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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 29 — Trust Proves Love — 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 Fly Like an Eagle

"Stop right there," Judy Greene demanded.

Reuben blinked at his wife as he stood halfway in and halfway out of the doorway to the kitchen at the bed and breakfast. "It's kind of cold outside."

"Why are you trying to come inside looking like that? You're a mess."

He was, too. Working with metal and fire didn't lend itself to clean clothes. "How about a cup of tea for the man who loves you?"

She laughed. "It's a good thing I love *you*. Are you going back out to the shop?"

"Maybe."

"I'll put it in a thermos, then. Come all the way in and shut the door, but don't you go any further than that."

He looked down at his filthy boots. It had been a busy morning so far. They'd gotten up early to prepare breakfast for the family that had come in yesterday. The Cranes were a good-sized group, having gathered from all over the country to celebrate their grandmother's ninetieth birthday. She lived north of here with her eldest daughter and family. One reason they'd chosen this location was the bedroom on the main floor so Mrs. Crane wouldn't have to negotiate any steps. The family was spread throughout the big house, taking every bit of living space available. They weren't interested in traveling or keeping themselves busy with activities; they only wanted to spend time with each other. It sounded like they hadn't done that in years; their lives had kept them busy and apart. Cousins were meeting each other for the first time and everyone wanted to spend time with Grandma.

Dinner last night had been a loud, joyous reunion. They'd split up duties, helping Judy cook family favorites and afterward, helped with cleanup. Judy and Reuben had been happily embraced as extended family members. This morning's breakfast was just as noisy and fun-filled and it sounded like they had the rest of the day planned out. Ginnifer Alborn, the eldest daughter, had been in contact with Judy all week as they planned meals and indoor activities. If only the rest of their guests were as engaged as this group.

When Judy finally told him he was released from inside chores, he'd tromped through the woods, pulling downed limbs out to be cut up later.

Snow started falling while he was dragging branches and it was still coming down. It wouldn't be enough to warrant bringing out the snowplow, but he'd keep busy sweeping walks and clearing the porch. Iowa was nothing like the San Francisco area. He hadn't dealt with this much snow in a long time.

"Do you have enough firewood inside?"

Judy spun the top on the thermos and set it on the counter beside him. "We should be in good shape through the weekend. The fresh snowfall makes this place look like a wonderland. Would you take some pictures while you're outside?"

"Of course." Reuben took his phone out of his coat pocket. "Hmmm, wonder what Rebecca wants."

"She's such a good girl."

"If I didn't have her, I wouldn't enjoy my Saturdays as much." He frowned at the text she'd sent. "I have to go into town."

"Is something wrong?"

"No, something is amazing. A customer wants to purchase that soaring hawk. They want to meet me, though."

"Celebrated artist," Judy said with a grin. "You should go in dressed just like that."

"You're kidding me, right?"

"No," she replied with a small laugh. "I'm not kidding. You're a working artist. This is what you look like when you're working. The wood floors at the gallery won't be any worse for you walking across them in your filthy boots. We can sweep it up later." She giggled. "I'm proud of you. This is exciting."

Several of his smaller pieces had sold since he'd opened Greene Space, but the large pieces were priced out of most casual buyers' budgets. That was okay. He put hours and hours into those sculptures and those who weren't willing to pay an artist's fee generally didn't understand the worth of the art in front of them.

Judy stepped closer to him and lifted up to kiss his cheek. "Go. I'll sweep the front sidewalk. This is important."

He'd forgotten about the snowfall, distracted by thoughts swirling through his mind as he opened the door. "I don't know when I'll be back."

Reuben was surprised when he looked up and found that he was halfway into town. He searched his memory and saw himself make the choice to drive the old Wrangler because he was so dirty. And yes, there he was turning out of the lane at the B&B onto the road. Now, when did he turn south onto the highway? Well, here he was and no other drivers had honked at him. He glanced in the rearview mirror. Only because there wasn't anyone else on the road.

Snow was coming down a little harder now, and he needed to focus on his driving.

He pulled into a parking space in the alley behind Greene Space and saw the thermos of tea sitting in the passenger seat. "I was not all there when I left the house, was I?" But no one was around to finish the conversation.

Reuben went in the back door and strode down the hall to the main gallery where Rebecca stood talking with two women and a girl several years younger than Rebecca.

"Here he is now," Rebecca said. "I'd like to introduce you to Reuben Greene, the owner of the gallery and the artist who created Soaring Hawk. Mr. Greene, this is Janice Louder, her daughter, Anna, and Mary Northing."

