

YOU *are*
ENOUGH

Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Book 37



Book Thirty-Seven
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 relating to Book 37 — You Are Enough — into one collection. These four short stories feature different characters from Bellingwood who get an opportunity to offer a little slice of life from their own perspective.

Vignette #1

The Observer

She loved this little town. It was part of her heart and soul. She spent so much time here, it often felt as if she walked its streets in her dreams. Bellingwood was as familiar to her as her home.

Now, walking down the sidewalk on Beech Street, she smiled at the sound of children's laughter. There was a day this part of town was dying. Funny, since the big old Bell House backed up to the cemetery. The houses across the street from Polly Giller and Henry Sturtz's place had been fading into oblivion, their owners caring little about how things looked. They had no motivation to change things. Why bother? No one cared. Since those two moved in with their constantly-changing household and desire to make things better one piece at a time, the rest of the neighborhood noticed.

Homeowners began picking up their yards, painting the outsides of their homes, even replacing roofs. The median age of the neighborhood had changed and families with children chose to live here. Now, yards were filled with toys and bikes, laughter, and friendships.

She turned west, knowing it would lead her downtown. Past the elementary school where kids played basketball on the courts. School was out for the summer and the warm breeze in the air brought everyone outside on this beautiful day.

Turning south on Elm Street, the sounds of a busy street where people were going in and out of the shops entered her senses. And then, there she was, turning in front of Greene Space. The owner, Reuben Greene, was not only a master at his craft, but he was generous with the space, inviting artists in different mediums to display their creations. A young artist, Barry something-or-other, had taken Rebecca Heater's place as a salesperson and people really liked him.

She passed the thrift store, then a cute little quilt shop with beautiful fabric and plenty of customers. At the other end of the

block from Greene Space was Sweet Beans Coffee Shop and Bakery. Oh, to have time to spend an hour or two in there listening to conversations, meeting customers, drinking gallons of coffee, and consuming pounds of sweet treats. The front door opened as Andrea Waters and Jody Gordon, the new elementary principal's wife, walked out.

"Are you going in?" Andrea asked with a smile while holding the door.

"Not today. Thank you," she replied.

"You look very familiar," Jody said, and put her hand out. "I know I've seen you before."

She nodded. "I've been around. Bellingwood is kind of a second home to me."

"There's a party on our street this coming Monday," Andrea said. "You should come. So much food!"

Jody laughed and patted her stomach. "I'd never experienced a real neighborhood party until we moved in across from the Bell House. Everyone makes a big deal of it and we have so much fun. Andrea's right. You should come."

"Thank you. If I'm still in town, I'll be there." She drew in the scent of the coffee shop and stepped back. "Thank you," she whispered as she continued on. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if everyone felt they could be free to invite others to parties?" she thought to herself, "We've gotten so tied up in our own fears, we don't realize that everyone else has them. All we need to do is reach out and those fears are breached. Friendships happen." In that singular moment, she knew why she loved this place.

Nan Stallings stood outside her new office space talking to her now-fiancé, Alistair Greyson. What a tender moment they were having. She had no idea what the conversation was about, but Grey loved the woman whose hand he held. It was obvious in every movement of his body and the look of adoration in his eyes. He loved her. The sign over the doorway read Stallings Marketing and Web Design. She wondered if Nan planned to keep her last name or change everything once they were married. There hadn't been any talk publicly about the wedding, so who knew what the two

were planning. It was just nice seeing them happy.

She crossed the street and looked over at Pizzazz. Now, that was a hopping place, something no one expected when they first opened. Dylan Foster was as unassuming as they came, but he offered good food and a pleasant atmosphere. The thing was, most people didn't know him as the brother-in-law of Mark Ogden, the rather gorgeous veterinarian who was married to the stunning Sal Kahane. Pizzazz was just a pizza place across the street to the south from Sweet Beans, and a favorite spot for Polly Giller and her friends on Sunday evenings when they had time.

Speaking of Polly's friends, she smiled at the sheriff's car that drove past and hoped that because Tab Hudson was in town on official business; it had nothing to do with another death. That poor girl was Sheriff Aaron Merritt's backup for all things related to Polly Giller and her bent toward discovering mysteries. Bellingwood was a nice community in a nice county in the center of Iowa in the middle of the United States. But if something untoward developed, Polly landed smack dab in the middle.

