



THANKFUL
FOR FRIENDS
Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Book 44



Book Forty-Four Vignettes

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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 44 — Thankful for Friends — 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

Tales of a Teacher

Henry held the door to Woody's Garage open for Mrs. Nederstrom. He smiled at her and she smiled back.

"You're Bill Sturtz's boy, aren't you?" she asked.

He nodded. "Henry. I was in your third grade classroom."

"That's right. And you had a younger sister, too, didn't you? My memory isn't so great these days. What was her name?"

"Lonnie. How are you doing, Mrs. Nederstrom? I don't see you around town much."

"Oh, I'm always here. You're the one who is busy with all those things you do. I hear about you, even if I don't see you." She wobbled on her feet as she approached the counter. Henry reached for her elbow. "Maybe if you could help me over to that table," she said. "When the young man comes out, I'll give him my car keys. The old Buick needs some TLC. I'm glad we have a garage in town again. I don't like driving out of town if I don't have to. My Richard bought that car for me. The last gift he gave me before he died. The kids think I should sell it and get something newer, but ..." She gave him a wink. "... I don't know how much longer I'll be driving. I feel like I'm getting away with something right now. Like I said, my memory isn't what it used to be."

Kirk Waters came into the lobby and caught Henry's eye. "Mrs. Nederstrom. I hope you haven't been waiting long."

"You were in my classroom, too, weren't you, Mr. Waters. I remember you." She looked up at Henry. "A spitfire, that one. Always in trouble. How many times did your mother have to come to school to take you home because you'd gotten out of hand?"

Kirk chuckled. "Only three times that year."

"Those must have been quite something for me to remember it all these years later."

"Is someone coming to take you home?" Kirk asked.

"I was hoping you might have an extra person on hand to give

me a ride," she said.

"Justin is out with another client right now, but when he returns, he'd be glad to take you home. You know, we can always stop by and pick up your car when you need to have it serviced."

"But then I wouldn't be able to visit, would I?"

"Would you like coffee, ma'am?" Kirk asked.

She set her purse on the table and then braced herself to stand. "You go on, go to work. I can pour myself a cup of coffee."

"I'd be glad to do it for you. Only take a minute. Sit on back down."

Mrs. Nederstrom complied, then pointed at Henry. "I remember you getting into a bit of trouble, too, young man."

"Not me," Henry said. He sat down across from her. She looked like she needed some company and he had a few minutes.

"Coffee, Henry?"

"Sure."

"Didn't you rap a boy atop the head for picking on your sister?" Mrs. Nederstrom asked, pointing at Henry. "That's right. What was that awful boy's name?"

"Ronnie Ruble," Henry said with a sigh. "I distinctly remember him. His family moved away after that school year. He spent every day trying to bully kids."

"He never bothered me," Kirk said.

Henry looked him up and down. "Because you were meaner than he was."

"I don't remember him at all."

"Big kid. Red hair. Taller than most of the rest of us," Henry said. "And for some reason, he liked Lonnie, but the only way he could show her was to torment her. He called her names, he pushed her around, he'd stand in front of her while she was trying to walk home, and then he'd grab her backpack, trying to take it away."

"What a brat." Kirk looked at Mrs. Nederstrom. "I was never like that. I didn't bully other kids."

"No, you just didn't like sitting still in class. You were always on the move. And you were always getting into everything. The day you tipped over the tub with the class's art projects, I was fit to be

tied," Mrs. Nederstrom said.

Kirk chuckled. "I do remember that day. I thought you were going to spank me. I would have deserved it."

"Instead, I called your father and let him deal with you."

"He spanked me," Kirk said to Henry. "Then he called Mrs. Nederstrom and they had me come back in. After cleaning up the mess, I not only mopped the classroom floor, but I washed windows. Then I was responsible for sweeping the hallways clean. Old Mr. Allen was a fan of that. He didn't have to do the work that night. I ended up emptying trash cans in every classroom, too. I think I worked until late into the evening."

"Mostly because you dragged your feet with every task," Mrs. Nederstrom said. "But you did it. Too bad that wasn't the last time you got yourself into trouble."

"I was a little dense," Kirk said. He touched Henry's shoulder as he looked at the woman. "Mom drove by your house the other day. Said your front door isn't hanging correctly. Everything okay?"

"Some kids got a little excited on Halloween. I haven't called anyone to fix it yet. I should do that before the snow flies," Mrs. Nederstrom said. "Don't know who I'm going to call, though. Richard used to take care of those types of things. I thought I had a young man to do handyman stuff for me, but he went and got himself a full-time job. And those boys are awful expensive these days." She shook her head. "It's not easy to own a house. So many things go wrong. I just can't fix them on my own anymore."

"What kind of things?" Henry asked.

"Nothing I should bother you with," she replied.

"Bother me. I'd like to know."

Kirk stepped back. "I need to get to the garage. When I see Justin, I'll let him know you're here."

