



PEACE
in the STORM

Sigarettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Book 30

Book Thirty
Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication / use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

Cover Design Photography: Maxim M. Muir

Copyright © 2020 Diane Greenwood Muir

All rights reserved.

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Vignette #1 What if You Can?

Vignette #2 Quite a Pair

Vignette #3 Is There Such a Thing as Normal?

Vignette #4 Of Pinups and Comics

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 30 — Peace in the Storm — 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

What if You Can?

Rebecca sighed at the knock on her door. Those boys would not leave her alone today. "What now?"

"Rebecca?" Lexi pushed the door open. She had Gillian with her.

"I'm sorry," Rebecca said as she jumped up from her desk. "I thought you were one of the boys."

Lexi laughed. "They're in the basement. Were they making you crazy?"

"Whenever they get the chance." Rebecca was uncomfortable at how bad her room had gotten. She couldn't even make the excuse that she'd been busy. She was always busy. Cleaning her bedroom just wasn't a priority. "What's up?"

"Weird question and you have to be honest with me. I don't want to bother Polly, but I'd like to go downtown. If you're busy with homework or drawing or something, you have to tell me."

Rebecca glanced at her desk. She'd been working on perspective details after her lesson with Beryl this morning. While it took concentration, she was always up for an adventure and Lexi had never asked her to do anything like this before.

"That's nothing I can't do later. It's for Beryl, not school. What do you want to do downtown?"

"I don't know. Maybe visit the antique shop or the general store. Now that it's warmer, I'm itching to get outside."

"Is Gillian going with us?" Rebecca took the little girl's hand and smiled as the baby reached for her. She was nearly seven months old, and she'd grown so much. "Can I?"

Lexi released her daughter into Rebecca's arms. "Cat said she'd watch her for a couple of hours."

"Do you want to go with just me or should I call Cilla or Kayla?"

"Whatever. All I want is to get out of the house and explore."

Rebecca smiled. "Let's do it without anyone else. Next time we can add friends. I'll meet you in the kitchen."

Gillian was none too happy to be taken back from Rebecca, but her mother had her out of the room and down the hall before she realized she should be upset enough to cry.

Rebecca took one last look at the mess in her room and scowled. She needed to beg Kayla to come help one of these days. Why anyone enjoyed cleaning and straightening as much as that girl did, Rebecca would never understand. Kayla needed a career in organizing. Maybe one day when Rebecca was a famous artist and Andrew a famous author, they'd hire her to manage their lives.

She pulled the door shut. Out of sight, out of mind. Thank goodness Polly and Henry didn't visit her room very often. Polly was annoyed by the mess, but that one time Henry ordered her to clean up her room freaked her out. He'd been mad and he didn't get mad very often. Maybe she should at least pick up the dirty clothes tonight. It was time to do laundry, anyway.

That was the weird thing. She did laundry for everyone else all week. She was trying to teach the boys how to do their own, but sometimes it was easier to handle it herself. Every time she had to pull a pair of jeans out of the load of underwear and t-shirts, she wanted to wring their necks. They knew it and probably did it just to see if she'd react. Especially Elijah. That boy was too stinking smart and he loved teasing her.

Rebecca ran down the steps into the foyer, then dashed into the hallway and Polly's office.

"You're panting," Polly said. "What's up?"

"Ran in to talk to you." Rebecca held her breath to slow her heart rate, then leaned across the desk. "Can I borr ..." She stopped, rolled her eyes and started again. "May I borrow some money? Lexi asked me to walk around downtown with her. I'll pay you back if I buy anything, but I don't have any cash and don't want to get caught without." She kept a close watch on the doorway, just in case Lexi came this way.

"That's sweet," Polly said. She opened her wallet and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill. "Is this enough?"

Rebecca shrugged. "That's fine. I'm not planning to buy anything, but she wants to go to the general store and you know,

there's ice cream."

Polly handed her another twenty. "Bring back the rest. Spend what you need. I hope you have fun."

"Thanks. I'll pay you back." Rebecca headed for the kitchen.

"How did you get past me?" Lexi asked when she saw Rebecca at the island.

"Through the foyer. Shall I drive?"

"That would be great. Thanks."

Rebecca went over to take her phone out of the charger and saw that Lexi's was there too. "You want?"

"I probably should. No one ever needs me, but if I didn't, sure as sh ..." She grinned. "Sure as heck, I wouldn't have my phone."

"You never do that in front of Polly and Henry."

"Swear?"

"Yeah. I'm always catching myself."

"You'll get better at monitoring the age and tolerance of the people around you," Lexi said with a laugh. "And with practice, you learn to have two distinct vocabularies. One with your friends and one with your family."

"Isn't that weird? I mean, I know you're right, but isn't it weird?"

"Yeah. Old people would like to think that you're either bad or good. If you're good, you never use bad language. Only bad girls swear or curse." She cackled.

"Sometimes I am a bad, bad girl," Rebecca said.

"The other side of it is, if we know it bothers someone like it does Polly and Henry, we have enough respect not to swear in front of them. And I don't want Gillian to hear me swearing. At least not until she's, like, thirty or something."

"Thirty-five," Rebecca said as she opened her car door.

"Okay?"

"That's when Henry will be comfortable with me having a boyfriend and doing adult things."