She really knew how to make an introduction. He put his hand out as he approached. Mary Northing was the first to take it.

"We found your website last weekend," she said. "I told Janice that it was imperative we drive over and see if you would sell this glorious sculpture to us."

Janice chuckled. "I will never convince this woman to take a low profile when it comes to something she wants. She has never made a good deal on an automobile purchase. Not one time in her life." She continued to laugh. "But Mary has decided that this must decorate her home, so here we are, ready to buy."

"Where are you from?" Reuben asked, knowing that he would be the one to install the sculpture. Unless they'd come with a trailer, they weren't packing it in any standard vehicle.

"Manning," Mary said. "West of here about an hour and a half. I told young Rebecca that I would pay extra to have it delivered."

He grinned as he watched Janice put her hand on the other woman's forearm. "She'd give away the farm if someone isn't around to stop her."

"Mr. Greene?"

He looked down at Anna. "Yes?"

"Did you make the tulip over there?" She pointed at a tulip sculpture he'd made for Judy. The base held a tea light candle. This was a copy. The original had its home on Judy's nightstand.

"I did."

Anna looked at Janice first, then at Mary. "My room has tulips in the wallpaper."

Janice laughed out loud. "It seems as if I'm surrounded by lovers of your artwork, Mr. Greene. We'll also be purchasing the tulip candlestand." Then she looked him up and down. "I'm so sorry. Did we take you away from your work?"

"It's fine," he said. "I was bothering my wife and she refused to let me into the house dressed like this, so when Rebecca's text came in, it was the perfect escape for both of us."

"Tell me about the hawk," Mary said. "What inspired you to create it?"

The story was one that made Reuben almost emotional. "Their return," he said. "When we were children, we didn't see many of the big raptors where I lived. Bald eagles were on the endangered species list and rarely spotted in the wild."

"Pesticides," Mary agreed. "DDT."

He nodded. "When my wife and I moved to Bellingwood, I started seeing hawks and even bald eagles everywhere. One afternoon, we were out for a drive and two bald eagles stood together in a field. When I pulled over, they didn't fly away. We

were both in awe as we sat fifty feet from a bird we never imagined being able to see in person. We didn't dare move because we hated for the moment to end."

"Two red-tailed hawks live out by the bed and breakfast. No matter the time of day, I can go outside and watch one of them soar down to snatch up a rodent and fly off, its massive wings beating to lift it back into the air. They sit on electric lines and fence posts now, just part of the scenery. But it's so much more than that for me. These great birds recovered and fill our skies with their beauty. I had to honor that."

He stopped talking and gulped in a breath, afraid that he had said too much and would cry again. It didn't matter how many times he saw an eagle or a hawk in flight, he still found himself overwhelmed with emotion. There was such great majesty in their flight.

Silence fell across the group.

Reuben shrugged. "I'm sorry. Sculpting these birds has become a passion of mine."

"If you wanted to double your price on the sculpture, I'm sure Mary would gladly pay it after that speech," Janice said with a smile. "I'm glad you told us your story, though. It makes the piece even more special."

"I have a story about tulips, too," Reuben said with a grin.

"What's that?" Janice asked.

"Those were the flowers my wife carried on her wedding day, so they are special to both of us. When we renovated the apartment upstairs, we discovered some beautiful stained glass that a previous tenant covered up. The artist's favorite flower was a tulip and now the colorful glass catches the light throughout the day."

Anna stood in front of the candlestand and looked at Rebecca.

"Go ahead," Rebecca said. "You can pick it up."

"Mama?"

"Of course, Anna. That's why we're here today," Janice said. "Mr. Greene, it's time we work out the details."

"We can do that in the office," Rebecca said. She gestured for Reuben to lead. "Pretty exciting, eh?" she whispered.

"I guess so. You go ahead and get things started. I want to text Judy."

"She'll be proud of you."

He grinned at the sixteen-year-old. She was so young and yet she understood exactly what he was feeling. "Thank you, Rebecca." "I really love my job."

Vignette #2 Royalty

"His name is Rex," the young woman said. "He's seven years old."

Jean Gardner smiled at her husband. They'd had to put their beautiful ten-year-old basset hound, Sebastian, to sleep in the middle of January. He'd gotten sick last fall, and when Marnie Evans from the veterinarian's office told them they would know when he was ready to go, she wasn't kidding.

