



LOVE  
*without*  
LIMITS  
*Sigarettes*

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



*Bellingwood - Book 45*



# Book Forty-Five Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR

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THANK YOU!

## INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

I have compiled the vignettes relating to Book 45 — Love Without Limits — 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

### Right Now?

"Here you go." Nan Stallings put a set of rolled up plans on the dining room table.

"You got them already?" Grey asked.

"Sal sent the file to me this morning. I could have called after I printed them, but I knew you had a busy day."

"What do you think?" He started unrolling the plans, then stopped himself. "Thank you for doing this." Grey gave her a quick kiss, but he was too excited to do or say much else.

Nan placed books at the corners as he laid out the plans for a new ice rink that would be part of the Bellingwood Community Center north of town. Sal Ogden and he had been talking about this for months and now he was about to see the fruits of their labor.

"What do you want for dinner?" Nan asked. She shrugged out of her sweater with a sigh of relief. "Think about it. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Grey barely paid attention as she left the room. He didn't want to think about dinner. He didn't care if he ate anything tonight. What he had in front of him would consume the next few days. He'd have to work, but his mind would be here.

Sal had sent it all. On the table in front of him, he now had a set of blueprints that included electrical, plumbing, entrances and exits, locker rooms, and more. Everything was here.

Not only had he worked closely with Sal on this project, he'd also contacted five of his friends from back in their hockey days. Two were still actively coaching. The other three were involved with local teams in a variety of positions. All had been willing to give him advice and assistance.

When he'd first come to Bellingwood and wrangled a small rink at the hotel, he thought that would be it. In the years since then, Grey had wondered if it was important enough to push forward. When Sal asked if he'd be interested in putting together an

organization, he was flabbergasted. She'd spoken to several people whose investments would be enough to make the project a successful part of the community center. How had he landed in such a wonderful community? Sal was busy enough with her family, the school board, and was still willing to spend time on a dream he thought only belonged to him.

When Nan came back into the dining room, she looked different from the professional who had entered their home after a long work day. Her hair was tied in a messy bun atop her head, she was barefoot, and the sloppy sweatshirt and sweatpants completed her comfort outfit.

"Ahh," she said. "I feel better now. Have you given any thought to dinner?"

"I'm too excited," he replied. "Whatever you want is fine."

"Peanut butter and jelly it is, then."

Grey nodded without really hearing her. He hated peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. "What?"

Nan rolled her eyes. She'd known he wasn't listening. "Do you want pizza? They'll deliver. That way neither of us has to work. I didn't think to ask Lexi for a meal tonight."

"Pizza is fine. How is Lexi doing with her business?" Grey didn't really care, but he needed to spend a few minutes with Nan.

"She's doing well. There are kinks still to be worked out, but she's getting there. The fun thing is, Lexi is about ready to discuss an app." Nan scrolled through her phone. "Like the one I designed for Pizzazz. I don't even have to talk to anyone to place an order. Do you have any preferences, or just get what we normally have?"

Grey had tuned her out as he turned over another sheet in the pile of plans.

"Grey?"

He looked up, confused at her query. "I'm sorry. What did you ask me?"

Nan chuckled. "Dinner. Pizza. Any preference?"

"I'm distracted. I don't care what we get. No pepperoni, though. It messes with my stomach."

She nodded. They never ordered pepperoni because he hated it.



"Do you want anything else?"

"That garlicky cheesy bread thing."

Nan tapped the order in. "Delivery in forty-five minutes. Should I leave you alone with your prints until dinner is here?"

Grey removed a book from one corner and then the next. He rolled the plans back up. "No. This isn't fair. I apologize. I can look at these between appointments tomorrow. None of this is urgent."

"I understand how excited you are," she said. "I was like this when I built out my office. There's something wonderful about creating a brand new thing. Forty-five minutes. I'm going to watch something inane. When the pizza arrives, we'll eat."

"Are you sure?"

"Lifetime," Nan said. "We have a lifetime. Forty-five minutes won't change that."

Grey sighed. Forty-five minutes could change everything. He spent time with people whose lives were transformed in the smallest time frames. "I love you, Nan."

"I love you, too. And just so you have something else to occupy your mind during these forty-five minutes, I want to talk to you about a phone call I had today." She gave him an evil grin, turned, and walked out of the room.

It felt like Nan had only been gone ten minutes when she walked back in, carrying two plates. "Two choices," she said. "Eat in here or in the living room."

Grey looked at the table. Notes he'd written and laid out on top of each set of plans were precarious enough. He didn't want to make any more of a mess. "Living room okay?"

With a soft smile, she said. "I already set drinks on the table. I brought the pizza in to tempt your senses." Nan waved a plate in front of his nose. "Are you hungry now?"

"And curious about the phone call."

"I didn't know if you'd have enough space in your brain to parse that while perusing these." Nan nodded toward the table. "Come on. Let's eat and I'll tell you why Mom called today."

"Your mother? Is everything okay?" Nan's parents owned a ranch in California. She didn't spend nearly enough time with

them, but they spent time on video calls three times a week. Nan was so organized that she'd scheduled those events. They were as important as any client meeting. A random phone call was something different.

Nan laughed. "Everything is fine. Mom and Dad have been talking about us."

"What did we do?"

"She invited us to have a small wedding at the ranch. Only family and any friends that we want to be there."