Lexi laughed out loud. "Thirty-five it is, then. He's so funny about you and Andrew."

"You know, Andrew and I have known each other since we were nine."

"Wow, really?"

Rebecca nodded as she craned her neck to look for traffic. There wasn't much back here on Beech Street, but every once in a while, one of the neighbors drove past. "Would you believe that I've always loved him? Since the day we met. He's so stinking smart and he didn't care that I was a girl. He just wanted to be my friend. It was like he was my other half. I know it sounds weird, but I can't imagine living without him. We broke up for a while because he got stupid. It was his father's fault, but he could have made better choices. While we were apart, I thought it would be fun to date other boys."

"And was it?"

"Not really. The best thing was that I figured out how much I wanted to be with Andrew."

"He acts like he's the lucky one."

Rebecca raised an eyebrow. "And we're going to let him keep thinking that. Right?"

"Fine by me. I think he is. So do your parents."

"They're biased. Polly and Andrew have this crazy friendship. Those two spent tons of time together when she first moved to Bellingwood. Sylvie went to work for her in the kitchen and the boys needed to be somewhere. Jason spent his time at the barn, and Andrew spent his time with her. He'd do anything for her. He's always talking about how he misses their trips together. When she went places, she just took him along."

"That's pretty cool."

"Where do you want to go first?" Rebecca aimed for a parking place in front of Sweet Beans. "We could walk down to Greene Space if you want to see it. I have a key."

"No, that's okay."

"Do you want to sew or anything? The quilt shop is really nice here. Cilla works there."

"I'd sew holes in my fingers."

With a little eyebrow waggle, Rebecca pointed at the coffee shop. "Do you need sustenance before we shop?"

"Do you?"

"I'm not allowed to drink coffee yet. Polly would have a cow. She has the weirdest ideas about teenagers and healthy living. What harm is coffee going to do?"

Lexi grinned. "You do know that my major was in neurological science, right?"

"Yeah?" Rebecca did a slow nod. "Oh. You're going to freakin' be on her side, aren't you?"

"A little. You're probably old enough now, but while a child's brain is developing, adding chemicals like caffeine isn't necessary. You want every benefit, right? She's smart to keep an eye on what you kids eat and drink. Especially the younglings, after all the trauma they went through. They need her to pay attention to that for them, even when they don't like it."

"Younglings? We've lost you to *Star Wars*, haven't we."

"It's such a great word. Would you mind if we walked first? I want to see things and have you tell me what you know about the people. I still don't feel like I fit in. I barely know anyone. It's my fault. I'd much rather be at home, but I know it isn't good for me to hide there."

"You've been through it this last year," Rebecca said. "You get to hide as long as you want." She turned in her seat and pointed at Pizzazz. "So, you know the pizza place is owned by Sal's brother-in-law, Dylan Foster. His wife, Lisa, is Mark Ogden's sister and she owns a dance studio down this street." They got out of the car and walked to the corner. Rebecca pointed north. "It's down there. She's pretty nice."

"Do I understand it right that Sal came to Bellingwood from Boston?"

"She and Polly were college roommates. Like, for their whole college time. They became best friends."

"It wasn't like that for me in college. I had friends and I liked my roommate, but I don't think I was best friends with her. She had her own things going on."

"I don't know where I want to go to college." Rebecca led them across the street. "Probably University of Iowa because that's where Andrew is definitely going."

"You want to go there because of him? Really?"

"I know," Rebecca said. "It sounds stupid. The thing is, I talk a really good game about being independent and ready to go out on my own and live a great big life without anyone telling me what to do, but that's not me. I want to travel with Beryl. I want to be creative and do wonderful things. I want to learn whatever I need to learn to build a career. And I want to live in Polly and Henry's house."

"I get that. It's a pretty wonderful place to live."

"I kind of envy you, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"You can live there as long as you want. For the rest of your life, if that makes you happy. You work for Polly and she treats you like a friend and a daughter. But everyone expects me to move out and find my own life. This *is* your own life. You're choosing it. What if I want to choose to stay there, too?"

Lexi laughed. "You do know that Polly isn't any happier about you moving on than you are."

"Henry wouldn't know what to do if Andrew and I were married and living in the same house as him. He'd make Andrew live in the basement."

"That's so funny. But only until you're thirty-five, right?"

"Right." Rebecca looked both ways and pointed across the street. "Let's go see Mr. Gardner at the antique shop first. He's such a cool man. He's old, but he knows everything and doesn't act like you're some dumb kid who can't have an intelligent conversation with him."

"If you could do anything in your life and not worry about money, what would you do?" Lexi asked.

"No one's ever asked me that before."

"I'm asking."

"I don't want to have kids right away. I want to travel and paint and I want to learn how to sculpt with clay and I want to explore the big art centers around the world. I want to go to Paris and Rome and London and then I want to see Easter Island and Machu Picchu and go to all those amazing cathedrals and castles. I want to study

great artists and learn about their passions and their fears and how they saw the world. Every artist sees things differently than anybody else, but we love to look at the way they share their insights. I want to understand it all."

"That's kind of a tall order."

"So, that probably means I'll end up teaching art in an elementary school and wondering why my career didn't go where I wanted it to go."

Lexi stopped on the sidewalk and gripped Rebecca's arm. "Stop that. Don't think that way. If you want to do something, you do it. If your dream is to travel and learn, then travel and learn. Paint, sculpt, teach. Don't settle for less than your dreams."

