



FINDING
the ROAD HOME

Vignettes



DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Prequel



Prequel / Prelude
Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR

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THANK YOU!

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

I have compiled the vignettes written to celebrate the first ten years of Bellingwood — into one collection. These ten short stories feature different characters before they met Polly Giller.

Vignette #1

Andrew

"I'm bored. There's nothing to do around here." Andrew Donovan flopped onto his bed, face down. When he didn't get a response, he lifted his head enough so that he could peek over at his brother, Jason, who was working at his desk.

"Leave me alone, punk. I'm busy."

"What are you doing? Can I help?"

"What did I just say to you?"

Andrew rolled and sat up, swinging his legs off the side of his bed. "I don't know."

"Leave me alone. And quit with the noise, would you?"

He stilled his legs. The only person in the world who had no hesitation beating him to a pulp was his older brother. It didn't seem like today would be a good day to push things. Jason was in another one of his moods. It didn't happen a lot, but when it did, living in the same room felt like he was living in a tiny cell.

Andrew leaned across his bed to his own desk and picked off a book. He'd read it and he'd read the other three books stacked in a pile. He needed more but the library wouldn't be open until tomorrow. This was going to be a long day.

"Boys."

They turned to look at their mother, standing in the doorway.

"Hey, Mom," Jason said.

"Homework?" she asked.

He nodded.

"What about you, Andrew?"

"Done. I'm bored. I need a dog."

His mother, Sylvie, laughed out loud. "That's the last thing we need in this little apartment. I'll be right back." She left and the two looked at each other.

"What was that about?" Andrew whispered.

"I don't know. Moms are weird." Jason kept his attention on the

doorway, though.

True to her word, she was right back, carrying a notebook and a bag of miniature donuts. "I'm going out with Lydia and the girls. Andrew, this notebook is for you."

He looked at it, then at her. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Write in it."

"What I am supposed to write?"

"All those stories you tell me. Write them down. If you don't have books to read, write your own."

"But I don't know how."

"Don't give me that."

"You read enough books, you should know everything," Jason said. It almost sounded like a compliment, but Andrew wasn't dumb enough to say anything.

"And you've written little stories your entire life," Sylvie said. She walked over to Jason's desk and set the bag of donuts down. Then she held out the notebook. "Write longer stories. You won't get better unless you practice."

He opened the notebook and ran his fingers across the blank sheet of paper. "It's so clean and perfect, but it's lonely."

"Lonely?" Jason asked. "See, you are a writer. All I see on that piece of paper is that someone will ask me to do something I don't want to do. Write a report, do math, something ..." He opened the bag of donuts and tossed one to his brother. "... Boring."

"Writing isn't boring," Andrew protested. He ignored the chocolate donut that had landed on the bed beside him, rolled over to get to his desk, and pushed at the mess that was always there.

"Andrew," Sylvie said.

"What?" He wasn't being short with her, he'd already gotten lost in his thoughts.

"Either eat that donut or deal with it. Otherwise, you'll have a mess when you try to go to sleep tonight."

"What donut?"

Jason stood, walked over to Andrew's bed and picked up the donut he'd tossed. "Thanks, Mom."

“For what?”

“For giving the notebook to Andrew. At least now he’ll be quiet for a while.”

Andrew had climbed off his bed and was rummaging through his desk. “I can’t find my pencils. Where are my pencils?”

“Heads up,” Jason said.

Andrew looked up in time to duck from the pencil flying toward him. It hit the wall and landed on the floor. “Thanks, but where are my pencils? I have a million of them.”

“Look in your backpack, punk.”

“Jason,” Sylvie scolded. “You know I don’t like you calling your brother names.”

“But he is a punk. I’m not wrong.”

She took in a long breath and let it out slowly. “You two stay out of trouble. If you get hungry, eat the donuts. There is lemonade in the refrigerator. I shouldn’t be too long.”

“Where are you going?”

“Lydia said we’re going to meet someone new.”

That got Andrew’s attention. “Who?”

“We’re going to the old school building.”

“Really?” he asked. “Some old lady bought it, right?”

Sylvie laughed. “I don’t think she’s that old.”

“But I heard she’s, like, an old maid. Never been married,” Jason said. “Why would she buy that place anyway? It’s a mess.”

“Have you been inside it?” Andrew asked. “How bad was the mess?”

“I’m just talking about the outside. No one takes care of it. That old playground equipment out back is seriously ugly. Who would want to ever move to this dirty little town when that place is the first thing they see on the highway?” Jason rolled his eyes. “They should just tear the whole thing down.”

“Sounds like she has plans for it,” Sylvie said.

“I hope it’s not another school,” Jason said. “We don’t need any more schools.”

She laughed and shook her head. “No, no more schools in Bellingwood. The town is too small for that. I’m just glad we were

able to keep the elementary school so I don't have to worry about you on a bus to Boone yet."

"Do you think she'd let little boys visit and explore the building?" Andrew asked.

"Not right now. There's a lot of construction going on," Sylvie shook herself. "Mrs. Merritt will be here any minute and I don't want her to wait for me."

"You'll tell me everything about the building, right?" Andrew asked.

"I've told you about the building."

"Yeah, but you saw it before it was abandoned. Like, are there ghosts in there now?"

"People didn't die in the building. No ghosts."

He slumped. "But ghosts in an old abandoned school would be a great story. Ghost teachers who make the poor ghost students learn the same things over and over again."

"Like regular school," Jason grumped. "It's never-ending. Always more and more and more."

"You boys do your thing and be nice to each other while I'm gone."

Andrew walked out with his mother. "Are you nervous to meet someone new, Mom?"

"Maybe a little. Mrs. Merritt is a good friend, but she thinks I shouldn't stay home all the time if I'm not at work."

"I like meeting new people."

His mother gave him a quick side hug. "You are my outgoing, happy boy. I hope that when you grow up, you find a way to make all your dreams come true."

"I don't even know what my dreams are yet," Andrew said.

"If you could do one thing all the time, what would it be?"

"Read books."

She laughed. "I set myself up for that one. If you could do one thing as a career, what would it be?"

"Read books. I could work at a publishing company and read all the books that come in. I'd be in charge of what books were published. It would be hard to reject someone, though. They put in

all that hard work to write it and then I'd have to tell them that the company wouldn't publish it. That would be hard."

"You should write books so amazing that every publisher is begging you to write for them."

He nodded. "Will you still remember to tell me everything about the old school building? I hope I get to see it someday. Are there old books in the library? Or blackboards on the walls? What about the lunchroom? Did they even have those in the old days?"

Sylvie swatted his arm when she saw his smirk. "You are a naughty boy. It's a good thing I love you."

"I don't know what to write first, Mom."

"Write about the old schoolhouse. Make up a story about the building in the old days. You know, before even I was born."

"Has it been around a long time?"

"It has. A lot of people in Bellingwood went to school in that building."

"Even dead people?"

She frowned. "What? Dead people don't go to school."

"That would be a good story, but I meant, even people who aren't alive any longer. Was it around when they were in high school?"

"Yes. I'm sure of that."

"I wonder what it would have been like back in the olden days. No, not like you," he said before he earned himself another swat. "But back when girls could only wear dresses and boys had slicked-back hair."

"Why don't you come up with a story about that?"

Andrew tapped his temple. "I have so many stories. They're always up there."

"What do you do with them?"

"Nothing. I don't know what I'm supposed to do with them."

"Write them down. Now, I'm going outside. If Mrs. Merritt is waiting, I'll feel guilty."

"Tell me everything when you come home. Promise?"

"I'll see what I can remember."

Andrew closed the door behind her and remembered to flip the

lock. He went back to the room he shared with Jason. "I'm going to the living room and write."

"You might as well stay in here, punk. I'm done with my homework. The television is going to be on."

"I can't think when you watch television."

"Like I said. Stay in here. You can keep the donuts. I've had enough."

"What do you want to be when you graduate from high school?"

Jason frowned. Then he shrugged. "I don't know. Why?"

"I was just curious. Do you want to go to college?"

"No way. I hate school. But you? You'll probably end up teaching in a college."

"That's sounds awesome," Andrew said. "I'd learn everything so that I could teach. Best job ever."

"Mom doesn't have money to send us to college, punk."

Andrew's shoulders sagged. "I know. Maybe I could get a scholarship, though."

"You're smart enough. And you're still little. Just don't get a girlfriend who will distract you from your grades. The way our lives go, you'll need a big scholarship."

"You don't want one?"

"A scholarship? I would never be able to earn one of those. I'm not smart like you."

"That's not fair," Andrew said. "Mom would be mad if she heard you say that."

"Mom's not here, is she?"

"You're smart, Jason."

"Not like you, but that's okay. I'll probably end up driving a truck or being a bum like Dad."

"Don't say that," Andrew scolded. "You're way better than him."

Jason shoved the last of his books in his backpack. He tossed another pencil onto Andrew's bed. "I hope so. What do you think about someone buying the old school?"

"I don't know. I hope she isn't old and boring."

"Me too. It's weird that nobody knows anything about her, isn't

it?"

"Maybe she'll lock herself into that old building and never come out. No one will ever see her except in the windows late at night. Like a ghost."

"Stop talking about ghosts. There aren't any."

"Just because you haven't seen them ..."

Jason interrupted. "Neither have you."

"Well, you never know."

"I'm pretty sure. Do you want some lemonade?"

"Nope. I'm going to mark up the first page of my new notebook."

"You are a weird, weird brother."

Vignette #2

Doug & Billy

"Here," Doug Randall said, tossing a bag of potato chips to his best friend, Billy Endicott. "Mom said I'm not eating enough and sent a ton of food for lunch today."

"Dude," Billy held up two bags of chips.

"We should sell them to the rest of the crew."

"Like contraband."

"Right?"

"What are you doing tonight?" Billy asked.

"Dunno. Wanna come over?"

"Yeah. What's your mom cooking for dinner?"

"Dunno. I want pizza, but she'd have a cow. I hate it when she's in the middle of a health and fitness stage. It doesn't last long, but here I am, suffering with her choice of food. Not mine."

"We have jobs. We don't have school. We're still living at home," Billy complained. "This morning I had to tell Mom what time I'd be home after work. I mean, are you kidding me? Just because I'm still living there, she thinks that I'm still a kid."

"We are," Doug said. "Last Saturday when we went to Ames to look for comic books? I had to tell Dad exactly where I was going and when I would be home. It's like I'm still in high school."

"Dead in a ditch," Billy muttered.

"What?"

"That's what Mom always says. If I'm not where I'm supposed to be when she thinks I'm supposed to be there, I'm obviously dead in a ditch somewhere."

"Well, there was that one time," Doug said with a grin.

"We were nowhere near dead. We were just stuck in a snowdrift."

"Way out in the country."

"Because you thought it would be fun to see if we could blow through snow drifts. If Mr. Beetle hadn't come by with his truck

and chains, we might still be there. I was so late that night. Mom was furious. I didn't dare tell her what we'd been doing."

Doug laughed. "I told my parents. Otherwise, I'd still be grounded. But it was an adventure."

"We gotta find a place to get everyone together to play games," Billy said. "When we were in school, we could at least stay late if there were other activities going on. We haven't seen everybody in forever."

"I know. That *Sword Lords* game looks way cool. Did you know the creators grew up in Bellingwood?"

"Duh. Everyone knows that. They live out in California now, making billions of dollars working on video games. Dang, I wish I could make billions of dollars and design video games."

"You want to design games? I didn't know that."

"Even though it would be cool to make all that much money, I think I'd hate it. I didn't like programming classes in high school. And you're the artist. You could do it."

