



MOMENTS^{AND} MILESTONES

Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Book 26



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

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

I have compiled the vignettes relating to Book 26 — Moments and Milestones — 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

More Than Meets the Eye

"I'll be right back with your drinks," the waitress said.

Sylvie yawned. "This was a good idea. I was in no mood to cook tonight."

"You didn't sleep well last night," Eliseo said.

"I'm sorry. Did I keep you up? I should have gone downstairs to the sofa."

He shook his head. "No, that's not it. What was bothering you?"

"I have no idea. Maybe it's the boys, maybe it's work. Shelly won't be working for me much longer. Once she starts nursing school, she won't have time for the bakery."

"She's turned out to be really helpful."

"Marta is going to miss her when she leaves." Sylvie smiled. "But those two will find ways to spend time together. Marta isn't much for giving up on her friends."

Eliseo put his hand on top of hers. "Just like you."

"I don't feel that way. I haven't spent time with the girls in months. Either there's something going on or I don't feel like going out. Sunday nights at Pizzazz are hard work these days. It's my last night of freedom before another week and I'd rather spend it with you than anyone else. I'm letting my friends down." She huffed a laugh. "I don't even come out of the back room at the bakery to see who might be in the coffee shop. I'm so afraid I'll run into someone that wants to talk and they'll take up all my time. Whenever Polly gets the courage to come back and knock on the door, I step out to say hello and then I rush right back to work. She never says anything, but she has to wonder."

"It's been hard with her since last summer when Andrew broke up with Rebecca, hasn't it."

She put her other hand on top of his and squeezed. "I think it brought home to both of us how tenuous relationships can be. We knew there wasn't anything we could do about the kids, but it put

a strain on our friendship." With a slow shake of her head, she said, "I know it was all on Andrew, but ..."

Eliseo interrupted her. "It was his father. Andrew wouldn't have behaved that way if Anthony hadn't been prompting him."

"You're right, but Andrew was the one who caused the uproar. Then he didn't know how to get out of it. Polly understood, though she was mad as hell at him for a while. I don't blame her. I was too, but he's my boy and I have to love him no matter how much trouble he makes. He'll always have my heart. I guess I felt guilty for not paying better attention when things started to go south. He was always so easygoing and easy to raise."

"You let him get away with murder," Eliseo said, his eyes alight with laughter. "He didn't ask for much, but you didn't push him too hard."

"He didn't need me to push. He got good grades, he was pretty obedient, he was happy."

"He's a good kid. He's still all those things."

"We did discover that he needed more structure, I guess," she said. "I'm glad you're around. You don't let him get away with much."

"I love your boys. Both of them."

"Thank you." Sylvie's eyes tracked a little girl and her parents as they walked through the restaurant. The little girl stared at Eliseo, her mouth open in shock. She tugged on her mother's hand and pointed at their table. The mother swatted the hand back down, but the girl was full of questions and she was getting louder.

They experienced this behavior nearly every time they were out. Eliseo insisted it didn't bother him. He'd lived with stares and taunts for more than twenty years. She couldn't imagine the inner strength it took to hold up under that.

Sylvie wanted desperately for him to have not seen that tonight, but it was too late. The little girl's questions had grown loud enough that the parents were now looking at them in embarrassment.

"What's wrong with his face, Mommy? Why is he so ugly?"

"I'm sorry," Sylvie whispered. She knew her words were

unnecessary. He'd told her so over and over. And over and over he told her to ignore it.

When the waitress returned with their drinks, she looked chagrined and mouthed "I'm sorry" to Sylvie. That behavior also frustrated Sylvie. Did the girl think Eliseo would turn into a raging monster if she apologized to *him*? She gave the girl a sharp nod. Adrenaline pushed her weariness away. She'd looked forward to a quiet evening and it was going to take least fifteen minutes to set this all aside.

Eliseo's demeanor didn't change. Not that most people would see whether it did or not, but as she'd grown to know him, she'd learned his tells. His ears grew bright red when he got angry. He tilted his head to the left when he was embarrassed and his shoulders rose when he was frustrated. Eliseo's eyes delivered a world of emotions and little by little, she'd learned to read him. Right now, he was worried for her. He expressed that by leaning forward and gritting his teeth. She had to bring her rage under control. It was no one's fault, something Eliseo understood and she was doing her best to learn.

"Are you okay?" he asked quietly.

"Working on it. I wish I had your self-esteem and could shrug these things off."

"She's just a little girl. She hasn't seen the whole world yet. Someday she'll know more. This is just one of her many learning experiences. I hope I'm the scariest thing she ever experiences."

Sylvie sighed and gave him a weary smile. "You are an amazing man."

"You make it easy."

"Excuse me." They looked up to see the mother of the little girl standing at their table. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I wanted to apologize for my daughter's behavior. You don't deserve having people stare at you because she was so curious."

"It's okay," Eliseo said.

"Would you be offended if I brought her over so she could meet you?"