"But what if I can't?"

"But what if you can."

Vignette #2

Quite a Pair

"I'll be back." Jeff gave Kristen a little wave as he walked past her desk.

"You okay, boss?"

He turned and shot her a look. "I'm fine. Just need to breathe. Take messages, okay?"

He'd just gotten off a phone call with an angry father. One of the groomsmen had picked a fight at the reception on Saturday and destroyed two tables by throwing a person into one and dropping someone else on top of the other. Then, he'd gone through the buffet and destroyed nearly a thousand dollars' worth of serving equipment. It was all insured, but who in the world refused to take responsibility for things like this? Luckily, this was the last daughter the man had. It would be the very last party Jeff agreed to host for them.

That was the thing with living in a small town. You knew the families. He was surprised by none of their behavior. They'd had trouble at the two other weddings this family was involved with. He thought he'd jacked the price up high enough to push them off on someone else, but they agreed to the cost without question. That was a year ago, and until they walked in Saturday morning, he'd completely put them out of his mind.

Jeff pushed the door open into the addition, thought about dumping it on Polly, then decided she didn't need to listen to him whine. She had enough going on. The thing was, no one needed to hear his sad story. Nobody could fix it for him. He only needed to breathe and then get back to work. This was nothing he hadn't dealt with before.

He went on outside and looked around, surprised at himself. Outside wasn't usually his first choice in stress relief. Loud music, spending money, snuggling Luna, cleaning out his car. Those things gave him a sense of calm. When he found his feet leading

him to the barn, he stopped and looked down at them. "Where are we going?"

This seemed like a terrible decision. His shoes weren't particularly new, but walking through dirt and possibly manure would be the end of them. Adam accused him of being a prima donna. Leather shoes were made to be worn and then cleaned, but not Jeff's shoes. These were carefully chosen every morning and each pair received attention before they were put away in their individual containers. Oh, good grief, he *was* a prima donna. But he couldn't help himself. He loved his shoes. His feet loved his shoes. They were so comfortable.

Before he knew it, he had walked through the gate, crossed the pasture and was inside the barn. He looked down again. "Feet, you're insane. This is not part of the relaxation process."

"Hello?" Eliseo stepped out of one of the stalls. "Jeff, is something wrong?"

"Not really. I was frustrated with a conversation and had to get out of the office."

"And you came down here?"

Jeff laughed. "Not me. This is all on my feet. I blame them."

"Your feet." Eliseo nodded slowly. "They have a mind of their own?"

"Apparently they do today. I had no control over their destination. I'd have to say this pair of shoes is looking to be rotated out of the regular cycle. If I can't depend on them to be normal, what can I depend on?"

Eliseo pushed one of the donkeys out of his way. Jeff never knew which was which. He didn't think it was all that important to know their names. He only knew Polly's horse, Demi, because she talked about him all the time. He knew the names of the other three, but for the life of him, couldn't tell who was who.

"You're talking about your shoes as if they're alive and communicating with you," Eliseo said. "That worries me. Do I need to call Adam?"

Jeff laughed. "Sorry. He accuses me of anthropomorphizing them, too. Don't worry. I'm not ready for an institution, but I'm also

not sure why I came down here. It's not my first choice of places that calm me down." He wrinkled his nose. "Hay and horse smells aren't particularly attractive."

"I like 'em," Eliseo said.

"And we're all quite thankful for that."

"Who upset you?"

"The father of the bride from Saturday."

Eliseo laughed out loud. "That was a trip. Let me guess, he doesn't want to take any responsibility for the actions of his out-of-control guests."

"Not at all."

"Haven't they been here before and haven't we had trouble with them each time?"

"I should have said no, but he was willing to pay an outrageous fee."

"Did you make enough extra to cover the loss?" Eliseo snagged a towel from a hook and dusted off one of the benches. "It's just dust," he said as he pointed.

Jeff hovered for a second and then sat. He really needed to get over himself. It was so quiet down here. Eliseo was like a lighthouse in a storm. Always steady, always there, always calm. And the barn was a reflection of the man. It wasn't that things were dirty at all. The floor was swept, there weren't any spiderwebs hanging from the ceiling, the lights were clean. Since the stall doors were all closed, Jeff couldn't see in any of them, but he was certain they were clean, too.

"We made plenty. And I think he's finally run out of kids that need to be married off."

Eliseo chuckled. "We'll hope there are no divorces."

"I've made a note to never say yes to him again." Jeff relaxed and leaned back, thinking as his shoulders hit the wall that he really didn't care if he got dusty. The second donkey wandered in from the back and before Eliseo could stop him, had nosed Jeff's arm.

"Tom," Eliseo said. "Leave him alone. He doesn't have anything for you."

Tom pushed his arm again until Jeff lifted his hand and rubbed

the donkey's neck.

"They're like dogs," Eliseo said. "They never get enough attention."

"And you have to put up with this every day?"

"It's a rough life."

"I keep saying that I should come down here more often. If you hadn't called him by his name, I wouldn't have known which was which."

"That's okay. You have your talent, I have mine."

"But yours are soft and warm."

Eliseo nodded. "They are that. Maybe we should get you a pair of boots so you can come down here without being angry at your leather shoes."