Jean was worried she'd never get over losing that sweet bo,y and Sam took it harder than she had. Enough time had passed that both of them were ready to fill the house back up with a furry beast. She loved her husband, but he was sometimes as crotchety as they came, especially during winter when there were no gardens to tend. Spending hours upon hours stuck in a house with the old man was more than she'd bargained for. Winter was nearly over and she couldn't wait for him to take off to visit his friends.

She'd never be able to express how much Eliseo Aquila and Sycamore House had given to Sam. When he retired, he swore he was done with messing around in dirt. It didn't take long for him to make his way over to help Eliseo work with those horses and donkeys as they tilled the ground for spring planting. But they were nowhere near that season yet and she was tired of putting up with Sam's grumpy behavior by herself.

The black lab with a graying muzzle sat at Sam's feet, looking up with big, hopeful eyes.

"How long has he been here?" Sam asked.

"A little over a year."

Jean held her breath. This had to be Sam's choice.

"He doesn't have a friend, does he?"

She turned to him in surprise.

"A younger dog, maybe. Someone to keep him active in the next few years. Someone who will still be there after he's gone."

The young woman smiled. "You want to take two dogs home

with you?"

Sam put his hand on the dog's head and rubbed between his eyes. "I don't ever want to feel that kind of loss again. The only thing that would have made it easier would have been having another dog to hold."

That nearly killed Jean. She had no idea he felt that way. When the young woman glanced at her, she blinked back tears and nodded. "Is he good with other dogs?"

"He sure is. He's kind of the granddaddy around here. He loves puppies. There is one girl who's been here about a year. Rex is good with her."

"Why is she still here?"

"She's a little mouthy, really clingy and needy. Part Chihuahua, part Bichon Frise, and whatever else is in her background. When she's around Rex, he doesn't mind her being needy."

"Rex means king," Sam said to Jean.

"What's the Chihuahua's name?" Jean asked.

"You can change it if you like. We just named her Princess because she's so demanding."

Jean chuckled. "Sounds like the two should go to the same home, don't you think?"

"Let me bring her in so you can meet her." The young woman left and Sam sat down in one of the chairs.

Rex followed him and sat down in front of his legs, then put his head on Sam's foot.

"This one's going home with us, no matter what," Sam said.

"He knows what he wants," Jean replied. She knelt and rubbed the dog's neck. "You've been waiting for Sam, haven't you? One look and the two of you both knew you were perfect for each other."

The door opened and Rex jumped to his feet, wagged his tail, and rushed over to a small white dog on a leash. He lapped her across the face with his big wet tongue.

"This is Princess."

The little dog whined at Rex, then yapped when he wouldn't leave her alone. That didn't stop him, and he wagged his tail so hard, his bottom moved back and forth.

She yipped and yapped.

When Jean moved toward her, she backed away, bared her teeth and growled.

Rex stepped between them, laid down and rolled onto his back, so Jean knelt and rubbed his belly. The little dog surged at her, yapping loudly. Rex rolled back over and nosed her backwards.

"Who is he protecting?" Sam asked. "Jean or Princess?"

"Probably both. This is why she's still here. No one can get past her attitude. We've been working with her, but when strangers show up, she forgets everything she's learned. If she could just spend more time with them, I think she'd settle. Would you want to take her home for a few days? If it doesn't work out, bring her back."

"Oh no," Jean said. "If she comes home with us, she's staying. We have plenty of time to spend making her comfortable. What do you think, Sam?"

He patted his knee and Rex came back over to sit beside him. Princess let out with another string of barking. "Sounds like the only way she's going to see freedom is with someone who's willing to take the risk. Having a dog like Rex around who will stay calm when the rest of us get all worked up will be helpful."

Jean grinned at him. Sam was in a good mood today, but the man could get a good head of steam going when he wanted to. She could hardly believe he was willing to take on two dogs, though.

"Do you think Eliseo would help us with her?"

Sam looked up. "That's a great idea. He has those dogs of his so well-trained, all he has to do is click his teeth and they know what he wants." He smiled at the young woman. "And don't worry, it's all done with love. He's the best animal person I've ever met. He takes care of the horses up at Sycamore House in Bellingwood."

"I've driven by there. Those animals are beautiful. I heard they were rescues."

"Lotta years ago. I hope those animals forgot all about their lean years. Now, they have more attention than they'd ever known. You should see 'em at Halloween all dressed up like some scary black horse from a movie."

"Lord of the Rings," Jean said.

"They're creepy, that's for sure," he agreed. "They're beautiful when they pull the sleigh in the winter, but we haven't had good enough weather for that in a while. Mr. Aquila uses them to till the ground and plant the big gardens and the field of sweet corn, too."

