



THE RIVER ROLLS ON



Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Book 10



Book Ten Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR

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THANK YOU FOR READING!

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 has been published on either the website (nammynools.com) or in the email newsletter that comes out on the twenty-fifth of the month.

I realized how much fun it was to expose little bits of the background stories that happen in Bellingwood. Because I write from Polly's perspective, unless she is directly involved in the action or with a character, we don't see everything. These characters have developed enough that they enjoy telling their own stories, so it's time to make that happen.

I have compiled the vignettes relating to Book 10 – The River Rolls On - into one collection. These four short stories feature different characters from Bellingwood and in one, even the cat – Luke and Leia – get to tell about their lives in Sycamore House.

Book 10 - #1

All That Glitters

Jeff strode into the kitchen at Sycamore House and set his mug on the counter loud enough to get Sylvie's attention.

"Yo, kitchen wench," he said. "What kinda coffee ya got for me this morning?"

"Yo, strumpet," she retorted. "Same as every morning. You know where it is."

"Where's Rachel?" he asked. "Don't you two have a lunch to cater or something?" Jeff poured coffee from the urn on the counter and went on through the kitchen to the table by the back window.

"No, it was a continental brunch thing at the library. She's taking care of it. I'm working on the cake for the wedding."

Jeff pulled a plate of scones closer and spun it around a couple of times, looking for just the right choice. Before he could select one, Sylvie slid napkins across the table.

"Can you sit for a minute?" He gestured to a chair across from him.

She shrugged and sat down. Before he started speaking, she jumped up again.

"What?" he asked. "Don't you ever sit still?"

"I need coffee." Sylvie took her mug up from the prep table, refilled it, and came back. "So what's up?"

"Not much. I'm tired of my office."

"Don't lie to me, mister man. You never drop in for coffee unless you need to talk."

Jeff sipped his coffee, looking at her over the rim. "You're much too observant."

"It's a mom thing. Is it work? A boy?" She winked at him. "Heaven forbid, is it a girl?"

He chuckled. "It's really nothing..." He paused. "It's kind of work. Do you ever wonder if you're doing what you're supposed

to be doing?"

Sylvie set her jaw and then put her hand out to touch his forearm. "You can't be serious. You aren't leaving us, are you?"

"No," he slowly shook his head. "No. Like I said, it's nothing."

"Don't you nothing me, Jeff Lindsay. I won't put up with that. You started something. You've put the fear of God in me and you will darn well finish telling me what is going on in that hot little head of yours."

"I love my job. I really do," he said. "And sometimes I think that it's just ridiculous how much fun I have here. I like everyone I work with and you know as well as I do that working for Polly is easy. She lets us do our own thing."

"And she appreciates everything you do," Sylvie interjected.

"Absolutely," he said. "She's free with the compliments. But is it strange that I like working in small town Iowa? Am I staying here because it's safe and I don't have to fight through challenges to grab big goals?"

"Do you want to run a big hotel in the middle of Manhattan?" Sylvie asked.

Jeff looked up at her in shock. "What? No!"

"Chicago? Kansas City? Dallas? Do you want to live in a large city?"

He shrugged and grimaced. "It would be a lot easier to find someone to be with."

"That's crap and you know it. The reason you haven't found someone is because you spend too much time working. You should also know that if Polly thought you weren't happy because you were lonely, she'd..."

"She'd find a string of nice young men for me to date," he said, rolling his eyes.

"Either that or she'd tell you to leave if that's what you needed to do." Sylvie scowled at him. "Is that what this is about? Finding the love of your life?"

He gave her a shocked look again. "No!"

"Then what? Why are you questioning this?"

"I hate to admit it, but..."

"But what?" Sylvie tapped an invisible watch on her wrist. "You're wasting time big boy. Out with it."

Jeff laughed at her. "You're a tough woman."

"Yes I am. You're babbling about how perfect your job is and how easy it is to work for your boss and how much you like this place. In the middle of that, you're trying to make something terrible out of it. Now why would you be that foolish?"

"Because it's too easy."

"Uh huh. Go ahead. Explain that to me."

"I got an email from a classmate this morning. She just lost her job managing a restaurant for some big time chef down in Houston. She worked hard for the position and clawed her way to the top." He pursed his lips. "I feel guilty. I didn't do any clawing."

Sylvie laughed and snorted through her nose.

"Stop laughing at me," he said.