"What kind of things, Mrs. Nederstrom?" Henry asked again. "I'd be glad to help if I can."

"The list is longer than my lifetime, I'm afraid," she said, bowing her head. "I don't much like to ask for help. Always been a bit of an independent sort, you know." She took a drink from the coffee cup and put it down. "Don't you worry about me."

"Why not?"

"Because you have too many other things to concern yourself with. How does it feel to have children in elementary school, high school, and college?"

"It feels good," he said with a smile. "I enjoy watching them grow up. Mom and Dad are enjoying it too. I think they wondered if there would ever be grandchildren, and now they have so many they're busy all the time."

"Is that why they moved back from Arizona?"

"They moved home before my family exploded," Henry said. "And now that Lonnie has a family, they get to be grandparents to even more children."

"I miss my grandbabies. They're all grown up now, too. Don't spend much time coming back to Bellingwood, and it's getting harder for me to travel to see them, except for the holidays." She shrugged. "That doesn't happen as often as it used to either. All the families are spread out and people have so many different places they need to be. It's hard to add an old lady that the great-children barely know. It would be different, I suppose, if they lived in town, but they don't, so the little ones don't know me all that well." She smiled at him. "But that's okay. I understand. They have their lives to grab hold of. I'm proud of all of them. Just like I'm proud of all you kids that I had in my classroom. Even if you were little terrors. You all grew up, didn't you."

"We did."

"I like Kirk Waters. He is a fine young man. Changed since he went into the military, and he's got a good family. Seems like he did okay for himself. And now, his boy is going to take me home. And his boy isn't a boy, is he? Nice young man. One of these days he'll have children and another generation will pass." Her eyes grew a little misty. "Generations have to do that. All we can do is hope that those who come after us see that we did good by them. You know, that was one reason I loved teaching."

"What was?"

"The fact that I could have an impact on a generation." She smiled. "Or two. It's nice knowing that the kids I spent day after

day with for at least a year, grew up to have successful lives and happy families. I know that not every one of them did, but for one year I was part of their lives. I always wanted that memory of theirs to be a good one. I wanted them to learn something, but I wanted them to remember how good it was to learn under my instruction. It might sound selfish, but that's one reason I did it."

"They are good memories," Henry said. "Even if Kirk remembers cleaning up the school building because he couldn't sit still and made a mess, he learned something that day." Henry looked up and saw Justin walking into the garage. "When would be a good time for me to come fix your front door?"

"You needn't do that."

"Do you have someone else who will?"

"Not yet."

"And it's been off since Halloween? How about I come over this weekend. Maybe Sunday afternoon? And you can show me some of the other projects that you'd like to have completed."

"You don't have time."

"I have time. I also have some boys in my life who would love to help me." Henry hoped that Heath and Jack might consider helping. He'd like them both to learn how to care for people in the community.

She looked at the table. "I hate to be a burden."

"After what we put you through when we were in your classroom, I can honestly say that I probably owe you," Henry said. He stood as Justin approached the table. "Justin, have you met Mrs. Nederstrom?"

"No, sir."

"She was a teacher at the elementary school when I was there. She also has stories about your father's childhood. They're pretty good stories, too." Henry smiled. "It was good to see you today, Mrs. Nederstrom. I'll be over Sunday afternoon."

Vignette #2

Different

"Do you think I'm gay?"

It took everything Heath had to keep walking and not flinch at the question. The last thing he needed JaRon to feel was judgment or fear about that conversation. "Think faster, you dummy," Heath thought to himself. He said, "Do you think you are gay?"

"No, but people call me fag and queer and pretty-boy and all that, all the time," JaRon said.

They arrived at Heath's truck, giving him another second to pull himself together. A coming-out story was not in the plans for the day, but if JaRon needed it, he'd do it. He felt like he was prepared for nearly anything by the time they were in the truck. Polly had called asking if he had time to pick JaRon up at Bill and Marie's house this afternoon. Of course he did. He always would with these kids.

"I'm sorry you are getting that," Heath said. "Kids say horrible things." He huffed a tight sound. "So do adults for that matter."

"But if they think I am, do you?"

"Here's a question for you," Heath said. "Do you think I'm a thug and a hoodlum?"

JaRon fixed him with an astonished glare. "No. Why would I think that?"

"Because of the way I acted in high school. I hung out with bad kids. Luckily, Polly stepped in and got me out of the worst of the trouble, but it took a long time before I got away from what people had decided about me. Why do you think they say those things to you?"

"Because I'm fat."

"You aren't fat," Heath said. JaRon had yet to grow into himself. It would come, but not yet. "That doesn't mean you're gay."

"Because I like to cook and I like to paint things with Grandpa and I like music and ..." JaRon looked at him. "I'm friends with LJ."

He's gay. He told me so, but I can't tell anyone else until he's older because his parents want him to get through adolescence before he makes a decision. They're cool with it, they just don't want him to make a life-changing decision right now."