"We should make a decision and let her finish this," Jean said. Once her husband started talking about something he loved, the stories would never end. They'd be here all day with a polite young woman who didn't know how to cut him off.

"I thought we already had."

"Both dogs, right?" the girl asked.

He frowned. "Yes, ma'am. Both dogs. We clear out space and they can bring in other animals who might be more easily adopted." Sam bent over and rubbed Rex's ears. "What do you think about that? Are you ready to walk around a new neighborhood and meet new friends?"

Princess barked at him and backed into the corner.

"I'm not going to push you, little girl," Sam said quietly. "But trust me when I tell you that you and I are going to be friends. It won't be long until you're happy about sleeping in our bed and sitting on our laps."

Jean blinked. She'd completely forgotten about dogs in her bed. As Sebastian got older, they'd made a soft place for him on the floor beside where Sam slept. He just couldn't make it up into the bed any longer. Most nights, Sam slept with his arm hanging off the side of the bed, his hand resting on top of Sebastian's head.

If they were about to add two dogs to their bed, she was going to have to readjust her way of thinking again.

Sam grinned. "Forgot about the bed, didn't you?"

"I did," she said, laughing. "Maybe Rex will sleep in Sebastian's place."

"Maybe."

The young woman bent over, picked up Princess, and brought her to Jean. "Try to hold her. See what she does."

"Please don't bite me, little girl," Jean said.

"She's never bitten anyone. She's mostly just nervous."

Jean sat down beside Sam and Rex put his head on her lap. When she put her arms out for Princess, the little dog shivered and shook.

"The shivering is Chihuahua behavior. They're always nervous. We'll go slow. Here are a few of her favorite treats."

Jean accepted the little white ball of furry fluff, surprised at how little dog there was. "She weighs nothing, but there is some strength in those muscles."

Once Princess got into Jean's arms, she actually settled down, her curiosity overcoming her fears. She took a treat from Jean's fingers.

"That's a good girl," Jean said. "I promise not to bite if you'll do the same."

"That happened faster than I expected," the girl said.

"Jean has a way. It usually does include feeding them," Sam said. "Her cooking is one of her best features."

"Be good," Jean said to him.

A bell rang and the girl turned. "I'll be right back. Will you two be okay alone?"

"We'll be fine," Jean said as she slid another treat into her hand. Princess nibbled it right up.

After the girl left, she slowly turned toward Sam. "Two dogs? Two?"

"If we'd had a second dog when Sebastian died, we wouldn't have waited so long to get it a companion. I don't know about you, but my heart would have healed a whole lot faster." He held up a finger. "I know, I know. People question whether I have a heart."

She smiled again. "I think better names for these two would be Mutt and Jeff. There's a rather distinctive size different here."

"I think it will be kinda cute. You can walk with Rex and I'll walk with Princess. It will give the neighbors something new to talk about."

"We need to go shopping. Dog beds, more food, new collars and leashes, fresh toys."

Sam burst out laughing. "It's usually me that wants to go shopping."

"I'll let you. The dogs and I can stay in the truck while you spend

money."

"Aren't we nearly out of ice cream at home?"

She looked at him. "Are you joking with me?"

"No," he said, offended. "We're getting low."

"Heaven forbid you don't have plenty of ice cream. Get whatever you need."

The young woman came back in with a folder. "We have some paperwork to handle. You're really interested in taking both dogs?"

Princess had settled into Jean's arms. "I think we'll make a very interesting family. This is going to cost a lot, isn't it," Sam said.

"Sam Gardner, be good. They take care of animals who need homes here. I'd pay them twice the amount if it meant rescuing a few more."

He waved his hand. "She didn't mean it. What do I need to sign?"

Vignette #3 Just Us Boys

"Hey, Elijah," Henry said. "Want to go for a ride?"

Elijah's face lit up. He missed Noah, who was spending his spring break hours at the barn with Eliseo. "Where are we going?"

"All over. Are you ready to spend the morning with me?"

Elijah looked at Polly, who just smiled.

"Put your boots on. We're going up to the construction site, too," Henry said. "The ground is muddy."

The weather hadn't been conducive to sending the kids outside to play, though they did have the basement and tunnel. Henry heard tales of the games Lexi played down there with the kids. That young woman had more patience than he would have expected, and she was everything Polly had needed to keep up with the house and this family.

"I'm ready, Dad," Elijah said.

"Jacket, too."

Elijah yanked his jacket off the hook and pulled it on. "What else are we going to do?"

