

A  
LIFETIME  
with  
FRIENDS

*Vignettes*

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



*Bellingwood - Book 42*



# Book Forty-Two Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR

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Cover Design Photography: Maxim M. Muir

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THANK YOU!

## INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

I have compiled the vignettes relating to Book 41 — A Story Unveiled — 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

## Matchmaking

Lexi tried to relax. She wasn't even sure why she was doing this. Polly had been so insistent that she couldn't say no. It really was no big deal. Just a day out with someone she kind of knew, but not really all that well. Everyone who knew Nan Stallings thought she was a wonderful person, but Lexi hadn't spent much time with her. Until today.

"This is weird, isn't it," Nan said as Lexi parked the car.

Lexi chuckled. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, we got through the whole nice weather - how's your job conversation and then we ran out of things to say." Nan bent to pick up her purse. "Good thing Ames isn't all that far from Bellingwood or we might have needed to call someone to help us."

"I'm not usually like this," Lexi said. She shrugged. "That's not true. It's never been easy for me to make friends. I like being a loner."

"Polly doesn't believe in that whole loner thing. When I lived in California, I had a few friends, but mostly I worked and spent time with my family. In Bellingwood? I have Grey. Polly insists that I'm her friend, but everyone else I know is like a friendly acquaintance. Does that make sense?"

"It makes complete sense. My friends are all Polly's family," Lexi said. "I go to school, but I haven't made friends from my classes. If it weren't for Polly, I probably would never have gotten to know Will either."

"Polly is matchmaking, and I'd bet anything that Grey talked to her. He worries about me."

"We might as well make the best of it," Lexi said. "Though the last time I was here, Polly found masks that carjackers used when they kidnapped Jill Ainsworth. I hope today's adventure is nothing like that. Are you sure you need my help? I hate imposing my ideas on someone else."

Nan shrugged. "Honestly, if I want it to look nice, I do need someone. I could come up with decorations on my own, but Polly says you're great with all that creative decor thing. She showed me pictures of the hallway in your apartment. It looks wonderful. I'm all about the big picture, but small details are beyond me." She grunted. "Grey thinks I need more personal touches in my office. He was so impressed when he saw it the first time. Heck, that's when he proposed to me. But now he says it is too techie and not gentle enough." She smiled. "The funny thing is that he likes what I did at the house. I'm the one who made his office look comfortable for clients."

"What you've done already is nice. You do have a lot of technology going on there," Lexi said with a laugh. She held the door as Nan walked in. "I've never seen so many monitors in one place in my entire life. It's kind of like a dream. Some days I'd give anything to have a place like that to work."

"Everyone who sees my office says that, but you know, nobody really wants what I have. It's too overwhelming. You have to focus all the time."

"Okay, a bank of four monitors, then," Lexi said. "And a separate one for Gilly to watch her shows while I'm working. But I want control of it. That little girl finds the craziest things whenever I turn my back. Child-safe systems? Bet me."

"I could probably help you with software to make the internet safer for her," Nan said. "I've done research for some of my customers."

"Yeah?" Lexi pointed to an aisle with frames. After a quick discussion with Polly, Grey, and Nan, Lexi's first plan to soften the walls in Nan's office was by using photographs. Nan didn't do things halfway. After talking to Lexi the first time, she'd gone straight to Deb and Chris Johns, the local photographers. She commissioned them to shoot both color and black and white photos of local residents doing whatever they enjoyed doing. They'd caught people eating at local restaurants, shopping around town, playing ball at the ball fields, and working at their jobs. Within a week, Nan had a huge file of photos.



Nan stepped into the aisle, stopped, stepped back out, and shook her head. "That's a lot of choices."

"For someone who can manage as many monitors and all that information as you have going on," Lexi said, "this shouldn't freak you out."

"It does. If it were up to me, I'd print everything the same size and use black frames. Just be done with it. All uniform, neat and tidy."

"And those quotations we chose?" Lexi asked. She had purchased a nice digital cutting machine earlier in the spring for all the projects she wanted to complete. Many of the quotations about friendship, success, positivity, and joy were printed and ready to be applied to Nan's walls. They only needed to buy the frames so Lexi could create a map for the story they wanted to tell.

"Block print in black letters," Nan said with a laugh. "I'm terrible, aren't I?"

"Why don't we both admit that we can't do it all. I couldn't dream of creating like you do. Your web and print design skills are incredible."

"They just don't translate to my decor."

"Can I tell you something?"

Nan held a pale green four by six frame. "What's that?"

"I'm not a psychologist, but ..." Lexi started.

"I'm used to psychology. But, what?"

"You could do this if you wanted to. You don't want to."

"Yes, I do."

"No, I mean, you don't want to clutter your mind with making it happen. You'll enjoy it once it's finished, but you don't want to be bothered with the process."