"How does he feel about that?"

"He doesn't care. We're only in sixth grade. They told him that when he was in eighth grade, he could tell anyone and do whatever he wanted with the information. They didn't question it at all. They told him that he could tell me because I'm his best friend and probably already knew it."

"Did you?"

"I never thought about it until he told me. But other people think I'm gay just because we're friends."

"Does that bother you?"

JaRon gave him a sly smile. "If it stops girls from looking at me, it bothers me. But otherwise, no."

"Good. That's really cool of you, JaRon."

"What am I supposed to do, though?"

"About the jerks who are calling you names? Tell them thanks for informing you of something so profound."

"What?"

"People have rules they want to live by. Some are good, some are bad. The bad ones make up rules that revolve around their fears. That person wants the whole world to be homogenized."

"What's that mean?"

"The same. Everyone should look the same, act the same, like the same things, the same people. The same. They are uncomfortable with differences so they try to package them up, make people feel bad for being different by labeling them with derogatory words."

"Derogatory means bad."

"It does - it means that they want to make people who are different feel less than a human being."

"That doesn't seem very nice."

"It's not, and JaRon, you have two strikes against you. You are different because you are black ..."

"Oh, I know that," JaRon said. "But when they call me a nigger,

it's the truth. I am black. That's why I wondered if I'm gay."

Heath pulled into the elementary school parking lot after having driven around the town. He reached into the cooler behind JaRon's seat and pulled out two sodas. "Want one?"

"Polly ..."

"Isn't here," Heath said. "We're having a deep conversation. I think it deserves a soda. Want it?"

"Yes, please." JaRon flipped the tab and took a long drink. "Thank you. I didn't know how to talk to Mom and Dad about this. They always try to make it all right, but I want to work this out myself."

"I'm cool," Heath said. "I might not have all the right answers, but I do know that you get to be who you are without listening to idiots who are afraid of who they are so they bully everyone."

"Why do they do that?"

"Fear. Always fear."

"I'm not going to hurt them. Heck, I don't even want to be near them."

"That's something they're afraid of. You don't give them any attention. Without their bullying, no one would pay attention to them. But look at you. You get attention simply because you are talented and smart and creative. That's the definition of different. And they don't like different. If everyone was like those kids, it would be boring, but then they would find a way to separate people into labeled groups. Their fears don't make sense, but they make trouble."

"How do you know all this?"

"Mostly long talks with Polly, then Rebecca, and now Ella. I lived with people who were scared of everything and were the biggest bullies in the world. They wanted me to fit in their tiny little world and when I didn't, they rejected me and let me become a thug and a hoodlum because they hated everything about me."

"Who was that?"

"My aunt and uncle. They didn't like my parents very much. When I showed up and needed love after my parents died, they didn't want to give any to me. Mostly because I think they didn't

know how to love or what to do with me. In their world, I was different. They didn't like different.

JaRon nodded in understanding. "I don't get it, though. Why is different a bad thing?"

"It's not. But people will label your differences so they can categorize you and judge whether it's worth it to accept you. Black, white, Hispanic. Gay, trans, hetero. Fat, skinny, just right. Too successful, loser, on and on."

"Everybody's different, then."

"You'd think so and then you'd think that would make it okay, but it never is. Which place do you prefer to eat - Joe's Diner or McDonald's?"

"The diner. For sure. The food is so much better. McDonald's is fine, but it isn't as good as Joe's."

"The diner is different. McDonald's is the same wherever you go. It's safe. You know that a Big Mac in Boone will taste the same as it does in Kansas City. But people don't trust that Joe's is always going to be good. So, McDonald's makes millions because it is safe and the same. And Joe makes enough to keep the place open and pay his employees."

"That doesn't seem fair."

"Safe. Same. Homogenous. Those are words that aren't fair to people who want to be different and stand out."

"We should be safe doing that."

"But it's always risky. You just have to have people who love you nearby. Do you think Polly was safe when she moved to Bellingwood?"

JaRon frowned. "I never thought about it. She's always just doing her own thing."

"She was different. In a big way. I remember my aunt and uncle talking about her. They called her an outsider and a meddler. They thought she was cocky and arrogant."

"Mom?" JaRon shook his head. "Not Mom."

"The thing is, those words didn't just come out of their mouths. A lot of people thought that she'd come in, blow up the town, then move away. Or they figured she spend all her money, then go

bankrupt and drag people down with her. Like Henry. Oh, were people mad when he fell in love with her. He was supposed to marry someone from around here, not a stranger."

"Why can't he marry the person he loves?"

