



# NEW BEGINNINGS

## *Vignettes*

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



*Bellingwood - Book 39*



# Book Thirty-Nine Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR

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THANK YOU!

## INTRODUCTION

These vignettes originally came about as a way to keep readers engaged while I was writing the next book. Talk about ravenous readers! Each short, short, short story (vignette) is published on either the website ([nammynools.com](http://nammynools.com)) or in the email newsletter that comes out on the twenty-fifth of each month.

Be sure to sign up for the newsletter so you don't miss anything, especially the latest vignette.

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

I have compiled the vignettes relating to Book 39 — New Beginnings — 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**

### **From Chaos to Party?**

Cat held the back door open while James ran inside. Lissa squirmed in her arms, desperately wanting to be put down. As soon as they were in the kitchen, Cat set her on the floor, then turned around and went back out to the stoop to get her bags. She'd be thankful when Lissa was able to take care of herself, but at eight months, she still needed her mommy.

James was two years old, and bless Grandma Marie's soul, she wasn't afraid of helping to potty train him. Bless Grandma Marie for everything. Cat couldn't live without that woman. And now, here she was, ready to flop down on the sofa and take a nap before spending the evening working on lesson plans. That wouldn't happen. No nap for this mommy. She wanted to spend time with her children and wow, was she hungry. Hopefully, Hayden wouldn't be too late tonight.

He'd sent her a text saying that he'd get dinner before he left Ames, so she shouldn't wait. Cat didn't want to make him feel guilty, but wow, she missed him.

A scream pealed through the house, sending Cat flying into the dining room. No kids in here, so she headed for the living room. Lissa was seated on the floor laughing like a hyena as her brother danced around with his teddy bear. Laughter, not terror. Cat took in a breath. She was going to have to train her daughter to make a clear distinction between the two.

"Keep an eye on your sister for a few minutes, James," Cat said. "I'm going to do something about dinner."

He kept dancing, but she knew he heard her.

The next sound she heard was her phone. Where was that thing? Cat dumped her first bag onto the kitchen table. Folders, books, papers, and other classwork fell out, but no phone.

A knock at the back door nearly sent her to her knees. This was too much.

"Who is it!" she yelled.

James ran into the kitchen. "Mommy!"

"Where's your sister, James?"

"Messy."

"What kind of mess."

Another knock. The phone had stopped ringing, but as soon as the knock sounded, it started up again.

"Go stand beside your sister and don't let her make it any worse," Cat said, shooing James toward the door. "Hurry!"

She'd learned that word would move him if nothing else. He scurried off and Cat ran to the back door.

Emma McKenzie, Hannah and Bruce's sixth-grade daughter, stood there. "Are you busy?" she asked.

"I'm insane. Come in right now," Cat said. "I need you."

Emma giggled and followed Cat into the kitchen. She glanced at the mess of papers and books on the table and cocked her head when the phone started ringing again.

"I can't find it. Don't bother, follow me." Cat ran through the dining room into the living room and stopped. "Where did Lissa find markers?"

"There, Mommy," James said, pointing at a table beside the sofa.

"What are markers doing in there?" Cat's voice was rising. She was either going to yell or cry. She didn't want to do either.

"Can I help you?" Emma asked.

"I want to cry."

Emma picked Lissa up and took the marker from her hand. "These are washable. It's okay. Should I take her up to her room and change her clothes?"

Bruce and Hannah McKenzie had moved into the house next door in July. Hannah worked for Sycamore Enterprises and Bruce had purchase a share of Woody's Garage. Their three children were good kids, if a little spoiled. Hannah let them get away with nearly anything. They didn't have a curfew and Cat wasn't sure if they were ever home for a family meal. The oldest, Sammy, was Elijah's age. Whenever Elijah was at the music store, Sammy made his way over there. Emma seemed to always be on her phone, talking to



friends, and the youngest, Tyler spent every bit of free time playing games on a tablet.

But Emma was helpful when Cat needed someone to keep an eye on James and Lissa. She'd spent time with them several times in the last two months.

"That would be wonderful. James, go upstairs with Emma and help her find anything she needs. Thank you both."

Emma walked away and Cat said, "Honey, why did you come over?"

"Oh!" Emma said, turning around. "Mom is grilling and she wanted me to ask if you'd like a hamburger. They had leftover potatoes and salad from a thing today at Sycamore House, so we have a ton of food."

"Are you kidding me?"

That made Emma stop. "Is it okay?"

"It's wonderful," Cat said. "You've saved my life."

"I can bring the food over if you want me to."

"Do you have homework?"

"Some. But it's no big deal."

"I'll talk to your Mom. If you'd like to make a few dollars tonight, I could use your help. I don't care if you do homework here while you're with the kids."

"It's really no big deal. It can wait."

"You know who you're talking to, right?" Cat asked with a grin. "Teacher-lady. Homework is a big deal."

Emma shrugged. "I'll clean up Lissa, then go tell Mom you want dinner."

Cat watched them go upstairs, then went back to the kitchen. Someone had been trying to reach her and they were probably worried by now. She dug into her second bag and was confused when she pulled out a paper sack. "Where did this come from?"