"I can't help it. You're an idiot."

"I know." He drew the words out. "But nothing this good ever happened to me before. What am I supposed to think?"

"I would never have pegged you for one of those dopes who looks for grey clouds in every silver lining."

Jeff grinned. "I'm usually not, but that email shook me up. Everyone knew that Kimmy was going to be a success. She knew it. There were days I wanted to vomit while I listened to her sketch out her plans for the future. Nothing would stop her. And now ... she's been stopped."

"Do you think she'll find another job?"

"Probably."

"Do you think she was happy?"

He sighed. "That's the thing. I doubt it. But then I don't know if she even understands the meaning of the word. She was always so driven. When the rest of us went out for drinks, she wouldn't go. She said we were wasting time that could be put to better use. That girl worked all the time and when she wasn't working, she was ... well ... working."

"I can't imagine what kind of life she'd lived up to that point to make her behave that way," Sylvie said quietly. "You aren't that

person."

"No I'm not," he declared.

"And you don't want to live her life, do you?"

"Only a little bit. Sometimes things are a little slow around here for me." He grinned at her.

"Well, give yourself another year or two. With Polly opening new businesses in town, I think you'll find yourself plenty busy."

"It's so strange. I always saw myself running one place - a big hotel. I'd take care of all of the needs of the guests and make sure that everything they encountered was smooth. Around here, I never know what I'm going to deal with next. Some days I'm helping guests at the hotel, and then in the middle of that, I have a Chamber of Commerce meeting to discuss a Crazy Dayz event downtown. Then I'm managing a kids club on Monday afternoons or soothing bridezillas and their mothers." He took a breath. "And now I'm adding a bakery and coffee shop to the mix."

"And you hate it?" Sylvie teased him.

"Stop it. You're right. It's more than I ever could have imagined. I use information I never knew I had."

Sylvie stood up and stepped back from the table. "So now what are you going to do?"

He glanced back and forth. "I don't know?"

"You're going back to work. You aren't going to complain about it any longer. You're going to be thankful you have what you have and you're going to leave me alone so I can build this stupid cake. Will you please ask Henry to hurry so I have a full-blown bakery?"

"Yes ma'am," Jeff said, mocking in his chagrin. "I'll be good."

"You're right, you will. And the next time you hear about one of your classmates failing in their high-powered job, remember that any one of them could have come to Bellingswood instead of you. You are a lucky man."

"Okay," he said. Jeff rinsed his mug out in the sink. "You really are tough."

Sylvie hugged him. "That's from being a mom. If you'd really needed a sympathetic ear, I'd have found it within myself to give that to you."

"Good to know," he said. "When I'm feeling sad about my love life, will you commiserate with me?"

"Nope, I'll kick your butt. Commiseration implies that I'm feeling sad about mine. I don't need that right now. If you want it, fine, but leave me out of it."

"We don't get to talk about your love life?" Jeff asked.

"No you don't. Now go back to work. This cake isn't making itself."

Book 10 - #2

Celebrate Good Times

"When are you going to invite Rebecca for a sleepover?" Stephanie asked her sister.

Even though Kayla tried to hide it, her quick glance around the living room broke Stephanie's heart.

"I don't know," Kayla said. "We play over there all the time and she has a big bed for us to sleep in."

Stephanie sat forward on the old sofa. She'd bought a slip cover for it, but the sofa still sagged and drooped. "I'm sorry we have to live in an old trailer," she said.

"It's okay. When I'm older, I'll get a job and maybe between the two of us we can afford to live in a nice house."

"Things are getting better, you know," Stephanie said. "Last week I put money into a savings account for the first time."

Kayla nodded. "That's good, right?"

"That's great. I'm going to save enough so that maybe we can move into an apartment in a few months."

"This is really okay." Kayla stood up and reached over to take Stephanie's dinner plate. "At least we have a roof over our heads, right?"

That was one of their father's favorite things to say - usually when he was yelling at their mother, telling her how lucky she was to have a roof over her head. But they didn't have to worry about him any longer. His murder trial wasn't supposed to happen until later this year, but when Stephanie had described the torment her family lived through at his hand, the judge denied any possibility of bail. He was in jail for the rest of his life as far as she was concerned.