"Because people labeled Polly one way and him another way. They weren't supposed to fit together. Everything Polly did was different from what most people in Bellingwood did. She started businesses, and she encouraged others to start businesses. She took risks. Very few people in Bellingwood took risks before she arrived. Polly was different. She brought different people to Bellingwood. Like Jeff Lyndsay and Mrs. Ogden. Camille is a black woman who runs the coffee shop. Oh, and who would put a coffee shop in Bellingwood? That will never work. If you want coffee, you go to Joe's. No one wants those fancy drinks. Unless of course you go to Boone or Ames for them. Hearing the gossip about Polly was disgusting. I hated it."

"Did you ever say anything?"

"What was I going to say? I was only a kid and these were all adults. I am a little ashamed, but now, these same adults who were so judgey, have come around. Polly would tell me that you kill 'em with kindness and patience. They don't have to keep those same attitudes, especially if you remain kind and do your own thing. You notice she doesn't give them much attention. I would tell you to act the same way with the bullies trying to make you feel like you don't belong in the human race because of the way you are. If there's a big problem and you think they are threatening your safety, tell someone. Mr. Gordon won't put up with it. And you aren't being a tattle-tale if you're protecting yourself. Otherwise, blow them off. Be the best JaRon Sturtz you can be. And if that looks a little gay to idiots, who cares?"

"I guess I don't," JaRon said. He took a last long swig from the pop can and looked for a place to put it.

Heath took it out of his hand. "Strict orders from head-quarters," he said. "Ella makes me recycle."

JaRon smiled. "Am I weird to want to talk about this stuff."

"It's a little weird for me." Heath put his hand up. "Not because

you want to talk, but because I'm so not a talker."

"You talked a lot to me today."

"Who knew I had so many words in my head. I think about this whole 'the same' thing a lot. I hate it. I wish people would be okay with others being different. I tell the guys on the work crew that even though they think choices our customers make are weird and they'd never do it like that, it's not their place. The customer gets to choose to be different than what one construction guy thinks is the proper and right way to do things. If a customer wants a black wall in their bathroom, what business is it of ours to criticize?"

"But a black wall is weird, right?" JaRon asked.

"Not if you have bright colors that you want to stand out. See, this is the thing. Different generally has a reason and when we are too small minded not to see out as far as the customer, that's not their problem, it's ours."

"Wow."

"Yep. Ready to go home?"

"Yes. Lexi has me helping with Sunday dinner tomorrow. We're making plans tonight."

"Good. Be different. Cook the meals. Hang out with creative people. And talk to me whenever you want," Heath said. "You're pretty cool. Remember that."

Heath turned on the truck, drove out of the parking lot, and reached over to pat JaRon's shoulder. "You really are pretty cool. Thanks for trusting me today." He couldn't wait to get home to tell Ella he thought he might have passed one of the tests for fatherhood. Listening and giving helpful advice. Maybe being a dad wasn't going to be as scary as he thought.

Vignette #3

Back in Time

Rebecca made a slow turn, checking every angle in her full-length mirror. It was only a sock-hop, but she wanted to look good tonight. Andrew ... She swooned, but only a little. Andrew Donovan. She'd never tell him how important he was to her. Maybe when they were older. If they were still together.

Polly liked him, too. It was Andrew who introduced Rebecca to Polly Giller and Henry Sturtz. And now, here she was, living in an old schoolhouse with them, all dressed up to go to her first Junior High dance.

The best part was that they were having the dance right downstairs. The school was busy tonight with something that the little kids were doing, but the eighth-graders had insisted they needed to start having dances. When Andrew heard about it, he asked Polly, who called the school principal and offered her own auditorium for the dance.

There wouldn't be a live band, even though some of the boys from school were practicing as a group. They just didn't know enough songs to last a whole night. They'd never play Rebecca's favorite songs anyway. She hoped that the kids playing the 45s tonight would play *Color My World* by Chicago, and *If* by Bread more than once. She liked the slow songs. Hopefully, Andrew would ask her to dance during those songs. She certainly didn't want to dance with anyone else.

She checked her purse before leaving her bedroom. Then she smiled at the poster of Donnie Osmond and turned to smile at David Cassidy and Bobby Sherman on another wall. "Pretty enough? Do I need more lip gloss?"

None of them spoke, so Rebecca made sure that her red leather purse contained her wallet, lip gloss, a handful of tissues, Certs breath mints, a hairbrush, and her keys to Sycamore House. What else did she need? She opened the top drawer of her desk and

pulled out a purple ink pen and small notebook. Andrew was always writing things down. What if he had an inspiration while they were dancing? She needed to make sure that her best friend had exactly what he needed. He'd never remember to carry anything like this.

Finally, she was ready. Rebecca walked into the living room from her bedroom where Polly and Henry were waiting. There was Polly's big dog on the blue and green shag rug in front of the sofa. That dog loved rolling around in the shag. Rebecca had two small rugs in her bedroom. Polly had offered to carpet the whole room, but after experiencing a few weeks of Rebecca's lack of cleanliness, decided that the wood floors were easier to clean up. It took a lot of work to run a vacuum cleaner over all that shag.