Down the street was the Antique Shoppe owned by Crystal the cat and her serf, Simon Gardner. He was devoted to that cat, a gift that had shown up in a box of things to be sold in his shop. Crystal was pampered and spoiled and she loved him dearly. Wandering through his shop was like wandering through history. Simon knew so much about the things he sold, whether they were pieces of furniture from different eras or toys and playthings that still held memories for people today. He'd been educated as an anthropologist and what better way to share that knowledge than through an antique store?

Next door to the antique store was Bradford's Hardware. Shops like this didn't exist but in small towns any longer. A person could wander in, ask for help and be given advice by either the owner, one of the clerks, or any random customer who might have overheard the question. A few pieces on the shelves looked as if they belonged at the antique store, their boxes aged with time. The pride of a family's strength showed over decades of business ownership.

New businesses had cropped up over the last few years. The photography studio owned by Chris and Debbie Johns. They had such talent and expanded their location to keep up with the demand. At the end of the strip, across from the public library, was a comic book store and video game arcade. A place like that might get lost in the back streets of a large city, but in Bellingwood, Boomer's Last Stand, owned by Doug Randall, was popular with kids and several adults. She'd heard that even Beryl Watson enjoyed its ambiance.

West from that building was an old-fashioned gas station renovated into a new-fangled garage. One of the main owners was Nate Mikkels, who owned the local pharmacy. He was a motorhead who would have spent his entire life under the hood of classic cars, except for the fact that he had a rather large family to raise. His wife, Joss, the librarian, was also a wonderful mother who worked much too hard. Luckily, they had hired a nanny to help with their six children. She'd also been fortunate to find Andy Specek, a former English teacher and all-around highly organized and talented woman who was thrilled to have a productive way to fill her days by spending them at the library.

Not that Andy's days needed filling. Lydia Merritt, the sheriff's wife, and Bellingwood's own Beryl Watson, kept Andy as busy as she wanted to be with whatever the group could concoct. It was told that those three, plus Sylvie Donovan, the extraordinary baker at Sweet Beans, were the original welcoming committee for Polly Giller. Some little old lady gossips blamed them for all the changes that had come to the sleepy little town. Once those four women gave Polly a foundation of friendship, she soared and challenged the community to reinvent itself, doing much of the hard work herself.

The thing is, Polly would never assume she was the catalyst for the transformation Bellingwood was experiencing. Population growth, Jeff Lyndsay's actions within the community, and many others who dug in and chose to invest in the town were as important as anything she did. Jeff was a heck of a leader and as manager of Sycamore Properties, he was a master at showing off its

highlights. He and his partner, Adam Epperson, had purchased one of the buildings downtown and now lived in the upstairs apartment. An Ohio boy, he had fully embraced all that Iowa had to offer and was knee-deep in the doings of Bellingwood.

Tempting as a scoop of ice cream was, she ignored the General Store, though she was curious as to what today's flavor was. She also walked past Joe's Diner. Polly's favorite sandwich was a pork tenderloin. Imagine living for years in Boston without access to that Midwestern favorite. How many had Polly eaten since she'd returned to Iowa? The girl preferred those served at the diner by her favorite waitress, Lucy. That woman was kind and generous, knew everything that was happening in town, and rarely spread rumors. That's the kind of friend you wanted on your side.

She went past the library, looked up the steep steps to the door, and grinned at a little girl hopping down each one while holding her mother's hand. The little girl saw her and waved madly. "Hi there. I got more books today!"

"That's so fun! I bet you can't wait to get home to read them."

"Mommy, can I read when I get home?"

"May I," the woman said with a smile. "Of course. Then you can help me clean up your messy room."

The little girl scowled. "It's not messy."

The woman laughed. "Then we'll count how many things need to be put away. If it's more than ten, it's messy."

That made the little girl smirk and laugh. "I get to read first, right?"

The two waved as she turned the corner and headed south again. Sycamore House was just across the highway down here. The place was always busy, and today was no exception. Walking down the Sycamore-lined lane from the highway to the front of the building, she almost wished it was dusk so the lamps were on to light the way, but it was still a pretty walk.

Stephanie Armstrong held the front door open as a group of women headed inside. It was nice to see her active after the physical rehabilitation she'd had over the years. That car accident had scared everyone and watching Stephanie return to a normal life was a joy.

The same went for Charlie Hanson, Jason Donovan's girlfriend. Those girls were strong-willed and not about to let injuries steal their young lives.

One last look at the horses and donkeys in the pasture sent a wash of peace and contentment over her. There was something about an animal's relationship with the people who cared for it. Eliseo, Jason, Noah and his friends had embraced the work and the animals. Even those little cats who lived among the horses. The donkeys, Tom and Huck, looked for attention at every turn and right now, Noah was letting Tom nuzzle his neck. Such sweetness.