Jeff laughed out loud. "I'd get cowboy boots, but you gotta know that I'd worry about scuffing them up or getting them dirty."

"That's just not right," Eliseo said, shaking his head. "They're made for hard work."

"Oh, and they'd probably be red or purple or blue. Bright blue." Jeff frowned. "I bet I have a pair from the hoe-down all those years ago. I wonder where they went. Oh well. I don't hate spending money on footwear."

"Elva has a pair of red cowboy boots. I don't think I've ever seen her in one of the horse barns with 'em on, but she likes them for dressing up."

"All my shoes are for dressing up."

"Jeff, you really need to learn how to relax."

"That's what Adam says, too. I didn't think I was all that uptight."

"When's the last vacation you took?"

Jeff glared across the aisle. "When's the last vacation *you* took?"

"Every day with these horses is like being on a tropical island."

"Uh huh. You're as good about taking time off as I am."

"When I'm riding Nan, it's as peaceful and relaxing as any beach." Eliseo huffed. "More so. I hate beaches."

"I love beaches. At least I'm taking weekends now. You have to give me that."

"If Adam didn't force you to stay away from this place, would you?"

Jeff nodded. "Probably not. But mostly it's because I like being around people. If I'm by myself for too long, I go stir crazy."

"I'm just the opposite. If I have too many people around, I can't breathe."

"Were you always like that?" Jeff asked quietly.

"No. It happened after I got back." The other donkey - Huck, it must be - nudged Eliseo, and he wrapped an arm around the animal's neck. "I like it down here. Vacations are stressful for me. I'm out of my element and I don't know who will be in my space next. If things get loud or too busy, I don't know where to escape to."

"I didn't think about that," Jeff said. "Are there places you want to visit and can't?"

"Not really. I've been in the mountains, I've seen the ocean, I've done the desert thing. I'm perfectly happy right here."

"I'm guessing a honeymoon to Cancun or Jamaica is out of the question."

"Is that where you're planning to go?"

"We're a pair, aren't we?" Jeff asked. "I don't want to talk about this any more than you do, and yet, I couldn't keep my mouth shut."

Eliseo stood. "I have coffee and scones that Sylvie sent with me this morning. Want one?"

"How come we don't get her scones up at the main building?"

"She loves me." He beckoned to Jeff. "The office is perfectly clean."

"I would never complain about your barn, Eliseo," Jeff said. "It's just that I'm persnickety. That's what my mother always said. Even *I* know it wasn't a compliment." He shoved on the donkey to push it away so he could stand and follow Eliseo.

The donkey nudged Jeff's hip, looking for more attention, and Jeff chuckled. "These guys are pushy."

"Tom's the worst. He knows he is irresistible. I'd let you give him carrot chips, but then he'd never leave you alone."

"You give him the carrots, then. He doesn't want to let me walk."

"Tom." Eliseo clicked his tongue against his teeth and Tom trotted ahead of Jeff. Eliseo led the two donkeys into another stall, then shut the door. "That'll fix 'em."

"I didn't mean for you to lock them up."

"They can get to the pasture. Don't worry." Eliseo gestured to a comfortable looking wooden chair with a soft pad on the seat.

"I shouldn't bother you," Jeff said. "I'm just not ready to go back to work. It doesn't happen often, but sometimes people push me beyond my capacity to remain calm."

"It's no bother. In fact, it's kind of nice to have you stop by. If you had your cowboy boots on, I'd give you a better tour, but this is good enough for now."

"You know I'm making Adam go shopping with me this weekend, right?"

"Buy two pairs. One for dress-up, one to get beat up. Or you could buy a pair of work boots."

Jeff laughed. "Work boots? How boring is that? I don't do boring."

"No, Jeff, you don't. That's why we all like you so much." Eliseo unwrapped a small plate and pushed it across the desk. "Best scones in the Midwest."

"Bet you never thought you'd say that ten years ago. Bet you'd never even heard of a scone."

Eliseo laughed out loud. "Bet you never thought you'd buy a pair of boots to wear to a barn."

Jeff laughed and tipped his coffee mug as a toast. "We're quite a pair."

"We should have dinner together sometime. I'd like to get to know Adam better. He seems like a good man."

"He is. I got lucky. Wasn't sure if I'd ever find someone in the middle of Iowa."

"I understand that," Eliseo said. He shrugged. "I was prepared to live alone for the rest of my life. It's not the worst thing in the world."

"But you have someone who makes amazing scones. Have you bought her a pair of cowboy boots?"

Eliseo laughed. "Maybe I should send her shopping with you."

"I'll bet you know where all the good boot stores are in Iowa. Maybe we should all go." Jeff took a long breath. "The smell isn't that bad. I could get used to it."

"Don't change too fast," Eliseo said. "You'll confuse us."

"Thanks for letting me sit for a minute. This is nice."

"Any time, Jeff. One of these days, maybe I'll even talk you into riding one of the horses."

"Let's not get all crazy."

Vignette #3

Is There Such a Thing as Normal?

"Pizza's here," Skylar called out as he walked down the steps into the basement room that had been turned into a lounge for Kayla and her friends.

Kayla jumped up from the sofa where she'd been sitting between Rebecca and Cilla and ran over to go upstairs. "I'll be right back. Need to get plates and napkins."