Stephanie picked up an embroidered pillow. It was one item she had wanted to take from their house. Her mother had cried herself to sleep many evenings with her face buried in that pillow so that

horrible man wouldn't hear her. The flowers were faded and it seemed to fit the dingy look of the room, but Stephanie smiled at the memory of her mother. The woman sacrificed everything so Kayla and Stephanie could escape.

She heard water turn on in the kitchen. It was Kayla's turn to do the dishes. Even if they didn't have nice things, Stephanie insisted that they keep the place as clean as possible. Thank goodness for garage sales. She'd been able to pick up some mismatched dishes last summer for less than a dollar and when she stumbled on an old vacuum, she'd grabbed it. They were still buying clothes for Kayla at Goodwill. One day she wanted to walk into a real store with her sister and tell her that she could get a brand new wardrobe - clothes that no one had ever worn before. They might not be able to do it ever again after that, but just once she wanted to give her little sister something special.

Kayla never complained. Even now, when she didn't feel as if she could invite her friend over, she refused to complain.

"Do you have a lot of homework tonight?" Stephanie asked.

Kayla stood in the doorway, a plate in one hand and a towel in the other. "There are only a couple of weeks left in school. Everything she gives us we can do during the day."

"So that's a no?"

"That's a no," Kayla said, stepping back into the kitchen.

"So what do you want to do tonight?" Stephanie rearranged the pillows on the sofa and moved the two TV trays off to the side.

"I dunno, watch television?"

"Why don't we go for a ride? Maybe we should go down to Boone and get ice cream or something. I don't feel like sitting here all night."

Kayla popped her head back out. "Really? Ice cream? I thought you were on a diet."

"It's just a reason for us to get out of here. Do you want to?"

"I'm almost done." Kayla came out of the kitchen. "Let's drive up town first. Sometimes the General Store is open in the evening. They have ice cream there, too."

"Let's go." Stephanie picked her car keys up from the ledge by

the front door and pushed the door open, holding it while Kayla stepped out.

Once they were in the car, Kayla asked, "What made you decide to do this? We never go out."

"Mostly because you always have homework. And besides, I'm proud of you."

"Why?" Kayla buckled her seatbelt and looked up at her sister. "What did I do?"

"You're a good kid. I'm a pretty lucky sister."

"We haven't even gotten my report card yet," Kayla said.

"Your progress report was really good this quarter. Don't you think you're going to get B's and A's?"

"Probably. Math got better since I've been going to Polly's in the afternoon. She always checks our work if we want her to."

"She told me about that. I think that's great. So tonight we'll find a treat to say congratulations. And I also think you're pretty wonderful."

"You're pretty wonderful, too," Kayla said. "But I still don't understand."

Stephanie stopped at a stop sign and waited for traffic to go past on the highway. She put her hand on Kayla's knee. "I know this last year hasn't been easy, but I also want you to know that I see that you never complain. We're going to live in a better place one of these days and we'll have decent furniture and you won't be ashamed to invite your friends over."

"I'm not ashamed." Kayla's voice dropped and she hung her head.

"It's okay. I know you are. If I had any friends, I probably wouldn't invite them over either. It's going to get better, though. I promise."

She turned north on Elm and a block later, west on Washington. There were plenty of people on the main street this evening. Restaurants were busy and people were going in and out of the Alehouse.

"Look," Kayla said. "The General Store is open. Can we go in?"

"That sounds fun. I'll find a parking place." Stephanie smiled at

her sister's big eyes as they circled the block. The girl was trying to take in all of the activity happening around her. They needed to get out of the trailer more often. She parked across the street from the library. The building was dark this evening, closed on Monday nights now.

"I'm glad it closed," she said quietly.

"No, it's open," Kayla said. "I saw people in there and all the lights are on."

"No, I meant the library. If they hadn't closed it on Monday nights we'd never have found Polly."

"Oh, I see. Well I found Rebecca."

"You sure did." Stephanie reached down and took her sister's hand. "Wanna skip?"

"Skip?"

"You've never skipped? You do it like this." Stephanie started out, pulling her sister along. There was no traffic and she stopped in the middle of the street. "Try it."

"That's silly."

"Tonight I feel like being silly. Come on. Try it."

Kayla stumbled the first time and then she tried again and skipped. She giggled. "That's fun!"

"Come on. Let's skip to the General Store."

"We'll look funny."

"Yes we will, but who cares?" Stephanie said.

"Can I have two scoops of ice cream?"