"Don't you look beautiful," Henry said. He stood, took Rebecca's hand, and spun her around. "Prettiest girl in Bellingwood."

"No way," Rebecca retorted. "That's Polly's friend, Sal. You can't tell me that anyone is prettier than her. She's the only person I know who can get away with bright red go-go boots. My legs look dumb with those on."

"You look beautiful tonight. Andrew Donovan better treat you well or I will dump him in the creek out back," Henry said.

Polly tugged on the skirt of Rebecca's dress. "We could have gone with the maxi dress. This is pretty short. Be careful when you bend over."

Rebecca put her hand up. "I forgot." She went back into her room and flipped through the clothes in her closet. It didn't take long. Most of them were on the floor, but she knew what she was looking for. There it was. An ivory maxi-length cardigan. Better than anyone, she knew that with a bunch of people in the auditorium, they'd turn down the heat. When she was dancing, it would be warm enough, but if they were sitting at a table, she'd get cold. Rebecca slid it over the dress and walked back out.

"That looks good with your outfit," Polly said.

"At least this way I can sit down or bend over without people seeing up my back end. I hate that. I wish we could wear jeans to these things." She had just bought a new pair of jeans at the thrift

store. Polly found some great floral fabric at the sewing shop and already inserted panels at the bottom of the jeans to increase the flair. Then, she made a sash from the same material. With the sash woven through the belt loops, Rebecca loved the way the jeans looked on her, but tonight was a dress-up night.

"You could," Henry said. "Make a statement. Be the strong-willed girl that I know and love."

"Not tonight. Not on my first date with Andrew. I want him to like going to this dance with me, not have to fight with me because I'm being all independent."

"Nope. I don't want to hear that kind of talk from you," Polly said. "If Andrew isn't strong enough and doesn't have enough confidence in himself to let you be who you truly are, he's not worth it. Toss him to the side."

Rebecca's eyes glistened. "I really like him, though."

Henry chuckled. "I don't think either of you need to worry about Andrew Donovan. As much as I give him trouble about nearly everything, he's one of the good ones. He likes you a lot, Rebecca. Don't let your own self-confidence waver. Not ever. You are worth a million Andrew Donovans and I'm guessing he's smart enough to know that, even if you aren't."

"You two have been best friends since you moved to town," Polly said. "Why is tonight different?"

"Because he asked me to go to the dance," Rebecca said. "I didn't think he would. I thought I'd have to ask him instead."

"You still would have gone together."

"But what if he said yes to me only because we're friends, not because he wants to be my date?"

"Asking girls out is the hardest thing ever for a boy," Henry said. "If you worried about what he might be thinking, he worried like crazy about what you were thinking. What if you said no? What would he have done?"

"Why would I say no?" Rebecca asked. "I really like him."

"Do you like him as a boyfriend?" Polly asked. She bent down and polished the tip of Rebecca's patent-leather flats. Two more years and the girl was going to be asking for pumps. For now, she

was still afraid of tripping over her own feet.

"I think so." Rebecca smiled. "I want to know what it's like to dance with him."

Henry jerked and shook as he made a strange attempt at moving.

"What are you doing?" Polly asked him.

"The kids these days don't know how to dance. They do all of this weird solo stuff standing beside each other. Disco? The Robot? Come on. Give me some two-step or a nice waltz."

"He's so old," Polly said to Rebecca. "I apologize for him, though I do like dancing in his arms."

"That's what I want to do with Andrew," Rebecca said. "I want to know if it's nice to dance with a boy."

Henry took Rebecca's right hand and wrapped her left arm around his waist. "Like this?" He swooped her across the floor so fast she barely had time to realize what was happening. When they got back to the sofa, he sent her spinning into its depths and grabbed Polly's hand to take her for the next ride.

"He's pretty good," Polly said over her shoulder. "We don't even have music playing."

That prompted Rebecca to launch herself back to her feet and head for the stereo. If Henry and Polly were going to dance, she wanted to give them music. Of course, she flipped through her own stack of albums. Whenever she got home from school, Rebecca liked turning on the stereo. Most of the time, Henry and Polly were still at work and she could curl up in the corner of the sofa with cats snuggled around her while she did her homework. Since Henry was dancing real dances, she went ahead and put on Peter Frampton's *Baby I Love Your Way*.

Henry slowed his pace to the beat of the song. When Polly leaned against his chest, he rested his head atop hers and they continued to dance. Rebecca loved that. She couldn't believe she'd gotten so lucky as to live with these two. Polly let her put crazy disco lights in her bedroom, play all the music that she loved on the record player, have friends come up to the apartment, and even though she wasn't really their daughter, they said *I love you* all the

time. To each other and to her. Polly even told Andrew and his older brother, Jason, that she loved them.