"In California? What about our friends in Bellingwood?"

"Mom believes that we can have a celebration here after the fact. What do you think?"

Grey's relationship with Nan had changed over the years. They'd been different things to each other as each of them grew into themselves. When Nan first arrived in Bellingwood, she was running from a family that protected her following the attack she'd experienced. They had done exactly what she needed, but when she was ready to go beyond the safety of the ranch, Grey was her first thought.

They'd been friends, but it had never occurred to him she was interested in him as anything else. The age difference had been a block for him, but not for Nan. She hadn't pressed, she'd simply waited for him to get on board. She knew his heart better than he did.

"You're not saying anything." Nan peered at him over a slice of pizza.

"Sorry. Thinking."

"About getting married?"

"Yes, but not because I'm afraid of it. Only reflecting on where we've been. Do you want to get married in California?"

"I don't want a big wedding. I only want to be married to you and I feel like we're there already."

"That didn't answer my question. Do you want to be married in California?"

"Mom agreed that we could make it a small event. But if we do it out there, my whole family can come and it won't be ..." Nan's

voice trailed off and she sighed. "I wish we could just stand before a judge, exchange vows and rings, and be done. You know how I hate being part of a spectacle. My family wants to be part of whatever we do, but I don't know if I care. It's just you and me."

"Did you tell your mother that?"

"No. She was excited at the thought of putting together a wedding on the ranch."

"Why don't we talk about having a family celebration when we travel out to visit them this summer? We could get married in Boone. It takes three days for the paperwork to process. All we need to do is schedule the day."

"How do you know these things?" Nan looked surprised.

"Before I gave you the ring, I investigated possibilities. Neither of us have a desire to go to Vegas and neither of us like to be the center of attention."

"That's the truth."

"We need witnesses," Grey said.

"Lexi and Will," she replied without hesitation. "They'd keep it under wraps. Would you really be okay with a simple ceremony?"

He chuckled. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"We don't talk about it. You talk about everything."

"I know. I'm still afraid of pushing you too hard."

"So you let my mother do it. She's good at pushing, that's for sure." Nan took his hand. "Will you marry me as soon as we can schedule a day with no clients?"

"You tell me the day," Grey said. "I'll reschedule every appointment."

She shook her head. "We're really going to do this."

"What will you tell your mother?"

"I'll tell her to plan a reception. Cake, gifts, toasts, dancing. Everything except the ceremony. That part will be ours and ours alone."

He withdrew his hand from hers, then took it back wrapping his fingers around hers. "I like the sound of that."

"If we have a reception in Bellingwood, it will have to wait until after the one in California. Mom would never understand."

He nodded. "Isn't it funny how we take everyone else's feelings into consideration when it should be about us?"

"Like you tell your clients," Nan said, "We can choose to be annoyed by it or accept it and move on. There is no harm in caring about someone else's feelings." She smiled and shrugged. "Now, Polly and Lexi might find it difficult to accept that we got married and they couldn't throw a party the same day."

"Will Lexi be able to keep the news of the wedding from Polly?"

"I hope so. She'll understand. I don't see her having a big wedding, if she ever gets married."

"She might surprise everyone."

"Lexi doesn't like people paying attention to her any more than I do. When it comes to Gillian, she will pull out all the stops. From what I heard, Polly and Henry didn't have a big wedding ceremony. They'll understand."

"I don't think I ever talked to Polly about how she and Henry got married. They were just always together."

"Rebecca and Andrew's wedding will be huge."

"It would have to be. I hope Rebecca is ready."

"She will be." Nan lifted her shoulders. "I need a dress. You need a suit. Mine is easy. I can get my dress in town. We need to go to Ames or Des Moines for you."

"I hate buying clothes," Grey said. "It's been a long time since I've worn a suit."

"You should have a nice one."

"It might take longer to fit me for a nice suit than it takes to plan our wedding day."

"Then we'll wait." Nan sat back. "We're such romantics, aren't we?"

"I love you," Grey said. "That's not romantic enough. I need a big gesture."

"If I was looking for big gestures, I would have told you," Nan said. "That you love me and take care of me means everything."

"I will never stop loving you."

## Vignette #2

### Choose Well

Stephanie sat in her car outside Kayla's apartment complex. They were having lunch together today, something that hadn't happened in a long time. She missed her sister.

Kayla opened the car door and said, "Where are we going?"

"That's up to you," Stephanie said. "Do you want to stay in Bellingwood or go somewhere else?"

"I haven't been to the diner in forever. Can we go there? I have to be home by one-thirty so I can get ready for my shift."

Stephanie pulled out of the parking spot and tried not to be annoyed. It didn't work. "If you'd told me, we could have planned for another day."

"No big deal. What did you want to talk to me about anyway?"

"Nothing," Stephanie said. "I wanted to spend time with you."

"Oh. Sorry. I guess I'm busy with work and all that."

This was going to take patience. "All what?" Stephanie stopped at the highway and waited for traffic to pass.

"You know. Quentin and the apartment and ..." Kayla shrugged. "Stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Cleaning and just stuff."

Stephanie turned onto Washington Street. The diner was only a couple of blocks away. Whatever was going on with Kayla could wait that long. They rode in silence, and Stephanie was thankful to find a parking spot just down from the diner. The walk from the car was also silent.

Lucy waved from the center of the diner and pointed at a booth. Stephanie waved back and said, "Lucy has a table for us."