Nan stepped back and laughed in uncomfortable amazement. "You spend too much time with Polly. Only she would think to say something like that to me."

"It's probably why I don't easily make friends," Lexi said. "I kind of just put it out there. Either that or I don't say anything at all. That's usually easier."

"I know that. Look at me. I spent how many years living in

Bellingwood before I finally talked to Grey about the fact that the only reason I was here was because of him? I never say anything to anyone." Nan shook her head. "That's not true. If it's my business, or their business, I have no problem telling people what the right thing is to do. I am so clear on how they should move forward. But when it comes to my personal relationships, I'm awful."

"It's hard to trust again," Lexi said, practically under her breath as she turned away from Nan to pick up another frame.

Nan touched her arm, making Lexi jump. "I'm sorry," Nan said. "You've been through stuff, too?" Then she smiled. "I guess if you are with Polly, you have. She tends to draw the best out of people after they've crashed and burned. No one would ever know that about you."

"Except that people do because of the circumstances of my arrival in Bellingwood," Lexi said. "It's funny, though. When I'm with Polly's friends and family, no one looks at me like I was ever broken."

"That's the nice thing about moving to Bellingwood," Nan said. She looked away. "I was raped."

"I'm sorry," Lexi said. She moved to stand in front of Nan. "No one really knows that about you."

"That's one of the reasons I came out here. My family couldn't see me except as a broken girl who had been wounded." Nan shook her head to change her mind. "That's not really true. They love me no matter what, but when I was living there, I couldn't see me as anything other than the broken girl who ran home to be safe. I had to make a huge leap so that I could help that broken girl heal. So, I came here. When people look at me, they see a young woman trying to be successful. There isn't any pity in their eyes and I don't feel like they're placating me to protect me from the horrors of what happened."

"I think that's why I am here, too," Lexi said. "Polly won't let anyone treat me that way because she doesn't at all. In her world, I can be everything that I want to be. No questions. Because I went through hell doesn't mean I had to give up my dreams. I had to change them a little, but at least I'm dreaming again."

They both took more frames from the racks and set them in the cart.

"Doggone it," Lexi said, the tone of her voice one of complete disgust.

"What? What's wrong?" Nan asked.

"She did it. That woman totally did it."

"Who did what?" Then Nan laughed. "You're right. She did it. Polly Giller is a stinker."

"That's the word I'd use around Gilly, but I have other words for Polly rolling around in my head right now. She knew that we'd find common ground and once we did, we'd connect."

"Like our own personal group therapy? Grey is going to hear about this from me, too. He knew what Polly was doing and encouraged it."

"I don't tell Will much about my past."

Nan nodded. "I feel like I've talked about it so often that it's tiresome."

"Are you ready to not talk about it again or do you still process conversations and thoughts about it all the time?" Lexi asked.

"All. The. Time. But no one else needs to listen to me go over the same things again and again. When I wake up in the middle of the night, I think through it. I always wonder if there was something I could have done to change the outcome. Then I wonder if I'm doing everything possible to heal. Then I wonder what kind of a different person I'd be if it had never happened. Do you talk about it anymore?"

"No," Lexi said. "Polly would let me, but sometimes I feel as if it happened so long ago that everyone thinks I should just let it be in the past."

"It's not in the past," Nan said. She pointed at her head and then her heart. "It's very present. Right here. All the time. Thinking about the rape doesn't hit me upside the head like it used to. I don't cry like I used to. So, yes, a lot of it is in the past, but the memory of the event and the fact that it completely changed me is always right here."

"Exactly. I've processed what happened to me and I know that

my life is better now than I could ever have imagined. Even before I was kidnapped. I have an amazing life ..."

Nan interrupted her. "Exactly. I couldn't have asked for a better outcome ..."

"But it's still there and I don't talk about it because I don't want people to feel sorry for me."

"We're not feeling sorry for ourselves," Nan said. "I don't feel sorry for you either. Tell me you don't feel sorry for me. I'd hate that."

"Nope. We get it." Lexi laughed. "I guess that's why group therapy works, huh?"

"Maybe with some ice cream?"

Lexi snapped her head toward Nan. "Did you say ice cream? I'm a huge fan."

"We could figure out how to make ice cream and then listen to each other."

"Polly and Grey would be very proud of us."

Nan pointed at the cart filled with frames. "They're going to take credit for this, you know."

"I suppose we could give it to them. How do we get them back?"

"You mean, like by becoming friends?"

Lexi grinned. "That would teach them."

## Vignette #2

### Age and Wisdom

Rebecca took a yellow plastic colander out of the box and set it to the side. It looked something that should have gone to the thrift store, rather than Mr. Gardner's antique shop. Sometimes things were too close to call. Like the strange looking squarish-metal cone thing she'd found the other day. Simon told her it was used to make toast over a campfire. He held it in his hands for a few moments before making a decision. It would stay here. Someone would find a use for it.