"Not at all. That would be fine."

As the woman walked away, Sylvie let out a soft gasp. "Are you kidding me with this? You're a human being. She wants to create an object lesson for her privileged little girl in a restaurant while we're trying to enjoy our dinner? Give me a break."

"Maybe she doesn't want her daughter to be afraid of someone who looks like me."

"Object lesson," Sylvie spat.

"I'd much rather this happened than the little girl go home tonight terrified because she saw a badly scarred face for the first time in her life. If she can talk to me and get to know me, maybe she'll learn compassion instead of fear."

"You're a better man than me," Sylvie said. She set her jaw as the young woman and her child came back to the table.

Eliseo pushed the chair beside him out and gestured for the woman to have a seat. "Hi. My name is Eliseo. What's yours?" he asked the little girl.

"Amy. This is my mommy."

He nodded. "Did you have a question about my face?"

"What happened?" She stepped closer to him with her hand out. Her mother grabbed the little girl's hand and pulled it back to her side.

"I was burned in a terrible fire," Eliseo said. "The burns were so bad that the doctors couldn't fix all of the scars. Do you have any scars?"

Amy shook her head, then said, "My daddy does. He said he got it when he was a little boy and broke a ketchup bottle. It's a big white line on his hand."

"That scar is one line," Eliseo said. "All of the skin on my face is a scar because of the fire. Do you want to touch it?"

Sylvie took a deep breath, trying to be patient. She couldn't believe Eliseo was letting this happen. All she wanted to do was protect him and when he did things like this, it felt as if he'd tied her hands behind her back. She didn't want to watch.

The little girl looked at her mother, who said, "Are you sure?"

"Will it hurt?" Amy asked.

"No, it won't hurt."

He bent closer and she hesitantly reached up with her little hand to touch his cheek. "It's not soft like mine," she said.

"That's right. It's not."

"Were you sad when you got burned?"

Eliseo glanced at Sylvie. Her frustration was showing, but she couldn't help it. She hated that he was exposing his pain to the world. She'd spent a lifetime hiding her own pain so that no one would treat her differently. When Anthony hit her or said horrific things to her, she absorbed it and refused to show the world how badly he hurt her. Jason and Andrew needed her to be strong and so she was. No one knew what she'd buried down deep.

"I was sad when it happened," Eliseo said.

Sylvie leaned forward. "It happened when he served in Afghanistan."

"Oh my," Amy's mother said. "I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago. I've dealt with it. Life is too important to stay angry and sad because something happened to me that I couldn't control. I'm not sad now."

The young woman stood up when the waitress approached their table carrying plates of food. "That's enough questions, Amy. We should let these people enjoy their dinner." She smiled. "Thank you for talking to her. It's one thing for me to explain, it's another for her to hear it from you. And thank you for your service."

After the waitress left, Eliseo took Sylvie's hand again. "That wasn't so bad. Maybe it will help little Amy learn to be more empathetic as she grows up."

"I don't know how you do that."

"Do what?"

"Let people talk about your pain. They were strangers. Why? How?"

"We all have pain," he said. "Mine is obvious. It's all over my face, my arms, and my hands. Most people get away with hiding their pain because it's in their hearts. That makes it hard for others to express how much they care and wish they could bear that pain with them." He squeezed her hand again. "I know you want to protect me, but it's okay. That little girl's mother did the right thing."

She helped her daughter not be afraid of someone because they look different. If she ever sees me again, I will almost bet you that she runs up to say hello while other children might turn away and hide."

"Okay. You're right."

"I wish I could protect you from the pain you bear," he said quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Do you really believe that I don't know how much you were wounded by Anthony and how hard it was for you to face a life of loneliness while you raised your boys? I would give anything to step in and take it away from you, but I can't. The thing is, my visible scars and your invisible scars are the things that make us who we are, and Sylvie Donovan, I love who you are."

"I love you, too." She smiled. "More than you'll ever know."

Vignette #2

You Can't Buy Happiness

"Slow down!" Rachel cried, gripping the door handle of her friend, Anita's, Mustang convertible.

The top was down and they were flying across Highway 30 to the Interstate, then down to Des Moines. They could have taken the state highway, but Anita was having nothing to do with that. People who drove under fifty-five made her crazy. Even worse were the scaredy-cats who hovered behind them, unable to pass on a two-lane road. This was much better.

"I'm only five over," Anita said. "Relax."

"If we get pulled over, I'm telling the sheriff."

"If we get pulled over, the sheriff will know in a heartbeat, trust me. You just feel like it's faster because the wind is in our hair."

The wind wasn't that bad and Anita loved her car. The silver Mustang was her one concession to her family's money. Otherwise, she preferred to live modestly enough that no one knew how wealthy her family was. After the big reveal last Christmas, Anita had been terrified it would become a thing and she'd have to suffer through scorn and ridicule. At the very least, she expected the guys at work to tease her about being a princess. She'd put up with a few weeks of minor teasing, but things soon returned to normal.