"Don't bother. Here I am." Kayla's sister, Stephanie, appeared at the top of the steps with a grocery tote in her hand.

"I'll get it, you don't have to come down here."

Stephanie shrugged. "It's good for me. How are things going?"

Kayla waited at the bottom of the steps, and Stephanie smiled. "Seriously. I'm fine. It doesn't hurt that much." Since the car accident had messed up her leg so badly, when she got tired or spent too much time standing, she used a cane. She had an obvious limp, but the doctor told her she'd always have that.

"We're looking at college stuff," Kayla said. She glanced at the coffee table covered in glossy magazines.

Stephanie stared at the girls. "For who?"

"For Kayla," Rebecca said. "We're working on a plan. Do you want to join us?"

The look Kayla gave her sister was priceless. She didn't want Stephanie to be here. They'd been discussing this for months and still hadn't come up with something Kayla wanted to do. The thing was, Kayla didn't know what she wanted. Well, she did, but that wasn't an option yet. She wanted to be a wife and a mom. She wanted that more than anything, but until she met someone who loved her, Kayla needed to find her own independent life.

Stephanie worried about her younger sister. Life had dealt them some terrible cards, but they'd come so far since moving to Bellingwood. Rebecca Heater had been a big part of Kayla's growth. The two girls had been inseparable from the day they met.

Sometimes Rebecca was a little much for poor Kayla, who could hardly keep up. But she did her best and because of that, she'd made friends, encountered things she never would have experienced back in Ohio, and even gone out with a few boys.

Skylar glanced at Stephanie. She smiled and shook her head. "I don't need to be in the middle of this discussion. If you come up with a plan, Skylar and I will figure out how to make it work. That's what we do."

Kayla took the tote bag from Stephanie and put it up on the antique buffet that the two had refinished last winter. They'd painted it a beautiful teal, and stenciled pink and yellow flowers on the drawer fronts and trim. It worked perfectly as a serving table down here. "You guys want one or two pieces?"

"Two," Rebecca said, as she shuffled what must be college brochures around.

Cilla Waters came over to the buffet and picked up a plate. "Thank you for the pizza, Stephanie. I love coming over here. This is such a great room." She sighed. "And no urchins to pester me."

"I'm glad you like it."

"This is the best room," Kayla said, beaming at Stephanie. "I can't believe it's ours."

"We'll leave you three to your work. If you need anything, buzz me," Stephanie said. "Pop and juice in the fridge. Take what you want."

Rebecca glanced up. "Thank you for everything. This is so nice."

"You're welcome." Stephanie pointed at the steps. "You go first, Sky."

He nodded and went up. It took her longer to make the trek and she hated knowing that people were standing behind her, waiting and waiting. By the time she got up to the top and headed inside, Sky was setting plates out.

"You wanna eat in here or the living room?" he asked.

"This is fine, if that's what you want."

He breathed out. "I asked you first."

"I really don't care. Whatever you want." She looked at his face and realized that she'd done it again. "No, really. Here would be

nice. Thank you."

Sometimes it felt like she had to battle every day to remember that her father no longer controlled her. She had worked so hard to become her own person, but every once in a while she drifted back into the little girl who acquiesced to everything, just to keep peace in the house. If she didn't push back, he wouldn't get angry and hurt her mother.

She and Skylar talked about that part of her life, both in therapy sessions and when they were alone. He wanted her to be strong and independent, to be herself, even when it was difficult for her. He hated it when she treated him like he was the one in control. Stephanie knew that he hurt deeply for the girl she'd once been.

Stephanie reached out and took his hand. "Thank you."

He nodded and gave her hand a squeeze. "What would you like to drink?"

"If I tell you I just want a glass of water, will you tease me about being a lightweight?"

"Not tonight. Water it is."

Stephanie sat at the little table. She couldn't believe the life she was living. Everything inside this apartment was hers. It was all hers. Even Skylar. This wonderful, gorgeous, crazy, silly man was part of her life. He loved her and treated her like she was a goddess. How in the world had that happened?

"How did what happen?" Skylar asked, looking at her with concern as he set two glasses of ice water on the table.

"Did I say that out loud?" Stephanie laughed. "I was thinking about how different my life was. I can't believe that I'm here. With you. And Kayla is downstairs talking to her best friends about going to college. How did this happen?"

"You made it happen," he said. "You didn't give up. You never gave up. Stephanie, I don't think you see yourself for who you truly are. You are one impressive young woman. You're smart and tenacious. You love like nobody's business and you are a solid rock, no matter how wildly the storm rages around you. That's the first thing I noticed."

"What?"

"It's hard to explain. You're solid."

She scowled at him.

"Not like that. You don't change." Skylar shook his head. "That's not right, either. I know you've changed a lot. But you are always Stephanie. No matter what. You're safe. You're just ... Stephanie."

"Thank you. I think." She gave him a small smile. "No. I get it. I understand what you mean. You know that's what I always wanted to be for Kayla. I wanted her to feel safe. Whatever I had to do, wherever we had to go, I wanted her to feel what I never felt. I wanted her to go to bed at night and know that the next time her eyes opened, the sun would be shining and she had a wonderful day ahead."

"She has that." He nodded toward the back door. "I still can't believe those three are old enough to be talking about college."