Later on, she'd found a photograph of the same type of toaster cleaned up and repurposed as light fixtures. He'd printed out the picture and after finding a small frame in another part of the store, set the image beside the old toaster. It sold later that afternoon to someone who decided to search for several more to hang in his kitchen.

She loved this place and enjoyed working for Mr. Gardner. It was too bad he didn't need her more often, but she was learning a lot at the hardware store, too. It was fun to laugh about it with her friends, but when she left at the end of every day, she felt good. And she was studying hands. While she hadn't yet found a good day to spend with Beryl each week, they found time to work on different projects. Right now, Beryl told her to take advantage of the people Rebecca was around. Hard-working older men whose hands showed signs of all those years of toiling in fields or at their jobs. Those hands were incredible. Bumps and scars, wrinkles, and even missing fingers.

Then there were the women who came in. One day as she checked an elderly woman out, Rebecca noticed the difference in their hands. While her own were soft and supple without wrinkles or scars, the woman's hands were beautiful. At least that's what Rebecca saw in the gnarled fingers that could barely grip a credit card. Rebecca had struck up a conversation with the woman and

asked about her past. For thirty years, the woman had cleaned rooms in a hotel in Des Moines. When she finally retired with her husband, they moved to Bellingwood to be closer to their family. The joy in the woman's face as she talked about her grandchildren who were graduating from college and starting their lives, belied the hard work she'd put in over the years.

Those were the things that struck her every day as she encountered people she never would have known had she worked anywhere else. People called this old family-owned hardware store a throwback, but the folks who relied on it wouldn't shop anywhere else. Paul Bradford, like his father before him, treated the customers like family. Rebecca carried heavy items out to cars for men and women alike. She listened as they told stories about their kids and grandchildren while she cut keys. She mixed paint and listened to a man tell of his elderly dog who had peed in the same place over and over. It was time to finally fix it because they had to put the dog to sleep the other day. That one had been tough. The man's eyes filled with tears as he told her that Rufus had been his very best friend for the last fifteen years and had been so excited at his retirement so they could take walks together.

Mr. Gardner's clientele wasn't as regular as those at the hardware store, but over the last few weeks, the same woman had come in at the same time every morning that Rebecca worked. She walked through the entire store, then stopped in front of the china and stroked the ridges on a set of off-white plates.

When Rebecca asked Simon about the woman, he smiled and told her that he'd offered to give the woman a deal on the china, but she didn't want to take it home. It was the same china that she'd grown up with. When she was a child, she remembered her mother's insistence that they use the wedding china every Sunday, no matter what they were having. Even if it was hamburgers and potato chips, they pulled out the good china, ate their meal, then carefully and lovingly hand-washed each piece and put it back into the hutch. Simon was afraid the woman was slowly losing herself to Alzheimer's and he kept an eye on her. He knew her son and had a phone number to call if things seemed to be off.

"How are you doing?" Simon asked as he came around the corner.

Rebecca jumped; she'd been lost in thought.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's okay," she said. "I was thinking about people."

"What kind of people?" He picked up a stack of old Life Magazines she'd taken out of the box. They had piles of these in different sections of the store. Rebecca had never seen photography like the images in those magazines and given time could have lost herself in them for hours.

"All kinds of people. I've been getting to know more and more of the older folks in town what with working here and at the hardware store. And ..." She took in a breath. "... I've just been thinking."

"Tell me about your thoughts."

"Kindness," she said. "That's where my thoughts run. And patience. Slowing down to listen and appreciate. There is so much to be said and heard if you just slow down. Mrs. Watson talks about that all the time. But I'll be honest, I leave Bellingwood and the world speeds up. At college, I'm learning how to create and so much more, but no one ever tells me to slow down and let experiences wash over me. It's always rush, rush, rush. Learn everything I can before the next test or essay or experience. There is never enough time to do anything but what I'm required to do."

"That's interesting." He chuckled. "When you get to be my age, slow is just how we move."

"Not even that, though it would be nice to take a rest sometimes. I feel like I'm moving so fast sometimes that I put off deep thinking until later. When is it going to be later?"

"The world does ask us to move along, doesn't it," he said. "These are pretty big thoughts for someone your age."

"Like I said, working here and at the hardware store is making me think about things." Rebecca held up her phone. "This doesn't help. My calendar pokes at me for things I'm supposed to do. Social media is always telling me to do more. People call and want me to go. I don't want to sound like I'm complaining about my life,

because I'm not. I know how lucky I am. My family loves me. Andrew loves me. I have friends who love me and my cats love me, but I never have enough time to spend with them. If I'm not working, I'm running off to a get-together or helping make dinner or cleaning up, or doing laundry, or baby-sitting, or rushing around to this or that. How do I slow it down?"