She turned around, leaned back in her chair, pulled the laptop forward, and began to type. "Covering her mouth as she yawned, Polly caught Henry's eye." Book 37 was well on its way.

Vignette #2

Cat in the Cradle

"How long do you think, Dad?" Justin Waters asked.

Kirk shook his head. "We're getting closer. Unless you're ready to take a cut in pay and move home."

Lucy Parker set down their drinks and said, "What are you two feeling like today?"

"A hungry, hungry hippo," Justin replied with a smile. "I didn't have any breakfast."

His father glared at him. "Why not?"

Justin shrugged. "Because I knew you were paying for lunch?"

Lucy chuckled. "He got you there. What brings you to Bellingwood today, Justin?"

"Lunch with Dad. Talking about when he can afford to hire me at the garage."

She nodded. "You sure you want to work with your father?"

"We've spent a lot of time in Mr. Mikkels' garage the last couple of years," Justin said. "Dad's always bossing me. I think I can handle it."

"What about you?" she asked Kirk.

"He's a good worker. His mother brought him up well. We are close to being able to bring on another employee. In fact, we're in that awkward place where there's too much work and not enough work."

"If your boy has a big social life, he'd best stay where he is, right?" Lucy asked with a grin. She gave Justin's shoulder a gentle push. "Right?"

"It's not that big," he said.

Kirk laughed. "You're blushing, Jus. Wanna tell us what that's about?" He glanced up at Lucy. "Sounds like there's a story that he hasn't told his parents."

"No big deal, Dad," Justin protested.

"It's a girl?" Lucy asked.

"We've only been out a few times. I don't even know if she really likes me."

Lucy smiled. "She agreed to go out with you more than once? How many times? Two? Three?"

"Four," he replied.

"You're in a committed relationship," Kirk said. "No girl would waste that much time on a guy if she wasn't interested."

"He's right, you know," Lucy said. "It isn't only the time you are together. She spends time telling her friends about you. She spends time figuring out what to wear, putting on makeup, fixing her hair and then hoping that you aren't taking her to a fancy restaurant or the racetrack without notifying her. There is a lot of time invested there. It's no small thing."

"I don't think it's that big of a deal," Justin said. "We went to lunch one time. She has a job, so we only had an hour. We had coffee once and then went to Ames for dinner a couple of times."

"Where does she work?" Kirk asked.

"She's a receptionist in a doctor's office."

"Any doctor I know?"

Justin shook his head. "Can we order, please?"

Lucy grinned and took their orders.

After she left the table, Kirk peered at his son. "Does she have a name?"

"You don't know her."

"That isn't surprising. I don't know that many people."

"But you used to live here. I'm constantly running into people who remember you as a big-time wrestler. They know Grandma and Grandpa too."

"Does your girlfriend know any of us?"

"She isn't my girlfriend."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"No, she doesn't know you. Dad, this really wasn't why I wanted to have lunch with you today."

"Oh, there was a reason other than spending time with your favorite father?"

"You're my only father."

"Good thing."

Justin shook his head in confusion. "What's going on here?"

"I don't know. You're the one who set up this meeting."

"Meeting? I didn't want a meeting with you. Mom said you wanted to talk to me."

"She did, did she?" Kirk mused. "That's interesting."

"Why. What's she up to now?"

"Wondering what you've been up to. The other night she asked when I last talked to you."

"I text her every day," Justin protested. "Every day. If I don't, she sends me three billion texts. If I don't respond to those, she leaves voicemail asking if I've driven into a ditch or something. When I'm at work. I can't answer the phone when my head is in an engine. What is she thinking?"

"She's thinking that you aren't living under her roof any longer and she worries."

"But ..." Justin didn't even bother. He could protest all he wanted, but his mother was the same person he'd lived with since the day he was born. She wasn't about to change now. "So if I don't show up at the house, she figures out how to get us together."

"I guess that's the way of it."

"Does she know that we hang out at the garage sometimes?"

Kirk raised an eyebrow. "She does now. I hadn't intended to tell her all my secrets, but when she started in on me about you the other night, I finally said something. That didn't help, you know."

"Because I haven't been by the house to see her." Justin's shoulders drooped as he shook his head. "I even know better. I kinda hoped that with Nat in high school and Lara and Abby growing up, and Cilla in college, she'd keep busy with them. I'm just working. No big deal."

"A new girl in your life is a big deal," Kirk said. "You still haven't told me her name."

Justin leaned forward, braced his forehead with his hand and closed his eyes. "It's really no big deal."