"I need to run a set of plans over to Grandpa at the shop."

"Can I say hi to Mr. Specek? Do you think Brandon will be there?"

Brandon Fortney and Haley Ferguson had come to work for Len Specek when he opened his piano repair shop as part of the Sturtz Cabinetry shop. Not only was Brandon a talented pianist, but his secondary passion was body-building. The young man was made of muscles and Elijah was enamored with him.

"I don't know," Henry replied, "but you can certainly ask."

"Mr. Specek said they had another piano coming in. Do you think it will be there yet?"

Henry chuckled as he opened the door to his truck. He waited for Elijah to climb up and in, thankful that both of his older boys were finally big enough to sit up front with him. Noah was nearly as tall as Polly now and showed no signs of slowing his growth spurt. Elijah wasn't growing nearly as rapidly. Thank goodness. Every time they turned around, they had to buy longer pants for Noah. "I don't know. I haven't been there yet this week."

"If Mr. Specek says I can, would you let me help after school?"

"Let's wait and see." Henry wasn't about to agree to something without talking to Polly first. The kids had busy after-school schedules and he didn't want to mess with those.

"But Noah gets to go to the barn whenever he wants to go."

Henry smiled as he shot Elijah a quick glance. "I said, we'll see."

"Sorry." Elijah wasted very little time being chagrined. He brightened back up right away. "Can we go to the coffee shop for a smoothie?"

"May we," Henry said, laughing. The kid never gave up. "Shall we do that first?"

"Yes. Can I ..." Elijah stopped. "May I have a cookie?"

"Didn't you just eat breakfast?"

"But I'm hungry again."

"Son, I do not know how you do it. You eat twice as much as Noah, and yet he's the one growing like a weed. Where do you put it all?"

Elijah shook his left leg out in front of him. "Hollow leg. That's what Grandpa calls it."

"I think you have two of those. One cookie. Fair?"

"Yes!" Elijah put his hand out on the console, just as he'd seen Polly do a thousand times. Henry reached over to take it, choking back emotion. He had sons. Some pretty great sons, too. Elijah pushed against every boundary placed in front of him, but he tried hard to be a good kid. He loved as passionately as anyone Henry had ever known. It was also easy to wound the boy to his core. He wore his heart on his sleeve.

Noah was much quieter and thoughtful. The boys were as different as night and day in so many ways, but when they loved, they were devoted. And they loved each other. It had taken a while for the four youngest to care for each other, but every day, it became more and more obvious that they saw themselves as a family unit.

He and Polly had brought such disparate personalities into the house and somehow they made it work.

He smiled at Elijah. It had all been Polly. Sure, he was part of everything they did, but she was the catalyst for this family. He saw himself more like the glue that held them together when life shook them up. How could he have gotten so lucky as to talk that woman into marrying him? And how was it that she'd managed to stay single until he finally found her?

"We're pretty lucky, you know that, Elijah?"

Elijah nodded and pointed at a parking place in front of Sweet Beans. When Henry drove past and turned the corner, the boy looked at him in a panic.

"Don't worry. When it's busy, I like to leave prime parking spots open for people whose legs don't work as well as mine and yours. I'm not going far."

"I was worried you forgot," Elijah said. "Why do you say we're lucky?"

"We have Polly in our lives." Henry pulled into a parking space in the alley behind the coffee shop. People didn't often think about parking back here, so it was always open. "Sometimes we forget to tell her how special she is." He took off his seat belt and waited for Elijah to do the same. "Sometimes we forget to tell each other the same thing."

"You and Mom are always telling us," Elijah said. He put his hand on the door handle. "I don't say it back, though. Noah and I talk about it at night sometimes before we fall asleep. Do you remember when we came to visit you and there was that big celebration downtown? And we slept on the couches with the dogs because it was scary? I remember waking up in the middle of the night that first night when we were in Heath's bedroom. Mom was right there sitting on a chair. She didn't want us to be scared. I didn't know what to think. Everything was so bad back then. Now, Noah says it's like we're living in a movie or something."

"A good movie, though," Henry said, taking Elijah's hand. "Right? Not like one of those horror movies where everybody dies." Elijah rolled his eyes. "Well, people do die and Mom finds them.

But it isn't scary. Noah says we hit the jackpot and we can't ever take it for granted. That's usually when he's mad at me for talking back or making you guys yell at me. I don't mean it, Dad. I really don't."