"You can have whatever you want." Stephanie felt tears in her eyes. In that single moment, it finally hit her that life was just beginning for her and for Kayla. They were safe and they had each other.

They skipped across the street and she hopped up onto the sidewalk, then waited while Kayla hopped up too. When Stephanie pushed the door open to the General Store, they were greeted by a buzz of activity. Two seats were open at the ice cream bar and she pulled her sister along with her.

"What can I get for you girls tonight?" an older man asked.

Kayla pointed at the sign for the flavor of the day. She looked at

her sister. "Can I have a scoop of chocolate and a scoop of chocolate chip?"

"We'll have two of those ... in waffle cones," Stephanie announced. "We're celebrating."

"What'cha celebrating?" he asked.

"Bellingwood," she said. "We're glad we're here."

"Then I'm glad you're here too."

He scooped up the first cone and handed it to Kayla. She beamed as she drew her tongue across the top of the ice cream.

"Thank you, Stephanie," she whispered. "I love you."

"I love you, too." Stephanie reached out and caught a drip with her index finger. "Be sure to lick all the way around, now."

Book 10 - #3

What's a Guy to Do?

"I have no idea what it is I'm supposed to do," Henry said.

Bill Sturtz clapped his son on the back and laughed. "That doesn't surprise me at all. I'm guessing this isn't the first time and it's certainly not going to be the last with that little spitfire you married. You know, when you were a boy, your mother and I wondered about what kind of life you'd have, but that wife of yours is going to keep you on your toes until the day you drop into your grave."

"Probably longer than that," Henry replied, rolling his eyes. "But help me out here, what am I supposed to do?"

"The flip answer is to tell you that she isn't your mother and so you shouldn't have to do anything."

Henry scowled at his dad. "You buy flowers for Mom. Don't give me that."

"She's the mother of my children." Bill flipped the switch to turn the sander on and then flipped it back off. "I'm not helping, am I?"

"Not much," Henry said. "Does she want me to recognize Mother's Day or not? And what about Rebecca and her Mom and Jessie and her baby. We have all of these people in our lives and..." He sat down in a beat up old desk chair behind the work bench. "It shouldn't be this hard."

"Son, you're the one who is making this difficult. Has Polly hinted that she wants you to celebrate this holiday?"

"No, but..."

"No buts," Bill said. "Has she ever hung you out to dry on holidays and celebrations?"

Henry nodded. "You're right. She would have told me. But what if she just isn't thinking about it. Should I be helping her do something about her own mother or the woman who raised her? I know they're dead, but maybe she wants to remember them

somehow."

"I declare," Bill said, leaning over the workbench. "When did you lose your ever-lovin' mind? You aren't usually this spineless. I thought you two had one of those open marriages."

"Dad!" Henry exclaimed. "What in the world do you mean by that? We don't have an open marriage."

Bill drew back in surprise. "I don't know. What do I mean? What's an open marriage?"

Henry was still trying to make sense of the conversation. "An open marriage means that we don't care who the other person..." He hesitated. "Well, who they have a relationship with." Henry waved his hand around. "You know... a relationship."

"Oh!" Bill started laughing. "No! I meant open conversation. You two talk all the time, no matter what it's about. Why haven't you talked this topic into the ground?"

"We don't talk things into the ground. We just..." Henry looked up at his father, who was grinning at him. "Okay, we talk things to death sometimes. But at least we talk to each other."

"Yeah. You're part of that new revolution in marriage." Bill drew his hands up in the air and made air quotes as he said. "You *communicate*."

Henry lifted his nose into a hint of a snarl. "And I'm not spineless. If Polly hasn't said anything about the holiday, I don't know if it will upset her because she doesn't have a mother or because she isn't a mother. Why won't you help me?"

Bill rubbed his hand across the piece of wood in front of him, as if he were testing to see if it really needed to be sanded. "Every marriage is different. You have to figure this out on your own. What works for me and your mother might not be right for you and Polly. What do you want to do?"

"I keep trying to tell you," Henry slumped in the chair. "I don't know."

"Then buy her jewelry or chocolate or something."

"She'd hate that," Henry said. "What are you and Mom doing for lunch on Sunday?"

"Your mother is probably cooking. I don't know. We haven't

talked about it."

"You aren't even taking her out?" Henry shook his head. "You're terrible."