Simon opened his mouth to speak and Rebecca put up her hand. With a giggle, she said, "Please don't tell me to get up earlier in the morning. I can't add anymore to my day, even if it is quiet time. I'd just go back to sleep."

"I'm a night owl, too," he said. "If I need extra time in my day, I look for it after the rest of the world has gone to sleep. It's quiet and peaceful in those late hours."

"But I don't dare do that very often because I have to get up and go to work."

"Right now you're feeling pulled from every side," Simon said. "That's part of learning how to integrate yourself into adult society. It is not an easy thing to do. You also have strictures that have been placed upon you. Education, work, even travel, and friends, and family. You're still learning things to get you started."

"Once I get started, I feel like my life is only going to pick up speed. Grad school, marriage, a career, kids, coming home to my family, friends, activities. It's just a lot. And I see these people who are older and they don't worry about those things. It's like it just happens when it does for them. I'm messing this up because I worry too much."

"With age comes wisdom," Simon said with a smile. "How well do you sleep at night?"

"Okay. I'd like to sleep longer in the morning, but I sleep."

"I don't. I think I do all my worrying about four o'clock in the morning. That way by the time I am here in the shop, I've taken care of all my problems."

"You're kidding," she said with an uncomfortable laugh.

"I am. Well, I don't sleep and I do a lot of worrying about things at four o'clock, but then when I get up and moving, I realize how little I should let those worries impact me. I wish I could tell myself



that in the middle of the night, but it never seems to work. Life is what you choose to make it. If you want things to slow down, you need to make choices."

"I don't want to choose."

"When you had to get your homework done in high school, did you do it in a flurry of activity?"

"No. Polly made us be quiet. If I wasn't in the dining room with everyone else doing their homework, I was upstairs in my room. I didn't even like having music on because I needed to think."

"So maybe you find just a few minutes every day to be quiet. No friends, no family, no work, no activities, no get-togethers. Just you and a paintbrush and a sunset or a tree."

"Beryl talks about how nature gives her peace."

"Ms. Watson is a smart woman. Maybe you need a little more quiet. Why don't you take the last hour of your time here today and sit with some of those magazines you yearn for."

"You can't pay me for that hour, then," Rebecca said. She was surprised that he'd noticed her looking at the Life Magazines. But then, Simon Gardner didn't miss much.

"I can do whatever I want to do. That's another nice thing about getting older. No parents to tell you what to do. I'm an old man who insists that you curl up in the comfortable chair back in that corner. Pick up a magazine and let your imagination wander."

"Maybe that's it," Rebecca said, her eyes lighting up.

"What?"

"My imagination. Mrs. Watson talks about how hers is always trying to get her attention. When she gets too busy, she feels like her fingers are itching to put images on a canvas. Andrew talks about how stories haunt him until he takes the time to write them down. Maybe that's why I'm feeling so much pressure."

"You haven't drawn anything lately, have you?"

"I haven't had time."

"That's some excellent insight," Simon said. "Take the hour. I have paper in the office. It isn't a sketch pad and I don't have any good pencils for you, but you might uncover some ideas to work on later."

Rebecca threw her arms around him. "Thank you for listening to me."

"Us old folks have time to listen," he said with a laugh.

"You aren't old. You're wise."

## Vignette #3

### Sitting in a Tree

Gillian could barely contain herself. Lexi smiled as they went down the steps to the kitchen. Nearly everyone else in the household was busy preparing dinner, but she and Gillian were heading out.

"Bye!" Gillian called out.

"See ya later, alligator," Elijah called back.

"After a while, crocodile," JaRon said.

Lexi gave them all a wave, but those in the kitchen were so involved with their tasks, they mostly just smiled in acknowledgment. Polly and Henry were upstairs with Delia. They knew where she was going.

Gillian danced in place, waiting for Lexi to open the door. Then she ran down the steps and raced toward Will Kellar's car, jumping up and down beside him.

"Where are we going?" she asked. "Where? Where?"

He patted her shoulder and hovered as she climbed up and into the car seat he'd purchased and installed in his vehicle. Lexi couldn't believe he'd done that. Gillian often went with them, but she'd have been glad to transfer the seat from her car to his.

Polly was the first person in Lexi's life to freely offer help, no matter the need. Lexi wasn't used to others taking care of her. It felt strange. She'd learned to be independent and strong all on her own, until she couldn't because outside forces had taken everything away.

Once Polly took her in, Lexi had to re-learn how to live as an independent person, while also allowing others to do what they did. Sometimes that meant they took care of her when she least expected it.

Will did that every once in a while and it threw her for a loop each time. She'd gotten used to him having the extra car seat for Gillian, but ... No, she wasn't used to it. Here she was over-thinking the whole thing while she watched him buckle Gillian in place.