"I know you don't want us to yell at you," Henry said. "But sometimes, a guy just has to get out what's happening in his head. You and Noah are very different people. I'd like to tell you that you should be more like him and think through things before you say them. And sometimes you should. But your heart and your mouth are very connected. Noah keeps it inside. Both ways are good. Both have problems. And while you're young, now's the time to figure out how to interact with people."

"Sometimes I say the dumbest things." Elijah shook his head in frustration. "And then I have to clean a bathroom. I hate that job so much, you'd think I'd learn."

"You'd think," Henry said with a laugh.

Elijah rapped at his forehead. "My other grandma back in Chicago used to tell me I was thick headed. She said that I'd never learn anything because it would never penetrate this skull of mine."

"You're one of the smartest boys I've ever known. Let's go inside. We can keep talking, though."

As they walked down the sidewalk, Elijah stuck close to Henry. He obviously wanted to hold Henry's hand, but how could a fifth-grader pull that off and still maintain a sense of cool? So Henry put his arm around the boy's shoulder.

They went in the side door and headed for the counter. Josie Riddle turned at the sound of the doorbell.

"Hello, Henry. Hi, Elijah. Just you two today?"

"I'm riding with Dad this morning," Elijah said. "Everybody else has their own thing. It's just us."

"You want a large black coffee, right?" she asked Elijah. "With one sugar or two?"

"I don't drink coffee," he announced, then looked up at Henry. "Mom would kill me. She won't even let Rebecca drink it, and let me tell you, that girl needs coffee in the morning. She's a hot mess. None of us want to talk to her."

Josie laughed. "Some people are just not made for mornings."

"Not Rebecca. I think God got lonely at night, so he made people like her."

"That must be it."

"I'll have that black coffee," Henry said. "Elijah wants a smoothie and a cookie."

"A cookie at this hour?" Josie asked. "How did you pull that off, Elijah?"

"I eat all the time. I'm always hungry. Are we eating here, Dad?" "Would you like to?"

"As long as you won't be late."

Henry rubbed Elijah's shoulder. "I'll be fine. You tell Mrs. Riddle what you want. I see Mr. Mikkels over there and want to say hello." Henry put a twenty-dollar bill down. "Pick out a dozen cookies. We'll take those to Grandpa at the shop."

"Plus my cookie, too?"

"Extra one is on the house," Josie said. She led Elijah to the display case. "What flavor smoothie would you like today?"

"Strawberry, please."

Nate Mikkels had waved when they came in and stood when Henry approached the table. "Running errands with your son today?"

Henry nodded. "What are you up to?"

"Waiting for Bruce and Kirk. We're looking at a couple of things for the garage."

"Any opportunity for coffee?"

Nate sat and pointed at a chair. "I guess." He, Bruce McKenzie, a high school friend of Polly's who had just moved to Bellingwood, and Kirk Waters were renovating an old garage at the other end of the downtown area.

"Gonna be ready by April first?" Henry remained standing. When Elijah was ready, the two of them were spending time together. That was what was important this morning.

"I don't know," Nate said. "We just keep plugging away. If I didn't have to spend so much time at the pharmacy, I'd be in there every day, but I have to pay for the thing somehow."

"Life's tough."

Nate was intently watching something behind Henry, who turned as Elijah gingerly walked toward them carrying Henry's cup of hot coffee. He reached out and took it. "Thank you."

"I'll be right back with the cookies."

"Your boys are getting so big," Nate said.

"So are your kids. When are you and Joss going to adopt a few more?"

Nate's eyebrows went up. "More? Did Joss say something to your wife? I was hoping six would be enough."

"I know nothing," Henry said. As Nate's eyes opened wide, he turned back to see Elijah balancing the box of cookies, his smoothie, and a single cookie wrapped in a napkin. "I'm going to rescue him before there's a mess. Let me know if I can help."

Nate nodded as Henry strode over to Elijah. He put his hand under the box to steady it. "Tell me what I can take from you."

"Hold my glass, maybe?" Elijah asked.

"Got it. Now, where would you like to sit."

Elijah looked at the doorway. "Can we sit in your truck? I like talking to you. Just us."

Gulping back more emotion, Henry nodded. "Let's go sit in the truck. We can turn the radio on if you want."

"Country music?" Elijah asked, a smirk on his face. "Mom says that's all you ever listen to in there."

"Mom is learning to like it. You can, too."

"Maybe. Or maybe we just talk."

"Whatever you want, 'Jah. It's our morning together."

Vignette #4 Say the Words

"Hey, what's up?"

Rebecca jumped and snarled at Heath who was standing in the doorway to the office. "You scared me to death."