"I saw," Kayla responded. She led the way to the booth and slid in.

Stephanie sat on the other side of and pushed the previous occupant's glasses to the edge. "It's busy today," she said.

"We could have gone to Sweet Beans," Kayla replied. "I want a salad, though."

"You can have whatever you want. I'm having a cheeseburger and fries." Stephanie laughed. "I've been so good lately. Sky decided we needed to eat healthier at home. I'm tired of vegetables. I want fried food."

"That's what I'm doing," Kayla said. "I have to lose another twenty pounds."

"Twenty pounds? You look fine. You should eat healthy foods because you want to be healthy, not because you're focused on losing weight."

"You lost all that weight. Look at you and look at me. I'm huge."

"You aren't," Stephanie said. "You're beautiful, Kayla. Anyone who tells you different is lying. Does Quentin give you trouble about your weight?"

"No. He wouldn't do that. He's too nice, but I don't want to embarrass him by being fat."

Stephanie gritted her teeth. "Does he act embarrassed around you?"

"No. I just don't want to be the reason he won't go to office parties or out with friends."

Lucy chose that moment to arrive at their booth with menus. "What can I start you with?"

Stephanie winked at Kayla and said, "A basket of onion rings. Remove all the calories before you bring it, would you?"

"That's my specialty," Lucy said with a smile.

"Iced tea for me." Kayla opened her menu.

"Me too," Stephanie said.

"I'll be back." Lucy walked away and Stephanie put her hand on top of Kayla's menu.

"Why are you so concerned with your weight? You look great. Has someone said something?"

"I've always been fat. I'm tired of it."

"No you haven't."

"The doctor told me that I was overweight."

"Overweight is not fat. And doctors will always find something

wrong with you. Is that the only person who said something?"

Kayla shrugged and slid the menu out from her sister's grasp. "A salad. That's all."

"You can crumble onion rings on top of it. I'm worried about you, Kayla."

"I'm fine."

"It's been two weeks since we've seen each other. You barely respond when I text, and you haven't answered any of my calls. What's going on?"

"Nothing. I'm just busy."

"With work? With Quentin? How about Rebecca. Have you two talked lately?"

Kayla gave a slight shake of her head.

"You haven't talked to Rebecca either? Why not?"

"She's busy."

"Too busy to talk to her best friend? That doesn't sound like her. How many calls has she made to you that have gone unanswered? Why are you hiding?"

"I'm not hiding." Kayla sneered at her sister. "I go to work. Quentin and I go out sometimes."

"When's the last time you two went out on a date?"

"We're both busy," Kayla said with a shrug.

"Too busy to talk to your best friend. Too busy to spend time with your sister. Too busy to go on a date with your boyfriend. Kayla, you aren't that busy."

"I'm not you," Kayla said. "I don't have your guts. I don't want to fight with the world just because it's there."

"What does that mean?"

"You've done it all. You escaped from Dad, you started a new life, and you have a great job. Your boyfriend is a great guy, your boss is great. Everything is great for you. I'm not you."

Stephanie tried to process all that Kayla was saying. "You should be you. You're pretty wonderful."

"No, I'm not. I didn't go to college. I'm never going to be anything special. I'll probably work as a checkout clerk for the rest of my life."

There it was. "A checkout clerk? I thought you had applied for different jobs in the store."

"Yeah, well, I didn't get any of those jobs, did I? And I'm not about to ask why. All I'm ever going to be is a clerk. I have no skills. I have no training. I have nothing."

"Is that what you want?"

"It doesn't matter what I want. It's what I have."

"Kayla, you're still young. When we first came to Bellingwood, I was happy to get a job at the convenience store. I didn't want to stay there forever, but we needed the money. I was thankful for whatever I could come up with. You don't have to work as a clerk if you want more, but you do have to want something more."

"Look at me," Kayla said. "Who would want to hire this?"

Lucy set their drinks in front of them and said, "I would hire you. You're smart, you're friendly, you're clean, and you are attractive. Who wouldn't want to hire you?"

"Nobody at the grocery store," Kayla said. "And you're just being nice."

"You bet I'm being nice. It's who I am. So, are you calling me a liar?"

Kayla gulped. "I didn't mean ... No. I don't know."

"Forgive me for eavesdropping, but I couldn't help but hear you tell your sister that you aren't worthwhile. Anyone, including you, who says those things is lying. Life is too precious to believe lies about yourself. If Rebecca were here, what would she say?"

"About what?"

"About you believing nasty things about yourself."

"I don't know." Another shrug.

"Yes, you do," Lucy said with a smile. "You know exactly what she would say. She'd tell you that you are exactly you. You are perfectly you. You are her best friend and no one gets to say those things about you, and that includes you."

"But she's my friend. She's supposed to say those things."

"You bet she is. Would you allow her to tell you that her paintings are garbage, and she shouldn't do anymore art in her life? Would you allow her to tell you that she's dumber than a rock and



shouldn't bother with college?"

"Well, no. Because she isn't."

"But you're her friend. You're supposed to say those things."

Stephanie sat back and smiled. She'd known that Lucy was unrepentantly positive, but this was better than anything she could have managed to say. She was much too invested in Kayla's life and right now, she was furious that she hadn't realized things were so bad for her sister. She'd let their disconnection go on too long.