"I remember the night I met Polly and Rebecca," Stephanie said. "Kayla wanted so badly to spend the night at their house because I had to work late, but she woke up from a bad dream and got scared. Polly called me. It was no big deal that Kayla woke her up and they had to wait for me to drive over there. She didn't care that I lived in the trailer park and we had nothing. Rebecca didn't care either. She thought Kayla's room was awesome, even though we hardly had anything. I can't believe Kayla found her as a friend."

"And you found Polly as a boss," Skylar said. "I guess I did, too. Where do you think Kayla will go next year?"

The three of them had been talking about this for months and Kayla still didn't know what she wanted to do. "You want to make a wager?"

He waggled his eyebrows at her, then laughed when she shook her head. "What'll I win?"

"I don't care."

"How about if I win, you go away with me for a weekend, just us. No Kayla. No worries. We go somewhere and have fun."

"And if I win," Stephanie said, "You go away with *me* for a week. Just us. No Kayla."

The slice of pizza was already heading for Skylar's mouth. Rather than taking a bite, he set it on the plate and looked at her in

shock. "Wait. What?"

"I have plenty of vacation and I want to see more of the world. I'll take Kayla another time, but I'd love to go to Colorado. Drive in the mountains, go to Denver, be a tourist."

"Just us?" he asked, his face still showing his surprise. "Alone?"

"Yes."

"Then I want to change my choice. I'll choose the same thing. Except, why don't I pick Philadelphia. A whole week with only us? I want that."

Stephanie laughed. "You know, we could plan a vacation without the wager, but back to the bet. I say that Kayla will go to the community college in Boone. She'll live here and work more hours at the front desk so she can afford it. Jeff said that she could help Judy Greene at the bed and breakfast, too."

"You know we can help with college." Skylar shook his head. "I know, I know. We've talked about this. She has to figure out how to do it on her own."

"You're still paying off your student loans. I don't want her to do that. We'll help if she needs it. Now, what's your bet?"

"Since you won't let her take out a student loan, I don't know if I have one. I was going to say she'd go to the University of Iowa with Rebecca."

"Those girls really need to separate from each other. Rebecca isn't always going to be around for her. Rebecca and Andrew will get married and travel around the world and do crazy things. Kayla isn't that person," Stephanie said. "You know I worry that Kayla relies on her too much for everything."

He reached over and took her hand. "She's going to be okay. You have to believe in her."

Stephanie nodded and pushed the pizza around on her plate. She discovered two or three months ago that Skylar loved mushrooms, but she hated them, so he never ordered pizza with mushrooms on it. They hadn't fought about it, but she did teach him that Pizzazz would actually make the two halves of a pizza different. He was such a good guy. "I do believe in her. She's so innocent, though. I never thought that would be a bad thing, but it

scares me for her."

"That's why I'm glad you guys live in Bellingwood. You have friends that will help her. Not just Rebecca, but Cilla's down there helping them plan, too. And no boy can get past Andrew Donovan to Kayla. She's going to be fine. So, what will you do if she finds a program at the University and really wants to go to school over there? Not just because of Rebecca?"

"I guess we'll make it work." Stephanie shook her head. "I'm not old enough to be worrying about college for someone else. This is weird, right?"

"Exactly what has been normal about your life?" he asked with a grin. "It hasn't mattered up until now. And look, that weird life of yours brought us together. What's normal about living in the caretaker's apartment of a little hotel in the middle of Iowa? Or working for a woman who finds dead bodies? Or spending your days in an old schoolhouse with big horses that live right nearby. It's all a little weird. Puhleeze."

"You're right." Stephanie took a deep breath. "We can do it. We can do anything. I'm just glad that you don't let me do it all by myself."

"Never. I'm always going to be here. You know I love you."

She blinked back sudden tears. "Wow. Didn't expect to cry. I love you, too."

Vignette #4

Of Pinups and Comics

Henry Sturtz rapped on the front door of Woody's Garage. The door was locked since the shop wasn't yet open for business. Nate Mikkels, the primary owner, looked up from behind the counter, waved, and as he made the move to come around, stopped and smiled.

Justin Waters was already dashing across the room.

"Looks like a crew with nothing to do this morning," Henry said. He handed a box of donuts to Justin. "Tell me the coffee is hot."

"Not as fancy as your wife's coffee shop coffee, but it packs a punch." Louis Waters put his hand on his son, Kirk's, shoulder and stood up. "I see you already have a mug here with your name on it."

Henry smiled. Nate, Kirk, and the other mechanic, Bruce McKenzie, a friend of Polly's from high school, not only wanted to open a garage, but they had a pretty good idea it would end up being a place where their friends might come when they wanted to talk about cars.

Large black and white checked tile on the floor and retro neon signs were only the beginning of the fifties-era decor Nate had used in the front of the shop. But once you went through the *Employees Only* door, you were in a fully-functional, contemporary garage.

One of the two Woodies that Henry and Nate hoped to restore someday sat outside under an overhang and two restored antique gas pumps had been set up at the edge of the parking lot. The teal and white color scheme had attracted a lot of local attention.

"What's in the envelope?" Kirk asked, pointing at Henry's hand.

"I brought a couple of pinup calendars," Henry said with a laugh. "Found 'em online."

Justin's eyes got big. "Really? Cool. We'll have to put them up in the back, though. Mom would kill us if she saw them out front."