Doug nodded. That was another thing that drove his mother crazy. The walls in his room were filled with tack holes from all the drawings he'd hung up. She told him that if he ever moved out, he was going to fill them all in and repaint. No big deal, Mom. He liked drawing characters from games and comic books. Not that he'd ever do anything with them. He wasn't that good, but it was still fun.

"You should send your artwork in," Billy said.

"Where?"

"Like, to one of those guys. That JJ Roberts wasn't all bad."

"Dad said he was, especially when he was in high school. Those guys were always getting up to something. Dad said he couldn't believe any of them grew up to own a business. Really couldn't believe they made something of themselves. Then Dad told me he despairs of me ever making something of myself. I'm working, aren't I?"

"But you don't love it."

"Running electrical cable? Yeah, whatever."

"It's not a bad job."

"Hey, boys." Jerry Allen, the owner of the electrical company Billy and Doug worked for walked into the room where they were eating lunch.

"We're almost done here," Billy said, rushing to gather up his lunch debris.

Jerry put up his hand. "No. You still have twenty minutes. I just got a call about another job. Would you two be interested in helping at the old school building? Some lady from Boston bought it and Henry Sturtz is going to renovate the place. He called and asked us to bid on the electricity. Just want to make sure you two will be around for a while. I'm going to need all hands on deck this fall. You planning on sticking?"

Billy stood up and put out his hand. Doug hesitantly watched it happen, then got to his feet and brushed his hands on his jeans.

"I'm sticking, Mr. Allen," Billy said. "Dad says this is a really good job and I'm lucky to have it. He's right."

"What about you, Doug?" Jerry asked.

"Yes, sir." Doug put out his hand and Jerry shook it. "Don't know how many years, but I'm in it for now." He chuckled. "You know me. Something else might light a fire under my butt. Until then, though, I like working for you."

"Good enough. I have enough guys that I can say yes to this bid. It's kind of a big project for us. Would really help build the business."

"Someone's renovating the old school?" Billy asked. "That's a big deal. It's going to cost a lot of money."

"Sounds like she has an inheritance to spend." Jerry shrugged. "She got the building for a steal. Last I saw, it was listed for less than fifty thousand."

"No way," Doug said. "That's like, totally affordable. Billy, we should have tried to raise that money. We could have renovated it on our own time and lived there. No more parents telling us what to do and when to be home."

"You'll miss the safety net when you finally move out," Jerry said.

Doug glanced at his friend. Old people never remembered how

much they wanted to get out on their own when they were his age.

"As I understand it," Jerry said. "There are bonuses for work that gets done faster than the schedule."

"Wow," Billy said. "You'd give those to us? I heard about a company in Des Moines that just absorbed the time bonuses. Their people did all the work and the company took the money."

"That's not how I do business," Jerry said. "You should know that by now." He pointed at the floor where they'd been sitting. "Sorry for interrupting your lunch hour. Take an extra five, okay? I'll mark it for you."

"The old school building?" Billy asked. "What do you think this lady is going to do with it?"

Doug huffed a laugh. "Probably turn it into a knitting store. Or she'll sell cute puppies and kittens."

"It's not right to sell puppies and kittens in a store. You rescue them."

"Fine. She'll rescue puppies and kittens. There's all that land back there. She could put kennels in. Some cutesy-wutesy, pink and lavender building with frilly curtains in the windows."

"Why would some lady from Boston move to Bellingwood Iowa?" Billy asked. "Could we be any more boring? I wonder how old she is. Probably some ancient spinster whose parents died and left her a ton of money. She doesn't know what to do with it, so she buys a building in the middle of nowhere. It will become a tax shelter. It would be nice if someone cleaned up that corner, though."

"I don't care. Don't care at all," Doug said. "All I want to see is the green of the money flowing into my checking account."

"Seriously. Bonuses," Billy said. "We could totally afford that *Sword Lords* game. A bunch of copies. Then we could pay for everyone to have one and have big gaming nights."

"But where?"

"Yeah. I could spend time cleaning out our garage. There's so much junk in there that if we worked on it, we could make a space. Mom's got a couple of card tables. That might work."

"For the summer. But what about when it gets cold?"

"Silver lining, meet the cloud."

Doug frowned at him. "What?"

"For every silver lining, you work hard to find a cloud that will rain on my parade."

"Sorry."

"No, you're not."

"What?" Doug said. "I said I was sorry."

"But you'll do it again. You're a bum in a box."

Doug burst out with a laugh. "That's weird. Can you believe we're going to be some of the first people to see inside the building in, like, over ten years? I wonder what kind of stuff got left when they closed it." He turned up his nose. "I hope they emptied the refrigerators. That would be way gross."

"Again with the cloud."

"What? It would be gross."

"After all this time, it would be mummified."

"Oh, what if there are mummies hidden in there?" Doug asked. "Wouldn't that be weird? And creepy, but weird and kind of interesting. Oh, maybe the lady who bought the building is some kind of weirdo witch and medium. She's going to read people's palms and tea leaves."

"Your imagination is off on a weird tangent," Billy said. He stuffed the trash from his lunch back into the lunch container his mother had bought for him. At least she'd gotten one with Darth Vader on the front. He grew up with Sesame Street. That would have been embarrassing at this age.

"Mom said she was going to get me a Star Wars lunch box, too," Doug said. "Won't that be cool?"

"We could buy our own lunch boxes."

"But they like doing things for us. We should let them until they kick us out."

"You know that them taking care of us all the time is why they think we're still responsible for answering to them," Billy said.

"I gripe about it, but it's kinda worth it," Doug replied. "She buys everything. I just keep putting money in my account."

"And that doesn't bother you?"

"Not really. If they want to take care of me, I'm making them happy by letting them, right?"

Billy made a sound of disgust as he stood up.

"What?" Doug asked.

"We're never going to grow up, are we?"

"Someday, but not today. Today we're working and talking about games and thinking about weird ladies buying the old school building. I hope she isn't really that weird. It would be nice if someone cool bought the building and, like, built good stuff in town. Still can't figure out why she picked Bellingwood, though."

"Because there was a fifty thousand dollar building rotting away and she has money burning a hole in her pocket?" Billy said.

"I hope she doesn't mess this up. It could be so cool."

"You be sure to tell her that when you meet her."

Vignette #3

Jeff

"You're home." Dana Lyndsay opened the front door and looked at her son, Jeff, in surprise. "What are you doing here? How long can you stay?"

"Hello to you, too, Mom," Jeff said, still standing on the front stoop. "Can I come inside? It's cold."

"Oh." She shook her head. "Where is my head? Come in. Mannie! Jeff's here."

"How long is he staying this time?" Jeff's father yelled from the other room.

"How long?"

"Only a day. I'm flying back out after I hire someone to pack up my apartment."

"Pack? Your apartment?" Dana stepped back in surprise. "Where are you going and why are you in such a rush?"

"Bellingwood, Iowa. I have a job."

She burred a laugh. "I've never heard of it. What's in Bellingwood, Iowa?"

"I don't know the area yet, but central Iowa is beautiful. Farmland. A lot of farmland. A bunch of small communities. A job for sure. After that, I don't know what else I'll find."

"A job?" She frowned. "But you applied for great jobs with hospitality corporations here in Central Ohio. I was looking forward to you being nearby."

Jeff walked past her into the living room. "Hey, Dad."

"Hey, yourself. Did I hear you tell your mother that you're moving to Iowa? What's in Iowa?"

"A small business with big potential."

"A small business, eh. Pay good?"

"It's a good place to start."

"But it won't have all the opportunities that a company like Indus would have," Dana said. She sat, but couldn't relax, so held herself tightly at the edge of the chair. "Sit. Sit, Jeff. Now, explain

what in the world you're doing looking for a job in Iowa. Is this a forever job or just something to drive me crazy? I thought you wanted to travel around the world. Why would you do this to me? I looked forward to watching you become an executive for one of those wonderful companies you applied for around here."

"Dana," Mannie warned.

"But all those years of education he invested. He hasn't committed to anything else because he was so focused. No falling in love, no buying a house, no future, just school."

"School leads to a future," Mannie said. "Jeff, what are you thinking, though? Iowa?"

"Worse than that, Dad. A little town right in the center of Iowa."

"You'll never find anyone in a place like that," Dana said.

"Because gay men don't live in Iowa?" Jeff asked, raising an eyebrow. "I haven't found anyone worthwhile in Columbus and the metro's population is over two million."

"You weren't looking."

He glared at his mother. "I'm always looking."

"Well, you haven't found anyone worthwhile."

"Because the right person hasn't come along."

"Maybe the right person is in Iowa, Dana," Mannie said.

That earned him a heated glare.

"You haven't asked me anything about the job other than where it's located," Jeff said.

"You said it's in a small town. That means it isn't a corporate job. Jeff, you're going to be working all the time for absolutely nothing. What could it possibly offer someone with your education and background?"

"What would a corporate job offer to me?"

"Vacations around the world, pay raises that are commensurate with your growth, exposure to the entire hospitality industry, the ability to rise into better positions. You could become a vice-president or even CEO someday."

"And why wouldn't those things be available in the job in Iowa?"

"Is a large corporation investing in something in this Bell-town,

Bellows, what is it called?"

"Bellingwood. And no, it's not a large corporation; it's a small business. But Mom, Dad, I have a good feeling about this place. The woman who owns it is amazing."

"What makes her so amazing?" Dana said with more than a little derision in her tone. She made air-quotes around the word amazing.

"I'm not sure how to best describe her. She did an amazing job when she took on the renovation of an old high school. She wants to make it into something wonderful. This young woman has great ideas on her own, but she listened to my ideas and got excited, telling me that I had free rein."

"So, some lady in the middle of Iowa gets excited about your ideas and you give up your entire career to work for her. Sounds about right." Dana shook her head. "I wanted so much more for you. Jeff, you are a brilliant young man with the potential to become anything and everything you want. There are no limits in front of you. Why would you settle for something this small?"

"There are limits in those corporate jobs, Mom. I'd have to work within their tight rules and regulations. I'd never be able to explore my own dreams and plans. In this job, I would have the freedom to do all of that. When I gave this woman a few ideas, she told me to get started on them right away."

"And I suppose she's willing to pay for it?"

"Who else would?"

"You. You've always spent money when you should have saved it."

"Mom, stop it. Ms. Giller is a good person. She's making good decisions. One of the first good decisions was to hire me."

"It's a done deal?"

"It is. My first event is a Christmas party."

"Jeff!" His mother said. "You don't have time to plan a Christmas party."

"Dana, if anyone can plan a Christmas party in a rush, it's your son. Have a little faith," Mannie said.

Jeff stared at his father. He rarely stepped in front of his wife.

"Will this job make you happy?" Mannie asked Jeff.

"It already has," Jeff replied.

"And you like the owner? Will she give you the freedom to do the things you want to do?"

Jeff grinned. "I believe she will encourage me to do those things."

"Does she know you're gay?" Dana asked.

Jeff raised his eyebrows and slowly turned his head to look at his mother.

"What?" she asked. "It's a small town in the middle of Iowa. You know how those people are, all narrow-minded and mean. Maybe she won't want the trouble that hiring a gay man will bring."

"Dana." Mannie's voice carried another warning.

"You read those horrible stories," Dana said.

"Narrow-minded people live everywhere, Mom," Jeff said. "And by the way, you're being a little narrow-minded about central Iowa. A major university is located within a half hour of Bellingwood. I'll probably get an apartment in Ames before moving into Bellingwood, just to acclimate myself to the state. Bellingwood doesn't even have a coffee shop." He chuckled and waved a hand up and down in front of him. "I don't exactly come off as a straight man. The answer is, I don't know if she knows. If it comes up, I believe she'll be okay with it."

"You should make sure before you move in."

"No, Mom. I'm not making my sexuality part of my job application process. I never have before and I don't believe that today is the day to begin. If you met Ms. Giller, you'd understand why it isn't necessary. I trust her."