"I ... I ..." Kayla stammered before handing Lucy the menu. "I want the Asian chicken salad."

Lucy smiled and turned to Stephanie. "Salad for you, too?"

"Heck no. I want a cheeseburger and fries."

"Fries and onion rings?" Kayla asked. "That's a lot."

"I'm worth it," Stephanie replied. "It's one meal. We don't go out very often, why wouldn't I get what I want?"

"Are you sure you only want a salad?" Lucy asked. "Your sister is right. It's one meal. I'll bet you eat like a bird when you're home or at work."

"If I ate like a bird, I'd be skinny."

"Skinny isn't worth giving up everything you enjoy," Lucy said. "Are you happy right now?"

"Not really."

"Because you aren't skinny?"

"I suppose."

"Happiness is a choice. If you wait until you're perfect to be happy, you'll miss out on the good life. You won't enjoy being with your friends. You won't enjoy good meals or going places. You'll just sit around being miserable. Choose happiness." Lucy took their menus. "I'll bring the onion rings. Those make me happy."

"Everything makes you happy," Stephanie said. "I appreciate that."

Kayla glared at her sister after Lucy walked away. "She doesn't understand."

"You think? Lucy's husband nearly died. He speaks through a machine and sits in a wheelchair. That woman has every reason to be angry at the world and yet, she chooses to smile and encourage

others. She chooses to be happy." Stephanie steeled herself and then said, "You've chosen to isolate yourself from your friends and even from me. You've chosen to feel sorry for yourself because someone convinced you that you aren't worthwhile. If it's your boss, you need to find another job. If it's your co-workers, you should find somewhere else to work. If it's your doctor, for pete's sake, find another doctor."

"Where else would I work?"

"I don't know. Sycamore Enterprises is always hiring. Rachel needs someone else to work in the kitchen. We're always looking for help at the hotel."

"I'm not doing that again."

"Okay. Businesses all over town have help wanted signs in their windows. They need someone at the pharmacy. Joss is looking for someone to work at the library."

"That's only part-time. I need insurance and all that stuff."

"Kayla, you're on my insurance for the next four years. Don't make things more difficult. You don't have to have your entire life planned out right now. Who knows what will happen before you turn twenty-five? Maybe you'll be running your own business or you'll work as Polly's administrative assistant."

"That's your job."

"No," Stephanie said. "If anything, I'm Jeff's admin. But I have my own job. Maybe I should hire you to be my assistant."

"No way. We'd fight all the time."

"But I'd see you more often."

"I'm sorry about that."

"Did you get the email from Polly about Rebecca's birthday party?"

Kayla looked up, surprised at the change in conversation. "Yes. Are you going?"

"Of course. Are you?"

"I don't know. I might have to work."

"Seriously? You can't make sure that you aren't scheduled for your best friend's birthday party?"

"It's not like she'll notice whether I'm there or not. Everyone else

will be there."

"You just insist on feeling sorry for yourself, don't you," Stephanie said. She looked up as Lucy set a plate of onion rings on the table. "Thank you."

"Remember," Lucy said to Kayla. "You get to choose whether you're happy or not. Choose well." She walked away.

"It isn't that easy," Kayla said to Stephanie.

Stephanie dipped an onion ring in ranch dressing and then in the ketchup she'd squirted onto her plate. "Yes, it is. I choose to enjoy the heck out of this onion ring. Let's talk about goals. Do you want to stay at your job?"

"I don't know."

"Do you want to stay with Quentin?"

"Yes. I love him."

"That's the first positive thing I've heard you say today," Stephanie said. "Focus on that. Do you want to see Rebecca?"

"I guess. I kind of miss her."

"She was the one who always initiated your get-togethers, wasn't she?"

Kayla nodded.

"Let's schedule a party at the hotel. Your friends will be home for the summer and will look forward to spending time together."

"It's all different," Kayla protested. "Boyfriends and all that."

"Invite them. It would be fun. Let's talk about you finding a different job. Do you have any friends among your co-workers?" Stephanie smiled. "Other than Quentin."

"Not really."

"If I help with your resume, would you apply for a different job? Maybe one here in Bellingwood where people know and like you?"

"Maybe." Kayla stared at the plate of onion rings, then reached out and put two on her plate. "I shouldn't."

"You should," Stephanie said. "What if we were to split our meals?"

"What?"

"I cut my cheeseburger in half and share it with you. You give me half your salad. What do you think about that?"

"Maybe."

Stephanie waved at Lucy, who came over to the table. "Would you bring an extra dish for the salad? We're going to share our meals today."

"I see you chose well," Lucy said, pointing to the plate in front of Kayla. "I'm telling you, those things will bring happiness no matter what is going on in your life."

"They're pretty good," Kayla said.

"I eavesdropped again," Lucy said. She leaned in and whispered, "Mr. Gardner is looking for part-time help at the antique store. He isn't advertising it because he wants to find the perfect person. If you talked to him ..." She winked. "Rebecca worked at the hardware store last summer. She enjoyed that. Oh, and I heard that Nan Stallings is looking for a part-time assistant. Lots of good jobs in town. I'll be back with your lunch in a minute."

When Kayla looked up at her sister, Stephanie was surprised to see tears in her eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Do you really think I could do those things?"

"Of course. Do you want to walk down and talk to Mr. Gardner after lunch?"

"That makes me nervous."