"Where are we gonna go?" Bill asked. "Every restaurant's filled to capacity. If Marie wants to go out to eat, we'll do it a different day. No sense standing in line for an hour to feel like we have to hurry through a meal because that long line hasn't gotten any shorter." He glared at his son. "It's no fun when there's a line of people staring at you because you have a table and they don't."

Henry rubbed his hand down his face and rested his chin in his palm. "You could come over to our place. Polly and I'll cook."

"Don't you think you should talk to her about this before you make the invitation, son? Or haven't you learned how dangerous that is."

"She'll be fine."

Marie Sturtz chose that moment to walk into the shop. She was carrying Jessie's baby, bouncing it gently in her arms. "I didn't hear any machines on out here but I saw your truck, Henry. Why aren't you working at the coffee shop?"

He shrugged. "I was just talking to Dad about Mother's Day. Am I supposed to do something for Polly or not?"

Marie gave her husband a smile, her eyes glinting with mischief. "Did he tell you to buy her flowers?"

"No. He thought I should do jewelry or chocolate," Henry said.

Bill frowned at his wife. "You don't like my flowers?"

"They're always lovely," Marie winked at her son. "I already have a spot picked out in the garden for them."

"Maybe I won't buy any this year," Bill grumped.

"Don't be like that. I love whatever you give me," she said and turned back to Henry. "Would you and Polly like to come for dinner on Sunday? Maybe that would help."

"You know Polly. She'll want to feed the world. Jessie and Rebecca and Evelyn and who knows? She'll probably want to invite Stephanie and Kayla and then, if she decides that Sylvie shouldn't cook for herself on Mother's Day, she'll invite them. Oh, and that means that Eliseo will be invited." He paused. "What am I up to

now, thirteen or fourteen? I'm sure I've forgotten some."

"Then we should have potluck," Marie declared. "I'll call Polly and set it up. That way you won't have to worry about anything."

"But I still don't know whether or not I should get her anything," Henry said with a little bit of a whine.

"Stop that," Bill said. "You don't whine."

Marie laughed at the two of them. "If I know Polly, she'll be happy just having all of her friends around. That's what fills her up. She isn't used to having people give her gifts or do nice things for her. Bring as many people as you can in for lunch and she'll be in her element."

"So I don't have to worry about buying her a present?"

The baby fussed in Marie's arms and she started to bounce again. She looked up at the clock on the wall and said, "I'll bet you're getting hungry. Mama's probably wondering where we went." Then she said to Henry. "You should always buy her presents. Even if it's just because it's Tuesday." Marie stepped close to her husband and elbowed his side. "Isn't that right, sweetie?"

"Right, sweetie," he echoed.

Marie left the shop and Bill groaned. "See what just happened there? Now I have to go buy her a present."

"You do not," Henry said.

Bill flipped the sander on and said over his shoulder. "Yes I do. And you should too. You'd be surprised at how much more fun you'll have."

Any further conversation was cut off at the sound of the sander on wood. Henry stood up and walked toward the door of the shop. He glanced back at his dad and heard humming. All of a sudden, Bill was moving his shoulders and swinging his hips to music that was playing only in his head.

"That's my dad, folks," Henry said. "He'll be here all week."

He took his phone out and texted Polly. *"What's your favorite flower?"*

Book 10 - #4

Good Morning Sunshine

"Boys, I'm not going to tell you again to get moving!"

Sylvie wondered if they would really stay in bed and miss school if she didn't yell at them. She'd tried everything she could think of, and still, they waited until she was ready to blow her stack before coming downstairs.

When they lived in the apartment, all she had to do was open one bedroom door and she could move them both. Now it was up a flight of stairs, and if she stood in one door, the other boy got a few extra seconds of shut-eye.

That was it. She'd had it. Tonight they were moving Jason's bed into Andrew's room. If those two boys couldn't learn to use their own alarm clocks, they were going to lose the privilege of privacy. She grinned to herself. That would work.

When Andrew was born, her mother warned her that raising two boys would be difficult. Her mother's words had simply acted as a challenge. Which was odd, because in those days Sylvie had practically given up on every other part of her life. She couldn't believe how she had lost herself in those years she was married to Anthony. Looking back, it felt as if *that* Sylvie was a stranger she didn't recognize. Anthony had taken away all of her self-confidence, stripping her down to nothing. Thank goodness for her boys. They would never understand how they had saved her. If nothing else, she would give them a foundation so they could make any decision they wanted for their lives. They were good kids; people respected and trusted them.