"You keep protesting. If you'd answer the question, it would all be over and we could move on."

"But you'll tell Mom."

"Not if you don't want me to tell her. I didn't tell her you are in town every weekend at the garage, did I?"

"Yeah. Why didn't you?" Justin asked, opening his eyes. "I didn't think it was a big thing."

"You keep saying that these aren't big things, but they are to your mother. How do you believe she'd feel if she knew you were in town and didn't bother to stop in to say hello."

"I didn't think about that."

"She would probably like to be a priority once or twice. Not just an afterthought when you have a few extra minutes with nothing else to do."

"You make me sound really superficial."

"Are you?"

Lucy chose that moment to land in their space, plates in hand. "Do you need refills on your drinks, boys?"

Justin held up his empty glass. "Yes, please. Do you have kids, Mrs. Parker?"

"No," she said with a wistful smile. "But I feel like this town is filled with kids I've cared for. Both young and old. Why do you ask?"

"I'm in trouble for not paying attention to my mom."

"Oh," Lucy said knowingly. She'd set their plates in front of them and was holding Justin's empty glass. "You're her first out of the house and are responsible for training her. Cilla, Nat and the girls will have it much easier because of you."

"That's not fair."

"Isn't it what you did your whole life? Grow up before she was ready?"

Justin looked at his father and shrugged. "Maybe."

"It was different for him because I was gone so much," Kirk said in way of explanation. "This is really the first time Andrea has had to deal with him being independent."

"Be patient with her, young man," Lucy said. "Your mother is a brilliant woman. She'll figure it out."

"Yeah. I know."

"She deserves a little patience, right?"

Justin looked up at her. "I know. I know. She gave birth to me and raised me and sacrificed for me and all that."

"So much more than all that," Lucy said. "She loved you when you were at your very worst and she supported you when you were at your lowest. When you were frightened, she held you close and when you felt like no one else in the world cared about you, she reminded you how special you were. The rest of the world ebbs and flows, but your parents remain solidly in your corner no matter what. You can get your own apartment, get married and have children. The one thing that will never change is the fact that your mom and dad will always be exactly that - your mom and dad." Lucy smiled. "I've preached my sermon for the day. Now I'll refill your drink and let you two figure out how you're going to make that good woman feel special."

Kirk chuckled. "You could introduce your new girlfriend to her. That would make her feel special."

"She's not my girlfriend, Dad," Justin said. "Mom probably wouldn't like her anyway. Mom never liked any of the girls I dated."

"You never dated any who were good enough for you."

"According to Mom."

"According to you, Justin. If they had been good enough, you'd have stayed with them."

"Maybe I wasn't ready. That's all."

"Are you ready now?"

"To do what? Get married? No way."

"To date someone who is good enough for you. Is this girl good enough for you?"

"I don't know if she's good enough for Mom. A princess probably wouldn't be good enough to pass Mom's inspection."

"What is it you think your mother is looking for in a girl for you?"

"I don't know. Perfection?"

Kirk chuckled. "Not really. Your mother would be happy if the girl you dated cared enough about you to see the best in you and

expect you to always live up to that. Andrea would like your girlfriend to have enough confidence in herself that she can let you be who you are."

"Did Mom do that for you?"

"More than that. She still does. She expects me to be better than myself because she believes that I can do anything. Even when I don't believe it, she believes in me. Your mother is the only reason that I'm anything at all."

Justin couldn't help himself and glanced down toward Kirk's missing leg.

"Exactly that," Kirk said. "When I didn't have it in myself to think that I'd ever be worth anything again, she wouldn't let me wallow in self-pity. She allowed me to grieve and to work through all that had happened, but she knew who I was and dragged me back to myself. She didn't care how many therapists I needed to talk to or how much work it took to find a way for me to heal. She knew that coming home to be near my family was important and she made that happen. Your mom let me take my time, and gave me the space to find what I loved to do. I didn't know what it was. For me, the military had been everything. She knew it wasn't, but while I was in the middle of it, she let me be everything I could be. Now, life is different, but it is no less of a life than I had before. In fact, because I can spend time with you kids and with Andrea and with my parents and my friends, it's pretty great."

"Wow," Justin said.

"That's why she wants a girl for you who has self-confidence enough to let you be who you are and who is strong enough to encourage you to be more every day. So, tell me about the girl you're dating." Kirk grinned across the table. "A name at least."

"Katie Lemon," Justin replied. "She's a receptionist, but she's taking business classes at the community college. She doesn't know what she wants to do yet."

"How old is she?"

"Cilla's age."