The hardest person to deal with was her boyfriend, Doug Randall. He'd acted like it was no big deal, but just about the time she thought they were about to make a lifetime commitment, he pulled back. It wasn't blatantly obvious. He still wanted to be with her and they still spent time with Rachel and Billy, but he quit talking about the future. Whenever she brought it up, he changed the subject. When she tried to talk to him about her family, he just said inane things about how nice her grandmother was and how he hoped that they'd see her again.

Doug's parents said nothing to her about any of it, which made her wonder if he'd even told them she came from money. Things

like that were awkward for Doug, so more than likely, he'd said nothing. That was going to make the whole thing more difficult to explain if they ever decided to get married. Then again, maybe he didn't want to. It was hard to tell with him.

She let out a sigh.

"What?" Rachel asked.

"Nothing."

"You've been really quiet. Are you that focused on driving? Because if so, I'm for it. I want to live."

"Just thinking about Doug. He's frustrating me again."

Rachel laughed. "No. Seriously? You have to be kidding me. Not Doug Randall."

"I'm such a moron."

"For loving Doug?" Rachel asked. "He's a good guy. I love him to pieces."

"Not that. I just want him to be something more, to do something other than go to work, come home, and sit in front of his computer. He's so much smarter than that."

Rachel shook her head. "Okay. I'm not supposed to tell you this. Billy will kill me. Of course, that's after Doug kills him, so make sure Polly is around. There's gonna be a mess to clean up."

Anita chuckled. "I'll take her with me when I come looking for you all. What's the big secret? Is Doug ever going to ask me?"

"To marry him?" Rachel asked with a frown. "Probably, but that's not what this is about. Billy told Doug he couldn't be an electrician."

"What?" Anita turned to look at Rachel, then looked back at the road. Traffic was busy through Ames and she needed to pay attention. "That's all Doug knows how to do. Why would Billy say something like that?"

"Because Doug doesn't love his job. He likes it okay, but it's not what he should be doing for the rest of his life. You know that, don't you?"

"Yeah, but he can't just quit." Anita rolled her eyes. "Then he'd be home all the time playing those stupid games. I don't know what I'd do with that."

"What if he opened a bar / arcade / game shop in Bellingwood?" Rachel asked. "What do you think about that?"

Anita laughed out loud. "Doug? You have to be kidding me. He'd never do anything that big. I tried to talk him into finding our own place so we could move in together and he can't bring himself to leave that apartment at Sycamore House. He hates change."

"You might be surprised. He and Billy talked a while ago. Did I tell you Billy is going to school to get his electrician's certification?"

"That's awesome. Congratulations to him."

"Yeah, he says he's going to have his own company."

"And Doug will work for him, right?"

"No, you have to stop that, Anita," Rachel said.

"Stop what?"

"Stop beating him up."

"You think I'm beating him up? How?"

"You don't believe he'll do anything more than what he's doing right now and that makes you mad."

"Yes, it does."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"What can I do? It's his life."

"It affects you. Maybe you need to just leave him if you don't like the way he's living his life."

Anita slowly turned to look at her friend. "Wow."

"Too far?"

"No, that's okay. You're saying that I'm as bad as Doug."

"Maybe not quite as bad, but if you know things should change and you don't do anything about it, then, yeah, you're not helping."

Anita pulled out to pass a line of semi-trucks. "You're right. You're really right. I don't believe in him. Why would I want to marry someone that I don't believe in?"

"Uhh, that isn't where I wanted this conversation to go," Rachel said.

"I know. It's just that I was blaming him for this, when I should be encouraging him. He's so scared about the future and he's too young to be that afraid of failing. So, now what was this about an arcade?"

"Billy and Doug were at the Alehouse one of those Friday nights they hang out and Doug just popped up with the idea that he'd like to open a bar with arcade games. He talked about having game nights and making it a fun place for people our age. He even said that if he bought a building in downtown Bellingwood, you guys could renovate the upstairs into a big apartment for the two of you to live in."

"He said that?" Anita darted back into the right lane since a Hummer was pushing her from behind. He flipped her off and she waved and smiled sweetly at him. "Jerk."

"You could have taken him."

"Yes, but you yell at me when I drive too fast."

Rachel smiled. "What do you think about Doug opening a bar?"

"He would be great at it. He loves talking to people. And he really knows his games. That would be fun." Anita flashed her a grin. "I could be his bouncer."

"All the nerdy boys in Bellingwood would be there. Every time you walked in, they'd start drooling. You wouldn't have to bounce anyone. All you'd have to do is crook your finger and they'd follow you anywhere."

"Stop it."

"I'm only exaggerating a little. You know one of the reasons Doug hasn't talked to you about this is that he's worried about your money."

"My money? Why?"

"Because you could help him buy this place."

"Without blinking."

"He's afraid your family will think that's the only reason he wants to marry you. That's why this has been so hard. He doesn't want you to think that he loves you because of your money."