"You're looking kind of guilty. What are you doing?"

She turned the laptop so he could see the screen. "Nothing bad. I was just reading a story that Andrew wrote. We're not even chatting. See, no chat screen."

He laughed at her. "Like I care? Do you think I'd tell Polly that you're talking to Andrew when you're supposed to be studying?"

"I'm just being dumb," she said with a self-deprecating laugh. "Sorry. Do you need the computer or something?"

Both Heath and Hayden had their own laptops, and it drove Rebecca crazy that Polly wouldn't buy more for the household. She wanted her own. Sometimes that woman was so old-fashioned about things. It drove her nuts. Even Kayla had her own computer.

She didn't dare ask about it again. The last time she did, Polly went on and on about how she wasn't going to have her kids bury their faces in screens and not talk to each other. Good grief, get in the twenty-first century, lady. Nobody lived like this these days. All her friends had laptops and tablets, and none of them had to park their phones in the kitchen before they went to bed. But no, Rebecca had to sit in the office to do her homework.

"No, I was just going to watch television. Are you busy?"

"Like I said, just reading a story. Not really busy here."

He dropped into the chair beside the desk. "So, uhhhh."

"Have you kissed her?"

"What?"

"Have you kissed Ella yet?"

"Of course ... yeah ... why do you ask? I mean, what?"

She grinned at him. "Just kidding. I shouldn't do that to you. Have you made out with her?"

"That's none of your business."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not. Forget I even came in here."

Rebecca reached out to grab his arm when he moved to leave. "I'm sorry. I'm being mean. You wanted to talk to me and I didn't listen. Sit down."

"No, it's okay. No big deal."

"Heath. I'm really sorry. I got mouthy. Did you want to talk about Ella, though?"

"Yeah, but it's seriously not a big deal. You're busy."

She closed the laptop. "See. Not paying attention to anything but you. You'd better talk fast or one of the boys will be in here trying to get you to play with them. What did you want to know? Are you asking her to marry you?"

He rolled his eyes. "You are such a pain in the ..."

"Neck. You were going to say I'm a pain in the neck. Right? I know that and I'm sorry. Sometimes I just say what's in my head and I should know better. What's the question?"

"Do girls care about anniversaries?"

"Yes!" Rebecca declared, frowning at him. "Wait. What kind of anniversary? Like your first date or first kiss or something little like the first time you took her out on a gravel road." She gave him a wicked grin. "I really can't stop myself."

"You know, I almost talked myself out of asking you anything. It would have been safer to talk to Polly. When I saw you sitting in here by yourself, I took a chance." He took a breath to say something more and Rebecca put her hand up.

"And I ruined it, right? You still love me, though. You can't help yourself. How long have we known each other, Heath Harvey? And who was it that dragged your sorry behind into the real world of this family? Huh?"

"You," he said, shaking his head. "And it's been forever. I can't believe I'm still living in the same house with you. You'd think that between the two of us things would have exploded by now. You talk all the time and I never talk."

"You went off to college, then you found out how much you

loved working with Henry, and then you got a girlfriend. You found a big life, Heath Harvey. Even if you're still stupid and shy around girls. Are you this way with Ella?"

"She treats me way better than you do."

"I should have a chat with her. You get all up in your head if left to your own devices. Like this thing with anniversaries. You're making it way too hard. All Ella needs to know is that you remembered. Do you think she remembers?"

He laughed. "Doubt it. She's terrible with that stuff."

"That's a different problem, then," Rebecca said. "You don't want to make her feel guilty because you remembered and she didn't."

"Every time I turn around, there's a different minefield for me to negotiate," he said, his forehead wrinkled with concern. "How do I know what to do?"

"You should talk to her," Rebecca said flatly. "Why do you people make it so hard? Just talk to her." Then she put her hands up. "Wait. Who am I talking to? Mr. Non-Communicator. How did you and Ella ever get this far?"

"We talk."

"What's her favorite color?"

"Green."

"What color are her eyes?"

Heath glared at her. "Green."

"What's her favorite retro television show?"

"I don't know. Scrubs? Friends?"

"Who took her to her junior prom?"

Heath looked up, processing on the question. "I think that one was Steve Bell. Yeah. She went to her senior prom with Deylan Moore."

"He was such a nerd."

Heath laughed. "I know, right?"

"What does she want to name your first child?"

"What?" he spat out.

"Just wanted to see if you were paying attention. But have you guys talked about that?"

"No."

"Why not? You are going to marry her, aren't you?"