"She's still young and she's working in a doctor's office?"

"It's her dad's office. And by the way, he remembers you."

Kirk frowned. "Dave Lemon?"

"Yes."

"He's a couple years younger than me, but he was on the wrestling team."

"He said he was never as good as you were. All those guys looked up to you, I guess."

Kirk shrugged. "Long time ago. How well do you like this girl?"

"I kinda like her a lot."

"When are you seeing her again?"

"Dad," Justin protested.

"Yeah, yeah. It's no big deal."

"Right. It probably won't last. Let's not get Mom involved yet, okay?"

"Got it. So a cut in pay to come work for me at the shop here in Bellingwood is out of the question."

"Yeah. Is that okay?"

"I'm proud of you. As soon as we can swing it, you and I will have another conversation. Hopefully, we'll talk about other things between now and then."

"Yeah."

"Come over and see your mother."

"I'll come this weekend. Maybe Sunday? Dinner?"

"I'll set it up. She'll be glad to see you."

Vignette #3

Oh, Brother

“Noah?”

He smiled at the little voice. At least it wasn't his mom calling him out for hiding.

Gillian came around the corner into the library. “Read book?”

“I'll read a book to you,” he said. “Which one?”

She shrugged.

He knew better than to ask. The littles always had their favorite stories, but most of the time, what they really wanted was time and someone to pay attention to them. Today had to have been disruptive for Gillian, what with everything going on. She'd gone out to Grandma Marie's house because the Bell House had been turned upside down for the eighth-grade graduation party. Polly was glad to host the party, but most all the parents stepped in to do the work.

His buddy, Graham Birdsong's, dad had taken charge of most of the food, and other parents were in charge of decorating. Noah was surprised at how easy it had been. Yesterday, Polly and Lexi brought the tables in from the garage and set them up. He was sure that he'd end up doing it after school, but then it was done.

How weird was it that he was going to high school next year? He didn't feel like a high-schooler. Rebecca was a high-schooler. That made sense. But now she was in college. That didn't make sense. He hated to admit how much he missed having her around this last year. The funny thing was that she'd been so busy when she was in high school that he rarely got to see her anyway. But at least she was home sometimes.

She'd finished her semester a couple of weeks ago and now, everything felt normal again with her at home.

Gillian pulled a book off the shelf and brought it to him, then stood in front of the other leather chair in the room. Noah grinned. “Need some help?”

She tried to climb, but the seat was so smooth, she couldn't get

a grip on anything. He tucked the book beside him and stood, then lifted her up, and set her in the chair.

She beamed at him. He shouldn't admit this either, but little kids were awesome. He loved babysitting Mrs. Ogden's kids. They were so easy to get along with. They were ready to do anything fun and he didn't mind talking to them. Since he spent so much time with the horses at Sycamore House, he was comfortable around the animals in the Ogden's yard. The goats were a riot and now they had chickens. Theodore and Alexander loved to take him out to the pens. Last weekend, Alexander showed him how to collect eggs.

That was crazy. When he was a kid Alexander's age, he never thought about where eggs came from. His grandmother bought them at the store. Real live chickens. Crazy.

The sound-level from the graduation party increased and decreased as a door opened and closed. Noah held his breath. Someone was going to find him and he would have to go back to the party. He knew he should be thankful that it was being held here at his house. He knew all the escape routes. It wasn't like he was that far away. Anyway, Graham knew where he was.

He watched the door, dreading what might be coming his way, then smiled again when he realized it was only Delia.

She spotted him and ran toward him with her arms up. "Nah!"

Noah bent down and gathered her into his arms. For a little girl who had been through a lot, she was happy. "I'm going to read a story to Gillian. Do you want to sit beside her and listen?"

Delia looked down at Gillian and then back at Noah. "Sit," she said.

He set her in the chair and then returned to his own seat, moving it so that he was facing the two girls.

Noah opened the book. "Voices or regular."

Both girls said, "Voices!" Delia clapped her hands together.

He opened the book and read, "One sunny Sunday, the caterpillar was hatched out of a tiny egg. He was very hungry."

Gillian's eyes lit up and she leaned forward. She loved this book. Delia clapped her hands together again, Gillian's excitement rubbing off on her.

He stopped when he heard footsteps coming their way and breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of Lexi.

"Mommy!" Gillian cried. She pointed at Noah. "Cattapilla."

"You three are about as cute as they come," Lexi said. "Noah, shouldn't you be in the foyer?"

"I'm busy," he said with a chuckle. "Can't you tell?"