"You only just met her."

"Exactly. And I trust her. I don't know exactly how to explain it. She's been through stuff. She didn't tell me everything, but it's like she understands that everyone has their own stuff and that's okay. Ms. Giller is ready to do exciting things in a small town that's been through its own stuff. But the crazy thing is, she doesn't look at the past and say that is the way it always has to be. She looks at the present and the future and thinks about the possibilities."

"You've never done anything like this before, Jeff."

"Mom," Jeff exclaimed. "I've never done anything before. I just finished college. I believe that not only can I build the business to pay any salary I want to earn, but to give Ms. Giller's company bigger opportunities for growth."

"Please don't tell me you're doing this because you're scared you won't be able to get a great job with one of the big companies."

"I don't even know why I try to talk to you," Jeff said. "I wanted to tell you two about something exciting I'm going to do and all you want to do is give me every reason it won't work."

"I only want the best for you, Jeff," Dana said. "I always have. Everything that we've done is to support you and your sister and brother."

"And what exactly does that look like, Mom? I should stay safe by living in a high-rise in downtown Columbus so I can come home to show you that I'm the same person you've always known? The safe gay son who doesn't step any further out of your zone of control?"

"Don't you speak to me that way," Dana snapped.

"No. I'm going to say what I need to say. I love you, but I can't stay here where you are in control of my life. I can't remain the same person that you've created in your mind. A sad young man whose life will be nothing unless I make a certain amount of money and have a certain title behind my name and maybe, just maybe, meet another safe young man who won't scare your friends. I have the opportunity to be everything that I want to be with this job. Who knows? I might leave next year for something else, but this is a possibility I can't ignore. It will be exciting and fun. There will be challenges I've never faced. There will be demands placed on me that ask me to be creative. None of it will be easy. Except for the fact that I know the woman I will work for will expect me to be at my best all the time. She will do everything to encourage my success. She will allow me to choose the tools that I need and ensure that I have them when I need them. This is my shot. I am not going to stay here because you think it's safer for me."

"What am I supposed to do without you around?" Dana asked,

tears spurting to her eyes.

Jeff wasn't sure if these were real tears or if she was simply pulling out another tool in her arsenal. She'd been known to manipulate with her emotions, but suddenly, it didn't feel that way. "What do you mean?"

"You've always been here for her," Mannie said. "You leave, she's going to turn all that worry on the rest of us. Twenty-three years you've given us. I guess it's time for me to man up and take my wife's concern on my own shoulders."

Dana turned tear-filled eyes to her husband. "Your life is so rough."

"Nope. It hasn't been rough. I'm afraid it's about to be, though. Do you refuse to admit that you've invested a lot of your emotional caring into Jeff?"

"I've always worried about him."

"And I've always proven you wrong," Jeff said. "I can take care of myself."

She sagged back. "I know. It's not easy to admit, but I know. You're a smart young man. I'm going to miss you so much."

"Mom, I'm moving to Iowa, not Siberia."

"Too far to drive, too close to fly."

"The drive isn't that far. Ten hours."

She clasped her hands to her chest. "I'll be asleep in three hours. Run right off the road and then what will everyone think? My son left his dear mother and she died trying to get to him while driving on dark roads in the middle of the night."

"Dramatic much?" Jeff asked.

His father chuckled.

"What?" Jeff countered.

"The two of you are exactly the same when it comes to all the drama. Dana, you will live. Technology makes communication easier. Jeff, you will visit your mother and call her whenever she needs to hear from you. It's going to be fine. We're proud of you, son. And I'm proud of you or jumping off into the abyss on your own. You'll be a grand success. I believe it."

"So do I," Dana said grudgingly. "I only wish you had chosen to

do it within a few hours of me. I will find a way to see you, though.
You will never be alone. I will always be there.”

“I know that, Mom. And that’s why I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Vignette #4

Andy

Andy waved goodbye to her grandchildren as her son pulled out of the driveway, then closed the front door and went back inside. She took in a long breath and started picking up the leftover mess. How had she gotten to the point in her life when a mess was no longer acceptable? All those years of raising her own children and now, the first thing she did when the grandchildren went home was put her home back in order rather than relax and think about the fun she had with them.

It wasn't as if she had much else to do. This house was much smaller than the farmhouse where she and Bill had lived for so many years. Keeping things clean out on the farm was always a challenge. Whether it was dust that blew in through the open windows, kids tracking in mud after doing chores, or everyone dropping their stuff wherever they stopped when they walked in the door, it was a challenge. Fortunately, Andy had the wherewithal to insist they clean up after themselves.

Back in those days, she'd had her own busy life, teaching high school English. After Bill died, she retired. She could afford it and life was so frighteningly different following his death. Their oldest son, Bill, Jr., talked to her about moving into town and she let him insist. He was absolutely right. He had a family that would fill that house while he ran the farm with his brother, John. And she certainly didn't need to care for that big old house by herself. But sometimes it felt as if she'd left her life somewhere in the dust and wasn't sure where to find it again.

It was a good thing she had Lydia and Beryl. Beryl. Hah. That woman was always coming up with some new thing to pry Andy out of what Beryl termed a boring old life. Who could be bored when Beryl Watson was your friend?

Andy put the last bit of trash into the bin and wandered to the sink. "Bill Saner, I'm trying to figure this out," she said, looking toward where he was buried in the cemetery. Her kids thought that

she was strange. Why would she want to live next to the cemetery?

The real question for Andy was why it would be a problem. There certainly wouldn't be any noisy parties. And if there were, that was an entirely different concern. She wondered if people really thought the dead rose every night to clang their chains together, dancing back and forth under the light of the moon.

That thought made her chuckle. Beryl had thought her choice of location was wonderful. She had all sorts of ideas for parties on Andy's back deck. Zombie haunts, witches on broomsticks, scary music played into the cemetery. Charlie Heller wasn't known for his sense of humor, so Andy put a kibosh on Beryl's wildest imaginative ideas. But she hadn't been able to stop her from decorating the back deck with paper skeletons, orange lights, and spooky witches for the last couple of Halloweens. Not that anyone would see them unless they wandered the paths of the cemetery. The front of Andy's home was tastefully decorated for trick-or-treaters and their parents. She didn't let Beryl near that decorating.

Andy gave her head a quick shake and smiled. If not for her friends, she'd be a boring, boring woman. Just to remind herself of how bad it was, she opened what she lovingly called her junk drawer. There was no junk. Everything was where it belonged. If she took out the stapler, a stapler-sized space was left. Whenever Beryl left after spending time in the house, Andy opened this drawer and found that it had been disturbed in a multitude of ways. She also had to check the toilet paper. Andy preferred that it come off the top and she generally folded a neat little triangle at the end. Beryl flipped it upside down and shredded the last piece, if for no other reason than to make Andy giggle.

And the strange little gifts that Beryl left around the house for her. One time, Andy went to bed and discovered a plastic snake under her pillow. Another time, five plastic spiders showed up inside the glass body of the lamp beside her sofa. It took a while for Andy to figure out how to unscrew the thing to get them out. How Beryl had made that happen in the short period of time she'd been alone, Andy had no idea. She'd found candy in coat pockets and strange jars of jam and syrup tucked into her cabinets. Once there

had been a bottle of tequila tucked into her freezer. It was always something.

When Andy confronted Beryl about the crazy gifts, her friend informed her that when Andy's life became more interesting, she'd stop trying to spice it up.

Spice it up. Hah. At least Beryl wasn't interested in matching Andy with single men in town, but mainly because Beryl didn't spend time getting to know single men in town. As crazy as the woman was, she was a hermit.

Andy poured another cup of coffee and headed for the dining room where she could look outside the glass doors leading to her deck. It was too chilly today to spend time on the deck and look out at the cemetery. She'd walked along the paths back there so often that she knew where nearly everyone was buried. If her kids knew that she talked to them, they'd probably commit her. So many interesting lives had been led by those people. More interesting than Andy's, that's for certain.

Donald Mcalister. He'd died when Andy was a little girl, but her mother had told her stories about the drunken Scot who wore his kilt in local parades and sang to the pretty young women as he passed them by. Andy wondered what the rest of his story was. She'd thought about it over the years, but couldn't even make up a tale that got him to that point in his life.

Fergus and Magnolia Gordon were buried not far from Andy's back door. Their story wasn't quite as illicit. He'd been a hard-working farmer and she'd been known as the queen of pies. Whenever the church had a potluck, Magnolia's pies were gone before Andy could get to the dessert table. She hated to admit that was one of the biggest disappointments of her childhood. Never once had Andy been able to taste one of those amazing pies.

Her phone buzzed with a text. Andy tapped it open and smiled. Lydia wanted to know if she'd like to join Beryl, Sylvie, and Lydia to meet the new owner of the old school building. That could be interesting. Andy already had a life full of memories from working in that building. She'd heard that someone from Boston had bought it and Henry Sturtz was involved in its renovation.

Henry Sturtz. Now, that was a good man. He'd been in a couple of her high school classes. She couldn't understand how he'd never managed to find a wife. His parents had moved to Arizona and he was living in the family home. He had a good business. Not too big, not too small. It would be enough to keep a family happy and content, especially if his wife wanted to work outside the home. Andy could see him as a great parent. His younger sister, Lonnie, was in Ann Arbor, Michigan finishing her doctorate. Lonnie might never be a mom. She was as independent as they came. Bright and sweet, but strong and independent. It would take quite a person to land her as a wife.

Lydia hadn't said much about the woman who bought the school. She didn't know how old she was or where she'd gotten the money to buy the old building or why she'd come to Bellingwood. They'd heard she was a librarian from Boston, but that was it. Bellingwood already had a librarian, so why had this woman come here? Andy hoped she wasn't a complete dingbat, throwing money around because she had some. She also hoped that the woman would be interesting and decent.

She hated not being in on things. When she worked in the school, gossip floated through the building and she had to pick and choose what she'd believe and what was pure garbage. Most of it was garbage, but at least Andy knew what was going on in the world. After Bill died and she'd retired to live at the farm, she lost all of her newsy connections. Even moving into town hadn't helped all that much. When she ate at the diner with Lydia and Beryl, she'd pick up little bits and pieces of things, but it was mostly depressing stuff. Who was dying, what business was closing, whose kids were rushing away from Bellingwood as fast as they could. Andy wondered if her generation would be the final nail in the coffin of this little town. Boone would absorb everything – the library, the post office, even the churches.

"You're ruminating," Andy said to herself. She re-read Lydia's text.

Sylvie Donovan. She'd also been a student of Andy's in high school. Then the poor woman got herself involved with Anthony

Donovan, a real peach of a man. There was some rumor that Sheriff Merritt had become involved in that whole thing, but Andy didn't know much. Lydia never discussed the things that her husband did as sheriff. Sylvie had two young boys. It took Andy a moment to remember their names. Jason and Andrew. Not Andy, not Drew, but Andrew. That's right. He'd made that clear one Sunday morning in church when someone had called him Andy. The boy corrected the person with a smile, but he was not going to be called by a shortened name. Sylvie worked at the grocery store. She was a pleasant young woman, much more so now that she was free of her husband. Lydia had brought her along several times when they all went out together. Evidently, she was going to be part of Lydia's group of friends no matter what.

It was good for Andy to get to know new people. One of these days she needed to stop thinking about how she'd had to leave the home she'd known for nearly an entire lifetime and start living in this house like she loved it. She needed to quit relying on her children and grandchildren to be her social outlet. They had lives of their own. Dragging along a grandmother who was as boring as Andy wasn't nearly as much fun as it sounded.

She was doing it again. If Beryl or Lydia heard her speak this way to herself, they'd have plenty to say.