She set it on the table and kept digging. This would drive her husband nuts. Everything in his life was organized. He told her over and over that he couldn't figure out how she kept her life straight with all the chaos she carried. What did he know? She found what she needed, when she needed it. And it wasn't like she

created messes on purpose. She always tried to be organized, but somehow things mixed themselves up when she least expected it.

"There you are," she said, snagging the brightly colored phone. She'd done that on purpose. Her phone was often lost at the bottom of her bag, so at least the wild colors of the phone case made it stand out.

Cat swiped it open and saw that she'd missed three calls from Hayden. No voicemail either. He knew that it was usually messy when she got home with the kids. Why wouldn't he leave a message, knowing she'd call him back as soon as she had time? That made her nervous. She called.

And it went to voicemail.

"Hay, what's wrong? I was trying to deal with Lissa, who found a marker. I'm sorry I missed your calls. I'll keep my phone on my body until we talk. I hope everything's okay." Cat took a breath and ended the call.

Another knock at the back door made her jump. She went out onto the porch and saw Hannah McKenzie there with a big smile on her face.

"Come on in," Cat said.

"Is my daughter here?"

"She's upstairs with Lissa and James." Cat remembered that she needed to clean up the marker stain Lissa had left on the carpet.

"What's wrong?" Hannah asked.

"Too many things happening all at once. Emma said you were grilling burgers tonight. How can I help you?"

"You can't at all. Since she didn't come back with an answer, I thought I should check. My daughter is easily distracted."

"This time it was my fault. I was glad she showed up when she did."

"I'll make up a couple of plates. Will James eat a hamburger?"

"He'll eat part of one. That would be wonderful. Are you sure I can't do anything?"

"All we're doing is grilling. The rest of the food is from work. This is easy."

Cat's phone rang. She pulled it out, saw that it was Hayden, and

said, "I need to take this. I missed earlier calls."

Hannah walked toward the back door. "I'll be back in a bit."

"Hay?" Cat asked. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I have to leave town. We're driving out tonight."

"You what?" She stopped herself from screeching, but only just.

"I know. I'm sorry. A big thing blew apart in Davenport and we need to get over there right now."

"Literally blew apart?"

"No. Figuratively, but my boss can't go and someone needs to be onsite as soon as possible. I'm sorry. We're about to drive away, but I wanted to let you know first. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I miss you."

"I miss you, too. I get comp time, if that means anything. I'm really sorry."

"When are you coming home?"

"Tomorrow night, but it will probably be late, after the kids have gone to bed."

"You don't have any extra clothes or anything. This is nuts."

"I don't think I'll have time to change out of what I'm wearing anyway. It *is* nuts. Unexpected and nuts. Will you be okay?"

"You know how happy we were to have the McKenzies move in next door?"

"Yes?"

"I'm really happy now. Emma is here with me and Hannah is bringing dinner over."

"We'll do something nice for them this weekend."

"I love you, Hay. Be safe."

"I'm sorry. And now I have to go. Jim is making faces at me."

"Bye." Hannah set the phone on the table and dropped into a chair.

"Mrs. Harvey?" Emma walked in, carrying a freshly cleaned up Lissa. James was carrying a stack of books.

"Cat when we're here, Emma. Mrs. Harvey at school. Thank you for taking care of the kids. Your mom stopped by wondering where you were."

"I should ..."

"No, it's okay. I told her you were helping me. She's coming back with food. Emma, I'm thankful for you tonight."

"All I did was clean up Lissa. I put her dirty clothes in the hamper. Do you want me to bring it downstairs?"

"Maybe later. Do you want to spend the night?" Cat asked with a laugh. "I'm kidding. Hayden isn't coming home. He's off on an emergency call to Davenport."

"That's clear on the east side of the state."

"Yep."

"I can ask Mom if she'd let me stay over."

"No, it's okay, but thank you. I wouldn't mind having you spend the evening with me and the kids, though. That would be a big help."

"Any time, Mrs., I mean, Cat. Really, any time. Your kids are great."

At a third knock on the door, Cat sighed.

"It's probably Mom," Emma said. "I'll get it." She hefted Lissa to her other hip and walked out. "It's Mom."

Hannah walked in with two big platters filled with food. "When will Hayden be home?"

"He's not coming home tonight," Cat said. "Some business thing. Just me and the kids."

"Then have I got a deal for you. My boys are all watching a football game. Let me and Emma feed you and take care of your kiddos. We'll make it a girls' night. With a perfect little boy in attendance." Hannah patted James' head.

Cat nodded. She frowned at the paper bag on the table and after bringing it closer, opened it. What she found inside made her laugh out loud.

"What?" Emma asked.

"Marie is taking care of me." Cat pulled out a container of Marie's homemade macaroni and cheese, four hamburger buns, and a bag of pre-cooked hamburgers. The final container she took out was filled with chocolate chip cookies.

"Everyone is taking care of me." She walked over to the counter beside Hannah and pulled her neighbor into a hug. "Thank you."

The move surprised Hannah, but she hugged Cat back. "We won't be in your way?"

"I'm glad to have you here. Let me clean off the table and we'll eat. James, did you wash your hands while you were helping Emma?"

Emma nodded as he held up his hands, turning them back and forth for his mother to see. Cat kissed his forehead.