Lexi took out her phone and snapped a picture. She moved to capture a picture of the two girls seated together, and then shifted to photograph all three. "Keep reading," she said. "Don't mind me."

"You're taking pictures. How can I not mind you?" he asked, still grinning. Even Noah could see how adorable it was having the two girls share a chair while listening to him read.

"Please?"

He looked down at the book. "I have to start again, girls. I lost my place because someone is taking pictures."

Gillian pointed at her mother. "Picher. Always pichers."

"I can't help it when you are so stinkin' cute," Lexi said. "Now, pay attention to Noah while he reads."

The two little girls looked at him and he repeated the first line. "One sunny Sunday, the caterpillar was hatched out of a tiny egg. He was very hungry."

Lexi ducked in front of him. "Ignore me," she whispered.

"Really?"

"You'll see." She set the phone down and put Gillian's hands together in her lap. Then she did the same with Delia. "Go ahead, Noah."

"How about I just sit here and look cute while you pose the girls?" he asked.

She glared at him. "You giving me trouble?"

"I think so."

"I thought so, too. Fine. I'll be done in a minute." After shooting pictures of the girls with their hands posed in their laps, she backed up and said, "Delia, would you hold Gillian's hand for a picture?"

Delia looked at Gillian and then at Noah as if she was confused by the request.

"Lexi is taking your picture," Noah said. "She wants you to try a few things. Do you mind?"

Delia was still confused, so he sat forward, leaned across the open space and took Gillian's hand. Then, he took Delia's hand and put them together on Delia's lap. He glanced to the side as Lexi shot pictures while he was posing them.

"You're a sick person," he said.

"I can't help it. I love the way you are so gentle with the girls. It's wonderful that you treat them as well as you do. Now, sit back in the chair and open the book. You know, if you crossed one leg over the other, that would be great."

"Do I need a pipe and a tweed jacket with patches on the sleeves?"

"Do you have those things?" she asked with a wink.

"Aren't you supposed to be helping with the party?"

Lexi put her hand on a hip. "Aren't you supposed to be at the party?"

"I'm in the same building as the party. That should be enough."

"Only because they're having it in your home."

"Isn't that great?" Noah laughed. "If I stay here with the girls, you can go socialize. Then we're both happy."

"You really don't like these things, do you?"

He shrugged. "It's not like I hate them. I don't know how to do that small-talk thing. How many times do I have to smile and say, 'Yes, I'm looking forward to high school. No, I don't know what my life plans are. Yes, I liked all my teachers. No, that wasn't me who puked under the bleachers.'"

Lexi had been taking pictures of the girls and stopped at his last sentence, then laughed. "Don't tell me."

"I wouldn't do that," he said. "Gross. I was checking to see if you were paying attention."

"Yada, yada. You don't like small talk."

"Everyone asks all of us the same questions over and over. I want to paint a sign and hang it on my back. Then maybe they'd leave me alone."

"But your grandparents are here."

"I can see them any time."

"And your friends."

"Graham and Miles have to put up with their own inane questions," Noah said. "Their family. Their friends. Things like this, it's every man for himself."

"You have a lot of these celebrations coming up. High school graduation, college graduation, a wedding, babies and baptisms ..."

Noah held up a hand. "Stop it. That's mean. You're torturing me now just for the fun of it."

"You're funny. Isn't he funny, girls?"

Delia pointed at the book. "Funny?"

"You're right," he said. "I should be reading to you instead of talking to Lexi. What do you think, Gillian?"

"Cattapilla," Gillian said. "Read it."

Noah started again. "One sunny Sunday, the caterpillar was hatched out of a tiny egg. He was very hungry."

Lexi moved back into the doorway as more footsteps came down the hall. He didn't want to look up, but he sensed Polly was watching. He heard the two whisper something, but he continued. He'd started this book and now he was going to finish it.

When he did, he looked up. He was only a little sheepish when he caught Polly's eyes. "The girls found me."

"Looks like it," Polly said. "What are you doing in here?"

"Reading them a story." He winked at her, knowing that wasn't the question she was asking.

"There's a party to celebrate your graduation happening in the foyer."

"I was there. I had cake. I talked to people."

"Did you talk to your grandparents?"

Noah looked away. "I was on the way out when they came in." He knew it was all over. He was one of the guests of honor and his mother wasn't going to let him get away with hiding through the entire thing.

She was generally pretty good about not forcing him to spend time at the big parties she hosted, so he couldn't complain. Noah

put the book down. It was time to face the people. Maybe it would be over soon.

Vignette #4

Love of My Life

"We'll only spend a few minutes," JJ said as he and Tab drove out to his parents' house. "I think you'll like them."