Henry nodded his thanks at Louis as the older man set a mug in

front of him on the table. Four square retro diner-type tables with teal speckled tops sat in front of the glass windows that looked out on the Woodie. The walls had been painted bright white and a counter that matched the tabletops held a chrome coffee urn. A peg board with hooks for mugs filled the wall. A small glass round display would hold pastries once they opened. The donuts that Henry brought in today had been dropped onto the table in front of Bruce, Kirk and Louis.

"Are you ready to open next week?" Henry asked Bruce.

"We are," Bruce said with a nod.

"Hopefully we're not too busy for a while," Nate said. "You know, at least a month to make sure that everything is running smoothly."

"Then they want to get so busy that they have to hire me," Justin said. He shrugged. "I like my job in Boone just fine, though. It's a fun place to work."

"That's great," Henry said.

Kirk had worried about his son, who didn't seem to have any idea what he wanted to do with his life after graduation. But Justin's love of cars and engines came straight from his grandfather. Kirk and his father had rebuilt a Camaro Z28 that waited in Louis's garage until Kirk and his family moved to Bellingwood two years ago. Now, it was Justin's car, and whenever it was parked across the street from the Bell House, Justin was outside tinkering under the hood or polishing the Camaro until it shined. His younger sister, Lara, either idolized her brother, or also wanted to be a gear head, because whenever she could, she was right beside him, asking how she could help.

"But he hasn't met a girl yet," Louis said, shaking his head. "Spends all his time with that Camaro."

"I'm here at the garage, too, Grandpa," Justin said. "Mostly here."

"Ain't gonna meet girls in a garage."

Henry put his hand on Justin's back. "You never know. Those girls in my house are just as likely to drive into a garage as they are to let me take care of their car." He laughed. "Especially if there's a good-lookin' single boy behind the counter."

Justin blushed and Kirk laughed out loud. "Even Polly?"

"Especially Polly," Henry said. "She loves to embarrass them. Especially if she knows their name. That's why I haven't let her come to Boone with the Suburban for an oil change." He took a drink from his mug and put it back down. "She'd end you."

Justin dropped his head forward. "Just what I need. I'm still the newbie. That would be so embarrassing."

They all looked up at another rap on the front door. Justin was on his feet in a flash, though it wasn't necessary; no one else bothered to move.

"Doug Randall," Henry said when the young man came in. "What are you doing over here this morning?"

"Tell me you have coffee," Doug said.

Henry pointed at the box of donuts. "I brought donuts to pay for my coffee. What did you bring?"

Doug grinned and produced a package. "Reading material. I thought you might like to have something for your customers. Now can I have some coffee?"

Justin accepted the package and handed it to his father.

"You go ahead," Kirk said.

The young man opened the end, frowned, and then pulled out a stack of comic books. "For real?"

"Yeah," Doug said. "Free comic book day came and went and since we aren't open yet, I figured you all might like to have some of these for your customers to read while they wait. If you keep me in coffee until we open, I'll keep you in comic books."

"I'll change your oil for free if you bring these over," Bruce McKenzie said. "My kids can hardly wait for you to open."

Doug shook his head. "I'll bring a stack of comics over for your kids. They're just sitting in boxes right now. When are you opening?"

"Next week," Nate said, flipping through a Minecraft comic. "I didn't even know they had these. Doug Randall, you are going to corrupt the children of this fair city. My five oldest aren't going to be able to contain themselves. Joss will think they should be at the library, but they'll all be across the street begging for a few dollars

to buy a comic book. I've assured her they can read both. I did."

"I'm trying not to be nervous," Doug said. "Anita and Billy keep assuring me that things are going to be okay, but this is huge for me." He poured a cup of coffee and sat down beside Justin. "I'm scared to death that it will fail."

"Right there with ya, buddy," Nate said. "Being an entrepreneur is always a risk."

"But if you don't try it, you'll be sorry," Henry said. "Especially if it's something you really want. You'll be fine. Heck, just in this group alone, how many kids are there who would spend every last dollar they have in your shop?"

The men all looked around at each other, counting on their fingers and in their heads.

"Thirteen?" Justin asked. "And me. I used to read *Spider Man* all the time."

Kirk wrinkled his forehead. "I remember that. I brought a few home for you every time I got leave. Been a while. I should do that for the kids."

Justin nodded. "It was awesome. They're still in my room somewhere. I probably have to catch up, though."

"If you want to, we can help with that," Doug said. "But you can just start a new series. No big deal."

"When are *you* opening?" Louis Waters asked Doug. "I can't wait to see what you're doing on the inside. I remember when that little restaurant was in there. Deb says I should remember the gorilla story, but it's hazy. I hear you have a big gorilla painting on a wall in there. From way back?"

"Yeah. Anita has a friend who's going to restore it." Doug laughed. "She put a tarp up over it, says it's creepy and watches her when she works."

"What's your timeline?" Nate asked.

"Anita says she wants us to be open by Bellingwood Days. I don't know if we're going to make it, but I'll try. Even if we don't have everything perfect. We won't do the grand opening until September, though."

"Why so late?" Justin asked.

"I can't believe you haven't heard," Doug said. "I thought it was a secret, but it's the noisiest secret I've ever had. *Sword Lords II* is coming out and they're going to do the release here in Bellingwood."

Justin's mouth dropped open. "No way."