"I'll be right there. He's not scary at all."

"And he has a cat."

Stephanie laughed. "Cats make everything better. Let's see what he has to say."

"If Lucy tells me to go there, I should probably do it. She's hard to ignore."

"I am," Lucy said. She placed their food on the table. "It doesn't take long for people to learn that I'm always right. You're choosing well."

## **Vignette #3**

### **A Very Good Day**

"Stop it," Noah said.

Elijah stopped bouncing his legs. "Sorry."

"Dad said we should go home since tomorrow is a school day." Graham Birdsong, one of Noah's best friends was driving them back to Bellingwood after a Jazz Band concert. Elijah and Noah could have ridden home with their parents, but if there was a possibility of doing something fun, Elijah was ready for it.

"No going out?" Elijah asked. "Not even to Pizzazz?"

"If we showed up at Pizazz, Dad would have my head." Graham laughed. "In public. A public beheading. It would be embarrassing." His father, Sonny Birdsong, worked in the kitchen at the pizza place in Bellingwood.

"Then we could go somewhere else." Elijah wasn't ready to end this day. He'd had a solo in the concert and was still revved up from performing in front of an audience. He and his friend, Brandon, from Mr. Specek's music store, had been working on his improvisation. Since Elijah was used to reading music scores, improv hadn't come easily. But he was learning.

Brandon and Mr. Specek were intent on helping him think bigger than notes on a score. They said that his imagination was big enough to do anything. If he could write music, he could play improvisationally. The jazz band director allowed Elijah a great deal of leeway, knowing the boy was still learning. But tonight's performance had gone well. Elijah had played his heart out and felt wonderful when it was over.

"What do you want to do?" Miles Gorham, another of Noah's friends, turned in his seat.

"I don't know," Elijah said. "I'm not ready to be done with today. Don't you ever feel that way? If I go home, I'll have to go to bed, and today will fade into the past."

"That's how it works," Noah said. "Mom and Dad will still be

awake when we get home. They'll party with you."

Elijah shook his head. No one, not even his brother, understood. Noah didn't get excited about performances. He didn't like being in front of people, and was always stressed out when he had to perform. Noah practiced all the time, so he was a good musician, but everyone knew he'd rather be in the library with his books.

"Wouldn't it be cool if Boomer's stayed open late so people our age could hang out?" Graham asked.

"They do on Thursdays," Miles said. "Too bad today is only Wednesday."

Only Wednesday. That meant there were only two days left in the week. If Elijah didn't work at the music store on Saturdays, he would hate the weekends. He needed activity and he needed to be busy. Even he couldn't spend all day playing the piano. Sometimes he just needed to be with people. Again, that was different than his brother. Noah wore out when he was around people too long. Sometimes he went to Pizzazz after school, but Noah loved to get home and spend time alone. Or go to the Sycamore House barn and be around the horses. He loved that even more. Mostly because those horses didn't talk to him. Whether it was there, the library, or their bedroom, Noah needed the quiet.

The funny thing was that Delia, who was as wild and outgoing as a little girl could be, adored Noah. And he seemed to adore her right back.

Elijah thought about that. Delia liked the rest of the family, but she would do anything Noah asked. When he studied in the library, that's where she was, looking through books, drawing pictures on paper that he'd give her, or playing with one of her toys. It was the only time Delia wasn't running around the house tormenting everyone with her need for them to pay attention.

Maybe her adoration of Noah was because he was quiet and let her be who she was.

"Steady," Elijah said out loud. The sound surprised him. He hadn't realized that he'd said the words so others could hear him.

"What?" Noah asked.

"You're steady," Elijah said.

"Is that an insult?"

"No, it's why you're the one Delia is drawn to."

"Whatever."

"Everyone thought it would be me because she loves the piano. You know, because of her dad. Remember how she used to crawl under it when I practiced? But it's not me. It's you."

"I read to her," Noah said. "And she still comes in to listen to you play. It's about the attention I give her. I do it to keep her from making Mom crazy. Mom has enough to deal with."

Elijah huffed a laugh. "Because of dead bodies?"

"That, and she takes care of everyone. She doesn't care who they are. If they need her, she's there."

"Yeah," Elijah said. "And our family keeps getting bigger because she keeps doing that."

"At least she isn't an old lady hoarding cats or dogs," Miles said. "Did you hear about that person who had thirty cats in her apartment? In an apartment! We can barely keep up with a dog and two cats. We're constantly dealing with poop and pee. I can't imagine trying to keep up with thirty. From what I read, someone smelled it from the outside of the apartment and called it in. Outside the apartment! It had to have been awful on the inside. I wouldn't want to clean that up."

"Good thing Mom didn't hear about it," Noah said. "She'd have helped the lady clean up." He shuddered. "Ick."

Graham slowed at the turn to lead them into the downtown area. "I'm taking you home. Right? There's no place for us to go, and Dad will be paying attention."

"I guess," Elijah said. He felt betrayed by the reality of life. This was a great day and it was about to come to an end. Bummer.

Graham headed to the Bell House, and when he got there, Elijah was surprised to see his dad's truck pull into the garage. He was sure that they'd taken the Suburban to Boone. Why would he be getting home so late? Had Elijah missed out by not going with his parents?

"Thanks," Noah said. "See you in the morning?"

Graham waved at them. "See ya."