"Maybe I should just buy the building and give it to him as a present."

"Oh yeah," Rachel said. "That will make it all better. Billy told him to talk to Polly and Henry."

"To borrow money from them?" Anita frowned at her friend. "That's a terrible idea."

"No, silly. To get help understanding the real estate in Bellingwood and what it takes to put together a business here."

"Oh." Anita relaxed. "Yeah. That makes sense. I don't have a clue about any of that, but I could hire a good lawyer and we could use my accountant."

"You know you can't hand this to Doug on a silver platter, don't you?"

Anita shrugged. "I know you're right, but it doesn't have to be this difficult. If I have the money we need, why can't I use it to make him happy?"

When Rachel didn't respond, Anita grabbed a quick glance and was surprised to see her friend looking forward, a slight grin on her face.

"What?"

"Do I really need to answer your question?"

"Maybe."

"Tell me why you hid the fact that you were wealthy from all of us."

"I didn't want you to think I thought I was better or more important." Anita scowled. "I don't know. It just didn't seem right."

"If you had started spreading your money everywhere, paying for things for me and Billy and Doug, would you have believed we were really your friends?"

"Friends I bought wouldn't talk to me like this," Anita said with a small smile.

"You would never have trusted our friendship. Am I right?"

"Yeah. You're saying that would be like me buying Doug's love."

"If the two of you decide that it is a good idea for you to invest in his business, then go for it, but you can't buy happiness for him or for you."

"I know that. It's why I live out here like I do rather than in Colorado with my mother or out east with the rest of my family. It's all so fake."

"Doug is not fake."

"You're right, there. He's the farthest thing from it. So what am I supposed to do? Wait for him to figure it out?"

"He's getting there," Rachel said. "He isn't stupid."

Anita's eyes flashed. "I know that. He's one of the smartest guys I know. It's just that he doesn't know it."

"I get it that the last thing you want to do is wait ..."

"I'm getting really good at it."

Rachel chuckled. "But Billy is talking to him and Doug is listening. I shouldn't have said anything. Billy told me not to, but you need to know that even though Doug might seem stuck, he's trying to figure it out."

Anita took I-235 south at the Mixmaster on the west side of Des Moines, and merged with the traffic. "I was sounding kind of hopeless, wasn't I."

"There's always hope. Billy and I want to be in our own place in two years."

"A house?"

"Yeah. Then we're going to start having kids. We have a plan and everything."

"That's great. I'm thinking about living above a bar and you're going to move to a sweet little house with a picket fence and have two children. When I met you the first time, you had electric blue hair and all you ever wore was black. Now, you're talking about being a mommy in a cute little house?"

"I still have these," Rachel pointed at the tattoos on her arms. "And these." She brushed her fingers across the many piercings in her ears. "I haven't given up the punk life completely."

"Uh huh. Whatever. Life is weird, isn't it?"

Rachel nodded and pointed to an exit. "I think we take this one."

They had come to Des Moines to pick up a hot plate from one of the restaurant supply stores. It gave them an excuse to get out of town and do some personal shopping, too.

"Oh," Anita said, her face brightening. "I'll bet they have bar supplies here. I should browse. Maybe I can find a present for Doug."

"You can't buy him anything until he tells you himself," Rachel said. "Stop that."

"I'll hide it in my apartment. When he asks me to marry him, I'll

give him a cocktail shaker or something fun like that."

"You just can't help yourself, can you?"

"Nope. If you're good, I'll buy you a new cheese grater, or maybe a nice set of measuring cups."

"You're the best."

Vignette #3

Mornings Come Too Early

"Jeff is feeding us at Sycamore House," Rebecca said as she ran through the kitchen. "See ya later. I was supposed to pick Kayla up five minutes ago."

"You're late," Polly said.

Rebecca didn't have time to talk about it as she ran for her car.

Cilla was leaning against the passenger door, her phone in hand. "About time."

"I know, I know. I never get up this early. It's killing me."

Cilla laughed. "Can you even believe we got jobs where they don't open until ten? Mom thinks that I should start cleaning the house at eight so I'm wide awake and bushy-tailed when I get to work."

Rebecca waited for her friend to buckle her seatbelt before roaring out of the driveway. "I'm glad Polly knows that I'm a night person. All she wants me to do is smile at the family when I get up. Sometimes that's more painful than anything else."

"Smiling's the worst," Cilla agreed.

"Polly says if I don't let my face know what my heart is feeling, no one else will know either. But she doesn't like it if I'm grumpy in the morning."

"Especially since you get to sleep til nine. It's not fair."

Rebecca pointed at the clock on the dashboard. "I didn't get to do that this morning. I'm in the car and it's not even nine o'clock yet. Why does Jeff want us at Sycamore House so early? The parade doesn't start until ten-thirty."

"You really don't like mornings, do you? This is only one day. You probably won't die from getting up."