Andy stood and walked over to the doors looking out on the cemetery. "What do you think, Bill? We're both in town now. Is it time for me to put aside my self-pity and start looking for excitement? Not that our lives were ever that exciting. But I can't sit here pining for a life that will never exist again." She huffed an uncomfortable laugh. "I could, but I'm certain that would ensure I joined you out there in a very short time. I'm not ready for that. I love you, but it's time to think about me again." It was as if she heard him sigh. "Right. Think about me for the first time."

She turned back, picked up her phone, and sent a return message to Lydia. "*Name the time. This should be fun.*"

Vignette #5

Jason

"Jason!"

"What?" He didn't know what was coming, but didn't think he'd done anything that would get him into trouble.

"Could you come out here, please?"

Whew. This was about her wanting him to do something. That was fine. He was bored sitting around anyway. He couldn't play video games if his mother was home because she hated the sound of them. He asked her for headphones, but then she told him she didn't want him caught up in a world she wasn't aware of. He couldn't win.

Jason stood up from his desk and when his little brother stood to follow, he pushed Andrew back on the bed. "She asked for me, not you, punk."

"But I want to know."

"Whatever." Jason gave him another push and headed for the living room.

His mother was on the floor scrubbing baseboards behind the sofa. "Jason, is that you?"

"Yeah, Mom. What do you want?"

"Bring me my purse, would you?"

This sounded like he might get to leave the apartment. Jason opened the front closet and took out her purse. She hung it on a hook inside the door. Because the three of them were so crammed together in this small apartment, Sylvie insisted that things were always put away. Once she established a home for something, that was where it belonged.

He took the purse from its hook and walked back over to her, holding it out.

"Could you do me a favor?"

"What do you need?"

"I called in a quick order at the grocery store. Would you walk

down and pick it up for me?"

"Okay."

"Take your brother."

"Mooommm," Jason whined.

"He needs to go to the library. Go to the grocery store after he's done, then come home."

"You aren't in a hurry?"

"No, the two of you need to get out of the apartment for a while and I need peace and quiet while I clean. Just remember to pick up the groceries before you come home." Sylvie opened her wallet and handed him some cash. "Do not go shopping for anything other than groceries. There won't be enough."

"Nothing to shop for," Jason said. He turned and yelled, "Punk!"

Andrew came around the corner, carrying a stack of books. "I'm ready to go. Thanks, Mom."

"Don't make your brother crazy, okay?" Sylvie pleaded. "Don't run away from him, don't make him chase you, don't beg for him to buy things."

"I won't." Andrew sounded offended.

"You do it all the time," Jason said. He put the cash his mother had given him into the wallet he carried. When he got his first wallet, he'd felt so grown up. He didn't have much to put into it, but it felt good in his back pocket.

The two boys headed for the front door.

"Don't forget to bring home the groceries," Sylvie called after them.

As soon as they were on the sidewalk, Jason took Andrew's shoulder.

"What?" Andrew snapped.

"Look. I don't want to walk downtown with you."

"But Mom said."

"Mom doesn't have to know. You go to the library by yourself. I want to walk around for a while."

"Got a girlfriend you're going to visit?" Andrew asked.

"No. I just want to walk around. When I'm done, I'll come to the

library and then we'll go to the grocery store. Like an hour or something?"

"An hour?" Andrew grinned. "I never get that much time in the library. I'll take it." He started to walk away and said, "Are you sure? You're not going to do something stupid, are you?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. This is weird."

"Really, punk. I just want to walk." Jason couldn't help himself and glanced toward the south.

Andrew turned his head that way. "What's down there?"

"Nothing. Why?"

That made his brother frown. "You're up to something."

"Not really. I just want to walk and look at stuff."

Andrew looked to the south again. "You want to go look at the old school, to see what is going on. Are you trying to catch a glimpse of the new owner?"

Jason shrugged. "I just want to see what's going on."

"What if I want to see, too?"

"You're the one who brought your books." Jason pointed at the stack in Andrew's arms. "Looks like you have something to do. If I see anything interesting, I'll tell you."

"Uh huh. With your grunts and half-sentences. The only way for me to know anything is to look for myself."

"You are going to the library," Jason said. He turned to walk south.

"I'll tell Mom."

"Tell her what? That I walked by myself? What do you think she's going to do except think that you're a tattle-tale?"

"Fine." Andrew stomped down the sidewalk. "Fine. Fine. Fine. You win. You always win."

Jason shook his head. That was the farthest thing from the truth, but he didn't care. He was out of the apartment by himself and yes, he was going to walk by the old school building.

There had been a lot of activity with trucks going in and out while Mr. Sturtz worked in there. All the kids at school were talking about it. None of them had actually seen the inside of the school,

but they thought they knew everything. Someone had heard that they bought paint from Bradford Hardware, so then they all speculated on what colors the rooms were being painted.

Who cared?

The old kitchen was being renovated, that was for sure. New freezers and refrigerators and even a commercial dishwasher had been installed. Then more kitchen equipment had been taken in because the lady was renovating some of the upstairs classrooms into an apartment. She was going to live in the building. Jason couldn't imagine that. The school had been empty for as long as he could remember. The broken out windows had been repaired, but the building had looked haunted and decrepit and run-down for so long. He couldn't remember a time when that corner was anything but ugly.

He turned onto the sidewalk along the highway across from the swimming pool. That place was going to have to step up their game if the school started looking nice again. New paint on the concrete walls and maybe some new pool furniture. It was depressing looking after it closed down. During the summer it was always busy. He huffed a laugh. When he was little, it was the place to be. His friends were always playing at the pool. Now, though, no one his age wanted to go. Too many little kids. They needed to build a real swimming pool where people actually went to swim rather than play.

"Donovan! Hey, Donovan!"

He turned his head and saw a couple of kids from school in the parking lot where he was headed. All he wanted to do was walk down the highway and turn to go up to the library.

Jason didn't really like these guys. They were a year older and always in trouble. He hesitated. He could turn around and walk through downtown to avoid them. But the reason he was here was because he wanted to investigate. Or spy on or at least try to see if anyone was outside the old school.

"Come here, Donovan," one of the boys said.

"Nah," Jason said. "I've got stuff to do."

"You have a minute."

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Just to talk."

"About what?"

"I don't know. What do you want to talk about?"

He stared at them with a frown. "I don't want to talk about anything. Gotta go." He turned around and walked away.

"What kind of sissy are you?"

Jason shook his head and muttered under his breath, "The kind who would like to beat you up, but won't because his mother would make him cry." Then he smiled. "See, Mom. You think I'm a hothead. I know how to walk away from stupid stuff, even when I don't want to. I wanted to go that way, but I thought about you instead."

He stopped at the corner of Elm and Washington, beside the pizza place. It had been forever since they'd ordered pizza. His mom always said that her pizza was just as tasty and it wouldn't cost as much. Someday, he was going to make a ton of money so she didn't have to worry about things like that.

She really was a good cook. And her baked stuff? Amazing. Both he and Andrew thought she should bake things and sell them, but where? Maybe at the grocery store. She always worked, though. When would she have time to bake and package her stuff? They kept telling her; he hoped someday she'd listen and believe in herself.

Crossing the street, he shook his head in disgust. Bellingwood was not the place to live if you wanted to build a business. So many storefronts were empty. There were a few holdouts, but it wasn't like they brought in a bunch of people. No one wanted to be here.

The high school had closed because the town was too small. Classes weren't really full in the elementary or junior high. How long was it going to take for that place to close? Then, everyone would be bussed to Boone. That would stink. He liked it here. The school was right behind their apartment building. They didn't have far to go in the morning. That was especially good for Andrew. Jason didn't mind getting up, but pulling that kid out of bed in the morning was impossible. Jason knew that his brother was wide

awake and reading long after their mom called for lights out at night.

He waved at old Mr. Gardner in the antique store. He was a good guy, but kind of lonely or something. Jason wondered why he'd never gotten married or had kids. The hardware store was busy. That wasn't surprising. All the old guys stopped in to talk to Mr. Bradford. Then they'd go to the diner for coffee. Like they were going to change the world with all their talk.

This walk had not turned into what he wanted it to be. He picked up the pace and then ran up the steps into the library.

"Hello, Jason," the woman said from behind the desk. She was married to the pharmacist. Mrs. Mikkels. That's right.

"Hello. Do you know where Andrew is?"

She pointed. "Looking for books about dragons if I know your brother. What can I help you find to read?"

"Nothing today. We have to get going. Mom has an order of groceries we have to pick up."

"Andrew said you were looking at the school building. Did you see anything interesting?"

"No. They must be working inside today."

"It's going to be something when that place is all fixed up. I look forward to meeting the owner."

Jason nodded.

Mrs. Mikkels pointed again. "That way."

"Thank you." He knew where the fantasy books were. That was Andrew's favorite section. "Hey, punk," he said.

"You're early. I thought I had more time."

"Nothing going on, so I thought ..."

"I need three more minutes to check out."

"That's cool. How about I go to the grocery store and get what Mom wants. Meet you there?"

Andrew took another book off a shelf. "Okay. I won't be late."

"No worries." Jason headed out, waved at Mrs. Mikkels, and went back down the steps. One of these days he had to meet the lady who bought the old school. People kept talking about her, but it was like no one knew anything. She was a mystery.

Would he like her? Would she like him? Did it really matter?

Yes, it mattered. There was something special about the changes that were happening there. He wanted to be part of them. It felt like magic. Like Andrew's dragons. Unusual and magical. He liked that thought.

Vignette #6

Lucy

“Order!” Lucy called through the window into the kitchen.

Joe grinned at her as he pulled the ticket from the clip. “You’re in a good mood this morning.”

“It’s the coffee,” she replied. “I’ve already had two cups. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be pretty.”

“Everything okay?”

She shrugged. “Greg and I had a long night.”

He frowned. “Is there a problem? You should have called. We could have figured it out here.”

“Are you kidding me?” Lucy beamed at him. “Donna showed up, Greg relaxed, and I ran out of there. She is in charge of his day now. I don’t think there’s really a problem. If something is wrong, they’ll call.”

“It’s okay if you have to leave. You know that, right?”

Lucy nodded and pointed at the ticket. “The boys are waiting for their breakfast. You’d better get on it.” She picked up a fresh pot of coffee and headed back into the fray. The diner was her happy place.

Not that she wasn’t happy at home. She loved her husband, but sometimes trying to figure out what it was he needed when he couldn’t speak or make himself understood was difficult. After his accident, she had been on edge. Unable to sleep because she worried he would need her. She hadn’t been able to work because she couldn’t leave him alone. Her life had become focused on one tiny room in their house. His room.

Then Donna came to work with him during the day and all of that changed. She had the proper training and somehow innately understood what it was that Greg needed to be comfortable and happy. She’d given them back their marriage. Well, as much as she could. Things would never be the same, but because of Donna, Lucy no longer saw Greg as an invalid or a disabled man who needed her care and was unable to return her love. She now saw

her husband, the man she had loved for years. He needed additional help, but the help Lucy gave was no longer a burden; it was a gift she could offer.

However, working at the diner had always been a joy. She loved seeing their regulars. They were her friends. She always managed to pick up on bits and pieces of news that would entertain Greg later that evening. It was easy for her to make people feel comfortable. All it took was paying attention and really listening to what they said.

Some women ordered a salad, when what they really wanted to eat was a pork tenderloin, or meatloaf or a hamburger with fries. Some men did the same thing when they came in with their wives, knowing they'd be in trouble later if they ordered something not on their diet. Half or even quarter orders of fries or onion rings calmed a lot of desperate tastebuds. Joe knew her shtick and was always ready. Lucy was willing to toss chopped up onion rings on top of a salad. It wasn't healthy by any means, but at least there was a pile of no-calorie lettuce at the bottom of the plate.