Henry and Zachery came out of the garage as Noah and Elijah walked up the steps.

"You're home just in time," Henry said. He held up a bag. "We went hunting and gathering."

"For what?" Noah asked.

"Ice cream treats. Thought we'd celebrate the day and Elijah's solo."

Elijah lit up. Someone noticed. "It was so much fun, Dad. I can't believe you did this."

"Zachery helped. We picked up great treats. You have choices. Lots of choices."

"Mom will be so happy."

Henry smiled. "It doesn't take much to make her happy, but ice cream treats are at the top of her list of favorites. Let's go in and find everyone."

The family was already gathered in the kitchen. They must have known what Henry was bringing home. Delia would be in bed since she wasn't downstairs jumping and leaping to see what was in the bag. Caleb was missing, too. Elijah shook his head. Of all the family members, he had the hardest time getting close to Caleb. It was like Caleb didn't want to be friends. That didn't make sense. When Caleb came to the high school next year, his best friend could be Elijah, who would show him around and introduce him to all the cool people.

That made Elijah think again. Caleb wanted none of that. He wasn't the same as Noah, but he didn't like hanging out with the popular people. And he didn't like being involved in activities. Every adult Elijah knew, except his parents, thought that participating in extra-curricular activities was of utmost importance for a successful future. Elijah was all over it because those things would look good when he applied to colleges. No, he was all over it because he loved doing everything. But Caleb wouldn't care about any of it.

"Into the dining room," Henry said. "Unless you want a glass of water or something to drink with your ice cream. We'll decide what treat you want once everyone is at the table. Cassidy and Teresa,



would you bring in a stack of napkins? A big stack. Who knows what kind of mess we'll make."

Elijah followed his family into the dining room and chose a seat near where Henry usually sat. He wanted to be close to those treats.

"Elijah gets to choose first," Henry announced. "He did an amazing job at the concert tonight. We're very proud of him. Here's to you, bud." He emptied the first bag onto the table, then Zachery emptied his bag as well. There were so many treats to choose from. Elijah finally picked up a peanut butter ice cream bar. Given a choice, he'd take two or three, but that could come later. No one gave him trouble when he wanted more to eat.

"I heard there was a fight at school today," Amalee said. "Did either of you see it?"

Noah rolled his eyes. "Elijah tried to stop it."

"You what?" Amalee asked.

Henry stopped handing out treats to look at his son. "Were you hurt?"

"No," Elijah said. "It wasn't that bad." He stood up, as he was ready to tell a tale and wanted to keep everyone's attention where it belonged. "And it was between two girls. Both of them are in band. Saban said that Lanie kissed Jedidiah last weekend. Lanie said she didn't, but it was obvious that she was lying. Then Jedidiah showed up. He was embarrassed by the whole thing and told Saban that she should just let it go, that it didn't mean anything. Because she was being a whiny b ..." Elijah looked around the table and swallowed the word. "A whiny brat. So, he decided to look around and see if there was someone better. That didn't help matters at all. You know, Saban and Lanie were best friends. They aren't that now. Saban pushed one of the girls who was beside her to the floor, then went after Lanie. She grabbed Lanie's hair, and the next thing I knew, they were on the floor wailing on each other. I figured, what were they going to do to me? Beat me up, too? All those people standing around. They watched, but refused to get involved."

The sound of footsteps behind him made Elijah stop talking. He turned to see Caleb and their mother in the doorway. His dad pointed into the kitchen toward the freezer where he'd stowed the

rest of the frozen treats.

"Anyway," Elijah said, glad that the rest of his family was here. He loved having them around. Why he thought that spending time with anyone else tonight would be more fun was crazy. This was where he knew he was loved and appreciated. "I just stood over the two of them and asked if they wanted to get in trouble. They had to know that the security guard was coming. Lanie shook her head. She was crying a lot. Saban pushed Lanie's arm one more time and then put her hand up so I could help her stand. I did that and then stepped between the two of them and gave Lanie a hand, too. No one else was getting near those two, but I know them well enough to know they wouldn't hurt me if they didn't have to. That was all it was. No big deal."

"It's a big deal," his dad said. "You did a good thing. Stayed calm and took care of business. That's two good things you did today. I am proud of you." He looked around the table. "I'm proud of all of you. Now, let's finish up the treats and get ready for bed. Tomorrow is a school day. Elijah, if you want to stay up a little later tonight, that's okay. Maybe you can show your mom and me some of the things you learned in order to play that music you played at the concert."

"Really?" Elijah asked.

His dad nodded and put an arm around Elijah's shoulder. "Really. This was a big day. It was a good day."

Someone finally understood, Elijah thought to himself. He should have known it would be his parents. They got him.

## Vignette #4

### I Love You

### I Know

Doug Randall stocked cans of sodas and bottles of water into the cooler behind the counter. The last Friday of the school year. If history, no matter how short, informed him of anything, it was that this evening would be busy. Caleb Devins was on his way to Sweet Beans to pick up Sylvie Donovan's fresh-baked sweet treats, and the candy box was full. Soda and sweet treats might not be good for a healthy diet, but the kids who walked in the door would empty everything before the evening was over.

He chuckled. Kids. While a large portion of his clientele were high school and younger, the number of older nerds in this region was immense. A *Magic: The Gathering* tournament was scheduled to begin tonight and that would bring in at least twelve to fifteen people. Regular customers, to be sure. They enjoyed having a fun place to spend their evenings and weekends.