"Let's hope not." Rebecca came to a stop at the highway. "Look at all these cars. Is everyone in town for the Fourth?"

"It's a long weekend. Who knows?"

Rebecca turned onto the highway and headed for the hotel. Her

phone had buzzed with texts a couple of times. They were probably from Kayla and Andrew, wondering where she was. Kayla was an early-bird, always ready in plenty of time. She was usually early to everything. Andrew complained about mornings like she did, but his mom kept asking him to work at the bakery before he went to work at the grocery store. That meant he was usually out of the house before five-thirty. How was that even morning? Five-thirty was still the middle of the night for Rebecca.

When she pulled in under the canopy of the hotel's lobby, Kayla was sitting outside on a bench. Her best friend in the world smiled and waved, then climbed into the back seat when Rebecca fully stopped.

"Good morning," Kayla said brightly. "It's going to be such a good day. I can't wait to get started."

Cilla started to laugh and swatted at Rebecca's arm. "Just like that. See how it's done?"

"What?" Kayla asked. "What's going on?"

"You're so happy in the mornings," Rebecca said. "What is wrong with you?"

"I don't know. Why not? I get to spend the day with you guys. We're going to carry the Sycamore Enterprises banner in the parade. There's a party and then we get to go see fireworks. It's the best day of the summer so far."

"I can't even," Rebecca said.

Kayla pushed at her shoulder. "Come on. You gotta perk up. This is going to be awesome."

"At least the horses are walking behind us," Cilla said. "We could have to follow them."

Rebecca chuckled at that. "That is a good thing. Kayla, do you know why we have to be there so early? Polly said she and the boys didn't have to be here until just before ten."

When there wasn't any response, Rebecca glanced into the rearview mirror and saw her friend's sheepish face. "What? What do you know?"

"It's my fault."

"What did you do?" Rebecca drove into the parking lot,

surprised at the number of cars there. She knew the parade was lining up in the street in front of Sycamore House, but this was still way early.

"I volunteered to help get everyone in place and then Jeff said that we should wear matching t-shirts and then Mrs. Donovan volunteered Andrew and then it just all sort of blew up. I'm no good at telling people where to go, but you guys are."

Cilla laughed out loud. "That's what friends are for. He wants us to help get people in the right order?"

"Yeah. He has charts and sheets and everything. Stephanie is already here. We're going to put stakes with signs on them out front so people can kind of get in order on their own, but we're supposed to help last-minute people get into the right place."

"I'm going to be all hot and sweaty before the parade even begins," Rebecca said in protest.

"At least we aren't in band uniforms," Cilla said. "Think about that. Shorts and t-shirts is way better. It's only for another hour. Quit being a whiner."

Kayla laughed from the back seat as Rebecca drove around looking for an empty parking space. She finally ended up down by the barn. "Rebecca hates mornings. She always whines."

"I do, don't I," Rebecca said with a sigh. "That's probably why Polly wants me to start smiling in the morning. But it hurts my jaw."

As she got out of the car, she saw Andrew running toward them. "About time," he yelled. "I've been texting you. Why didn't you respond?"

Rebecca frowned. "Because I was driving. Polly would kill me."

"And it's illegal," Cilla whispered.

"Yeah. It's illegal." Rebecca laughed. "I need to stay out of jail. Can't you just see it? Chief Wallers or Sheriff Merritt would love to call Polly and Henry to tell them I got pulled over for texting. I do not need to be in any more trouble with any of them."

"There are already people inside," Andrew said. "Come on. I saved some of Mom's breakfast sandwiches for you. She gave me croissants today. Jeff has cold pop for us, too. He said we needed as much caffeine on a day like this as we could get."

Cilla opened her mouth and Rebecca knew exactly what she was going to say, so she brushed her off. "Don't even argue. I know caffeine isn't as good as water on hot days. Whatever. Polly isn't here to stop me and I'm having a party."

"I'm glad Stephanie isn't that bad," Kayla said.

Rebecca shook her head. "Of all the things that Polly has to get pushy about with us kids, no pop is a killer. She used to drink it all the time. She said once we all started showing up, it wasn't fair of her to drink it in front of us, so she stopped. How do you just stop? It's not like she's a saint or something, but man, she's hard to live with."

"Poor Rebecca," Andrew said. "Poor, poor Rebecca. She lives such a terrible life."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever."

Cilla held the front door of Sycamore House open. "We all feel really sorry for you, Rebecca. Really, we do."

Rebecca shook her head as she went inside. They didn't spend as much time here since Polly and Henry bought the Bell House. She kind of missed being part of the action. Of course, back when she lived here, there wasn't as much going on. Nowadays, the place was always busy. People were walking in and out of the auditorium and the kitchen was open, so there was a line waiting for coffee and breakfast.

"What did Rachel make for breakfast?" she asked Andrew.

He shrugged. "They're serving scrambled eggs, sausage and bacon. Mom sent me over with cinnamon rolls and muffins earlier this morning, but Sweet Beans was packed with people. If I hadn't been working here, she'd have made me stay up there."