She stopped when she felt a tug on her apron. Turning, she saw a little boy with a big grin on his face. "Good morning, Andrew Donovan. Did you get more A's again?"

"This morning it's Jason's turn," Andrew said.

Jason looked at her, blushed, and then looked down.

Sylvie brought them to the diner for breakfast to celebrate high grades. It was generally Andrew who achieved the goal. That boy was bright. Lucy wondered what he'd grow up to be.

"Do you have donuts this morning?" Andrew asked.

She glanced back at the counter. The covered donut display was empty. "I'm sorry. They're already gone."

He sighed and slumped. "Can I have pancakes or waffles, Mom?"

"It's a celebration," Sylvie said with a smile. "You can have anything you want."

"Pancakes and waffles?"

"Only if you have sausage or bacon."

His eyes lit up. "Really? You'd let me?"

“How about one big pancake and one waffle,” Lucy said. She knew that Sylvie’s purse strings were stretched as far as she could make them go.

“Powdered sugar on the waffles?” he asked.

“Of course.” Lucy had her pad out and took their order. She nodded at a table of women who were holding up their coffee mugs. Like she hadn’t noticed their insistent waves. Patience, ladies. Patience.

Marigold, another server, took the coffee pot from Lucy’s hand and headed for the table, a smile on her face.

“Did you hear?” Andrew asked, excitement filling his voice.

“Hear about what?”

“Somebody bought the old school building.”

“I did hear that. Sounds pretty exciting, doesn’t it?” Lucy asked. She put her hand on Jason’s shoulder. When his brother ramped up about whatever was going on in his head, Jason ended up taking a back seat.

He looked up at her.

“It’s your special day, Jason,” Lucy said. “What would you like for breakfast?”

“Biscuits and gravy, please.”

“You should get a pancake,” Andrew added.

Jason glanced at his mother, who nodded and said, “I wouldn’t dare eat that many carbs, but they’re boys. Might as well enjoy it while they can.”

“I agree,” Lucy responded. She took Sylvie’s order and then retrieved the coffee pot from Marigold’s hands, wandering through the cafe, greeting her customers.

“I heard Sturtz got the job because he is practically giving that woman a free renovation,” Ben Drucker said to the others at his table. “Must be nice to have so much money you can buy a woman’s affections.”

“What are you talking about?” Lucy asked. She glared at the four men. “You are worse than what you accuse women of being. Four old shrews sitting here mouths blabbing about rumors. You don’t know anything and I’m ashamed of you.” She slapped the

ticket down beside Drucker. "You know what? I don't even want a tip from you this morning. You are nasty, nasty men. Henry Sturtz is the nicest guy I've ever met. If he finally met a woman who intrigues him, why is it any of your business? Tell me, Ben. Explain why it's your business."

He blinked and sat back. "We were just talking."

"No, you were talking smack about things you don't understand. Every Saturday, the four of you sit in here, making up stories and hope that people will think you're the smartest thing on the earth because you repeat filth. Next time you come in, sit at Mari's table. I want nothing to do with you."

She stomped off and then caught herself. Where had that come from?

Oh, she knew exactly where that had come from. For the last six months, she'd listened to people speculate about the new owner of the old school building. How did she have the money to buy the place? What was she going to do with it? Why would she buy an old building in Bellingwood? How did Henry Sturtz manage to get the contract?

Lucy had answers to those questions, but it wasn't her place to talk. Polly Giller had stopped in a couple of times to carry food out for the guys who worked for Henry. She was as nice as they came. She also had an affinity for pork tenderloins and told Lucy that she never did find one that met her standards while she lived in Boston. She'd told Lucy about her father and how his inheritance had given her a chance to come back to the roots that she'd loved. She wanted to open a type of community building where people could congregate. The girl didn't have all the answers yet, but she was full of energy and ready to make a go of this venture.

She'd chosen Henry Sturtz to do her renovation for one simple reason. He had listened to her as she explained her dreams. Rather than try to correct her or tell her she should do something different, something easier or maybe less expensive, he'd given her proposals across the board and allowed her to make choices. He treated her with the respect due an intelligent woman, something other contractors hadn't done.

Yes, Lucy felt a little protective of Ms. Giller and of Henry Sturtz. She'd known Henry throughout his entire life. He was a good man. He'd been as ornery as any other boy, but his parents were good role models.

Henry's father, Bill Sturtz, had come from a good family, too. His sister, Betty was married to a great man. His brother, Loren, was a bit of a different story. No one saw much of him. He'd stayed in the old family house after their parents died. Betty and Bill decided it was easier to let him live there than force him to live in an unfamiliar place. Something had gotten twisted in that man's head. Betty said that he refused anyone's help, even though she and Dick had offered to work on the land around his home. Lucy had driven past there once. It was a mess. Something that old Mrs. Sturtz would never have tolerated. He couldn't throw anything away. Over the years the fences had broken down, the metal in furniture rusted, and wood rotted.

Henry had tried to help, but Loren had kicked him off the land, too. At least the family understood that he needed a safe home. She'd overheard Betty tell Henry once that they had paid off his electric bills. Loren was her brother and she couldn't let his life be for nothing.

Lucy handed the Donovan's order to Joe and picked up plates that needed to go out. After her little explosion, she heard more tittering about Henry and Polly. She'd said what she needed to say. If someone wanted to challenge her, they could, but she was finished with it.

"Simon Gardner, you're a sight for sore eyes," Lucy said to the older man as he came in the front door. Paul Bradford walked in with him and pointed to a booth. "Coffee for you?"

Simon gave her a look.

She giggled, something she rarely did. "Tea, right?"

"Just hot water. I brought my own tea this morning," he replied. "I feel the need for something soothing. I might be coming down with a cold."

"I'll be right there."

Simon stopped by Sylvie Donovan's table and said something to

the family. Andrew lit up. The boy waved his hands while he talked. Simon patted Jason on the back, then followed Paul to the booth and took a seat.

She returned to them with hot water for Simon and coffee for Paul. "What are you two doing this morning? Making trouble?"

"Mr. Bradford here thinks that I'm not taking care of myself," Simon said. "He insisted on buying breakfast this morning."

Paul looked at his friend and laughed. "I did no such thing. I thought you were buying breakfast."

"Should I tell your dear wife that you reneged on your promise?" Simon asked.

It was like this every Saturday morning with these two. Lucy looked around the diner and realized that she knew the history of nearly every person seated here. Simon's past had been tragic, but he'd moved on, making his life a wonderful journey.

Sylvie Donovan had been through a lot with that horrible ex-husband of hers, but she had two happy boys who were proud of themselves for their accomplishments.

Stories of overcoming and growth, joy and sadness filled the room. The best part was that it was because people filled the room. That's why this was her happy place. The people she encountered every day. Their stories molded their lives, but they came in to share a moment of that with her.

"You two boys stop it," Lucy said. "I'll pay for your breakfast."

"Now that's a heck of a deal," Paul said.

"You charlatan," Simon said. "For that, you pay the entire ticket, plus, Mrs. Parker, add twenty dollars for your tip."

Paul laughed. "Sounds fair."

Lucy took their order and then walked past the table where Ben Drucker and his buddies had been seated. They'd left their money in the center of the table. When she picked it up, she saw a note of apology from one of the men, along with an additional fifty dollars. That was one way to deal with it.

"Hey, Joe," she said. He came to the window and took the ticket from her.

"What's up?"

She took out the fifty dollars and handed it over. "I yelled at some gentlemen for being gossips and they gave this to me. Split it among everyone in the back, okay?"

"You sure?"

"I have enough."

He smiled and slid it under a telephone book.

She turned back to the diner and thought to herself, "I really do have enough. This is my happy place."

Vignette #7

Sylvie

“Forty-three, fifty-eight,” Sylvie said, smiling at Pat Carter. She didn’t receive a smile back; it wasn’t in the woman’s personality.

While Mrs. Carter filled out her check, Sylvie finished sacking the groceries. “Would you like help carrying these to your car?”

That earned her an offended glare. “I can carry my own groceries.”

“Of course. I only wanted to offer.” Sylvie accepted the hastily written check. She knew better than to glance at the list of customers whose checks were no longer accepted at the grocery store. Pat Carter wouldn’t be on there and even the implication that she was would bring out even worse behavior in the woman. Sylvie handed over the receipt, smiled again, and said, “Thank you. I hope you have a great day.”

Mrs. Carter stowed her bags in the cart and pushed it out of the store, banging it on the metal frame as she waited for the front door to respond to her desire to exit.

“She’s not having a great day,” Lydia Merritt said as she placed items from her cart onto the conveyor belt. Not that the belt conveyed groceries terribly far like those at the larger grocery stores. In fact, this one had only just been installed. Before this, all they had was an old well-polished wooden counter.

The two, count them, two registers in the store had been upgraded at the same time. Sylvie felt so high-tech now. Credit cards were easier to run and with the advent of the EBT cards, they’d needed to make life a little less embarrassing for people in town.

Sylvie wasn’t about to gossip about her customers, especially not with someone like Lydia Merritt. She was just starting to get to know the woman, and while it might be easy to commiserate about the bad behavior of Pat Carter, that wasn’t the way she wanted to be known. “How about you? How’s your day?”

Lydia looked up as Mrs. Carter re-entered with the cart and

pushed it just past the entrance. "Much better than that. Excuse me." She walked over, looked outside, smiled, and pushed the cart to the corral.

"I could have done that," Sylvie said. "Thank you."

A young girl about Andrew's age was waiting patiently for Sylvie to finish with Lydia's groceries.

"Honey, is that all you have?" Lydia asked, pointing to the small basket the girl held. "Isn't your mama about to have another baby?"

The girl smiled. "She said she feels like crap and didn't want to come inside."

Sylvie and Lydia looked at each other and laughed. Those were probably exactly the words the girl's mama used.

"Tell you what," Lydia said. She took a card out of her wallet and handed it to the girl, then took the basket and set it on the counter. "You tell your mama that Mrs. Merritt hopes she feels better." She added four different candy bars to the basket and said to Sylvie, "Check her groceries onto my bill. Would you do them next so she can go?"

"I have money," the girl said.

"You give that back to your mama. I get to be the grocery fairy today."

Sylvie just shook her head. Mrs. Merritt did this type of thing more than anyone in town realized. She also knew that the little girl's mother was on her own most of the time. She had three children and a fourth on the way and her husband was an over-the-road truck driver. He was always gone. He didn't make all that much money and she couldn't afford to work because childcare was so expensive.

The little girl took the two bags from Sylvie, looked at Lydia in amazement, and headed for the door. She stopped, then came back, threw her arms around Lydia and said, "Thank you."

"Oh, my dear, sweet girl, you're welcome. Tell your mama that if she needs anything and your daddy isn't around, she can call me."

With that, the girl bounded out the door.

"Thank you for not making a big deal of that," Lydia said to

Sylvie.

“You’re amazing. When I grow up, I want to be like you.”

“One of the main reasons I did it was so that you wouldn’t hurry me out of here. I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Oh no,” Sylvie said. “What did my boys do this time?”

Lydia frowned. “Your boys? What do they have to do with anything?”

“If someone wants to talk to me, it’s usually because one of the boys got involved in something they shouldn’t.”

“You have terrific boys. Don’t ever let anyone tell you different,” Lydia said. “No, I wanted to ask if you’d be interested in going with me, Beryl, and Andy to visit the new owner of the old school building.”

It still astounded Sylvie that these women had taken an interest in her. They all had lives that were so much more interesting than hers. Lydia knew everyone in Bellingwood. She took care of everyone in Bellingwood. If there was a death or a birth or a celebration, she made sure that the person knew she cared. It usually showed up in the form of a casserole or cake, but she was always there. Her husband, Aaron, had been a big part of saving Sylvie from having to live with her now ex-husband. When he discovered what was happening, he stepped in. Then she was free.