He turned and smiled at her. "I have the sandwiches. Thanks for placing the order. I always worry that I'll miss something for our little miss in the back seat there." Will put out his hand and Lexi took it as he walked around the car to the passenger side with her. These were the things that still surprised her.

He held the door, then shut it after Lexi was inside. She turned in her seat to look at Gillian. "Are you all set?"

"He's your boyfriend," Gillian said. "He holds your hand."

"Be quiet." Lexi chuckled as she pulled her seat belt on. Gillian was not safe around anyone these days. The little girl had no concept of keeping her thoughts to herself. Most of the time it didn't matter, but ...

"What are you laughing at?" Will asked as he settled in his seat.

"Mommy has a boyfriend. Mommy has a boyfriend," Gillian's sing-song-ey voice rang out from the back seat.

"She does, does she?" he said. "And who might that be?"

"You, silly man." Lexi cringed when Gillian returned to her sing-song-ey voice. "You hold her hand. You hold her hand."

"I hold your hand," Will said. "Does that mean I'm your boyfriend?"

That stumped the little girl. She frowned at Lexi, then she brightened. "You're too old for me."

"You've been informed," Lexi said.

"At least she doesn't think I'm too old for you."

Lexi smiled. He was so easy with this whole thing. It didn't matter that they'd been seeing each other for nearly a year now. She still couldn't believe he wanted to spend time with her. No, she could get on board with that, but Will made an effort to include her daughter. From the very first time they met, he hadn't flinched when it came to Gillian.

When she expected to go out - just the two of them, he always encouraged her to make the decision as to whether or not to include Gillian. He genuinely enjoyed spending time with her daughter.

"We're invited back to the house tonight," Lexi said quietly. "Party food." She shot a glance to the back.

"Summer party food?" Will asked with a grin.

They both knew that was code for ice cream. Delia was the worst when it came to those two words. She couldn't get enough and would climb across hot coals and burning sands to get to it. Gillian loved dessert, but at least she wasn't quite as rabid in her desire for more ice cream.

"We could make a stop at the convenience store instead," he said. Again, he knew her daughter. Gillian had a great time choosing an ice cream treat from the freezer. You never knew what it would be. She always chose something different. As if she couldn't wait to try everything.

"That would be fun."

Will pulled into a space near the playground. "Sandwiches are in the cooler in the trunk. I'll help Gillian out." He pulled the trunk lever.

He had a cooler in the trunk. Lexi shook her head. She thought she was organized and always prepared. Will was a master. When he took them out, she didn't have to think about a thing unless she offered in the first place. He made sure to have napkins, plates, drinks, sometimes even a table cloth.

She watched the two of them head for the playground. Lexi chuckled. Gillian was running full-out and left him in her dust. That girl loved the slides. The play set in their backyard had a small slide, but it was nothing like this one. She screamed with joy as she slid down the first time. Will stood nearby watching, while also glancing to keep an eye on Lexi.

"Need any help?" he asked.

"No, just paying attention to the two of you." Lexi opened the cooler. Sure enough, the bag of sandwiches was nestled atop a towel he'd laid across ice packs. Cold bottles of water were on either side and on top of that he had a bag of potato chips and another bag of Gillian's favorite cookies. She picked up the cooler as well as the blanket he'd draped across its top. Apparently, they were having a picnic on the grass today. When she stepped away, Will clicked a button on his remote and the lid came down and latched into place. Man, she wouldn't hate being spoiled by this guy. Okay, she enjoyed being spoiled by this guy.

He stepped back from the slide, while still watching Gillian as she ran up the steps to glide down again. "Where would you like to eat? There's a nice place under that tree there." Will pointed, then took the blanket from her. "I'll get it ready."

"We're in no hurry," Lexi said. She set everything on a bench nearby, then sat down beside it all. "Let her play."

He nodded. Then, unsure, he looked at Gillian, and back to Lexi.

"She'll be fine," Lexi said. "If she needs something, she'll ask. And if she scrapes herself, she'll live."

"I have a first-aid kit in the car."

"Of course you do." Lexi laughed as she patted the bench beside her. "Sit. Let her play. She can work off all that energy. It makes putting her to bed so much easier."

"You are good with her," he said, sitting down. He slung his arm up on the back of the bench, not encroaching into her space, but letting her know he was close.

"I actually like her," Lexi said with a smile. "She's fun to be around. I want to be careful not to spoil her so she turns into a terror ..."

"You? Spoil her? I don't think so. You don't let her get away with much."

"Most of the time. There are times I'm so tired I just don't want to deal with it. I hate to admit how often I turn on the television, leave her on the sofa, and go into my room just so I can work in peace."

"Everyone does that."