The front door opened, and Doug turned away from the cooler. "What are you doing here?" he asked his wife. Wife? He still had no idea how that had happened. She was the best thing since ... well, since ever. Brilliant, beautiful, a gamer, a hacker. What more could a geek-boy want in a woman? And what she saw in him, he'd never understand.

"I knew you had a busy weekend, so I thought I'd hang out. I've finished everything I needed to do at work. Here I am." Anita had not left the house this morning in what she was wearing now. She was always professionally dressed to work at the sheriff's office. Right now, she was wearing jeans and a black t-shirt with a steampunk cat on the front. "I let the dog out and fed him. We're all good here."

Doug nodded. He'd have gone home later to do that, but now he could spend the evening with Anita at the store. "You're staying for

the evening?"

"Why not?" She hopped onto the counter and swung her legs around, missing a neatly arranged display of Marvel Comics action figures by an inch. This girl was all that and more.

Two boys in their early twenties had watched the whole thing. Doug didn't know them well - they were here from Boone and planned to spend the evening playing video games in one of the rooms upstairs. They'd already called in a reservation. Smart boys. Right now, they were acting more like dummies, their mouths agape at the gorgeous woman in tight jeans and a snug t-shirt.

"Close your mouths, boys," Anita said. "I'm a cop."

That got their attention and they turned back to the rack of graphic novels.

She leaned in and whispered, "That's why I love this place. Nothing like turning boys into flibbertigibbets. I'm mean."

It didn't pay to be jealous. Anita made it clear that the only person she was interested in was Doug. She'd never given him any reason to worry. But he understood the boys and their awe. Thank goodness they had each other. If Billy Endicott hadn't been his best friend, willing to do anything for the fun of it, Doug would have been an absolute idiot in high school. He looked back now on their early days working for Jerry Adams as electrical helpers. They really had been morons. Waving painted wooden sticks around while dressed in robes their mothers pulled out every Christmas for the church pageant. Thinking they'd been Jedi and all that. He chuckled.

"Are you laughing at me?" Anita pinched his behind. "Because I'll give you something to laugh about."

"No. Thinking about when Billy and I played Jedi knights at Sycamore House. You know, Polly never laughed at us. In fact, she encouraged us. Who does that? I'll never be as cool as her."

"You don't have to be," Anita said. "You be as cool as you. That's perfection."

"But we were idiots and she just let us do our thing."

"You weren't idiots. You were creative. You *are* creative. It's almost sad that you've grown up to be more like your parents."

"What do you mean?" Doug tipped his head and frowned at her. "I'm nothing like my parents."

"Sure you are. You spend hours working here and then more hours working at home. When was the last time you and Billy did something just for the fun of it?"

"You're the one who does most of the brain work," he protested. "At least I don't have to play with numbers. I stink at that stuff."

"We all have our strengths." She pinched his behind again, then leaned in. "I really like your bum," she whispered, then kissed his lips.

"The children," he whispered back, pointing at the two boys who were staring in awe again. Maybe they'd never been here when Anita was around.

"Once they get to their games, they'll completely forget about me," Anita said.

Caleb walked in the door, followed by four others. "I think I have everything. Mrs. Donovan said she'd have tomorrow's order ready at nine o'clock. Do you want me to stop by there before I come to work?"

"That would be great," Doug said.

"I didn't know you would be here tonight," Caleb said to Anita as he set the three large boxes of baked goods on the counter. Everything from brownies to cookies, muffins and cupcakes. Doug didn't make a lot on them, only enough to cover overhead. Luckily, Sweet Beans gave him a sweet deal. He chuckled at the thought.

"You're laughing again," Anita said. "Entertaining yourself with your thoughts?"

"You know me."

The door opened again. These were mostly middle-school boys and girls. Danny Hogan came up to the counter. "Is my order in?"

"Came in early this morning," Doug said. "It's all ready for you. Are you staying tonight?"

"No. Mom is going out for a girls' night and I have to stay at home with the punk."

His younger sister, Mikayla, sent Doug a wicked grin. "He's all mine tonight. He has to do everything I want to do."

"No, I don't," Danny said. "I am not playing with your Barbies. Especially since my comic books are here. I'm going to read. You're going to be good."

"Mom said," she replied with a slight whine in her voice.

"Mom said I have to be nice to you. That does not include Barbies."

"Come on."

"I didn't know you liked Barbies," Anita said. "How many do you have?"

"So many," Mikayla replied. "And I have the Dream House and the car and the camper."

"She's spoiled. She has everything," Danny complained. "Little Barbie shoes everywhere, just waiting to hurt my feet."

"They're not everywhere." Mikayla put her hands on her hips. "I have that box made just for shoes. You're being mean to me."

"Come on, Mikayla," Anita said. "Let's look at some Barbie graphic novels. Maybe those will interest your brother."

"He's a dumb boy."

Anita laughed and looked at Doug. "Boys have a tendency to be dumb. It's our job to help them be smart."

"But you have a cool boy. I wish my mom had a cool boyfriend." Mikayla and Danny's father had left them not long after the little girl was born. Their mother was great with them, but she had her hands full with these two. When Boomer's opened, she knew a good thing when she saw it and brought Danny in right away. She said that she'd grown up with three brothers who loved comic books. They were a perfect way to keep her child entertained. Danny had fallen in love and devoured everything he could get his hands on. There were quite a few local kids whose reading skills had improved because Doug opened Boomer's Last Stand.