Beryl Watson was a character. Sylvie didn’t know too much about her except that she was an artist. No one in Bellingwood knew much about Beryl. The woman who had been through just before Lydia was Beryl’s sister-in-law. They’d never been seen together.

Sylvie overheard conversations when she was with the ladies about Beryl traveling to the east coast – maybe Boston or something – to work with gallery owners in setting up showings. It hadn’t made much sense at the time, but the more she listened, the more she wondered if Beryl wasn’t some kind of a big deal in the art world.

And then, there was Andy Saner. The first time she’d been with those three women had been a little uncomfortable. Mrs. Saner was Sylvie’s high school English teacher. While she was a nice enough

person at school, she'd had high expectations for her students and never allowed them to get away with much.

It had taken some laughter and teasing from Beryl before Sylvie was comfortable calling her Andy instead of Mrs. Saner. Sylvie also had to get used to the fact that Andy allowed Beryl and Lydia to be the stars of the conversation. She always sat back and seemed to enjoy passing the attention to someone else. That hadn't been Sylvie's experience with her in class. When Mrs. Saner wanted you to listen to her, you'd better listen. She was in charge of the classroom and didn't let her students get away with anything.

She had been one of Sylvie's favorites, even though it had taken until the last couple of years to realize it. And now, here she was, friends with a former teacher. Sometimes life was strange.

"You just want us to go over and meet this person?"

"Yes. Doesn't it sound like fun?"

"What do you know about her?" Sylvie concentrated on putting groceries into bags. It did not sound like fun. It sounded like she was going to have to get to know another new person. Lydia was outgoing and comfortable in new situations, but it took Sylvie time to prepare herself for those types of events.

"She's about your age," Lydia said. "No kids. In fact, I don't think she's ever been married. Rumor is she grew up over by Story City or something, but went to Boston to go to college and stayed."

"Boston?" Sylvie asked. "That's a long way from Story City. Why Bellingwood if she has family over there?"

"I don't think she does have much family in Iowa."

Sylvie frowned. "No sisters or brothers?"

"Nope."

"Okay." Sylvie didn't have any of those either. It would have been nice for her sons to have aunts and uncles nearby. They didn't seem to be bothered by it. As much as Andrew and Jason picked on each other and sometimes drove her crazy with their bickering, they were friends. "Why did she come back to Iowa?"

"I'm not sure about that."

"Why would she buy that old school building?"

Lydia smiled. "You know, I hoped that someday, someone

would see the beauty of that place.”

“Beauty? It was a wreck. The grounds are still a wreck.”

“We have to give her time to do the work. Aren’t you interested in seeing what she’s done inside?”

“I suppose. I hadn’t really thought about it.”

“You hadn’t thought about it?” Lydia laughed. “I’m such a snoopy girl. Whenever I drive by, I have to force myself not to rush right in and demand a tour. After all these years, someone is giving that place some attention. Is she painting the walls wild colors? Did she paint the old woodwork? Did she tear out walls? What about the old auditorium? Did she turn that into apartments or what?”

“You have a lot of questions,” Sylvie said. She lifted the bags of groceries into Lydia’s empty cart, just to give herself something to do.

“I have more questions than those. I can’t wait to see what is happening in there and I believe that the safest thing for me to do is to drag you all along with me. We’ll make a party of it.” Lydia grinned. “Whenever Beryl is around, it’s a party, right?”

“The boys have been talking about the building,” Sylvie said. “It might kill them if I find out before they do what’s going on.”

“Everyone in town is talking about it. I’m surprised she hasn’t been inundated with nosy Nellies from dawn to dusk.”

“Maybe she isn’t very nice and people are scared of her.”

Lydia shrugged. “Could be, but I think it’s on us to find out for ourselves. Tell me you’ll come. I’ll pick you up.”

It was useless to argue with Lydia Merritt when she had her heart set on something. Sylvie nodded. “I’ll go with you. Don’t expect me to take Beryl’s place as the life of the party, but I’ll go along. If I didn’t, Jason and Andrew would be disappointed.”

“They’ll kill you if you do and be disappointed if you don’t?” Lydia asked with a smile.

Sylvie laughed at herself. “They’re pretty hard to get along with.”

Lydia smiled at Amanda Bowen, who hesitated at putting her groceries on the conveyor belt. “I’m finished and I’m taking up Sylvie’s time. She’s too nice to tell me to get along. How are you?”

"Fine, thank you," Amanda said.

"Ben's working on the old schoolhouse with Henry Sturtz, isn't he?" Lydia asked. "How's it going?"

Sylvie just shook her head as she scanned the groceries. Lydia Merritt could talk to anyone. If she wasn't behind this counter, she would avoid ever having conversation with people.

"Ben says it's a lot of work, but they're getting there," Amanda said. "It would be hard to bring back an old building like that. Especially since they're doing all new electrical and that."

"Who's doing the electric work?" Lydia asked.

"Jerry Allen's crew."

"Another good man." Lydia put her hand on the cart and pushed it toward the door. "Good to see you both."

After she left, Amanda smiled at Sylvie. "What would Bellingwood be without Lydia Merritt? She is the nicest woman."

Sylvie nodded. "It's hard to believe they live here and not in Boone. We're lucky to have her around."

"She takes care of everyone. I'll bet she'd get lost in a bigger city. She brought us a pot roast when Ben hurt his back a couple of years ago. I didn't think anyone even knew and then she showed up. It was nice to know that we weren't alone."

"That's it, isn't it," Sylvie said.

"That Lydia makes you feel like you're part of something bigger?"

"Yes," Sylvie agreed. She handed the bag of groceries to Amanda after checking her out and thought about it. Lydia made people feel seen. She made Sylvie feel seen. That hadn't happened very often in Sylvie's life. What a special gift that was.

Vignette #8

Beryl

“Miss Kitty,” Beryl said to her cat as she flopped onto the living room sofa, “I’m getting too old for this traveling stuff. You might be seeing a lot more of me than you used to.” She had to reach across the sofa to touch Miss Kitty’s tail. What would it be like to have a fuzzy tail that you could flick when you were annoyed or tucked between your legs when you were scared? Beryl smiled at the thought of Miss Kitty curling into a tight ball, her tail the last thing to wrap itself around her.

The cat responded with purrs and finally deigned to walk across the sofa to Beryl’s side. It had been three days since Beryl got home from her last trip to Boston and in those three days, Miss Kitty had made known her disapproval at being left behind. Not by doing anything destructive, but by ignoring Beryl unless one of the girls was in the studio.

Deena and Meryl, Beryl’s two students, traded babysitting times with Miss Kitty. Some evenings, they both came over to eat the fun meals that Beryl had set in for them, watch television, and snuggle the cat.

“Silly spoiled cat,” Beryl said. “Are you grateful that I ensure your comfort even when I have to leave town? No. I’m off to sell paintings so that you live in the lap of luxury and you act as if I subjected you to the seventh level of hell.”

Miss Kitty rolled and purred as Beryl stroked her back, then ended with her belly up. Beryl almost caught herself rubbing down the exposed tummy. It wasn’t as if she didn’t know that it was a trap, it was just so darned fuzzy and pettable.

“Nope. We’ve been through this. I want it to be a real invitation, but it isn’t.” Instead of rubbing the belly, Beryl picked Miss Kitty up and cuddled her to her chest. “I have two big commissions I should be working on in the studio. Would you like to join me today or would you rather go back upstairs to the bedroom and await my return?”

She groaned as she lifted herself off the sofa, the cat in her arms. "I'm getting too old," Beryl repeated. "Much too old."

She walked down the steps, through the basement to the glass doors and outside to the small building she'd had built for her studio. There was something important about this space. Beryl loved her home, but even more, she loved being able to walk away from all of its responsibilities into a room that allowed her to forget the world and embrace her imagination.

Years and years ago, she'd set up her studio in the finished basement. It had everything she needed. Light, a bathroom, storage for her tools, and a large space to spread out. But then the phone rang and the television was right upstairs. People knocked on her door and she'd think about the bills at her desk upstairs that needed to be paid. She'd try to multi-task by running the washing machine or dryer. Dishes in the sink haunted her mind. Distractions in the house were hard to move past.

She'd complained about her state of mind to her best friend, Andy Saner. Andy was one of the gentlest, most organized people Beryl had ever known. And she'd met a lot of people in her lifetime. If anyone knew how to manage their time, it was Andy. She'd still been teaching when Beryl mentioned that she hated having to work so hard to carve out time to paint. Beryl half-expected Andy to show up and do all the housework for her, but instead, Andy mentioned that Beryl had that immense back yard that looked out on farm fields. It wasn't being used and Beryl wouldn't likely ever plant a garden. Why wouldn't she build a studio?

The thought had never occurred to Beryl. She had a perfectly good house. Why build something else? The more she thought about it, though, the more the idea seemed genius. Within a week, she had called Bill Sturtz and he helped her find a contractor. She'd gone through it with the contractor at the time, arguing to make him understand what she was looking for. But he'd finally listened and given her a studio that thrilled her soul every time she entered. It was even more thrilling all these years later because the paint splotches on the floor, the stacks of canvases against the wall, the coffee rings on her counter, the worn seat of her stool, every flaw in

the building illuminated the reality that it was her perfect space.

She could put her hand into a drawer without looking and know which brush she would find. Okay, sometimes she dropped the brushes into spaces where they didn't belong and she'd have to tear the studio apart looking for what she needed. Okay, that happened more often than not, but she was never letting Andy in to do her organizational thing. Not that Andy hadn't offered. Several years ago, after Beryl had complained about not finding something, Andy and Lydia showed up. Andy with her labeling tote and Lydia with a thermos of coffee and sandwiches. They'd thought to be helpful. Beryl padlocked the front door of the studio, confusing her friends. She didn't unlock it until after they left. She was thrilled to have them spend time in her home. She even allowed the two of them to sort through and reorganize her kitchen. The studio was off-limits.

Beryl was afraid of what Andy would do in there. She'd tormented Andy for the last year or so whenever she visited her friend's new home. Neither of them were extraordinarily social. Andy, because she hadn't needed to throughout her life. She had a family and she had her school. When those two things were gone, she'd become more of a hermit than Beryl. That was saying something. Rather than let her friend become an old fuddy duddy, Beryl made it her mission to keep Andy's heart skipping along, even if it was only a rubber snake under her pillow or spiders in a glass lamp base. Once Andy's life jump-started again, Beryl would stop the silliness. It was exhausting trying to come up with clever ideas all the time.

Miss Kitty jumped up to the soft bed Beryl had made for her in front of a window. She turned around in the sunbeam. Rather than curl in on herself, she stretched out, ensuring that as much of her body absorbed sunshine as possible. Beryl thought curling up in the sun with her cat sounded like a grand idea, but she needed to work. Company of the feline persuasion was all she could tolerate when she was starting a new project. This was when she needed to focus in utter silence. Once she fully understood how the painting would come together, she could stand a few interruptions, but she

preferred quiet. Cats were quiet.

“Aren’t you, Kitty,” Beryl said aloud.

Miss Kitty’s tail twitched, but that was the only sign she’d heard Beryl speak.

Beryl sat in front of the blank canvas, her eyes half open as she considered the images she wanted to portray. She thought about the sculptors who told about chipping away the excess to leave only that which the stone wanted the world to see. As nice as that would be, she’d never felt as if the canvases had magical qualities that she alone could find as she covered them with paint. No, what the world was meant to see came from her imagination.

She had spent a lifetime as the oddball, the strange girl, the weirdo, the crackpot, or the misfit. Those labels should have destroyed her and there had been a time in high school when she desperately tried to fit in. That hadn’t lasted long. She couldn’t do it. The moment she wore mundane clothing or attempted to act as the other girls did, her silly mind would cause her to say or do something ridiculous. Beryl knew she was odd. She felt odd on the inside every day.