Tears sprang into her eyes again. Her mother would be so happy that Rebecca was living a good life. They'd had a lot of struggles before landing in Bellingwood. Once here, even though her mom had died, these were the best times of Rebecca's life. She didn't know how it could get any better.

When there was a knock at the front door, Henry guided Polly that way, indicating that Rebecca should stay where she was. He'd escort Andrew inside. The music was still playing when the door opened, but they heard a lot of noise from downstairs.

Rebecca checked the big clock on the wall above the door into the dining room. It was almost seven o'clock. She felt herself get all fluttery, especially as she stood up. Andrew smiled at her and her flutters got worse. She was so excited.

He looked great. His mother wasn't a fan of long hair, something she made clear on a regular basis, but she hadn't made him cut it short like some mothers did. It hung about shoulder length and was neatly trimmed. Mrs. Donovan insisted on that. Rebecca was surprised to see her standing behind Andrew with a camera in her hand.

"I couldn't help myself," Mrs. Donovan said. "Andrew's first big dance. Rebecca, you look fantastic. Did you two plan for your colors to be similar?"

Rebecca blushed. Yes, she had. When Andrew told her that his mother had found a light blue leisure suit, Rebecca had asked what color shirt he was wearing. He wanted to wear a shirt with lots of color in it, meaning that she could wear a light blue blouse and her patchwork skirt. The collars on his shirt and the suit jacket were insane. Big collars had just come into style and though Andrew liked it, Henry was having nothing to do with any of that craziness. He was such a stodgy old man sometimes.

"We have to hurry, Mom," Andrew said. "We don't want to be late for the dance when it's right here in Rebecca's house."

Mrs. Donovan was still dressed in the uniform she wore to work at the grocery store. Her skirt was short, too, but at least she wore

an apron over it.

Rebecca turned off the music. There was too much happening.

"Where should we take pictures?" Polly asked Mrs. Donovan. "I was thinking about the bookcases in the other room since both our kids are part of the intelligentsia." She smiled at the kids. "That's an elite group of intellectuals. You two formed your own group. I like it."

"Not too long, please," Rebecca begged.

"I took pictures of poor Andrew before we left the apartment. I even made Jason stand in a few of them and then I made him take pictures of me with Andrew. This roll will be used up in no time," Mrs. Donovan said. "Don't worry, kids. We just have to mark this special day. First date, first dance."

"First kiss?" Polly asked.

"Over my dead body," Henry announced.

Rebecca blushed and stared at Andrew. "They are so embarrassing."

"Let's just get it over. I saw some of my buddies coming in as I walked upstairs. Hopefully, they'll save a table for us."

"Okay," Rebecca said with a nod.

By the time they got downstairs, the lights in the auditorium had been dimmed and music was playing. No one was on the dance floor yet, but things were only getting started. Andrew found his buddies and waved just as the organ intro of Iron Butterfly's *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida* started. That wasn't any fun to dance to, but a group of seventh grade girls peeled away from the wall by the stage and started dancing anyway.

Andrew took off, then stopped when he realized that Rebecca hadn't followed him. He walked back to her and shouted in her ear, "Do you not want to sit with them?"

"It's okay," she said.

He smiled and took her hand. Tonight was going to be a good night after all.

Vignette #4

A Garden of Friends

Agnes Hill sat at her kitchen table, paging through seed catalogs. The television played in the living room, and four little girls were wrapped up in blankets on the sofa. Polly didn't let her kids watch unsupervised TV at the house, but on Saturday mornings, it was pretty innocuous. Agnes had checked the schedule and sure enough, the girls were watching a show about wild animals and their habitats.

After dinner last night, Cassidy had begged for a sleepover. Polly and Agnes suspected a plot had been hatched during the day at school. As soon as they agreed, Cassidy asked to call her best friend, Missy Gordon, who lived down the street. She was excited enough about it to include her two newest sisters, Teresa and Kestra Ricker. They were sweet little girls, still trying to find their way in the big house and immense family they'd found themselves part of.

Cassidy had a little trouble when the Rickers first moved into the Bell House. She was used to being the little girl in the family. Young Delia and Lexi's daughter, Gillian, didn't count. They were too small to draw attention from Cassidy. But Teresa was a year older and Kestra, while only in first grade, was a bright spot in the world. She was noticed because she existed. Both girls had no idea that Cassidy was jealous of the time and love they received from the family. Agnes had made sure to increase time spent at The Bell House or the time she invested in Cassidy at her own house.

When the jealousy didn't abate, even Agnes had to have a discussion with her favorite girl about love and acceptance. No one loved Cassidy less because there were more kids in the family. In fact, Agnes wholeheartedly agreed with Polly. When you had more people to love, your love didn't grow a little for each person, it grew exponentially. There was more love for everyone.

Kestra wandered into the kitchen, her little blanket trailing

behind her. "Mrs. Agnes?"

"Are you hungry for breakfast?" Agnes asked.

"It smells good. How much longer? Missy told me I could ask."