"It's fine," Tab replied. "Maybe a quick dinner and then we can come back for the last bit of Polly's party."

He chuckled. "She does throw big parties. Everyone I talked to was going. We'll try not to stay too late at Mom's house. I haven't seen Uncle Bud and Aunt Vi in years. I didn't know if I ever would again. I want you to know these people."

"Tell me about them."

"Aunt Vi. Hmm, what to say about her. She's nothing like Mom. Way more laid back. When Mom worried about making everything perfect, Aunt Vi was more concerned with going to concerts and playing shows. She was the epitome of eighties rock and roll. Big hair, big makeup, big everything. Especially her personality. Aunt Vi had this crazy wild guitar. She painted it in neon colors." He laughed. "I wonder if she still has that."

"Does she still play?"

"Not like she did. But yes. Here and there. And she did this big reunion show with her bandmates about ten years ago. I was in California and couldn't make it. Mom wouldn't have been caught dead going. The thing is, Mom might have acted like she was embarrassed by Aunt Vi, but I believe she secretly envied her sister. Vi never worried about where her next meal was coming from. She knew that she could beg for food if she was hungry enough, but she was also willing to work. She had this old Ford Bronco that she drove everywhere. Mom nearly died when she found out that Aunt Vi was sleeping in it. But Vi didn't care."

"When did she meet your Uncle Bud?"

JJ screwed up his mouth as he thought. "It was in the late eighties." He nodded and grinned. "That's right. This is such a great story. So ... she drove into this little town in Montana. Apparently, she was only passing through, but the Bronco broke down. Vi was

ticked off because she had a gig she was trying to get to. She'd stopped to get something to drink and that Bronco plain wouldn't start. She didn't have much money, there were no cell phones, but she found a pay phone and called her dad. The town was so small, he couldn't even wire money to her. So she sat down on the curb beside the Bronco, kicked back and waited, knowing that someone would show up sooner or later."

"No way."

"Fearless," he said. "Completely fearless."

"Pretty sure I would have curled into a ball and cried."

"Not Aunt Vi. She believes the best about everyone. She knew without a doubt that someone would help her. Sure enough, this tall, lanky guy walked across the street from where he worked in the grocery store where she'd bought a bottle of pop. He asked what the problem was. Aunt Vi kicked out with her foot, making contact with the tire and told him that her Bronco had died and she didn't know what she was going to do."

"Not worried at all?" Tab asked.

"Nope. The way both of them tell it, she was just matter-of-fact. When he asked how he could help, she told him where she was trying to go because she had to play her guitar that night. He took the rest of the afternoon off, drove her to her show, then brought her back to her car. She asked about a hotel and he took her to his parent's house for the night. They were already in bed, so he put her in a guest room and went back to his own place."

"Wait. What?"

"Right!" JJ said with a grin. "He'd left a note for his parents on the kitchen table. The next morning, there was a pile outside her bedroom door. Towels and soap, shampoo and a note telling her where to find the shower, offering laundry service, and that breakfast was ready any time she was."

Tab just shook her head. "How is this real?"

"That's what she wondered. When she got downstairs, both of his parents were already at work. There was another note on top of a plate of food with instructions on how to microwave it to heat it up. There was bread for toast, glasses set out with instructions for

juice, and coffee in the fridge that could be heated up. She didn't know what to think."

"That's a family you don't want to ever let go."

"Well, Vi was beginning to think that. She was stuck at the house, though, because she didn't know where she was in town and didn't have any wheels. She wandered through the house. It was filled with books and records and magazines and newspapers. Apparently, they were readers. She couldn't find a television anywhere, but there was a radio in every room. She sat down with a magazine, hoping someone would show up or call. Right at noon, on the dot, Bud showed up with her Bronco."

"No."

"Yes. He'd gotten it towed to the local garage, which was owned by a buddy of his. Whatever it was that had quit working was fixed. He wouldn't take any money - told her that his buddy owed him a favor. She drove him back to his job and got back on the road."

"Okay, that's just not right."

"Two days later, as the story goes, she realized how wrong it was. She'd met the man of her dreams and instead of doing something about it, she drove away."

"So she drove back?"

"Not yet. Vi had a few more shows booked with her band, so she went ahead and drove all over Montana and Wyoming."

"Did she call him or anything?"

"No," JJ said. "As Vi tells it, if he was still there when she got back, then it was meant to be. If he was with someone else and had forgotten about her, that was fine too. It wasn't meant to be and she was free to live her life. I'm telling ya, the woman is like no one I've ever met."