Rather than expose that part of herself to the world, which felt really unsafe, she boldly chose to give people a reason to stare at her, to laugh at her, or to talk about her behind her back. She was in control of the Beryl Carter they saw, not them. If they wanted to laugh, she would be in charge of what they laughed at.

It wasn’t until she was older that she discovered by putting the ridiculousness from her mind on canvas, she could fully express herself. No one in her family, or for that matter in Bellingwood, really cared that she created art. Sometimes it felt a little strange that she could enter a Boston art gallery to applause and celebration, yet walk into her hometown grocery store and feel as unnoticed as the spider in a corner.

To be honest, it was easier that way. The people she loved, Andy, along with Lydia and all her family, and now that cute gal, Sylvie Donovan, saw Beryl for who she was. It would be awkward to walk down the streets of Bellingwood and have people she’d encountered throughout her life ask for autographs, wouldn’t it?

Of course it would. It would embarrass Beryl to death.

She blinked and looked at the canvas in front of her filled with paint and images. How had that happened?

Miss Kitty stood and stretched, then looked at Beryl expectantly. The sun had long since left Kitty's bed and was starting its path downward. Beryl's painting was coming together. It didn't happen often, but every once in a while, her hands seemed to move while her mind worked on other things.

There was so much joy in creation, in allowing herself the freedom to gather beauty onto a canvas. She had quite a bit of work left to do, but it was a good start.

"I'm hungry," Beryl said. "Shall we return to the house and see what I can find to eat?"

Miss Kitty jumped down and stood in front of the door. Beryl picked her up, then flipped off the lights.

When she walked into the living room, the first thing Beryl did was check her phone. Her friends knew that if she didn't answer, she was busy. They also knew there was every possibility Beryl wouldn't return their call, but they left voice mails and texts for her anyway.

Lydia had sent a text asking if Beryl would be interested in joining her, Andy, and Sylvie to meet the new owner of the old school building. That was interesting. People had been talking about this woman for months. Bill Sturtz's son had taken on the task of renovating the building and no one was quite certain what the purpose behind the renovation was. If it was to be a single woman's home, that was plain ridiculous. Beryl laughed at herself. It sounded like something she would love to do, just to drive the people of Bellingwood crazy.

Where would any of them be without Lydia? She gave Beryl as much privacy and freedom as Beryl needed, but sometimes she stepped up and dragged Beryl back into the world to remind her that there was still life and love to be found.

"Why not?" Beryl sent back. "Should I wear my purple and lime or my yellow, red, and green?"

"I was thinking maybe you could wear your muumuu and

turban," Lydia sent. "Did you have a good workday?"

"Great workday. I'd love to join you."

"I'll pick you up, then. I can't wait."

One more person for Lydia to care for. She was addicted to people, that woman. "I'll bring the slime and nerf guns," Beryl said.

"Maybe that's a second date type of activity."

"I love how you understand me. Sedate and normal it is."

"Don't do it. You need to be you."

"We'll see." Beryl smiled at her phone. What would this new woman bring to Bellingwood? It might not be a grand adventure, but it could be interesting. She'd have to wait and see.

Vignette #9

Lydia & Aaron

“Good morning.” Lydia held out a mug of hot coffee. She’d heard Aaron come downstairs. For once, he wasn’t running late. The man had trouble getting moving in the morning and her day had started long before he opened his eyes. It always had. When they were younger, Aaron never knew what his hours would be, often working late into the night. She’d been the one to make sure their five kids had breakfast, were dressed and off to school. She’d learned to love her mornings alone once the kids were out on their own. And her favorite place to spend her mornings was her kitchen. There was something about this room that brought out the joy in everyone. It could have been the scents coming from the oven, the possibility of snacks in the refrigerator, or wrestling matches around the kitchen sink, or memories of her family crowding around while she worked. It could be anything, but she loved her kitchen. The cupboard doors were worn and the countertop had an untold number of stains, but she knew where every single one of them had come from.

Aaron took the coffee, smiled, gave her a kiss on the forehead, and sat at the kitchen table. He picked up a book she was reading. “*Ready Player One*? What is this?”

“Andy said I should try it. It’s forcing me to think, but I spent enough time watching the kids play video games while they were growing up, the premise makes sense.”

“I’m not sure what to think about you reading sci fi books.”

She waggled her eyebrows at him and laughed. “Don’t ever expect me to be boring.”

“No. That is not something I would call you. Ever.”

“I had fun. Checking that book out at the library made the sweet librarian do a double-take,” Lydia said. “I haven’t read books like that in years. Andy is good for me.”

“You’re good for her, too. I’d say you girls are all good for each other. Have you talked to Beryl since she came back from Boston?”

"No. She had a couple of commissions to take care of and was stressed about getting started. I told her that I'd leave her alone for a few days." Lydia shot him an ornery grin. "Not too long, but a few days. I wouldn't want her to think I didn't love her. Sometimes I worry about that lady. She spends too much time alone."

"Just because you are a people person doesn't mean everyone likes to cavort amongst the populace."

"What just came out of your mouth?"

"I read too," he said. "Beryl isn't like you. She needs to be alone so she can be creative. You've told me this over and over."

"I'm not talking about that. All the traveling that she does wears her out. She has no one to help her or make sure that she's safe. I worry every time she gets on that plane. Beryl is easily distracted and you know her. She can get lost in Bellingwood."

"Maybe someday she'll find a traveling companion. You could go along for now to make sure she stays safe."

Lydia snorted out a laugh. "Me? Travel with Beryl? We would never speak to each other again after a trip together. I'm hoping that she'll find a way to sell her paintings without traveling across the country."

"You like having all your chicks in a nearby nest?"

"Leave me alone." Lydia tossed the hand towel she'd tucked into her waist at him.

He snagged it out of the air and draped it across the back of a chair. "I stopped in the grocery store yesterday to pick up coffee for the office. Sylvie looks good. She told me her boys are doing well."

"She is good," Lydia said. "And those two boys are great kids. Jason is going to take care of his mother. He has that personality. He watches out for people."

"Learned that at the feet of his father," Aaron said with disgust. "I'm glad Jason chose to take care of people because of his father's behavior. It could have gone the other way."

"He couldn't protect his mother when he was little," Lydia said. "He'll take care of everyone he can as he gets bigger. And I think he's going to be a big, strapping boy. His daddy isn't much of a person, but he's a good-lookin' man. Jason has all of that going on."

Did you want juice this morning?"

"Coffee is enough. Thank you." Aaron took another drink from his mug and sighed in contentment.

She set a plate in front of him and another across the table. "I tried a new recipe this morning and it should be out of the oven in three minutes. You came downstairs early today."

"It smells wonderful." He grinned. "I slept like a rock last night and when I woke up, there was no more lying around. I wish I had more of those nights."

"Things are quiet at work."

"Quiet isn't exactly the word, but we're slogging through the cases one by one and making things better in the county. It won't likely stay this way, but a man can hope."

"No big murder cases or anything," Lydia mused. The timer on her oven rang and she opened the door, then stepped back as heat rushed out.

"No big murder cases," he agreed. "I like it that way. I don't know if I told you. I have a couple of interviews today and tomorrow."

"Oh?" Lydia took out the casserole, set it on the counter and turned off the oven. A couple of minutes for it to settle and she'd cut it into pieces. She took the coffee pot to the table and set it on a hot pad.

"A couple of young women. One sounds like a hotshot tech person. We could really use her if she's as good as it sounds."

"What are you planning to do if she upgrades your system?"

"Thank her. I might ask you to make cinnamon rolls or even a cake for her." Aaron grinned. "I don't want to get too excited. She's from out east somewhere and who knows if she really understands what living in a small town in Iowa means."

"Everyone should be so lucky. I heard that the gal who bought the old school building is also from the east coast. Boston, maybe?"

"She used to live in Iowa," Aaron said.

Lydia turned on him. "What have you heard?"

"Nothing much. I heard that and thought I'd mess with you."

“What about the other interview?”

“A young deputy whose family is up in northwest Iowa. Tab Hunter, maybe?”

Lydia shook her head. “That can’t be right. Tab Hunter is that gorgeous blond swimmer and actor.”

“Right. Tab Hudson. Tabitha. She’s young, but after meeting her, I think she has potential. I want one more interview, though.”

“Sandy might be coming down next weekend. What day is good for a family dinner?”

“Saturday night will work,” Aaron said. He glanced at the casserole dish.

Lydia smiled and turned back to cut it. “I thought I’d call Andy and Beryl to see if they’d like to join me in greeting our new citizen. Sylvie Donovan, too, if she’s not working.”

“New citizen?” Aaron asked.

“The gal who bought the school building. Aren’t you curious about what’s going on in there?”

“I hear things.”

She glared at him as she set the casserole dish on another hot pad, then took a seat. “What do you mean, you hear things? You haven’t told me any of it.” When he reached to lift out a piece, she placed her fork into it and pulled the dish away from him. “Nope. You’ve been holding out and don’t deserve this.”

“Only things about the building. They’re renovating the stage and auditorium. I’m surprised you haven’t heard more. Isn’t the boy who is dating Andy’s daughter working for Henry Sturtz this summer?”

“I don’t think Andy sees much of him. If he isn’t working, he’s in Ames. She hasn’t said anything. What else?” Lydia pushed the dish back his way.

“It sounds like they’re keeping most of the original structure. The old offices are now the new offices. Classrooms on the lower level are still going to be classrooms. I’m not sure what she’s planning there. They’ve completely renovated the kitchen. Heard there’s some pretty nice equipment going in.”

“Where did she get all that money?” Lydia mused. “And why in

the world would she choose to renovate an old school in Bellingwood. I love it here, but that's because it's my home. Most people drive in, see how decrepit the buildings are and how empty the downtown is and drive right back out. I wonder what she's thinking?"

He smiled. "I'm sure you'll find out as soon as you meet her. When are you planning to do that?"

"I need to ask the girls."

"I wonder what will happen once you fall in love with her."

Lydia shrugged. "Who says we'll fall in love with her?"

"I know you. She will welcome you with open arms, happy to finally meet friendly faces. In a split second, each one of you will decide that this girl is about to become your new best friend. It will be downhill from there."

"Why downhill?"

"I'll never see you again. You won't cook for me, you won't make sure I wake up in the morning, and you won't be home when I want to talk."

"Maybe we'll have to find something for you to do at the school building."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Maybe there's an old cold case that will pop out of the ceiling and we'll call you in to solve it. Or maybe she'll uncover a hidden hidey-hole where students stowed their illicit drugs and you'll need to come take them away so no one is poisoned."

"It is an old, old building," Aaron said. "No telling what went on in there when the place was bustling with students and teachers."

"Or in all those years it was abandoned."

He nodded. "It wouldn't have taken much for someone with some knowhow to get into the building. I'm surprised we didn't see more of that over the years."

"Let's keep as much crime talk out of Bellingwood as we can," Lydia said. "Don't want to spoil things for our new resident. Calm and peaceful is the name of the game. Welcome her to town, let her

get to know us a little before we spring any of the Bellingwood-crazy on her."

"She's meeting Beryl," Aaron said. "There's a whole lot of crazy in one woman."

"Do you think she'll like us?"

Aaron pushed his plate away and sat back. He wiped his mouth with a napkin before shaking his head. "Lydia Merritt, when did you become concerned about whether or not people like you? You are one of the most loving and caring people I've ever known in my life. That much is obvious the moment you walk into a room. People are drawn to you. Beryl is a hoot. A little crazy, but she loves life. Andy is as sweet as they come. I don't know Sylvie all that well, but she is someone you all care for, so that means she's a pretty terrific person. Explain to me why this woman wouldn't like you."

