, Mommy. That's boring."

"Who told you it's boring?"

"Cassidy and Rebecca."

"Matching is boring." Lexi shook her head. When would she ever learn? "Do you want a pink top to go with the green pants?"

"Mommy," Gillian scolded. "You help me."

"And I'm not helping. Okay, how about this striped sweater with a lot of colors?"

Gillian took it, laid it down beside the pants and nodded. "Yes."

"Blue socks?" Lexi asked.

"Yes, please."

Lexi handed down the socks and then bent to gather up the pile of clothing. As soon as she put her hand on it, she stopped herself. "When we get home tonight, you will fold everything and put it back in the drawer."

"No folding," Gillian complained. "I wear them."

"Are you arguing with me?"

Gillian looked away. "No, Mommy."

"Do you need help putting your clothes on?"

"No, thank you."

"I'm going to my room to change," Lexi said. "Come find me if you need something."

"Will you brush my hair?"

"Yes, I will. Maybe we'll put in one of those pretty barrettes that Grandma Marie gave you."

Gillian smiled sweetly at her in agreement. Oh, this was going to be an interesting night. Lexi still didn't know how Polly and Henry managed to care for so many children at once. She barely felt like she had a handle on one little girl. In fact, there were many days when she thought she might as well give it all up. Gillian was running the show and Lexi was only along for the ride.

She changed into a clean pair of jeans and a warm sweater. If she could move Gillian, they'd have time to do some shopping in downtown Ames before finding a restaurant for supper. Tonight they had to do better than McDonald's. Lexi chuckled. Maybe she'd take Gillian to Hickory Park. Polly thought that place was jinxed. At least it was for her. According to family legend, she'd never been in there long enough to enjoy an entire meal. The only way she was able to eat their food was to do takeout. Since Lexi didn't have to worry about tracking down murderers or finding dead bodies, she might be able to pull this off. Gillian would love having ice cream after dinner.

Gillian pushed Lexi's door open. "Am I pretty?"

"You're very pretty. Hands up, though."

"Why?" Gillian asked, her nose turned up in a frown and her hands on her hips.

Lexi pulled the sweater neck out and said, "The tag goes in back. Hands up and we'll flip it right around."

"But I like it this way."

Raising one eyebrow, Lexi stared at her daughter. There had been enough arguing for one night. "What did I ask you to do?"

With a sigh, Gillian raised her arms and allowed Lexi to pull the sweater up, turn it, and pull it back down.



"Shall we brush your hair and put in the barrettes?"

Gillian nodded and bolted out of the room, through their living room, and into the bathroom they shared. Now that they were nearly finished with potty training, the bathroom had suddenly become much smaller.

Lexi picked her up and set her on the small countertop beside the sink and ran water over Gillian's hairbrush. The pretty little curls were finally growing out enough that she could put in barrettes and give her daughter a fancy hairdo. Well, not terribly fancy, but more than the floppy hair that Gillian usually wore around the house.

"When can I go to school, Mommy?"

That set Lexi back. "Are you ready to go to school now?"

"Cassidy goes. JaRon goes. Caleb goes." She would have listed every person she knew, but Lexi put her finger over the girl's lips.

"They didn't go to school until they were older. I'd miss you if you were gone every day."

Gillian nodded solemnly, then put her arms around Lexi. "I don't want you to miss me."

"Thank you. Look in the mirror. What do you think?"

She turned and stood up on the counter, then sidled to her mother and put an arm around Lexi's neck. "I am very pretty. Just like you."

"Thank you again. That was sweet. Put on your tennis shoes and we'll leave."

"My pretty shoes?"

She had a pair of black patent leather shoes that she wore to church and a pair of bright red shoes that Lexi had been unable to resist at Christmas since they perfectly matched her Christmas dress. There was never going to be another opportunity to wear them unless they came up with something in red for Easter.

"Which pretty shoes?" Lexi asked.

"The red shoes."