"Instead of work, tonight it's a party." She brought down colorful paper plates they had left over from the last birthday party and found plastic cups. "I have a bottle of sparkling grape juice in here for the adults and apple juice for the kiddos. Let's have some fun."

## Vignette #2

### You're My Best Friend

Joss read the text that just came in.

*"I'm stuck. I need help."*

She looked around and since there were only a few patrons in the library and they were caught up in their own business, she put up a sign that explained how to do self-checkout and tore for the basement stairs. Andy had never sent her a text like this and she didn't dare leave the poor woman in a bad way.

*"Where are you?"* she sent back when she got to the bottom of the stairs. Nothing seemed out of place.

*"Don't laugh. I'm in the bathroom. The door won't open."*

Joss couldn't help herself. She was laughing. The only problem was, the women's bathroom was off to the right and the door was wide open. *"Why are you in the men's bathroom?"*

*"Oh. I should have explained that. Otherwise, I'm only a weird old lady. Cleaning up after disgusting young men."*

*"We have people who do this work."* Joss got to the door and, though Andy had said she couldn't get out, tried the handle anyway.

"It won't open," Andy said from behind the door. "I've tried for the last five minutes and have come up with a million ways to get myself out of here, but nothing will work. That little window over the sink is too high and too skinny for me."

"I don't know what to do," Joss said, frustrated. "Stand back."

"Where?" Andy asked.

She was right. These bathrooms were tiny.

"Okay, I'm back as far as I can get."

Joss lifted her right leg and placed it at the door handle, then set it down, lifted again and tried to kick it open. She ended up on her back end. "Oof."

"Don't tell me you tried to kick it down," Andy asked.

"Leave me alone."

"You have six children, ponies, and a dog. You are not a weak-

minded person. No ideas at all?"

"None."

"I'm going to die in here."

Andy Specek was not one to exaggerate and make a situation bigger with dramatics.

"Looks like I can slide thin foods underneath for the rest of your life. Nothing thicker than a tortilla shell, though."

"You'll have to start with cleaning rags. The floor is disgusting. How has this bathroom missed Lance's notice?"

"He does only what's necessary. And he's the board president's grandson who needs a job."

"Yes. I'm going to die in here. Please tell my family that I love them."

Joss chuckled. "You have a phone. You can call and tell them yourself." Even as she spoke, she scanned through her contacts list, hoping to find someone who was handy. Henry Sturtz would take care of her, but she knew how busy he was and besides, he was likely far away from Bellingwood.

"How handy is Len?"

"He's handy. This is embarrassing, though."

"You've never embarrassed yourself in front of him?"

"I am not talking to you about that. You won't call your husband?"

"I would, but he doesn't have any tools and he'll make a big deal out of going home to get them and then turn this into an immense project and ..."

"I will have died by then."

Joss landed on Bruce McKenzie's name. If he wasn't under a car, he'd walk across the street and help them. Doug Randall was across the street to the north. She'd never seen him as a handy kind of a guy, but he had re-done the interior of the comic book store by himself. Henry had done some of the work, but Doug had taken on the big projects. His father was known to be a good guy, too.

"Doug Randall or Bruce McKenzie?"

"Oh, the options you offer me," Andy said. "Why not call Polly or Beryl? Do you believe that because they're girls, they can't figure

this out?"

"Andy," Joss said flatly. "We're girls."

"Oh. That wasn't helpful, was it?"

"Doug or Bruce? Your choice."

"Start with Bruce. If he's busy, try Doug."

Joss sighed in frustration. Why couldn't she figure this out? What was wrong with the stupid door? "Bruce, it is." In her mind, she repeated, *"Please be free, Bruce. Please be free."*

"Woody's Garage."

She didn't know the men there well enough to guess who was answering, so she forged ahead. "Is Bruce available?"

"This is he. How can I help you?"

"Hi, Bruce. This is Joss over at the library. Are you alone right now?"

"That sounds like a proposition sure to make people talk."

She laughed out loud.

"What?" Andy asked from behind the door.

"Bruce thinks I'm propositioning him."

"You might have to in order to save my life."

"If it comes to that, I will. I promise."

Bruce was laughing by this point. "What happened over there?"

"I'm asking because Andy is locked behind a door in the basement and we can't figure out how to open it."

"But she isn't hurt?"

"No. Though she's afraid she will die in there."

"Got it. I have a few minutes. Kirk is here and I can leave. You're in the basement?"

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I've opened more doors than you might believe. One time when Sammy was young, he locked himself inside his bedroom. I had to run home from work, take off the screen and storm window from the outside, and climb through his window with my tools to remove the hinges."

"Boys are adventurous little things."

"He wasn't supposed to be home. He was supposed to be at the neighbors. I got a panicked call from the mom while she sat outside



the locked door trying to keep him calm. She needn't have worried. By the time I got there, he was sound asleep on his bed."

Joss chuckled. She had her own stories like that with her kids. Didn't everyone?

"You can't get in through this window. Not even you are skinny enough."

"Let me see what we have before we take extreme measures. Give me five minutes."

"Five minutes, Andy."

"Five minutes closer to my death. I can wait."

"You are never like this. What is up with you?"

"Have you ever been locked in a filthy bathroom with a filthy rag and no hope? Wait until it happens to you."