Missy Gordon, the principal's daughter, and Cassidy had become fast friends the day the Gordons moved into the neighborhood. One was rarely seen without the other. Missy was a good influence. Positive and happy, she didn't let much negativity get in her way. She was a creative thinker and pushed Cassidy to try new things, something Cass had struggled with since the day she came into Polly's life. Her fears still threatened to overwhelm her some days.

Last night, one of the first things the girls helped Agnes do was build the egg casserole for this morning's breakfast. After that, they mixed up dough for chocolate chip muffins. There just might have been late night muffins for the girls. On Friday nights, little girls were spoiled at Agnes Hill's house.

The funny thing was, they told no one. There was no gloating about extra treats they received or the wonderful things they did. None of the girls wanted the boys to horn in on their fun. The boys could make their own.

Sometimes the fun involved cleaning and scrubbing. Cassidy had figured out that Agnes wasn't quite as nimble and spry as Polly. When it came time to do deep-cleaning, Cassidy and Missy both stepped in to help. Since cleaning bathrooms was a punishment in the Sturtz household, Agnes had been afraid that Cassidy would rebel against it here, but the opposite had happened. She knew what needed to be done and wasn't afraid of a bucket filled with soapy water.

Kestra had taken a seat at the table beside Agnes. She lifted the corner of a dish towel covering a plate of muffins. "Do we get another muffin this morning?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"If you want one," Agnes said. She patted the girl's shoulder. "Why don't you tell the others that we will eat in ten minutes. Hands need to be washed and hairs need to be brushed, but you can stay in your jammies."

Kestra left her blanket behind and dashed back to the living

room. It was only short dash in this small home.

Agnes was thankful for her home. She and Henry had spent time going over plans for the little house. The backyard garden had been more important to her than a large living space. A small home was warm and cozy during the colder months, but once the temperatures got warmer, Agnes preferred being outside. Henry had enclosed a small back porch for her so she could sit in the warmth of the day and not worry about bugs eating her up. She loved having bees buzzing around her garden, but preferred they not buzz her hair when she wanted to relax.

Cassidy was the next girl to come into the kitchen. "What can I do to help?"

"Have you washed your hands?" Agnes asked.

"Yes," Cassidy said with a smirk. "I know you'll check. Should I get glasses for everyone? I can set the table."

It was time for Agnes to haul herself up and get moving. Four active little girls kept her going strong. What would she have done without this in her life? She wrapped her arms around Cassidy. "I'm thankful for you."

"Me too," Cassidy said. She shook her head. "I mean, I'm thankful for you, not me."

"I still think about that day when you and your mother picked me up off the ground. What would I have done if someone else had driven by? I might have never gotten to know you and your family."

"Mom says that everything has works together," Cassidy said. "I bet she'd say that we would have found each other no matter what. You were meant to be part of our family, just like me."

"I'm glad we're part of the same family," Agnes said. She pointed at the step stool in front of the cabinets. "Five glasses. We might need more."

"Chocolate milk?" Missy asked, walking in.

"If you want it."

"You know we all do."

"And orange juice?"

Missy stuck out her tongue and made an icky-looking face.

"Orange juice and chocolate milk together?"

"Egg casserole and chocolate chip muffins together?" Agnes asked with a grin. "You don't mind that combination. It's all a matter of what you choose to like. And I like having orange juice with my breakfast. I also like having chocolate milk. My taste buds can figure out the difference and still be happy."

Teresa had come into the kitchen as the other two were setting the table. "What can I do?"

"Take your sister's blanket back to the living room," Agnes said. "Thank you. I'm about to take the casserole out of the oven and while we're waiting for it to cool, we'll start with muffins. Does anyone want anything else?"

"Everything else is in the casserole," Cassidy said. "We put it all in there."

"And it's going to taste fantastic," Agnes replied. She set her hand on Teresa's shoulder as the girl folded the blanket into quarters. "While we're eating, we're going to talk about my gardens. I have loads of ideas and want to hear what you all think we should do this year."

"It's only January," Missy said. "You can't start planting a garden until, like May, or something."

"But you have to plan. And that little indoor greenhouse that Henry built for me is going to be bursting at the seams by the time spring planting arrives." She looked up. "Teresa, check on Kestra, would you?"

"Here I am," Kestra said, practically bouncing on her toes. "Did I hear that we get chocolate milk?"

"Yes, you did," Agnes said. She looked over the table and her heart burst with joy. The kitchen table wasn't large, but had enough space for five of them to eat breakfast. "Everyone find a place to sit."

She nodded at Cassidy, who removed the dish towel from atop the muffins, took one, and passed the plate. While the girls were eating and chattering, Agnes sliced the breakfast casserole into small squares. Now, were the boys here, the serving sizes would be much bigger. The girls knew they could eat as much as they wanted, but she didn't like forcing food on anyone. After all those

years of running a restaurant and throwing perfectly good food away, Agnes was reluctant to repeat that behavior.