"Yeah. It's going to be huge." Doug looked at Justin and then at Kirk. "Did you guys know that the people who wrote that game are from Bellingwood?"

If Justin's mouth could have opened any wider, it would have. "Bellingwood?"

"Yeah, the owner of Secret Woods used to be a partner, but not anymore. He set this whole thing up for me." Doug shrugged. "Well, he put me in contact with the right people. There are going to be hundreds of people in town that weekend. I have to be ready by then."

Justin just sat and shook his head in awe. "Bellingwood? Seriously? Podunk Bellingwood?"

"Hey now," Henry said with a laugh. "Stuff happens here."

"But not *Sword Lords*. Have you played that game? It's great. Does everyone know about them being from here?"

"Pretty much," Doug said. "At least they do now. The owners came back to open the winery and Polly found a body. You know, the usual stuff. It was like all the old people in town knew who they were, but nobody ever said anything."

"Seriously," Henry said. "I am not an old people."

Doug laughed. "Well, you weren't telling us. No one really talked about it. We just played the game."

"Have you told the Chamber about this event?" Nate asked.

"Oh yeah," Doug said. "As soon as I heard about it. Jeff Lindsay and Nan Stallings, that awesome girl who does web design and marketing? They're putting together a plan. You should be getting information in the next couple of weeks."

Nate nodded and set the comic book back on the table. "Thanks for these, Doug. You're welcome to coffee any time you want to take a break." He leaned across the table and picked up the manilla envelope Henry had brought in. "Pinup calendars?"

"You bet. I think you'll like them. There might even be panting," Henry said.

That drew everyone's attention.

He shrugged. "See for yourselves."

Nate pulled a calendar out and laughed out loud. He flipped it open so everyone could see the photograph of a pit bull dressed up and posing for the camera. After handing it to Bruce, he took the second calendar out and shook his head while still laughing. "Henry Sturtz, you're a twisted man."

The second calendar had photographs of cats in fancy outfits, posed with their legs up to clean themselves, sprawled across a furry rug, or lying on cat-sized beds and sofas.

"Even our wives can't be upset at these," Bruce said. "I want the pit bull calendar in the garage. I have the perfect place for it."

"We'll hang the cats on the wall beside the computer," Nate said. "I can't wait to tell Joss that Henry brought us pinup calendars for the shop."

~~~

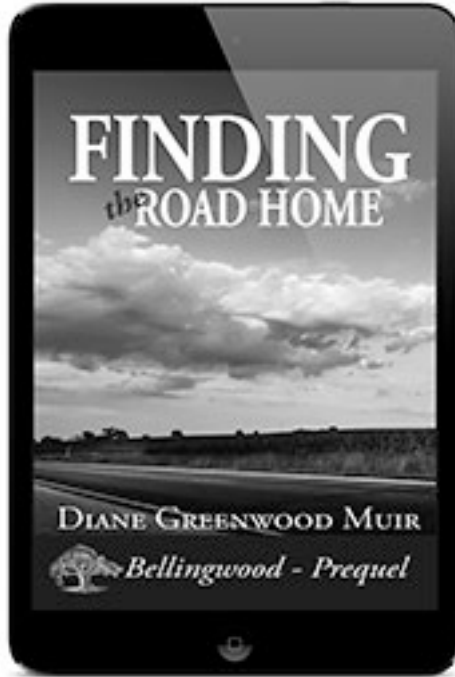
*(Turn the page for links and more information.  
You know you want to.)*

Meet Polly before she arrives in Bellingwood.

FREE novella.

Click on the image or go to

<http://nammynools.com/bellingwood-prequel/>



*(Keep going, there's more.)*

*Don't miss any books in Diane Greenwood Muir's*

## Bellingwood Series

Diane publishes a new book in this series  
on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March, June, September, and December.

Short stories are published in between those dates. vignettes are  
written and published each month in the newsletter.

The first nine books, plus short stories, are published  
to Kindle in three boxed sets:

[Bellingwood Boxed Set: Books 1-3](#)

[Bellingwood Boxed Set: Books 4-6](#)

[Bellingwood Boxed Set: Books 7-9](#)

To ensure that you never miss anything,  
sign up for the newsletter by clicking on this [LINK](#).

You can find a list of all published works at [nammynools.com](http://nammynools.com)

## Journals

(Paperback only)

Find Joy – A Gratitude Journal

Books are Life – A Reading Journal

Capture Your Memories – A Journal

## Abide With Me

(Kindle only)

[Abiding Love](#) - the story of Ruth

[Abiding Grace](#) - the story of the Prodigal Son

[Abiding Hope](#) – the story of the Good Samaritan

*(Turn one more page!)*

# THANK YOU!



I'm so glad you enjoy these stories about Polly Giller and her friends. There are many ways to stay in touch with Diane and the Bellingwood community.

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

Join the Bellingwood Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/pollygiller>

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

Diane Greenwood Muir's [Amazon Author Page](#) is a great place to watch for new releases.

Follow Diane on Twitter at [twitter.com/nammynools](https://twitter.com/nammynools) for regular updates and notifications.

Recipes and decorating ideas found in the books can often be found on Pinterest at: <http://pinterest.com/nammynools/>

And if you are looking for Sycamore House swag, check out Polly's CafePress store: <http://www.cafepress.com/sycamorehouse>

*Finis*