"You have water to wash the filthy rag."

"Uh huh. The rag has gone beyond hope. No amount of water will help this thing. It needs to be burned. You know ... die like the good rag that it was."

"Andy!" Joss said with a strained laugh.

"Worry. You should worry. When I've moved to macabre humor, my next step is singing. I do not have a pretty voice." To emphasize her words, she wailed out, "Love is a many-splendored thing." Her voice cracked and never once landed near a familiar pitch.

Joss wasn't sure if she was messing around or that was truly her voice.

"That's my voice," Andy said. "My real voice."

Joss said nothing.

"You can't speak. I don't do that to you very often."

To protest would be embarrassing, to commiserate would be facetious, to argue would be ... well ... wrong. Joss remained silent.

"No one ever gets to hear me sing," Andy said. "When I go to church, I mouth the words to the hymns."

How could Joss possibly respond?

She was relieved to hear footsteps pounding down the basement steps.

"Joss? Where are you?" Bruce McKenzie called out.

"Turn left at the first aisle. You'll see me."

"Saved by the mechanic, weren't you?" Andy asked.

"I'm not talking to you right now." Joss gave Bruce a weak wave and backed away from the door so he could get closer in.

He did the same things she had done. Jiggled the handle, turned it and pushed, turned it and shoved hard. Then he frowned. "Odd. The door is locked."

"What?"

"It's locked. Do you have a key?"

"We've never had a key," Joss replied. "Andy is there a switch to flip back there?"

"I may be about to die, but I have not lost all my faculties. No, there is no switch to flip. And I don't even have anything long enough to push through the door plate to let you know that I'm still breathing in here. It's not pleasant having to breathe in here, but I'm doing it."

"How long?" Joss asked Bruce.

"It's been years since I picked locks."

Andy tsked. "Picking locks, young Master McKenzie? Were you ever caught?"

"No, and it feels like you should be happy I learned a few tricks."

"Not pulling any punches with the old lady, are you?" Andy asked.

Bruce turned to Joss. "How long as she been friends with Miz Watson?"

"Longer than you've been alive, young man," Andy said. "I don't hear any clicking happening on that side of the door. Prove your worth."

Joss's eyes grew big and she grimaced with laughter. She opened her mouth, and shook her head, while lifting her shoulders. "I don't know," she mouthed.

"How long were you in there before I arrived?" Bruce asked.

"Long enough."

"How long before you called me?" Joss asked her. "You said it was only five minutes."

"I exaggerated."

"Which way?"

"By a half hour, maybe? I started to lose track of time. When one sees their death happening in a filthy men's bathroom in the basement of the town library, measuring time becomes inconsequential."

Bruce continued to work on the lock, peering into it as he moved little pieces of metal around.

Joss heard a click. "Is that it?"

He nodded and stepped back, gesturing for her to go ahead. But Joss didn't have time to turn the knob.

Andy flung the door open and lunged at Bruce, knocking him off balance with a hug. "My hero. Don't tell anyone, but you are my very favorite man today. No one else will come close."

"Not even Len?" Joss asked.

"Poor man, he's far behind Bruce McKenzie right now." Andy panted a few long breaths, dramatic, to be sure. "I'm free. I'm free!" She lifted Bruce's hand over her head and spun underneath it. "This is as much of a jig I shall dance, but dance, I shall." She spun underneath it again.

"Do you two have this much fun at the library every day?" he asked.

"What? Don't you dance jigs after being locked in a filthy bathroom at the garage every day?" Andy asked.

He nodded. "It's never really come up."

"Let me pay you for your time," Joss said, knowing he wouldn't allow it.

Bruce laughed. "That's not right. We're neighbors. Kirk and I will always be here for you. Now, I have a car that has been piddling oil into a pan. I should take care of that."

"Did you just say that?" Andy asked. "In front of our ladylike ears?"

"It's Miz Watson for sure, only in a shorter body," he responded.

"Thank you, Bruce," Joss called out as he headed for the steps. "I will find a way to express thanks that you can't refuse." Sweet Beans would take care of her.

He waved and turned the corner.

"We need a new door," Andy said.

"It never occurred to me that this was an issue. We've never had a problem before."

"Aren't I the fortunate one to locate a problem for you."

Joss stepped into the bathroom and wrinkled her nose. "You're right. This is gross. I'm bringing in help. You shouldn't clean this."

Andy snagged Joss's hands and danced her into the aisle. Then she sang out, clearly and beautifully. "Duh, dun, dun, dun, dun. Duh, dun, dun, dun, dun. Ooh, you make me live. Whatever this world can give to me." She hummed the Queen melody and then, "I really love you. You're my best friend."

Joss dropped Andy's hands. "I don't even know you. Who are you?"

"Your best friend. Didn't you hear the lyrics?"

"You lied to me."

"I thought I was dying."

"You did not."

"I was channeling my inner Beryl?"

"You are funnier than you let people believe, aren't you?"

Andy winked at her. "I don't need the attention." She spun on the men's bathroom. "Until I'm locked in a bathroom like that and wonder how long I will be stuck there. Thank you for rescuing me."

## **Vignette #3**

### **A Witch on the Hunt**

"Hello, Agnes. Are you here to buy a ticket?" Dick Mercer, in his warm coveralls and a warm hat on his head, stood in a booth on the street between Pizzazz and Sweet Beans.