"She sounds like it." They were getting close to his parents house and Tab put her hand on JJ's knee. "You have to pull over and finish this story. Don't make me wait."

He grinned and pulled into a field entrance. "Three weeks later, Vi drove back into town. She parked in the exact same spot and got out of her car."

"Don't tell me. She sat on the curb and kicked back."

JJ nodded. "You guessed it. Her feet out in front of her, crossed at the ankles." He laughed. "I've heard this story so many times, I practically see it in my head. When I was a kid, every time I saw them, I asked her for the story. Anyway, she was leaned back, enjoying the sunny day, and waiting. She'd been smart enough to show up just before lunch, so if he came out, he'd have time to talk."

"Did he?"

"Nope." JJ said with a laugh. "She sat there for an hour and managed to get a beautiful sunburn. The funny thing was, his mother was working in an office down the street, but she'd never met Vi, so she didn't know what she looked like. She walked past her going to have lunch with her husband. He must have said something about the Ford Bronco, wondering if it was the same one that Bud had talked about. By the time they were done with lunch, Vi had taken off."

"This is making me tense," Tab said. "It shouldn't, because they're obviously together."

"She drove to the first garage in town and asked if anybody knew Bud. Well, they all knew him, but that wasn't where he'd taken the Bronco to be fixed. She went to three other garages and at the last one, she was ready to give up, believing this was not meant to be. Bud's friend that fixed her Bronco just happened to come out to get something to drink and asked her if something else had broken down. She nearly passed out from relief. Finally, someone who might be able to tell her where Bud was."

"They called him, right?"

"No, he'd taken the day off to interview for a different job. A plant in the next town over was looking for drivers and he was going to drive trucks across country for them. However, Bud had talked non-stop about Vi for the last three weeks and his friend wasn't letting her out of his sight. He made her sit in the waiting room and then begged her to follow him over to Bud's house after work. They waited on the front porch for Bud to come home. He'd met another friend for a drink, so he was late."

"Thank goodness she waited."

JJ nodded. "Bud walked up, sat on the edge of the porch and

asked if she'd like to go have dinner with him. She said yes and, I'm not kidding you, they talked all night long and he asked her to marry him at six o'clock the next morning. The reason he wanted to drive a truck? Because he was going to go looking for her. If it took him the rest of his life, he was going to find Vi."

"Did she say yes?"

"The way the story has gone so far, you might have expected her to say no, but she said yes. She moved into his place that day and called her parents to tell them that she was settling down. She rode cross county with him while he drove the truck. On one trip, they got close to Vegas and stopped by to get married."

"Just like that."

"Just like that."

"Any children?"

"Nope. They say that they have enough to take care of just taking care of themselves and each other."

"Do they still drive?"

"Yes. Mom is appalled that her sister is a truck driver. Vi has her CDL license so she can drive while Bud sleeps. They have a dog named Crusty and as far as I can tell, they have a great life together."

"Does Vi sing anymore?"

"Ask her. She'll sing for us. She loves it. I think she's got a few places around the country that wait for her to show up so she can do a show. Just little bars and dives, but it keeps her on her toes."

"JJ, I had no idea. Why haven't you told me about them before?"

He backed out onto the highway and headed toward his parents' house again. "I don't know. I really didn't think you'd ever meet them. But you are about to be entertained. Are you ready?"

"I can't wait."

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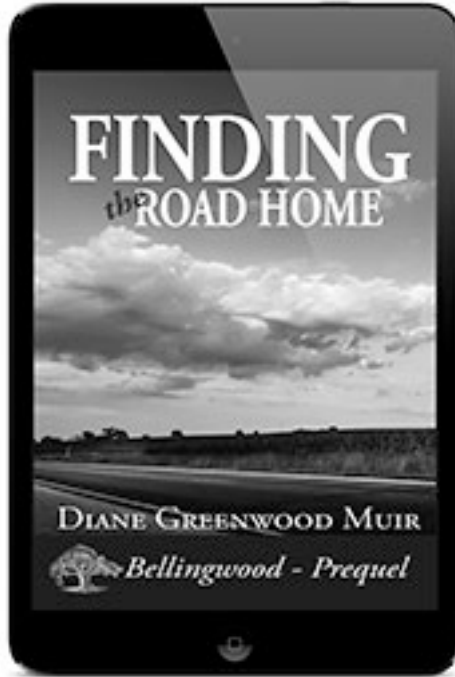
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# THANK YOU!



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

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

Join the Bellingwood Facebook page:

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

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*Finis*