"Maybe someday," he said with a shrug. "I told her that we can't make any decisions until I'm done with school. You know she has, like, years of vet school ahead of her."

"So?"

"Yeah. You're right. But I have to finish first. That way I can find a place to live."

"Both of you can find a place to live? Together?"

"If her parents let us. Her mom is strict."

"But Ella's over eighteen, isn't she?"

"Like that matters. Do you think Henry and Polly will let you live with Andrew when you're in college?"

Rebecca visibly shuddered. "That's a conversation I never want to have with them. What Henry doesn't know won't hurt me."

"But he'd have to know if you two moved in together."

"And he'd hurt me." She shook her head. "Even worse, he'd hurt Andrew."

"Come on."

"Not, like, physically, but he'd make sure Andrew cried."

Heath laughed out loud. "Do you ever think it's weird that we care so much about what they think? I mean, what exactly would they do to us? Kick us out? Send us to Giller-prison? Lock us in the basement? They'd never hurt us. They don't talk about us to their friends, so we wouldn't be shunned by anyone."

"But they'd be disappointed. And I don't know about you, but I'm pretty sure Polly would wait until every bathroom in this house was filthy and make me clean them all."

"Exactly how does she make you do that? Does she carry you into the bathroom and stand over you with a whip? This is what I don't get about being a parent. How will I ever be like them? I didn't care at all what my aunt and uncle thought about me."

"And that's why you were nearly in jail."

"Right. I know. Then I get into Polly and Henry's family and I don't want to mess up because why?"

"They'd be disappointed," Rebecca said, nodding her head. "Dang, they have us brainwashed. I know that I care, but why?"

Heath shrugged. "It's so weird."

"It's because they love us, I guess," she said. "And that's why you want to do something nice for Ella on an anniversary that she doesn't even realize exists, am I right? So what is it?"

"It's dumb."

"Are you kidding me? We've talked about all this and now you shut me out. Come on."

"It was just the first time I told her that I loved her."

"You really said those words to her? What did she say back?"

"It was like, no big deal. She just said *I love you, too* and we went on. Like she'd always known that I loved her and it was the thing we say. You know, how Polly and Henry always say it to each other?"

"And to us."

"Yeah. It's hard for me to say it back to Henry. It sounds so weird. I don't know how he's so cool and he doesn't have a problem saying those kinds of things to us. You should see him out on the work sites. He's like a man's man. All the guys really respect him. He's strong and tough and he doesn't put up with any crap from anybody. And then, sometimes, he just pops out to me with an *I love you, Heath*. What am I supposed to do with that?"

"Say it back, maybe? Like Ella did to you. Didn't you ever tell your dad that you loved him?"

"When I was little. He wasn't like that. Do you think Henry gets upset that I never say it back?"

"He knows you. He gets it."

"I'd rather be like Henry with my own kids, but I don't know if I can. It's just so weird."

"Make it less weird," Rebecca said.

"How?"

"Practice. Do you love me?"

Heath gulped. "Well, yeah. I guess. You're my sister."

"Not really. We just kind of ended up in the same house together. And I don't mean it in any weird way. I mean it like family stuff."

"Then yeah, I do."

"Say the words." Rebecca sat forward and looked at him.

Heath turned his eyes to the floor. "Now it's weird."

"Chicken."

"I'm okay with that."

"You better get over it. Do you say it very often to Ella?"

"Yeah. She says it to me a lot, so it's easier."

"I get it. I should say it to you first."

Heath put a hand in front of her face. "Please, don't."

"I love you, I love you."

"Whatever."

"You should totally take her out to a nice dinner and get a single rose or something. Maybe even a card."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Let her know that it meant something to you. She'll think it's really sweet."

"Just one rose? Not, like a dozen?"

"No, it's a one-rose kind of a celebration. Girls don't always want big expensive gifts. Sometimes they just want to know that you think about them. One rose is enough. Save the dozen roses for big anniversaries."

"That makes sense."

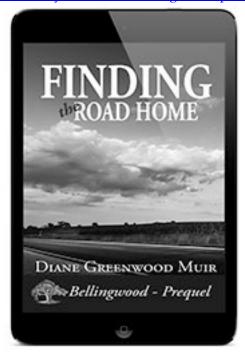
"I'm not that hard to get along with."

Heath stood and headed for the door. "You really are. But I love you anyway."

Rebecca opened the laptop, took a deep breath, and blinked back tears. "I love you too, you dope."

(Turn the page for links and more information. You know you want to.) Meet Polly before she arrives in Bellingwood. FREE novella.

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