"Maybe I should," she said and handed over a five dollar bill. "Here. Don't tell anyone."

"Are you ready for your first clue then?"

Agnes was one of the organizers of today's events. She'd helped Cassidy and her classmates take today's scavenger hunt from a child's dream to a community-wide event." She cackled her witch's laugh and said, "Why not? I hope you have fun out here. It's a little chilly this afternoon."

"As long as my dear wife brings me hot cocoa and warm cider to keep my fingers warm, I'll have fun. By the way, you look like a witch. I hope you take that as a compliment."

She preened. "Thank you. I spent time on my makeup." And she had. Her face was painted green, she'd made warts for her cheeks and nose, and her lipstick was as red as she'd ever worn. Cassidy and Missy Gordon had helped find all the pieces for her costume. It was one of the best witch's dresses and hat she'd ever seen.

He handed over a slip of paper. "You and Mrs. Wallers and her class have spent a month putting this together. The whole town is looking forward to it. Smart of you not to do it on the thirty-first. Compete with Sycamore House's Haunted House and all."

"Kids will get candy by coming out this afternoon. Who could resist extra treats?" She cackled again. "Can't get enough practice with that voice."

This afternoon's scavenger hunt was all about having fun, giving away treats and prizes, and raising money to purchase feed and hay for the animals at Elva Johnson's rescue.

She, Maude Wallers, Cassidy, Missy Gordon, Rick Gordon, and several other parents and students had discussed who they wanted to raise funds for during this initial Bellingwood Autumn

Scavenger Hunt. They'd talked about needs for the new elementary school, but that wouldn't be finished for at least two years. The kids needed to see that their hard work was put to use as soon as possible. Learning about generosity had been a good lesson this fall.

Mrs. Wallers' entire third grade classroom, along with most of their parents, had gotten involved in the scavenger hunt's planning. The day after the initial meeting, she, Cassidy, Missy, and Maude met with Nan Stallings. Of course they met at Sweet Beans. The girls felt so important that day. Nan had access to email addresses for every business in Bellingwood so she sent an initial email introducing the idea. Two days later, kids swarmed the downtown area along with their parents, dropping off a thank you letter and sign-up cards, promising they'd be back the next afternoon to pick up the cards. They weren't letting anyone take too long to decide.

Every business participated in one way or another. Whether it was providing treats during the hunt, coupons for visitors, or even prizes for the giveaway that would happen at the end of the afternoon, they signed up.

Having the wife of the chief of police as one of the leaders made conducting today's hunt much easier. The police department blocked off the street through downtown. At four-thirty, participants would start through. Two separate booths, one at each end of the street, were set up take names of those who purchased tickets and hand over the first clue.

She looked at her slip of paper. *Nothing is ever too old to be a treasure. He says, "Come visit."* Agnes headed straightaway for Simon Gardner's antique shop. Kids and adults alike had come up with clues to send people around town. The third graders had shuffled hundreds and hundreds of printed clues into piles, Mrs. Wallers was as organized as anyone and Agnes left it to her to ensure the process was put into good order. Bins with shop names on them littered the classroom's counters and had been filled with the clues to be delivered.

Today's scavenger hunt was either going to be a mess or people would enjoy themselves enough that next year would be even more

fun. Nan Stallings had mentioned creating an app with QR codes and all that. By the time she stopped describing the process, Agnes was fairly certain her eyes were spinning in circles. They'd wait another year to develop that.

In September, Cassidy and Missy had read a story about a scavenger hunt. They'd come to Agnes and wondered if they might be able to raise a little money for a charity by hosting a small hunt with a few shops participating. Agnes encouraged them to do more research. Then she encouraged them to talk to their teacher, Maude Wallers. In no time at all, the idea exploded into something that no one could have imagined.

"Hello, Mrs. Hill." Simon Gardner held his cat, Crystal in his arms as he opened the door to his shop. "Today should be fun."

"Are you prepared for hordes and hordes of visitors?" Agnes nodded to the small dish of candy sitting on his counter.

"I've never had hordes of visitors in my shop," he replied, "but I always look forward to new experiences. As for the candy, you're missing something."

"What do you mean? Are you planning to give away furniture?" She looked around. "You have plenty of that in here."

"You do enjoy a good jest." Simon led her to a large basin sitting beside a pitcher.

"A wash basin? Mr. Gardner, I used one of these when I was a child." The pitcher was filled to the brim with candy. Slips of paper with the clues had been folded and lay inside the basin. The clues given to each shop were randomized so that people wouldn't land in one place all at the same time. "Ahhh, the next clue and as much candy as a person could desire."

"I have refills for both." He frowned while looking at her. "Your costume seems to be missing an essential piece."

"I'm missing nothing," Agnes said. "Cassidy and her friends spent a great deal of time putting this together for me."

He picked out a slip from the basin and said, "Follow me."

She followed him to a display of jewelry behind his counter. He removed one tray and then another until he said, "Ah ha. Here it is. Every witch needs a cameo of Hecate to complete her costume."

"Hecate?"

"The Greek goddess of witchcraft. Allow me."