While the girls ate, she picked at her own food. She wasn't telling anyone that she'd eaten a muffin before the girls crawled out of bed.

Agnes took the seed catalogs from the counter and opened them to a few pages she had marked. "I was thinking ..."

"That we should plant tomatoes and beans and cucumbers and peas and carrots and potatoes?" Missy asked with a laugh.

"We could do that, but I thought that it might be fun to plant a friendship garden in the front of the house. All that beautiful sunshine will make it thrive."

"What is a friendship garden?" Teresa asked.

"Does anyone have an idea?" Agnes replied.

"Something we can share with friends?" Cassidy asked.

"We can share the flowers, but I was thinking that we spell the word *friends* with the first letter of each flower we choose."

"Oooh, that sounds cool," Missy said. "What flower starts with the letter F?"

"Look at these." Agnes pointed at a cluster of colorful trumpet-shaped flowers. "They are called Four O'Clocks. Not only do they look pretty and smell wonderful, but they attract hummingbirds. What do you girls think about hanging hummingbird feeders outside my front window? Should we do it?"

"Yes!" echoed around the kitchen. It was easy to get these girls excited about new ideas. Gardening wasn't something that Polly enjoyed doing, giving Agnes the opportunity to introduce one of her favorite things to the girls.

"What's the second letter?" Agnes asked.

"R." Everyone knew that.

"That should be a rose, shouldn't it?" Cassidy asked. "Or something else?"

"We have a lot of roses in the back garden," Agnes said. "What if we did something completely different out front? These are called Rudbeckias, though most people call them black-eyed Susans."

"Because they have a black eye in the middle, right?" Kestra asked.

"They'll last through the fall. What do you think?" Agnes asked and acknowledged the nods.

"For the letter 'I', I was thinking about Impatiens." She showed them the pretty flowers. "We'll fill up the background with Elephant Ears, adding lots of big green leaves to the garden. For the letter 'N', I'm introducing you to Nasturtiums. Did you know that those taste wonderful?"

"You can eat a flower?" Kestra asked.

"You can eat a lot of flowers. The nasturtium leaf tastes a little peppery. When I was younger, I liked to wrap it around a slice of ham and some cream cheese. They make a fabulous appetizer."

"Could we do the red ones? Those would be pretty with the Ruddle ... what were they called?" Missy asked.

"The Rudbeckias or black-eyed Susans. Red nasturtiums would be very pretty with those," Agnes said. "Now, for the letter 'D'. Either dahlias or dianthus. What do you think?"

The girls peered at the pictures of the two flowers.

"I like the way this one has a bunch of flowers on it," Teresa said, then stopped herself. "I'm sorry. It doesn't matter."

"I like that too," Missy said. "Dianthus? That's what it's called?"

"Dianthus it is. And now for the letter 'S'."

Cassidy put her finger on a picture of snapdragons. "I love these. They get so tall. Can we do snapdragons?" She looked around the table for confirmation. No one had a better idea.

This was one of the hardest things for Agnes. Given unlimited funds, time, and space, she'd fill her garden with every flower in the catalog, but she needed to limit herself. Today's exercise was a way to have fun with the girls and keep herself in check. She chuckled to herself.

"What's so funny?" Cassidy asked.

"You girls have just made my day. I didn't know what to put out front and within a matter of minutes, we've filled that garden with color, height, and beauty."

"And friends," Missy said. "What happens next?"

"Next, I will order the seeds. When they get here, we'll plant them in little pots so they grow strong before we replant them

outside. Then, one day, you will come over to visit me and be greeted by your friendship garden - all grown up and beautiful."

Kestra rubbed her hands together. "This is fun."

"It is fun," Agnes said. "We get to play in the dirt and have fun doing it together."

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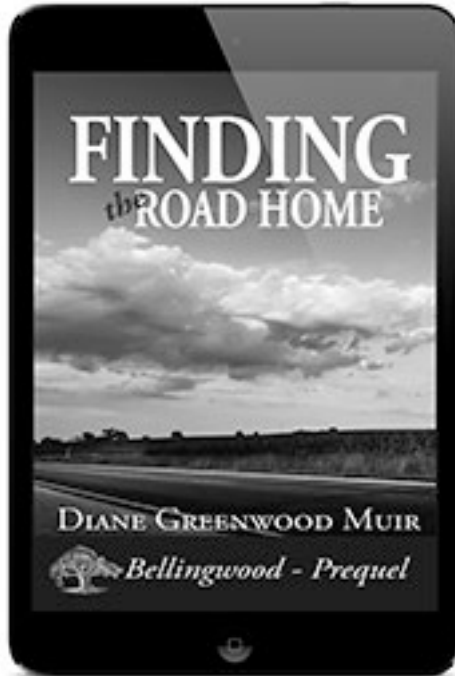
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