"You're a good man to have as a husband," Lydia said. She stood and walked over to him, wrapped her arms around his neck and felt her body relax as he hugged her back. That was the way it always was when she was with him. After all these years, he made her feel strong, safe, and loved.

"I love you, too," Aaron said.

Vignette #10

Henry

Henry Sturtz sat at his hand-built table in the kitchen. He'd made it when he was young and his mother, bless her heart, insisted that they use it. He pulled the printouts he'd received from a possible client in front of him and looked them over again while drinking from the coffee mug. It had gotten cold, but he didn't have time to make a new pot.

His phone rang and he smiled at the picture of his mother on the back deck of their Arizona home. He'd taken it the last time he'd gone to visit them.

"Good morning, Mom."

"It's your dad," Bill Sturtz said. "Just checkin' in. You can talk to your mother in a minute. She told me you have a potential client on the hook."

"Not on the hook yet, Dad. I'm meeting with her later today."

"Her? You be polite, you hear me?"

"You and Mom raised me to always be polite. I'm a good, obedient son. Remember?"

Bill chuckled. "Your mom also tells me that you might be reno-ing the old high school. That's a big project. Do you need me to come home and help?"

Henry laughed. "I thought you were retired."

"Retired, re-shmired," Bill said. "There is nothing to do down here unless you golf and you know how I feel about golf."

"A good walk ruined?"

"Those were Mark Twain's words. I don't even appreciate that it's a good walk. I've been sketching out some model railroad setups to keep myself busy, but Marie tells me there's no reason to build anything like that. Who would enjoy it?"

"You would."

"Not as much fun if you can't share it."

"You're making friends down there, aren't you?"

"Your mother is making friends. I'm reading books and

watching television. At least I can wear my shorts all the time. Your mother is happy, though." Bill huffed. "And now she's waving her hands and making noise that she wants to talk to you. Marie, I want to talk to my boy, too."

The next thing Henry heard was his mother's voice. "Are you ready for your meeting about renovating the school building, dear?"

"Yes, Mother," Henry said, with only a hint of long-suffering in his voice.

"Don't be like that. This could be an exciting project. I'm excited for you. How many other contractors are bidding on the job?"

"I don't know. One or two."

"You're smart enough to figure out the best way to get this job. You have an edge."

"I do?"

"Are the other contractors from Bellingwood? Did they grow up knowing that building inside and out? No. You're the one who knows all that. And you know the community and what that means."

"If the other contractors ..."

"Nope. Not listening to any of that kind of talk. You are the best person for the job. You walk into that meeting with confidence. But you also need to listen and be polite."

"Mom," Henry said with a laugh. "I've been doing this for a few years now. I know how to talk to people."

"We worry about you." She sighed. "We worry about Lonnie, too. She has her friends and seems to know what she wants out of life. What do you want?"

"I want my parents to trust me. I'm not a kid any longer. You sold the business and the house to me. I'm doing okay. It's taken some time to get the business back into shape, but I'm working on it."

"I know," Marie said. "You're right." She lowered her voice. "You have no idea how strange it is not to be needed. We have no responsibilities. I made this move for your father's health, but it's hard being away from our family. Have you talked to Betty or

Dick?"

"Not lately."

"Checked on Loren?"

"Not likely." Henry sighed. "He only has to throw me off his land once or twice for me to choose not to go through that again."

"Poor man. Bill worries about him. Betty says she checks every once in a while, but he doesn't like having her come around either. I wish there was something else you could do."

"I can only try so much, Mom. Uncle Loren wants to live his life his way."

"You're right. It's hard to watch, though. Okay, so tell me what you are planning to do and say at your meeting today."

"What do you mean?"

"Where are you meeting your client?"

"At a coffee shop in Boone."

"And you're going to pay for the coffee, right?"

He chuckled. "I hadn't thought about it."

"You pay for the coffee and buy a sweet baked good, too. Be a gentleman."

"Mom. I don't want to have to whine at you, but I'm not a little boy. If you haven't done your job by now, what makes you think you can fix me at this point?"

"I'll never be finished fixing you. You're pretty close to the perfect son, but I'm still your mother. Listen to your mother."

"Yes, ma'am." Henry smiled. "You sound as if you're more nervous about the meeting than I am."

"Renovating that old school building would be such a great job for you. If you do the work well, imagine the reference it will be for future contracts. This is a big deal, Henry. Don't tell me it isn't."

"It is, but whatever is going to happen is what will happen."

"Stop that. You take charge of your future. Go into this meeting intending to be the very best contractor the woman has met with yet. You *are* the best contractor for this project. Understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am," he repeated, still with a smile. "I will be my mother's son and go after this contract with gusto."

"Good boy. You'll call to let us know how it goes? I want to hear

all about the woman who is taking on a project like this.”

“What if she’s an old hag?”

“Then I want to hear all about the old hag who is taking on a project like this. But be sure to treat her like you would your mother.”

“I need to get going, Mom. I want to go over the information one more time so I’m certain that I know what I’m talking about.”

“Remember, Henry Sturtz, you’re our son and we think the world of you. If your father hadn’t believed you could follow in his footsteps, he never would have trusted you with his company.”

“I know.”

She whispered, “To tell you the truth, he believes you are better at this than he is. Prove him correct, okay?”

“I will. I love you both.”

“We love you, too. Be sure to call us.”

Henry smiled as she ended the call. He looked over the printouts he’d made, then gathered everything and slid it into his briefcase. Renovating the old schoolhouse could be an exciting job. He double-checked the email that he’d received from the woman – a Polly Giller – to ensure that he had paid attention to what it was that she was looking for. The sketches were pretty clear. The woman knew what she wanted. He’d worked on blueprints for the apartment she wanted to create for herself from upstairs classrooms. She had big dreams for the place, but there wasn’t anything that scared him. At least she wasn’t planning to tear down the building to put up an ugly apartment complex.

He rinsed out the coffee mug and set it into the sink. Henry didn’t want to admit to his mother that he was nervous about this meeting. Whenever he met with a potential client, nervous energy was part of the meeting. It kept him alert and aware. But this felt like an important point in time. His mother was right about that, too. Renovating the old Bellingwood schoolhouse could make or break him. If they pulled this off, it would be a big deal for the community. Losing the school had taken the wind out of the town’s sails.

The briefcase lay open on the table and Henry sorted through

the papers one more time. Blueprints, printouts of her sketches, and notes that he'd taken while reading through her email. He hoped she would be easy to work with. That she knew what she wanted could either be a problem or the best working relationship he could have.

He gave himself a quick shake. "Quit thinking about it, Sturtz. Get in the truck and drive to Boone. If this all falls apart, you will find something else to do."

The drive to the coffee shop in Boone didn't take nearly as long as he thought. Before he knew it, he had parked the truck and was taking a deep breath. He wasn't sure what the woman looked like, but surely there wouldn't be too many single women waiting for someone. Boone just wasn't that big.

"Move it, buddy," he said to himself. Instead, he opened the briefcase once more to doublecheck that the papers were where he had placed them before leaving the house. Of course they were. Why was he so nervous about this? He shut the case and headed for the shop.

Henry opened the front door, looked around, and saw a woman about his age seated at a table. His heart lurched and he took in a quick breath. She was beautiful. This couldn't be who he was meeting, could it? She smiled as she read something on her phone and he took in another breath. It had been so long since he'd been attracted to a woman that he didn't trust his feelings.

"Stop it, Sturtz," he murmured to himself. That could be a very bad idea. This was a business relationship, nothing more. He wouldn't presume it to be anything more. Oh my goodness, his mother would kill him if he messed it up because he was tonguetied by a woman.

He walked over to the table and said, "Miss Giller?"

She set her phone on the table, stood, and said, "Yes. Are you Henry Sturtz?"

He could only nod in response. Then he noticed the cup of coffee and pointed at it. He would buy coffee and feed her. That would make his mother proud of him. The more he thought about his mother, the easier this would be. She could be in charge of his

emotions right now. That felt safe.

Henry blathered something about the coffee shop's strudel and coffee cake. His grandmother had always fed people when there was stress. Food was good. Gathering his thoughts was good.

Miss Giller smiled and started to walk toward the counter with him. He heard her mention the coffee cake. At least that's what he hoped he heard.

"I've got it. Go ahead. I'll be there in a minute," he said as he gestured back to the table.

Whew. She returned and sat with her back to the counter, giving him a minute alone again.

"May I help you?" the girl behind the counter asked.

"A piece of coffee cake, a piece of strudel, and a coffee." Henry handed over his credit card and turned to look back at the woman at the table. She had no idea that people watched her when she moved. She was not only beautiful, but there was something about her. Strength, intelligence, creativity. Her presence indicated that she was all of those things.

"Sir?"

He returned his attention to the girl, signed the credit card slip, and took up the mug and plates.

When he got to the table, he didn't hesitate. After setting the plates and mug down, he moved the briefcase to sit to her side rather than across from her. He wanted to know this woman better. Whatever it was going to take, he would get this contract.

"This is one of my favorite places when I'm in town," he said, cringing at the words. Really? "Thanks for meeting me here."

She said something about not having been in Boone for years. She was staying in Ames while she waited for things to be done in Bellingwood. The man who connected them had told Henry she grew up in Iowa and was moving back from Boston. Henry hadn't known what to imagine about her, but the woman seated beside him was not what he expected.

They made small talk and Henry realized he wasn't paying attention. He needed to pull this together. She was nice enough, but they were here for a business meeting, not a date.

“Tell me what you’re hoping for that old school building,” he said.

She beamed at him and he realized he’d said the right thing. She had a dream for that building and it didn’t involve tearing it down and starting over. He opened his briefcase to pull out the blueprints and she cleared the table so they’d have room to spread out. This no longer felt like an interview. It felt like they were working together to create something amazing.

As he explained the designs he’d put together based on her sketches, he watched her excitement grow. She pointed at specific things that he’d thought about, the spa bathrooms upstairs, the redesign of her apartment, even the idea of bookshelves along the empty walls to warm up the rooms. She knew what she wanted.

What *he* knew was that he wanted to work with this woman. He’d never met anyone like her. Whatever it would take, he’d find a way to get this contract.

“Ms. Giller,” he said as she flipped through the blueprints.

“If we’re planning to work together,” she responded, “you should call me Polly.”

“Okay, Polly. Then, call me Henry.” He put out his hand and she took it, her hand warm in his. She held it and smiled at him as he said, “Tell me more about the ideas you have for the building.”

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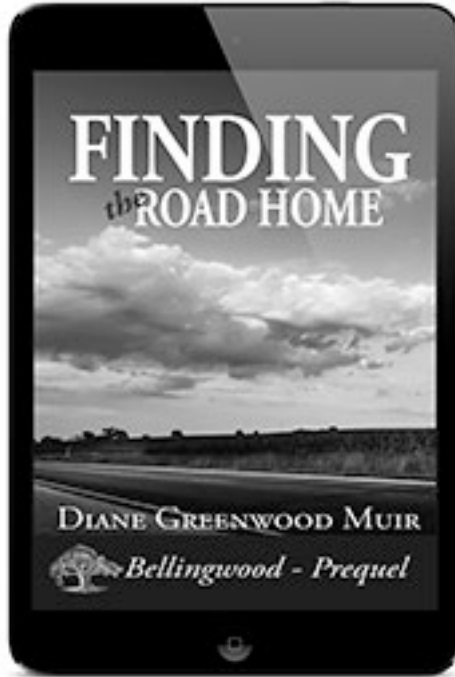
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I'm so glad you enjoy these stories about Polly Giller and her friends. There are many ways to stay in touch with Diane and the Bellingwood community.

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