Agnes peered around him to see the price tag. When Simon realized what she was doing, he picked it up and slid it into his pocket. "My gift to the organizer of this wonderful event. If you argue, I might be irate enough to miss when placing the pin in its clasp."

"You wouldn't."

"Only if there is trouble."

"You're tough."

"I've heard the same about you." Simon Gardner was a gentleman and one of the few people in town that Agnes found it difficult to provoke. He was a frustrating man. After pinning the brooch on, he handed her the slip of paper. "Are you going through the scavenger hunt to ensure that the businesses are prepared?"

"Just keeping my comfort level stable," she replied. "The kids worked hard to make this a success."

"They've had fun. Between you and Mrs. Wallers, you taught us all to embrace the youngsters and their enthusiasm."

"They do wear me out." Agnes looked at the slip of paper, then read it out loud. *Thor's hammer and Obi Wan's lightsaber have nothing on the angry ape.* She chuckled. "That's obvious."

"On your way, stop in to say hello to Paul. He's giving away tape measures. Everyone can use a tape measure."

She nodded and tipped her hat before leaving the shop. Agnes looked at the cameo. It was a regular cameo, not Hecate, but what a thoughtful and odd gift. Paul Bradford's hardware store was right next door, Halloween decorations filling the windows. A wolf's head howled as she opened the door.

"Mrs. Hill," a young man said when she walked in.

She had no idea who he was. "Hello."

"Mr. Bradford!" he called out.

Paul Bradford stepped out from behind a rack of batteries. "Get the lady a tape measure, Jess. Mrs. Hill, are you checking on us before the event begins?"

"I'm taking a walk," Agnes said. "You weren't my next clue, but



Mr. Gardner insisted I stop in. Your store is very festive."

"My Lisa likes Halloween. She did all this."

The young man handed Agnes a small tape measure with Bradford Hardware's logo and web address printed on it.

"Time was, you all gave away yardsticks," Agnes said. "I have quite a collection of promotional yardsticks from years gone by."

"If you'd ever consider selling those, I'd use them to decorate."

"None of them are from your shop, though," she said.

"I understand, but those are treasures." He winked at her. "I'd trade you for them. A new lamp or something else you could use in your new place."

She shook her head and laughed. "This little trip around town is becoming more interesting than I expected. Maybe we'll discuss it one day."

"You don't shop here nearly often enough."

"That's because Henry takes care of me. Every lady of a certain age should have a Henry Sturtz in their life."

"I'm glad you do. Where are you off to next?"

"My next clue takes me to Boomer's Last Stand."

"Free comic books for everyone," Paul said with a laugh.

"And I'm off. Thank you for the gift. I hope the afternoon is successful for you." Agnes left and sighed. Instead of walking to the other end of the street to collect a free comic book, she decided to walk back to Sweet Beans. Maude Wallers and her daughter, Naomi, were waiting there for her. They would also be dressed as witches and the three of them would man the hot chocolate cauldron.

"Mrs. Agnes, Mrs. Agnes!" She turned at the sound of children's voices. Cassidy Sturtz and Missy Gordon led a pack of girls all dressed in costume. Missy was Wonder Woman and Cassidy had transformed into Shuri from Black Panther. There was a traditional Disney princess, another witch, and a surprising She-Hulk.

"Hello, girls. Are you ready?" Agnes asked.

Cassidy gave her a quick hug. "This is so much fun. We're going to spread out like you said so we can answer questions and keep people moving along since they only have two hours."

"The stores are open late," Agnes said. "If it takes longer, that's okay."

"But you said it had to be over by six thirty."

"The flyers all say that it ends by six thirty, but stores are open until nine o'clock."

"But ..."

"No buts. It's going to be fine."

"I can't stay out until nine o'clock," Cassidy said. "Mommy won't let me."

"Our job will be finished at six thirty, but anyone who wants to wander around town after that is welcome to do so. Shops will be happy to have them."

"I wish I could stay for it all," Cassidy said.

"You should be proud of yourself today." Agnes had told her so over and over. She didn't believe that Cassidy realized what a big deal it was to have pulled off something this big. And she shouldn't. Not yet. As she got older, her responsibility would grow. For now, it was enough that she'd taken on a project and stuck with it until the end.

"Next year it's going to be even better."

Agnes smiled on the outside while groaning on the inside. Next year. Bigger and better. Maybe she wouldn't be quite so involved. The girls needed someone younger to take over and lead them as the project grew. She was getting too old to do this for the next bunch of years. "I hope it is," she said. "I'm heading to Sweet Beans."

"We'll be there later for hot chocolate," Missy said. "Will you be stirring the cauldron?"

"I'll be drinking it all so nothing will be left."

"No you won't," Cassidy said. She turned to her other friends. "She's only teasing. Come on. It's almost four thirty. This is so much fun!"

Agnes watched them walk away and felt a pang of something. Regret? Love? Fear? Yearning? Pride? She wasn't certain what feelings she was having right now. If Polly were around, she'd make Agnes talk about it until she admitted to feeling everything. Her life had certainly changed since the day she met Polly and

Cassidy. After that, it hadn't taken long for her to become acquainted with young people who would change the world. Why hadn't she been able to do this thirty or forty years ago when she had limitless energy?