"Sky is working at Sweet Beans," Kayla said.

Andrew pointed at the classrooms. "I have our food in here. Unless you want to eat in the auditorium."

Rebecca felt her energy level rising, just like it did whenever she was around people. She loved the excitement of big groups of people. "Let's eat in the auditorium. I want to see who's here." She was already turning toward the main doors of the auditorium when she realized that she shouldn't make Andrew carry her

breakfast for her and spun to catch up with the rest of her friends.

"Whoa," said a big, booming voice. Scott Luther, the new custodian at Sycamore House, pulled up short so she didn't crash into him.

"I'm so sorry," Rebecca said. "I wasn't paying attention."

It wasn't like she would have bowled him over. He was a mountain of a man.

He put his hand out. "Haven't had a chance to meet you proper since I came to work. I've seen you around with Ms. Giller. I'm Scott."

"Rebecca," she responded. As she looked at their hands together, she wished she could get a photograph of the image. It would be perfect subject matter for a still life.

"Everything okay?" he asked, releasing her hand.

She realized she'd probably held on long enough to make things awkward and giggled. "Sorry. I was thinking about how to draw our two hands together. Yours is so big and strong."

"That's right. Eliseo said you're an artist. Anytime you want to draw my hands, it's okay with me. They're always with me."

Rebecca smiled at him as he went into the noisy auditorium. The doors closed and the sound died down.

"What are you doing?" Andrew came up beside her and held out a brown paper bag.

"Embarrassing myself."

"I doubt it. You don't get embarrassed that easy."

"I just held Scott Luther's hand too long. When I tried to figure out how to explain it, I had to tell the truth. He was nice enough, but I made it awkward."

"Why were you holding his hand too long?"

She shrugged. "Thought it would make a good drawing. His great big hand and my little one."

Cilla pushed them toward the doors. "She's always doing weird stuff. We have to keep her from wandering off into the forest and getting lost."

All three kids turned to Cilla and stared. It was only last year that she'd been kidnapped and taken into a wooded area by a crazy

friend of her family.

"What?" Cilla asked. "So every time we talk about a forest, you think I'm going to fall apart? Where else do elves and fairies drag their prey? Duh."

The door to the auditorium opened again and Jeff walked out with Eliseo. He stopped and looked at the four kids. "Thanks for coming. You have about ten minutes before I need you outside. Your t-shirts are on Stephanie's desk. Make sure to put those on before you come out."

Rebecca smiled at him. "We're late. It's my fault. I'll hurry."

He laughed. "Don't get too excited. It's the first time I've been in charge of this thing and Adam tells me that I'm uptight. Me? Uptight? Come on. That can't be true."

Eliseo's eyes lit up with laughter and Jeff shook his head. "Evidently, I'm uptight. Come outside as soon as you can. It isn't like the parade is going to come to a complete stop because someone is out of order. Right?"

"You're doing fine, boss," Eliseo said, patting Jeff's back. "You kids come out as soon as you can. The paper that has the order of parade entries is on top of your t-shirts and we're putting signs up right now. You're fine." He held the door open as they went inside.

Rebecca took in the number of people seated at tables around the room. Whatever leftover sleepiness she'd felt when she ran out the door of her house was long gone. She snagged Kayla's arm and tugged her toward an empty table. "You're right. Today is going to be a great day."

Vignette #4

Summer Fun

Cat leaned back in the chaise lounge at the swimming pool. Sitting by a pool had been much more relaxing on her honeymoon with Hayden. Wow, was that a year ago? Time passed too quickly. Servers brought her adult beverages, there were no screaming children, and her adoring husband sat quietly beside her. She laughed out loud and then shrugged, embarrassed at the looks she got from the other moms here for some sun while their kids played in the water.

Okay, they weren't her kids, but she loved them just the same. The other day someone referred to her as a nanny and she'd been startled by that word. She and Hayden didn't feel like they were employed by Polly and Henry, even though they had free room and board and she was paid a little something, too. They were family and what she did was important.

Her poor husband still couldn't believe his new life. He was in awe that he no longer felt it necessary to handle the world on his own and that his brother was turning into a great guy. After their parents were killed, Hayden expected to spend the next six or seven years struggling to make a life for himself and do whatever he could to keep Heath out of jail. He told Cat over and over about the hopelessness he'd felt until Polly showed up.

When he and Cat found each other, he was just beginning to realize that he wasn't going to be alone for the rest of his life. Alone, Hah. They laughed about that now. The Bell House was so full of people, you were never alone. Those four little boys filled every nook and cranny of that big old place.

"Cat, Cat, look!" Caleb held his nose, jumped up high, and then waved as he went into the pool.

JaRon was right there, watching his brother. She waved at him and he beamed before diving in. Elijah was playing water games with friends he met here every day. Noah was at the barn with

Eliseo. He didn't enjoy swimming as much as the other boys did. At least he loved working with the horses.