"Not Polly," Lexi said. "She's got those kids on lockdown when it comes to television and tablets. It took years for the older kids to even realize that they were missing out on what everyone else does."

"But there's a big television in the family room."

"Uh huh. And they can watch movies or play video games. But they have to ask first. Otherwise, they're reading or playing outside or Polly has them doing things with people all over town. Cassidy is at Agnes's house most days during the summer unless she goes to the pool with her friends. I think she'd be the worst because she

wants to be like everyone else, but even she doesn't realize that she might be missing out."

"That's really cool, though."

"I know. I should be better about it with Gillian, but I'm not."

"What does she watch?"

"It's always kid videos."

"So, you're in control of it."

Lexi shrugged. "I guess."

"And you don't let her do it all the time."

"Well, more than I should."

"Stop beating yourself up." He tapped her back. "Polly has a million people who help her. She has you, for pete's sake. You have ..."

"One little girl," Lexi said. "Not six kids and a business and I don't find dead bodies or deal with employees or ..." She smiled. "I think I must be tired. I'm sorry. Gillian was at Marie's today and I didn't have to make supper either. What's my problem?"

"You were excited to spend time with me."

"That must be it."

Gillian ran over to them. "Push me?"

"Push you into the ocean?" Lexi asked, sitting forward to stand up.

"No, silly. On the swing. And not you. Will."

"Why Will?"

"Because he pushes me harder. I go higher."

Lexi gave him a sideways glance. "Maybe I should ask him to push me, too."

"I'd do that." Will stood up and offered Lexi his hand. She took it and hauled herself to her feet.

"You're holding hands. You're holding hands," Gillian sang out in her sing-song-ey voice again. "Will and Mommy. Sitting in a tree. K.I.S.S.I.N.G."

"Do you even know what that means?" Lexi asked.

Gillian looked at her in surprise. "It means you two are sitting in a tree together like girlfriend and boyfriend."

"Where did you hear it?"

Her daughter screwed up her face in concentration, then she smiled. "Cassidy and Missy were talking about Rebecca and Andrew."

"I see," Lexi said with a laugh. Gillian remembered everything she heard, and the words would come out when people least expected it.

"After we swing, maybe we'll all sit under a tree and have a picnic," Will said.

"Will you hold Mommy's hand?" Gillian asked.

"I'll hold your hand and her hand if it makes you both happy."

"First, we swing," Gillian announced.

"First, we swing," he agreed.

"Then you can hold Mommy's hand while I eat my dinner."

Lexi chuckled. "And there you have it."

"At least I have permission to hold your hand." Will took her hand and gave it a small squeeze as they walked to the swing set.



## Vignette #4

### Master Chefs

"JaRon!" Cassidy hadn't made it into the kitchen before she was yelling for her brother.

Lexi looked up from her laptop. "What's up?"

"Mrs. Agnes says you're supposed to take the night off and we're going to cook dinner and she's going to teach us and we're going to make a cake and you don't have to do anything so you and Gillian should go somewhere and have fun unless you want to eat what we make."

Before she could take a breath, Agnes Hill, who had come into the house behind Cassidy, grinned at Lexi. "All of that."

"You want to make dinner here?" Lexi asked, perplexed.

"Cassidy and I thought it would be fun to cook a meal for more than just the two of us. We'd like to feed the Bell House masses. I hoped to get here before you started your process."

"I haven't started anything," Lexi said. "JaRon?"

"If I'm teaching Cassidy how to prepare a meal, I might as well involve some of the others," Agnes said with a grin. "You know, my patience is sometimes a little thin, so let's do it all at once."

Lexi shook her head. "You're right. I should have started teaching them. They're all old enough to work in the kitchen."

"You're always working," Cassidy said.

Agnes nodded. "And you have enough to do without trying to figure out how to instruct children on the ins and outs of recipes."

"But it is a really good idea," Lexi said. "Who knows if I'm missing out on training a master chef?"

"We start today," Agnes replied. "But what if you aren't around every day?"

Cassidy had started for the back steps to look for JaRon. She stopped. "Why wouldn't Lexi be around?"

"No reason, sweetheart," Agnes said. "I was teasing her. Go on."

Lexi scowled. "I'm not going anywhere."

"What about your young suitor? He might have something to

say about that."

"My young suitor answers to me. I don't answer to him."

"That's my girl," Agnes said with a smile. "However, maybe you two could do something fun tonight while I make trouble in the kitchen with the kids."

"You won't have too many here to help. Elijah will be home after a bit, but the others are all out and about."

"I need only two or three. We'll make a menu, go buy groceries and have a party."

"This feels strange," Lexi said, closing her laptop. "Can I help you at all?"

"The only responsibility you have is to relax and enjoy yourself. Cassidy was right. You are always working."

"I love being here. I don't feel as if I do enough for everything I've been given."