Owen and Lucas Mikkels, along with their brother and sister, Cooper and Sophia, were the next to come into the shop. They also had standing orders, something that made Doug smile. Their mother ran the library, but she let them buy their own comic books. She was a smart woman.

Most of the middle schoolers wouldn't stay throughout the

evening. A few might, but that was really only because they had nowhere else to go. Even in a town the size of Bellingwood, Doug was always surprised at how parents abandoned their children to relative strangers so they didn't have to deal with raising them.

Freddie Langdon and Dom Fletcher were two of those who would be in soon. They'd land at one of the tables and spend the entire evening. They tried to make trouble in the beginning, but Caleb didn't put up with much. He towered over the two boys until they were finally intimidated enough to stop spouting nasty comments to other customers.

Doug knew better than to call their parents. Those people wouldn't do anything. The boys were a problem in school and had been banned from several stores downtown because they made trouble. It wasn't always shoplifting or vandalism either. Most of the time, what got them into the worst trouble was when they would stand in one place, making it difficult for shoppers to move around them. Not only that, but the two would make nasty comments about people, ensuring their voices were loud enough to be heard. More than once, Chief Wallers had to escort them away from the shop. He usually parked them in the back seat of his squad car and took them home. Again, the parents didn't care. At least it didn't look that way on the outside. Rumor was, though, that Freddie Langdon's father didn't hesitate to use a belt on his son when there was trouble. No one knew for sure, but that would explain the kid's behavior.

"Mr. Randall?" Doug looked around for his father. Okay, he didn't really look, but whenever one of the young people called him mister, he was surprised. Sophia Mikkels barely reached the top of the counter and looked up at him with the sweetest brown eyes.

"Hello, Sophia. What are you looking for today?"

"Mama gave me this." She put a credit card on the countertop. "She said we can spend between forty and fifty dollars. But I want to buy four comic books. What do you have that will add up to twelve dollars?"

"Four," he mused. "That's specific."

She snickered. "Cooper wants three. I want one more than him."

"Got it. Well, we do have free comics over here. If you buy three regulars, you can choose one of these and that will make four."

"Cooper can do that too. I want something different."

"Got it. Let's see what we can find." Doug knew they could do this. The only question was whether the inexpensive comics would interest her.

The shop was filling up. High schoolers had finally made it from Boone and surrounding schools to Bellingwood. Doug led Sophia to a rack of cheap comics, glad that he was running interference for the little girl. These big kids didn't even see her, they were so focused on their own stuff.

Sophia tugged on his arm. "That's Mikayla Hogan," she whispered. "She's, like really popular, but she's only in second grade."

"What grade are you in?" Doug asked. Sophia couldn't be that much older.

"Fourth. She's way more popular than me. I think it's because she scares people." Sophia's wide eyes took in the scene and she tucked herself closer to Doug. "She scares me," was said in a whisper.

"She scares her brother a little too. That's okay," Doug said. "You don't need to be everyone's friend. Pick people who treat you well. You'll be much happier. Look at me. I have the very best girl in the world."

She peered at him. "Your wife?"

"That's the one. And my best buddy is Billy Endicott. Once you find your best friend, they'll be there for a long time."

"Cooper is my best friend." Sophia nodded and looked around. "He doesn't know it, but he is."

"I'll bet he knows," Doug said.

One of the things that he'd learned early on in the shop was that kids would talk about anything once they got to know you. He and Anita had discussed whether or not to tell parents what they learned, but as long as the kids trusted them and nothing dangerous was happening in their lives, they felt it was best to just let the kids blather on about their likes, dislikes, fears, and joys.



He watched Mikayla wander away. Anita turned and saw him with Sophia. She strode over, bent at her knees and said, "Sophia Mikkels, you look adorable in that purple skirt. What are you looking for today?"

"More comics than her brother," Doug said.

"You go on," Anita said, waving him off. "I know just the thing for this girl." She took Sophia's hand. "Go on," she said to Doug again. "You have customers at the counter. Caleb can't do it all."

"I love you," Doug mouthed at her.

Anita smiled. "I know."

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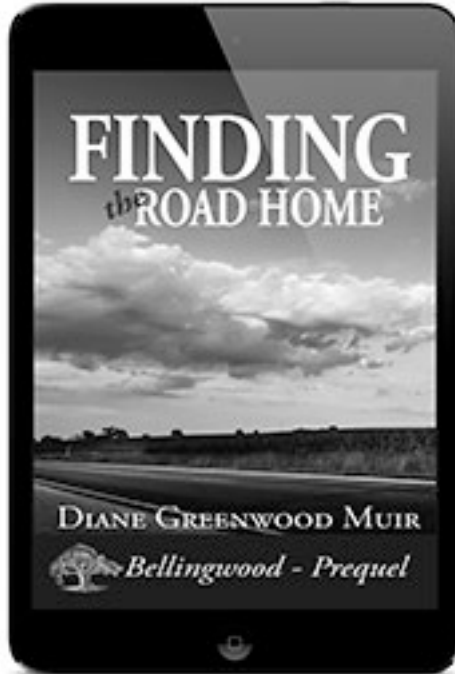
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