Jason had been a mess for a while, but he'd pulled out of it and he made her proud. He was still embarrassed when she tried to be affectionate, but it was getting easier. Polly had been good for him, too. She and he were so comfortable around each other. His little crush on Polly had grown into a deep affection, one that would be

there forever. When things fell apart in his life, Polly was the one who listened and put him on the right path. And now he had Eliseo as well.

Sylvie took a sip of coffee. She heard footsteps upstairs. At least one of the boys was up and moving. And there, Jason's feet just hit the floor.

She wasn't sure how she'd gotten so fortunate as to land at Sycamore House. What a crazy set of circumstances led to that, but her boys had gotten so much more out of it than she ever would. She hoped they would be able to look back on these days and see what a great gift they'd been given.

Andrew came bounding down the stairs and into the kitchen, Padme close behind him. He opened the back door and the dog ran outside, oblivious to the cold, gray, rainy day.

Sylvie opened a drawer and tossed a towel to Andrew. "Be ready for her," she said.

"Is it ever going to be sunny again?" he complained, dropping into his chair at the table.

"Stop whining," Sylvie said. "You'll have plenty of sunshine this summer."

Andrew opened his mouth to say something, saw the look on his mother's face and decided against it. She put the carton of milk on the table beside boxes of cereal.

"Can I have toast?" he asked.

"You know where it is. Help yourself."

"Did you slice some?"

Sylvie chuckled. She'd threatened him several times when he tried to use her bread knife. It terrified her that he would cut himself. She knew that one of these days she should train her boys how to properly use knives. There were too many things to do and not enough time. When had her life gotten so crazy?

Oh yeah. The day she met Polly Giller. First it was a couple of parties, then it was school, and now she was preparing to open a bakery as well as cater out of Sycamore House. Sylvie sat down in a chair and put her head in her arms. If she spent too much time thinking about it, her throat clenched up and she couldn't breathe.

"Mom?" Andrew said.

She looked up at him and realized that he was worried. "What?"

"Did you slice the bread?"

That one question had sent her spinning into insanity. She chuckled at herself again. "You know, Andrew, you could just open the refrigerator and look. But yes, the bread is sliced for you. Go ahead."

He shook his head and walked over to the refrigerator. Jason came into the kitchen, and instead of walking past Andrew to the table, took the time to stop and push his brother toward the counter.

"Stop it," Andrew said.

"Make me."

Andrew whined, "Mom!"

Sylvie took another drink of coffee. Jason wouldn't keep pushing. All he had to do was make contact with his brother. He gently shoved Andrew once more and made his way to the table.

"Up late last night?" she asked him.

"English paper," he mumbled. "Make me some toast, brat?"

"Make it yourself," Andrew said.

She pursed her lips. "You can put two more slices in when you take yours out, Andrew."

"I don't know why I have to be nice. He's not nice to me."

Sylvie ignored him and said to Jason, "If it stops raining today, will you mow after school?"

Jason looked outside. "If it ever stops raining." He poured cereal into a bowl and reached to the center of the table for a banana.

Sylvie pushed a knife toward him. "Did you finish your paper?"

He shrugged. "It's not due until tomorrow."

"But you'll have it done?"

"No problem."

Andrew danced across the room, bouncing hot toast on his fingers. He dropped them onto a plate and reached across the table for the butter dish. Sylvie scowled at him, snagged the butter and said, "Sit down and ask for it politely."

"May I please have the butter?" Andrew asked.

She passed it to him and said, "Now that I have you both here, we need to have a family discussion."

Both boys stopped what they were doing and looked at her with concern on their faces.

"Oh," she said. "Nothing's wrong except your morning behavior. It's going to change. I'm not yelling at you or chasing you out of your beds any longer. You're old enough to get up on your own. You have alarm clocks and you're going to use them. I will give you one wakeup call when I come downstairs, but from then on, you're on your own."

They nodded and Jason took another bite of cereal. His toast popped up and he went over to get it.

"I don't think you believe I'm serious," Sylvie said. "So here's the deal." She waited for Jason to sit back down at the table and then put her hands on both of their arms. "I want you to understand how serious I am. I'm tired of being angry in the morning because you two can't be responsible."

"Okay mom. We'll get up on our own." Andrew said. He moved to take his arm away, thinking it was over.

"Yes you will and here's why," she said. "The first morning that you aren't down here by seven o'clock on your own will be the last morning that you are alone in your room."