She opened the door of the coffee shop and grinned. They'd created a fake fire with a large cauldron hanging over it in the corner beside the books. Maude Wallers and her daughter were in place with cups and napkins at the ready.

"Mrs. Hill," Maude said. "I believe we're ready. Most of my students have already been in to tell me how excited they are. I hope we see many, many participants."

"We will," Agnes said. "Thank you for helping make this a success for the kids."

"It's been a wonderful learning experience for them. I'm grateful that you allowed Cassidy to bring forth her vision. It has given her a great deal of confidence."

Agnes nodded. Giving Cassidy confidence was important. The little girl had so much going for her, but fears had nearly hobbled her. Polly and Henry gave Cassidy the strength and courage to reach beyond herself and her past. The little girl had reached for Agnes, a gift Agnes would have never believed possible.

"I need a large cup of cocoa," Agnes said to Naomi.

The girl smiled and handed her mother the cup. "Mrs. Agnes is a very nice witch."

Agnes cackled her witch's laugh.

## **Vignette #4**

### **Left, Right, Left, Right**

Noah felt a little sick to his stomach. No, that wasn't it. Everyone would be here. Everyone would be watching. Polly and Henry tried to reassure him by saying that he was one small part of the whole, but he knew that he stuck out. He was one of the tallest people in the marching band. The director put him in specific places in the line because he was so tall. Yeah, he'd stick out. Now, if he could just avoid tripping over his feet or losing his music. He tugged on his hat and checked his shoes one more time. Nothing could fall apart tonight. Nothing.

He was knocked off-balance and turned to find Graham Birdsong there with a grin on his face. "This is going to be great!"

"What?"

"We are so ready for tonight."

"You aren't nervous?"

"About what? Buddy, you have to get over yourself. Quit trying to be a perfectionist. You have the whole show memorized. More than the rest of the people, that's for sure."

"Whatever."

"I'll bet you dream about the show in your sleep, don't you."

Miles Gorren sidled up to the two of them and Nat Waters walked over. "Are you ready?" Nat asked. "We need to line up."

Pre-game. People kept telling him that the pre-game show was no big deal. Get the crowd excited, play the fight song while the team came onto the field, and then file off to the bleachers. He could do that, but still.

Noah's shoulders were slumped and Nat clapped him on the back. "You're going to do great. You really have to quit worrying about things. If you don't stand up straight, how will your parents ever find you? Besides, you don't stand up straight, you get yelled at."

"Why are you so happy?" Noah asked him.

"Because I'm a sophomore and you're a freshman. You think that

everything is awful because you've never done it before. I know that nothing is awful because once you do it the first time, you have nothing to worry about ever again."

"You worry about stuff."

"But not this stuff. I did that last year. Really. One or two of these shows and it's no big deal. You'll find out that you worried about nothing. I did. It's kind of embarrassing when you realize that you made a big deal out something that people will forget about by the next week."

"Not if I fall on my face."

"Have you ever fallen on your face?"

"Well, no."

"Then you won't do it tonight."

"Everybody is here."

"And by everybody, you mean ..."

"Everybody," Noah said. "Mom and Dad brought everyone down and Elijah texted me that they're going to send video to Rebecca."

Nat laughed. "Parents are so dumb. It's just a stupid half-time show in the middle of a stupid high school football game in a little town in the middle of Iowa. At least that's what Cilla keeps telling me."

Noah couldn't get there. This was still important. It was important to his parents and to Rebecca and Andrew. His grandparents weren't here tonight, but that was because they were doing something. They showed up for all his special things, even if it was stupid, like Nat said.

"You really think it's stupid to do this?" Noah asked.

Nat frowned, surprised at being called out for his words. He shrugged. "I don't know. Cilla said she always thought it was stupid. But she thinks everything that isn't in New York City or London or Paris or Chicago is stupid. Only the big-time for her."

"You have to do the small things to get to the big time," Noah said.

"That's what Mom tells her. Mom say she has to pay her dues. But Cilla says that she's paying dues by going to a small college in

Iowa. She wants to transfer to Juilliard."

Noah's eyes grew big. "Really? That's a big deal."

"Dad said that if she could get in, he'd find a way to pay for it. She hasn't gotten in yet. But I don't know. Maybe she will. There are other colleges and she might even transfer over to the University of Iowa if she can't get into some big arts school. Mom said that because she was so slow getting her college applications in, she should be happy that Grinnell took her."

"I hate thinking about doing that," Noah said. "I don't know what I want to do."

"I know what you want to do," Nat said.

"Really? What?"

"Yeah, what does my man want to do with his life," Graham said. "Can you do the prediction thing on me, too? I want to know what I'm doing with my life."

Nat waggled his fingers in front of Graham's face. "I see tons of children. Wait. That's my sister with you. Nope, not thinking about you making babies with her. No children. You are going to be a famous chef. You'll be sought after on the Food Network and will have restaurants in all the major cities across the US."

"I hate cooking," Graham said with a laugh.

"You'd better change your ways, man," Miles said. "You have some chef-fing ahead of you. Wouldn't that be cool, though? Your dad would be proud."

"It's better than cutting hair. I'm terrible at that," Graham said. "Okay, do Miles."