She couldn't believe these kids were part of her family. Of course they had their issues, but they'd given her a surprising gift. When she signed on to help Polly take care of them and the house, she'd never assumed she would fall in love so hard. She loved these kids so much that she changed her intended degree from teaching high school to elementary. Hayden thought she was crazy. Maybe she was.

When she graduated, Cat hoped to find a job near Bellingwood. Hayden was so happy to have his brother back in his life. They'd missed a lot of time together after losing their parents. That aunt and uncle had been awful and he felt guilty for letting his brother go through that alone. The night Hayden told her about what those people had done to Heath, he actually cried. He'd found an internship this summer in Ames and hoped to turn that into a job. It would keep him in the area, especially since Heath would be working with Henry after graduation.

"Mrs. Harvey?"

Cat looked up to see one of Elijah's friends standing beside her. "Yes, Devin?" She made sure not to giggle at the use of her formal name. Devin's mom was one of the women who spent a lot of time at the pool. When she'd discovered Cat was student teaching at the elementary school this fall, she made sure her son and his friends learned to be more formal.

"Mom said I should ask you if Elijah could come with us after we're done swimming. We're going to Boone for ice cream. We'd take Caleb and JaRon, but the car isn't big enough."

Cat looked down the row of chairs and Devin's mother gave her a nod with a smile and wave. Cat nodded back. "Sure. That sounds like fun."

He ran back to the pool to tell Elijah the good news while Cat waited for one of the younger boys to be upset about this. It didn't take long.

JaRon showed up in front of her. "Elijah gets to go have ice cream," he said with a pout.

"Yes, he does. Isn't that wonderful for him?"

"What about me?"

"What about you?"

"Why don't I get to go?"

"Is Devin your friend?"

He nodded his head up and down, his lips still out in a pout.

"JaRon?"

"But I want to go have ice cream."

"I tell you what. Maybe it would be better if I tell Elijah he can't go. Then no one gets to have fun. Is that a better idea?"

That brought a confused smile to his face and he nodded again.

"Really? You want to punish Elijah because you don't get to do what he does?"

"But I want ice cream."

"Honey, how many times have we made homemade ice cream this summer?"

He shrugged.

"How many times just this last week?"

"Two times."

"And did you eat that ice cream?"

"Yes, but I want to go."

"You aren't going with Elijah. Those aren't your friends. He gets to do fun things without you sometimes. And when there is an opportunity for you to do fun things without him, we'll make sure that happens. It's much better for you to be happy that your brother is having fun than it is for you to be selfish and greedy. Right?"

JaRon just stared at her. Cat was terrified that she might have pushed too hard and end up with a sobbing, heartbroken child. That wasn't the way Polly and Henry raised these boys, but because they'd come from such difficult backgrounds, you could never tell what was going to send one over the edge. She had learned incredible patience this last year as she helped them grow up.

"Go on back and play with Caleb."

He turned to go back to the pool and Cat sat up. "JaRon?"

When he looked at her, she beckoned for him to come close.

"What?"

"Come here. Closer."

JaRon moved into range and she gave him a hug. "You're a good kid. I'm sorry you feel left out."

"Elijah always leaves me out because I'm so little."

"You know better than that." Cat held him close. "It's not always easy being the youngest brother, is it?"

"No."

"Tell you what. You go play with Caleb and see if that doesn't make you feel better. Remember what Polly says."

He frowned. "What?"

"You get to choose whether you're going to be happy or mad. You don't want to ruin a good day at the swimming pool by being mad, do you?"

"Elijah's right."

"About what?" Cat asked with a chuckle.

"You even sound like her sometimes."

"I think that's a good thing. Go on, now."

"Can we get ice cream?"

"We'll see what we have at home."

JaRon slumped his shoulders, stayed in her arms just a moment longer, than turned and scuffed his feet across the concrete on his way back to the pool. As soon as he saw his brother jump up from the water, his demeanor changed and he hopped back in.

"You're really good with them," Addy Miles said. "You'll make a great mom someday."

Cat turned. "Thanks. I've learned a lot this last year."

"Polly is lucky to have you. I wish I had someone to help with my monsters."

The woman was right. She had two little monsters. It drove Cat crazy watching them. She'd have hauled those two out of the pool and off to their bedrooms for the entire summer for some of their antics. They tormented other children in the pool, splashed their mom and anyone who happened be nearby, demanded attention from the lifeguards, insisted that wherever they were, they were taking up the entire space. All of that with no intervention from this very nice woman who sat beside her.

"I'm the lucky one," Cat said. "Hayden and I get to live with that big, crazy family. It's wonderful."

"You do everything. She should pay you more."

Cat smiled. "They take good care of us. I couldn't ask for a better life right now." Cat was also grateful that Polly insisted on well-behaved kids. She couldn't have lived in that house if Polly and Henry let the boys get away with the things this woman let happen.