Of course that's what she wanted to wear. Lexi smiled. "Why not?" The girl had her own idea of style and at this age, there was no reason to stifle it.

"Wear your red shoes, too. Please?"

Lexi's red pumps weren't comfortable, nor did they look good with blue jeans. They were also tight when she wore socks and she was definitely wearing socks tonight. It was too cold not to. "Not tonight, sweetie. I can't wear them over my socks."

Gillian's lips poked out in a pout. "Then I won't wear mine either. Put me down, please."

"Your tennis shoes are in the hallway," Lexi called after her daughter. She pulled a brush through her own hair, considered some mascara and eyeliner, then reconsidered. She didn't want to take the time and besides, who would notice?

Lexi slid her feet into her own shoes and picked up her purse. She checked it for all that she might need. Would there come a day when she could go back to carrying small clutches? Would it ever really matter as long as she had her daughter?

She walked into the hallway as Gillian was fighting with the closure on her shoe. "Will you let me help?"

Gillian slapped at her foot. "Yes, please, Mommy."

Lexi set the bag beside her daughter, sat down in front of her and took the foot into her lap. Once she fixed the shoe, she pulled Gillian all the way onto her lap and held her close. "Do you know how very much I love you, little girl?"

"A lot?"

"More than a lot. More than all the water in the ocean."

"I can't swim in the ocean." Gillian stated.

"Why not?"

Gillian pulled back and looked at her mother, eye to eye. "Mommy, I can't swim."

Lexi burst out laughing and pulled Gillian back in for a tight hug. "You make me smile, sweet girl. Shall we go out? Just us?"

Gillian nodded. "I love you, too, Mommy. More than all the water in the ocean, too."

## **Vignette #4**

### **Friends**

"See, he did it again." Lara Waters rolled her eyes in disgust as Graham Birdsong turned away from her while standing in the lunch line with his two buddies, Noah Sturtz and Miles Gorren. He'd watched her come into the room, whispered something to Noah, and then turned his back.

"He's a stupid boy," Riley said.

"I think all boys turn stupid when they enter fourth grade."

Riley Shields, Lara's best friend, laughed. "That's kind of specific."

"I made it up. I don't know when it happened."

"Your brother Nat isn't stupid."

"Puhleeze," Lara said. "You've had a crush on him since the day you met him. He's way too old for you. And that's gross. He's my brother."

"Your brother is cute. And he's sweet. And he isn't stupid."

"You have no idea what it's like to live with him."

Riley batted her eyes. "I'd like to know."

"Ugh," Lara said. "Stop it. Stop it right now."

Noah smacked Graham in the shoulder and the shorter boy laughed, then shook his head. They found a seat across the room and Graham parked himself so he could see Lara. Every time she tried to catch his eye, he looked away.

"What is the big deal?" Lara asked. "It's like he hates me or something."

"Maybe he likes you instead."

"Whatever. He doesn't act like it and Noah hasn't said anything to me."

"Why would Noah say something?" Riley asked.

"Because we're friends. We've been friends for years." Lara lifted a shoulder. "He's better friends with Nat than he is with me, but he lives right across the street. He's a good guy."

"What don't you make moves on him, then?"

Lara gave her friend a disgusted look. "He's like a brother to me. That would be weird."

"Not really," Riley said. "That's how the best relationships start. Don't you read?" She tapped her backpack. "Every good love story starts with the couple being best friends first. They don't know that they're destined to fall in love, so they both date other people until one day they end up talking all night and one of them realizes that they are looking at the person they want to be with forever."

"You read way too many romance books," Lara said.

"You don't read enough of them. You have no dreams," Riley retorted.

They took their meals to a table on the opposite side of the room. Lara deliberately sat with her back to Graham. She wasn't going to wonder whether he was watching her.

"He's watching us," Riley said.

"Don't want to know about it."

"We should go to Pizzazz on Friday."

Lara sneered at her. "No way. I'm not walking in there. He and his buddies go there after school all the time."