"We all feel that way with this family," Agnes agreed. "But I will insist."

"The last person I want to argue with is you," Lexi said. She gave Agnes a quick hug. "Thank you. I'll go upstairs so you can wander around the kitchen without me looking over your shoulder."

"Everyone looks over my shoulder," Agnes said. "I'm short."

After Lexi was gone, Agnes looked around, saw no one, rubbed her hands together and said, "You're all mine, you pretties. All mine." And she cackled an evil laugh. "That would actually have been better had someone been here to watch me."

"Who are you talking to?" JaRon asked when he came into the kitchen.

"Myself. What do you think about helping to make dinner tonight?"

"What would we make?"

Agnes shrugged. "What's something you love to eat when you go out."

"Chicken strips," he replied without hesitation. "They're my favorite."

She dug down into her tote bag and pulled out a notepad and pen. Opening the pad, she wrote something in it. "Chicken strips.

Check. What else?"

"French fries!" Cassidy said loudly. "Like the ones we make at your house."

"Okay. What else?"

"Can we make garlic bread?" JaRon asked.

Agnes raised an eyebrow and thought to herself that asking kids to choose menu items was begging for carbs and fried food. But it was okay once in a while. "Anything else?"

"We should have a salad, I guess," Cassidy said, looking glum. "Not my favorite."

"What about macaroni salad?" JaRon said. "I like that."

"That's a very yellow meal," Agnes said.

"Then we should have a chocolate cake to go with it," he replied with a grin.

Today wasn't the day to teach them how to balance color and menu choices. Today was an opportunity to inspire them to enjoy working in the kitchen. Their choices would be fine. Especially if she could teach them how to make a few simple things on their own. "What about a German chocolate cake?" Agnes asked.

"I've never had one of those. Is it good?" Cassidy replied.

"Very good. Let's make a list of things we need from the grocery store."

JaRon lit up. "We're going to the grocery store, too?"

"We have plenty of time. We'll buy all the ingredients for the entire meal. That way you can see how dinner is made from start to finish."

"All the ingredients?" He was flabbergasted.

"Except for everyday staples Lexi keeps in the cupboard. But all the main parts of the meal will be purchased fresh today. Lexi and Polly keep the pantry and freezer stocked so they can cook big meals without rushing. We have time. We'll use it to learn." Agnes sat on a stool, tapped her pencil on the notepad and said, "Nope. Not here."

The two kids standing in front of her looked confused.

"We should go to Sweet Beans and make this list. What do you think about that?"

"Really?" JaRon asked. "That would be fun."

Cassidy looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. She smiled and bumped her shoulder against his arm. "You want to go with us?"

"Yeah. I kinda want to learn how to cook."

Agnes took a much smaller tote from her large bag, opened it as if checking to ensure she had everything she needed and slid off the stool. "Well, my young friends, let's make tracks. Do you have your money?"

JaRon's face fell until Cassidy poked him. "She's teasing. She does it all the time. You have to watch her left eye. Whenever she teases me, it winks."

"It does not," Agnes said and turned on her heels. "Little stinker learning my tells." When she got to the kitchen door, she turned back. "We won't finish if we don't get started. Move it!"

Normally, walking from the Bell House to Sweet Beans took ten to fifteen minutes, but Agnes stopped regularly, pointing out different plants and flowers along the way.

"She always does this," Cassidy whispered loud enough for Agnes to hear.

"I think it's cool," JaRon said. "She knows everything."

"I really do," Agnes said. "I even know what drink you'll order when we get to Sweet Beans."

Cassidy nodded when JaRon looked at her questioningly. "Go ahead. Test her. She's always right."

"I don't even know what I want."

Cassidy shrugged. "Whatever."

"I've written it down in my notebook," Agnes said. "I'll show you when we're at the table."

JaRon held the door of Sweet Beans open for Cassidy and Agnes, who smiled at him and patted his shoulder. "What a good boy you are. I should take you with me more often."

Agnes watched him peruse the menu board. Gayla Livingston smiled and nodded, then asked. "How are you today?"

Cassidy piped up. "We're making dinner for the whole family, so we have to get groceries. Mrs. Agnes said we could stop for

something to drink first."

"It's a little warm outside. That's a good idea," Gayla replied. "What would you like me to make for you?"

"I'm going to have a banana strawberry smoothie," Cassidy said.

JaRon waited a beat, then said, "I just want strawberry. Is that okay?" He looked at Agnes.

She nodded, smiled, and ordered a glass of iced tea. When their drinks were ready, they followed her to a table. She dug around in her tote bag, which, though smaller than the immense bag she usually carried, was still packed with any number of things. Drawing out her notepad, she flipped to a page and set it on the table. The only thing written on the page was 'strawberry.'

"How did you know?" he asked.