That got their attention. Both boys looked at her, this time in shock.

"Yep. Exactly. Unless you have a darned good reason, like you're deathly ill and need to be hospitalized, you will be down here, fully dressed and ready to go. If you aren't, after school, Jason, we will move your bed into Andrew's room since it's bigger. I don't care which of you screws up, both of you will pay. Am I clear about this?"

"You wouldn't," Andrew whined.

Jason sneered at his brother. "I don't know why you're complaining. You're the one who never gets up on time."

"No arguing," Sylvie said, interrupting them. "You have less than two weeks of school left. I think you can do it. We'll set a different time for summer, but just in case you think I'll forget, this

rule will go back into place when school starts again. Do you understand me?"

She waited and they nodded. "Say it out loud," she said.

Both boys mumbled, "We understand."

Sylvie smiled and released their arms, then patted them. "Good. I'm glad we've had this time together. It won't be so bad, you'll see. And just think. Every morning when you come downstairs on time, you'll have a much happier mother. I might even make a real breakfast for you sometimes."

Andrew couldn't help himself. He smiled and laughed. "No more cold water on my face in the mornings?"

"No more. You're going to be in seventh grade next year. It's time for you to grow up."

She looked at her older son. He was turning fifteen this summer. He must have felt her looking at him and glanced up. Sylvie winked and he smiled at her.

"I love you boys," she said. "And I'm proud of you. Every day." Sylvie took another drink of coffee. It had cooled to the perfect temperature. She sat back and craned to look out the window. Padme was sniffing at a bush and Sylvie jumped when she saw a rabbit run out from underneath. The dog chased the rabbit to the other side of the yard and stopped short when it scooted through a hole.

"You'd better bring the dog in," she told Andrew. "Have the towel ready. She's a mess."

Book 10 - #5

I Don't Understand a Single Word

"If that big furball gets in my face one more time, I'm going to paint a row of scratch marks down his nose."

"No you won't. You'll do what you always do and walk away. Anything else would be completely out of character," she replied.

He harrumphed, pushed at her with his back paws, and licked his chest. "I don't know why we are subjected to those horrible, smelly animals, Cleo. We're better than that."

"Use my new name," Leia said. "It's been long enough. There's no reason for you to forget it."

"But I like Marc Antony and Cleopatra. It's much more romantic than those whiny space pirates." Luke stretched out beside her and rubbed his face against her belly. "And you like romance."

Leia licked the top of his head. "Romance, shromance. Neither one of us has any desire for that. I don't know why you keep bringing it up."

"Tall-lady and Tall-man are romantic all the time," he protested, continuing to rub against her. Luke liked it when she groomed him. If he was feeling particularly friendly, he groomed her back.

"They are human. It's what they do."

"But Shortgirl and Shortboy and other Shortgirl aren't romantic."

Leia leaned back and stretched out, flexing her paws. Surely he wouldn't mind if she...

"Don't even think about it," he said. "Keep those claws to yourself. That's what barky-thing is for."

"Come on. Just a little?"

"No. You say it will be just a little and the next thing I know, you're digging those daggers past my fur and into my skin. We've

had this discussion a million times and you can just stay away."

Leia sat back up and then leaped to the floor.

"Where are you going?"

"Tall-lady is crying again."

"So?"

"So she needs me."

"Alpha barky-thing is with her. He can take care of her. He always does," Luke said, jumping down to walk beside her.

"She needs me, too. Tall-man can't fix this."

He brushed against her as they walked through the doorway. "Did you see the brown thing jump across that bar this morning?"

Leia stopped mid-stride and sat down to lick her front paw. She looked up at him. "Do you mean the squirrel on the branch? Seriously, Luke, pay attention. I know it's a different language, but if we are ever going to communicate with Tall-lady and Tall-man, we have to learn their words."

"You learn their words. If I learn them, I'll have to do something about it."

"You know the words *treat*, *food* and *come here*."

"I'll admit to knowing the words *treat* and *food*, but anything else means I have to respond. I'm my own man, you know," he said, arching his back.

Leia jumped to the back of the sofa and brushed her face across Tall-lady's neck to let the woman know she was there.

Both barky-things were already trying to get into the woman's lap, the younger one making a complete fool of himself. She agreed with Marc ... no, Luke. That one was a mess. So stupid and slobbery. He'd do anything to get his people to pay attention. At least the alpha was dignified. Well, except when he turned over on his back so they'd rub his belly.