"How do you know that?" Riley taunted. "Do you follow them?"

"Whatever. I just know it. That's where his dad works."

"Yeah, so? Are you telling me we never get to eat pizza again?"

"If you want pizza that bad, we can do takeout. You can go in and pick it up." Lara cackled. "Then we can take it to my house and you can offer some to Nat."

"I can what?"

"Offer him pizza. You can offer to let him eat it right out of your hands. How sexy is that?"

"Now you're just being mean."

"What's up, girls?" Serenity Miller sat down beside Lara. The other member of their BFF circle, Jade Foster, slid in beside Riley.

"Lara's being ignored by Graham," Riley said.

"Hey!" Lara exclaimed.

Serenity poked her fork in Lara's mac and cheese. "You aren't eating this, are you?"

"I guess I'm not eating it now."

"You don't like the stuff, remember?"

Lara pushed her tray toward Serenity. "Have whatever you want. I'm not hungry."

"Because of Graham."

"It has nothing to do with him."

Riley laughed. "It has everything to do with him. He's dumber than a block of rocks."

"Box of rocks," Jade whispered.

"You know what I meant. Birdsong is dumb. He keeps ignoring Lara."

"Does he even know you like him?" Serenity asked around a mouthful of mac and cheese. "This isn't very good. I don't know why I eat it."

"You shouldn't be eating it, then," Jade said. "You know it's not good for you."

"Don't start," Serenity said. "Just because I have a few curves doesn't mean I'm not beautiful."

"I didn't say that," Jade protested. She turned to the others. "Did I say anything about her not being beautiful? I don't think anyone heard me say that."

"You thought it. That's hurtful enough."

"How do you know what I was thinking? Because you're totally wrong."

"All you skinny girls think that I shouldn't eat anything. That I should starve myself so I can be skinny like you. What if I don't want to look like you."

"Nobody thinks that," Riley said. "We don't care what you eat. We don't care what you look like."

"That means you think I look bad, but you don't care." Serenity turned up her nose in a sneer. "I thought you were my friends, but you're just like everyone else."

She put her hands on the table as if to stand up and Lara grabbed her arm. "Why are you so mad? Nobody here said anything mean to you."

Serenity pointed at Jade. "She did. She told me I shouldn't eat the

mac and cheese."

"Because it's not good for you," Jade insisted. "It's not good for anybody. That is pure garbage. Most of what they feed us is garbage. All those chemicals in there to keep it from spoiling. It's bad stuff. I didn't mean anything about it being fattening." And before Serenity could respond, she put up her hand. "I am not talking about you, Serenity. Quit taking it so personal."

"Personally," Riley muttered. When Jade glared at her, she said, "You correct me, I'll correct you back. Fair's fair."

"Why are you so mad about this, Serenity?" Lara asked.

"No reason."

Serenity was a big girl. She didn't like doing anything outside. She hadn't as long as Lara had known her. And she did eat things that weren't good for her. She was always sneaking candy and potato chips into her locker and eating them whenever she opened it. There wasn't anything anyone could do or say to make her change. Lara's mom had made that perfectly clear one day after everyone spent the night. When the rest of them wanted to go for a walk down through the cemetery and tell scary stories, Serenity didn't want to go. She was content to sit in Lara's living room by herself and watch TV while watching videos on her phone. That's all she ever wanted to do.

When Lara complained about it the next day, her mom kind of went ballistic on her and told her that everybody had their own stuff and unless Lara knew everything that was going on with Serenity, it wasn't her place to judge. She hated it when her mom got all preachy about those things. Like Lara wasn't smart enough to figure it out on her own. Sometimes it just took longer. She was only twelve.

"We're all best friends," Riley said quietly. "Don't get mad at us for something we didn't do. Besides, the topic of today's conversation is Lara and Graham. Are they or are they not going to be a couple. What's your vote?"

"OMG," Lara said. "Stop it. We are not a couple. He won't even talk to me."