"It's magic," she replied. She wasn't about to tell him how she'd performed the trick. She was ready for everything. "Now, we have to make our list before we get to the grocery store. What do you think we need to make chicken strips?"

"Chicken, duh," Cassidy said.

"That's a start. JaRon, how do you feel about cutting chicken into small strips. Does that gross you out or do you think it's something you can do?"

He frowned. More confusion. "Gross me out?"

"Good answer," Agnes said with a laugh. "Some people don't like cutting up raw meat. That makes it difficult to cook a meal." She continued to talk them through ingredients for the chicken strips and the fries. They discussed the best type of bread for garlic bread and then she dug into her bag again, this time pulling out another notebook.

"That's her recipe book," Cassidy whispered. "You should see it!"

"He's about to," Agnes said, rubbing Cassidy's shoulder. "JaRon, what you are about to view is my secret to good cooking. I've tested these recipes over and over. They will make people swoon."

"What's swoon?" Cassidy asked.

Agnes chuckled, then put the back of her hand on her forehead and leaning back, closed her eyes and gave a satisfied sigh. "That's what girls did when they saw Elvis Presley in person."

Before anyone could ask who that was, she put her hand out to stop them. "Don't even ask me. He was a popular singer when I was young. He was beautiful and had a voice like an angel."

Cassidy rolled her eyes and said, "We listen to his music all the time at her house."

"Stop giving away my secrets, little girl," Agnes said with a laugh. She rubbed Cassidy's shoulder again. "Let me see what I can find in my little book of tricks." Post-it tabs stuck out from the side and the top and the bottom. She smiled at the book that had been with her for as long as she could remember. One day she should probably start a new book and better organize it, but Agnes knew simply by looking where she would find the recipes she needed for today. "Ahh, here it is. My best macaroni salad." She took JaRon's hand and placed it in the book. "Hold my page, son." Then, she opened it to another page and tapped it. "Best German chocolate cake. Do you kids like coconut?"

"I do," JaRon said.

"Me too," Cassidy echoed.

"Good. When you are prepared to try any flavor, you will make a great chef. Let's mark down the ingredients necessary for the cake first. Cassidy, here's the notebook, will you write while I list them?"

Once they had what they needed for the cake, Agnes took the notebook and put it in front of JaRon. "You can write what we need for macaroni salad. Do it on your own. If I see something that should be changed, I'll tell you. Can you figure out how to triple the recipe?"

He looked at her in surprise. "I don't know."

"Try it."

JaRon had no problem with the assignment and Agnes gave him a quick hug. "See how easy that was? When we finish our drinks, we'll head to the grocery store. Before you two know it, you'll be ready to take charge of an entire meal."

"Is it hard to be a chef?" JaRon asked.

"Now, that's a good question," she said. "You can do what I did and figure it out as you go. I made a lot of mistakes, but I learned at the same time. The smartest way to do it is what Mrs. Sylvie did."

Especially when there is a culinary institute so close. Many opportunities will open up for you if you choose to go her way. Do you think you want to be a chef?"

"I don't know," he said. "I'm still a kid."

"Try everything," Agnes said. She loved these kids. They had so much potential. "When you find out what you love, learn more. Do things."

"Do you think Lexi would let me help her in the kitchen?"

Agnes smiled. "I think Lexi would love to have help. If you offer, I'd bet a box of M&Ms she'll say yes."

He nodded in understanding. "I can do that. I like reading your recipes."

"You should see what she has at home," Cassidy said. "Magazines and cookbooks and recipe boxes. It's a lot."

"You're welcome to come over any time, JaRon," Agnes said, her heart filling. She would never get over the fact that these kids wanted to spend time with her. She was an old lady, for goodness' sake.

"Really?" His eyes lit up.

"Really."

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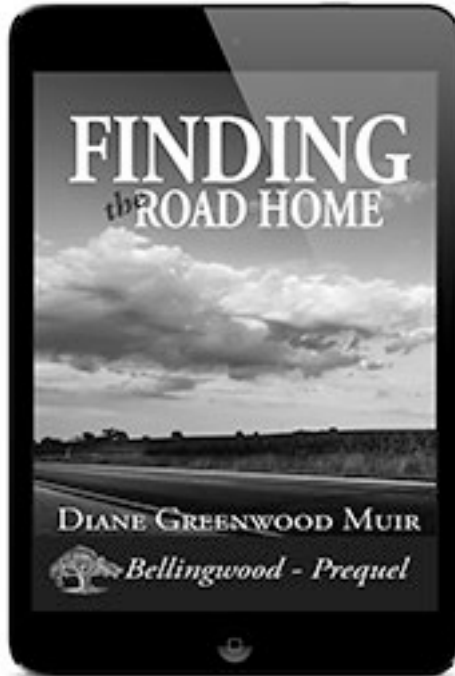
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