She smiled to herself. Belly rubs weren't the worst thing in the world. Luke hated having anyone touch his belly. Tall-lady tried a couple of times and he scratched her both times. Leia scolded him, but he refused to feel bad about it. The person should know automatically that he hated that. He wasn't a barky-thing.

"Stupid young barky-thing got in trouble this morning," Luke

said. He'd perched on the table between the sofas.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Alpha barky-thing told him not to go into the place where they dig up dirt and pull out random green branchy grass, but he wouldn't listen. I don't know why they don't know any better."

"Who?"

"Tall-people. Stupid barky-thing is too young to know where's he's supposed to go. Just look at him. He even looks stupid, that tongue hanging out. You wouldn't catch me doing that."

"You're being awfully judgmental today."

He hunched down and put his head between his front paws. "They kept me up late last night. That's what you get when I'm not allowed to sleep. Tall-lady tossed and turned and turned and tossed. Do you know that she kicked me in the head once? I nearly bit her on the ankle, but that would have required me to move."

"It was a long night," Leia agreed. "You could try to sleep now."

"Right here? With nobody to keep me warm? Have you lost your mind?"

"They look like they're going to sit still for a while. Climb up on Alpha barky-thing. He's used to you sleeping on his back."

Luke sprang from his seated position and landed on barky-thing's back. He opened and closed his claws a few times in the thick fur and looked up at Leia with a smirk. "That's perfect. He likes it when I massage him."

"He's just patient," she said. "And because he's a barky-thing, he tries to make everybody happy." She stretched out along the back of the sofa and nestled in against Tall-lady's shoulders. "Do you ever wish you knew what they were saying?" she asked.

"You're the one who pays attention." Luke settled in on the Alpha barky-thing. She heard his breathing slow down.

"But both barky-things know more of their words than we do."

Luke looked up. "Maybe their language is closer to human than ours. I don't understand a single word these big lugs say. It's *bark bark* this and *bark bark* that. And it's always so loud. And what's up with those other cat smells they bring into the house, by the way. Then there are those other smells from something really, really big.

Probably those huge brown four legged things that let the humans sit on their backs. Sometimes I can't stop my nose from sniffing."

"Sometimes it smells like poop."

"Not my poop," he said. "Tall-lady is constantly taking mine away." She heard laughter in his voice. "But do you remember when stupid barky-thing thought it would be fun to eat my poop? Stupid barky-thing. It's my *poop*! You're not supposed to eat that." He stood up, arched his back, and lay down again. "Just goes to show how ridiculous these big animals are."

"Why's that?"

"You heard me. They eat poop."

"But they get to go everywhere with Tall-lady and Tall-man."

"Trust me, Cleo..."

"Leia," she whispered.

"Whoever. Trust me. I got out once and it was the scariest thing I've ever done."

"I remember that. You hid under the bed for the entire day."

"I did not." He stood back up and batted at her tail. "Take that back."

"No." Leia turned to face him. "You hid under the bed," she taunted.

Luke reached up and wrapped his front paws around her neck to pull her down beside him. Leia wasn't having any of that. She hissed at him and swatted at his face. When he wouldn't let go, she let herself fall on top of him and grabbed his shoulder with her teeth.

"Stop that," Tall-lady said in a very loud voice.

The barky-thing stood up and let them fall to the floor. Both cats landed on their feet and shook themselves. Leia sat down and licked her front paw, Luke stretched out beside her and yawned.

"You understood *those* words," Leia said.

He stood up and rubbed against Tall-lady's leg. She reached down, picked him up, and held him in her arms, stroking her hand down his back.

"It's all in how you respond," he replied, purring.

Leia waited until Alpha barky-thing settled in again and

jumped up to tuck herself in between him and Tall-Lady. She purred, waiting for Tall-Lady to pat her head.

Soon both cats fell asleep. She dreamed about warm sunshine and stretched out, then woke up when Luke settled in beside her. Alpha barky-thing turned his head and gave a sloppy lick across her head. That was going to take some cleanup, but she'd do it later. Now was a good time to sleep.

THANK YOU FOR READING!

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

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

Join the Bellingwood Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/pollygiller>

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

Diane Greenwood Muir's [Amazon Author Page](#) is a great place to watch for new releases and to find all of the books she's written.

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