Nat waggled his fingers in front of Miles' face and said, "Wow. You're going into real estate. No. Architecture. All those doodles you do will be sketches of buildings. You'll move to Austin, Texas and build their tallest skyscraper someday."

Miles laughed. "I'd never thought about architecture. That's interesting."

"While you're in college, you can work for my dad and learn all about the contracting business," Noah said.

"It would be a good job. I like working outside."

"So, what about me?" Noah asked. He didn't know why he

cared. It's just that these questions were starting to come up and he didn't know how to answer them. Everybody was asking. He was feeling the pressure. His freshman year should be all about starting a new part of his life, but for some reason, he couldn't quit looking ahead to the rest of his life. Where would he go to college? What major would he do? What did his parents think he should do?

Elijah was figuring it out already. If he didn't end up being a concert pianist, life just wasn't fair.

"Did you hear me?" Nat asked. "You didn't say anything. Am I right or wrong?"

"Sorry. I was trying not to trip over my feet," Noah responded. He hadn't been, but he didn't want to admit he wasn't listening because his mind wandered.

"I said you're going to be a professor."

Noah peered at Nat. "A professor?"

"Yeah. Not a high school teacher, though you could do that, but you're going to get a whole bunch of degrees and while you're working on those, you'll be a professor. You'll give these great lectures about books and authors. Maybe you'll find some author's hidden stories. You know, like Tolkien or something."

"Tolkien has sons who have his works," Noah said.

"Well, not him, then. But somebody famous. You'll get lost in libraries around the world doing research and discover an ancient tome ..."

"Tome?" Graham asked. "Tome? Where did you get that word?"

"Remember. I live with my mother who teaches history. She uses words like tome. I can't help myself." Nat laughed. "Anyway, you'll discover an ancient tome and end up writing a paper on it and then you'll receive a Pulitzer or a Nobel prize for your work."

"Uh huh," Noah said. "Though I don't hate the idea of living among the dusty tomes of libraries around the world. Wouldn't that be the best life ever?"

"Uh, no," Graham said. "That sounds terrible."

"Really bad," Miles agreed. "But it kind of fits you."

"Right?" Nat said. "He's totally the guy with glasses, a brown corduroy jacket with leather elbow patches and old jeans with those

brushed leather brown loafers on his feet. He'll need an assistant to remind him that he needs to eat and take a shower. When he forgets where his glasses are, she can point to the top of his head because he propped them up there when they got too dusty.

"She?" Graham said. "Maybe Millie will be glad to take that job."

"Sure," Nat said. "She could travel with him and make sure that his absent-minded ways .."

"I am not absent-minded," Noah interrupted.

"Who's the guy who was thinking about something else and didn't even hear me ask him a question?"

Miles and Graham both pointed in Noah's face. "This guy. This guy right here."

"I can't help it if I'm thinking about things," Noah said. "Mom does it all the time." He grinned. "She's really bad, too. Sometimes I think we could move all the furniture around and she wouldn't notice until she ran into something."

His imagination took off and he saw himself in that corduroy jacket and wire-rim glasses, poring over a book in the basement of a big library with piles of books spread out on the tables around him, some open, some closed. But the person he saw as his helper was Delia. She loved spending time with him in the library at home. When he sat in a chair reading a book, that little girl was either in the living room listening to Elijah play while she had her toys scattered all over the floor or in the library with him. She loved stacking her books into piles and then making him pick one out for her to look through. If he pointed at a book in the middle of a stack, she'd do her best to slide it out without knocking everything over. Of course, she always knocked everything over, but she was patient and stacked them back up again. Someday, she'd figure out how to make the stacks neat and tidy. He could see that in her personality now. She just didn't have the motor skills to do it yet.

He was pushed forward and scowled at Graham.

"You did it again, you nerd," Graham said. "Absent-minded much? We're lining up."

Noah's stomach fluttered again. Nat said that this would get easier after doing it a couple of times. Now, he just needed to get



through those couple of times. He fell into line with the rest of his section. Left, right, left, right. They marched onto the field and he raised the saxophone to be ready. Please don't trip. Please don't fall. Please don't lose your music. Please don't ...

The signal came and he brought the sax to his lips. He knew this. He could do this.

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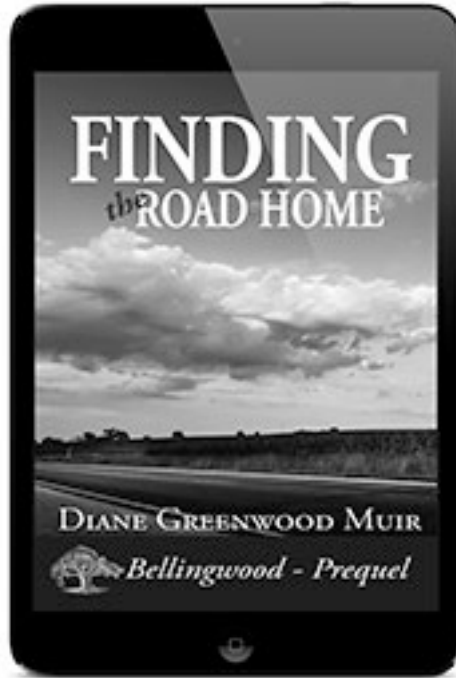
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