"Because he likes you," Jade said.

"We aren't in third grade," Lara retorted. "He could act more like an adult."

"Because you're all aduly and everything?" Serenity asked. She'd gotten back into the flow of the conversation.

"I'm more of an adult than him."

"Yeah, right," Riley said. "You won't go talk to him and find out why he's ignoring you. You're just as bad. And look at you. You turned your back on him when you sat down. Not very adult-like."

"Because I don't need a boy in my life." Lara put her arm around Serenity. "I have you four. You're enough."

"Not if you want a boyfriend."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. I don't want a boyfriend. They're dumb. What good will he do me? Will he write poetry for me? Maybe he'll compose a song and record it. Then he'll make millions of dollars and give me some of it. Forget it. I can write my own stupid song and make my own millions of dollars. I don't need him."

"You say that now, but your eyes say something different when you look at him," Riley said. "Your eyes say 'I love you, Graham Birdsong, and I want to marry you and have your babies.'"

Lara stuck her finger in her mouth. "Gag. That's the worst idea ever."

"I'd marry him," Serenity said. She turned to look at where the three boys were sitting.

Lara grabbed her and wrenched her back into place. "Don't look at them. They'll think we're talking about them."

Jade shifted to look past Serenity. "We *are* talking about them. What do you think about Noah?"

"I think that Shawna has her eyes on him. That means she'll scratch yours out if you even look at him."

"She's not that tough."

"Slammed a girl against a locker in sixth grade for flirting with Tom Nolan. He was in fifth grade and Shawna thought they were going together." Lara shook her head. "She's got anger management issues."

"Noah's too nice to be with her. He's, like, the studious type."

"Yeah, that's so you," Riley said. "Have you ever read a book for fun?"

"Why should I? They make us read books for school. That's plenty of reading for me," Jade said. "Okay, then, what about that other kid. Miles something?"

"Gorren," Lara offered. "He's a good guy. Sure. Why don't you make a play for him. See how far it gets you. I'm telling you, boys are dumb."

"So why do we keep talking about them, then?" Serenity asked.

Riley and Lara looked at each other.

"I have no earthly idea," Lara said. "I wish I did. Everything would make more sense. I don't want to be a girl that wants to be with a boy just because he's a boy. You all should be enough."

"Tell that to the universe," Jade said. "Everybody wants somebody."

Lara looked up. "Universe. Help me figure this out. Any day now would be great. Okay? Thanks, then."

"You're weird," Serenity said.

Riley put her hand in the middle of the four of them. "Come on ... pile up, here." One by one, each girl placed a hand on top. "We're best friends. No matter what. Weird, normal, with a boy, without a boy, chemicals in our food or not. We're friends. Yes?"

"Friends," each of them said and lifted their hands in the air, then wiggled their fingers at each other. "Friends."

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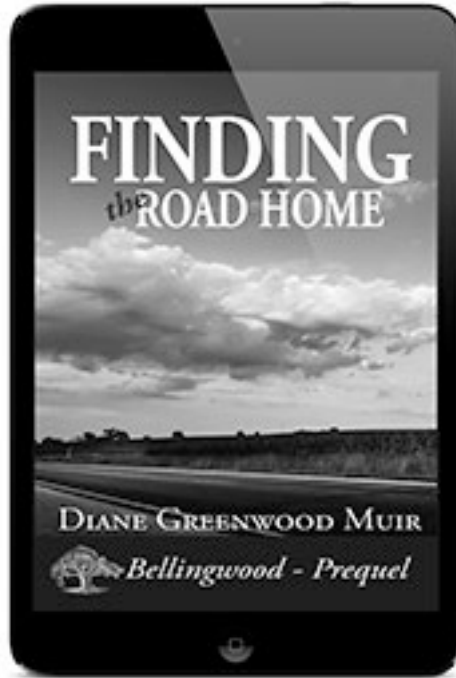
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