"Are you ready for school this fall? Do you know which teacher you're going to be student teaching with?" Mrs. Miles asked.

"I'm not sure yet," Cat said. "I won't be in any of the boys' classrooms. We already discussed that. And yes, when it gets here, I'll be ready. It's going to be great not driving to Ames every day."

"You should try to get a job here when you graduate."

"Wouldn't that be awesome?"

"Mom, look at me!" One of Addy Miles' daughters flung a big cup of water at her mother and ran away cackling. It happened every day.

"I don't know what I'm going to do with her," the woman said. "I guess kids will be kids. I just hope she makes it to adulthood without someone killing her."

Cat smiled politely and checked her watch. It was time to round the boys up and start for home. She needed to pick Noah up at the barn first, though. "Time to get moving. I'll see you another day."

"You all never relax, do you?" Addy asked.

"Oh, I relax plenty," Cat said with a smile. "Have a good rest of the day." She wasn't going to get into it with the woman and walked over to the pool where Elijah was playing with his friends.

"Cat!" he said. "What's up?"

"We're about to leave. You be good, okay?"

"I'll be great. Thanks for letting me go." He bobbled his way across to her. "That's really nice of you."

"Have fun." She watched him splash back to his friends as Caleb and JaRon made their way to her. "Hey, boys. It's time to head home."

"Aww, not yet," Caleb whined. "I'm not ready."

"Get your things together. I'm calling Noah to tell him to be

ready for us and I need to speak with Devin's mother." She gave them both a stern look, hoping that was all it would take. They'd pushed her a few times this summer and she always felt conspicuous when she had to raise her voice. She really was trying to be more like Polly, but she'd grown up in a very loud family. Polly was always so reasonable. Except with Rebecca.

Cat chuckled. Rebecca could send Polly over the edge. It was funny to watch, especially since she didn't have to be involved. Even then, Polly tried to stay calm. Hayden didn't like loud fighting either. That was as hard on Cat as any of the rest of it. With Polly's kids, she knew what the expectations were, but with Hayden, sometimes she just wanted to loudly express herself, get it all out and then deal with it. She sighed. Oh well. She was going to have to get a house in the country so when she needed to be loud, she could go outside and scream.

Taking a ten dollar bill out of her wallet, she walked over to Devin's mom. "Thanks for taking Elijah. I want to send money for his ice cream."

The woman stood and pushed Cat's hand back. "No way. We invited him and one little boy won't break the bank. We'll drop him off by five-thirty. Does that work?"

"Perfect. Thanks so much."

"He's a good boy."

As Cat walked away, she breathed out a sigh of contentment. Polly would love to hear that someone actually took the time to tell her Elijah was a good boy. The woman worried over her boys. That she let Cat and Hayden be so involved with their lives spoke volumes about her trust in them. Cat never wanted to mess that up. She dialed the phone number for the barn.

"Sycamore House barn," a voice answered.

"Hey, this is Cat."

"Hi Cat, Jason here. What's up?"

"We'll be there in a few minutes to get Noah."

"I'll tell him. Eliseo has him cleaning tack for the parade. He'll be ready."

"Thanks."

As she headed for the main door, she hesitated, hoping Caleb and JaRon would catch up and she wouldn't have to yell for them.

"I wish we could stay longer," JaRon said, walking up beside her.

"We'll be back tomorrow or the next day."

"Yeah, but it's always so much fun."

Cat bent her knees and took him in for another hug. "You know I love you, right?"

"Yeah?" He was waiting for a caveat.

"That's all. I just love you boys so much." She was careful not to hug Caleb too often; he still wasn't comfortable with a great deal of physical touch, though he was better.

"I love you too," JaRon said. "Can we get ice cream?"

She grinned. At least he was consistent. "We'll see what we have at home."

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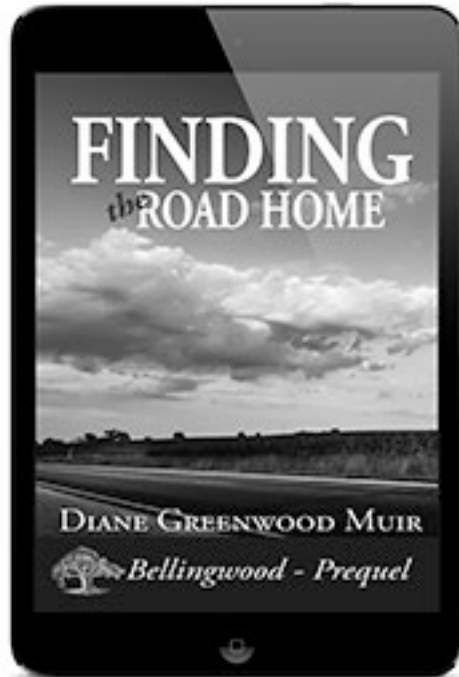
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## THANK YOU!



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/>

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for news about upcoming books, conversations while I'm writing and you're reading, and a continued look at life in a small town.

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