



LOOK
ALWAYS
FORWARD

Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Book 11

Book Eleven Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR

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Cover Design Photography: Maxim M. 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 11 – Look Always Forward - into one collection. These four short stories feature different characters from Bellingwood who finally get an opportunity to tell how it is from their perspective.

Book 11 - #1

What 'cha Gonna Do?

"Ellie told Brianna that Caleb French-kissed her at the fair," Kayla said. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "He also tried to touch her... you know." She lowered her voice again. "Her..."

Kayla glanced back and forth between Rebecca and Andrew. They were her best friends, but even *this* was uncomfortable. "You know," she said.

"Caleb is a player," Rebecca said. "Everybody knows that. She's just asking for trouble."

"Ellie or Brianna?" Andrew asked. "I'm confused."

"Ellie." Rebecca scowled at him. "Why would Brianna be in trouble?"

"I don't know," he said, confused. "Because she's telling people about it?"

Rebecca shook her head and pursed her lips at Kayla. "He's an idiot."

"What?" Andrew asked. "I am not."

"You kinda are," Kayla said. "But it's okay. This is girl-talk and you'll never understand it. You shouldn't even try."

"Then why am I even here?" Andrew muttered.

Kayla handed a tightly folded piece of paper to Rebecca. "Have you seen this yet?" she asked.

Rebecca started unfolding it. "What is it?"

"It's the calendar for next year."

"Oh," Rebecca said. "I didn't know there was a calendar."

"There's always a calendar," Andrew commented. "You know, January, February, March."

Both girls glared at him.

"Whatever," Kayla waved her hand in dismissal. "There's a dance the Friday after we start school. What do you think that's about? The calendar just says *Seventh Grade Dance*."

"I'm sure they'll explain it in home room." Rebecca's hand trembled as she opened up the final fold. "Why is there a dance? Isn't it enough that we go to school every day and learn what the government says we have to learn? Why do we have to go to a dance, too? That's just ridiculous. I suppose the next thing they're going to demand is that we participate in extracurricular activities. Do we have to march in the marching band or try out for cheerleading so we can get a good education?"

"It's just a dance," Kayla said. "And you already march in marching band."

"What if I don't want to go to a dance?" Rebecca asked.

Andrew looked at the two of them, his brows creased in confusion. "You like to dance. You danced at your mom's party and you were pretty good."

"But I don't think it's fair. What about all those kids that don't know how to dance? Or maybe the ones who don't *like* to dance. And what if moms and dads don't want their girls touching a boy? Or the other way around? Did they ever think of that?" Rebecca slammed her fist down on the table and stood up. "I won't go. In protest. They can't make us do this." She spun and walked into the kitchen.

"What's up with you?" Kayla asked, jumping up to follow her friend. "It's just a dance. You don't have to go if you don't want to go. Nobody's making you."

Rebecca opened the refrigerator and beckoned Kayla to the other side. "Do you think we have to have dates to go to the dance?" she whispered.

"I hope not," Kayla whispered back. "At least you have Andrew. I don't have anybody."

"I don't *have* Andrew," Rebecca protested. "He's just a friend. It's not like he's a boyfriend or anything. And my mom told me that I shouldn't get serious about boys until I was seventeen."

Kayla was shocked. "That's like more than four years away," she said out loud.

"Well, I'm not in any hurry. Why can't we just all be friends," Rebecca whispered again. "I don't want to get serious with

anybody, especially if we have to dance in front of everybody."

"You'd better get something out of the refrigerator," Kayla said. "We've been standing here a long time."

"Do you want a brownie or anything?" Rebecca called across the room to Andrew.

Andrew stood up and headed for the kitchen. "Nah, I'm good. What are you two talking about back here?"

"Nothing." Rebecca shut the refrigerator door, barely missing Kayla's nose.

"So what are you gonna do about the dance?" he asked.

Kayla looked at Rebecca and gave a slight shrug. "I don't know, I guess," she said.

Andrew sat down at the peninsula. "You aren't really going to protest it, are you, Rebecca?"

"I think it's stupid," she responded.

"It's because she doesn't have a date," Kayla blurted out.

Rebecca's face fell as she looked at her friend in shock.

"Well, that's what you said," Kayla frowned at Rebecca. "I don't have a date either. It's no big deal."

"You're going with me," Andrew said. "We should just be boyfriend and girlfriend anyway. We're always together. That way you don't have to think about it. You don't have to think about anything like that."

"No!" Rebecca exclaimed. "You can't just expect me to be your girlfriend. I don't want to go to the stupid dance with anybody and I really don't want to go with you."

She stomped out of the room and across the living room floor to her bedroom. Andrew flinched when the door slammed.

"What was that about?" he asked Kayla.

She shrugged. "I've got no idea. She's probably mad at me for telling you she didn't have a date."

"She got really mad when I asked her to go to the dance," he responded.

Kayla looked in the direction of Rebecca's bedroom. "Who's going to go talk to her?"

"Not me," Andrew said, throwing up his hands. "I didn't do

anything wrong. If she wants to act like a baby, she can do it all by herself. I was just trying to be nice. Who needs her."

He stood up and walked back over to the sofa in front of the television, picked up a controller and turned on a game.

Kayla stood alone in the middle of the kitchen, unsure about her next move. She finally made a decision and went to Rebecca's room. It took a few minutes of courage-building before she knocked.

"Rebecca, can I come in?" Kayla asked, lightly tapping at the door.

"Whatever," Rebecca said and opened the door to her friend. "Come on in."

"Why'd you get so mad?"

"Because he's so stupid."

Kayla looked back toward the other room. "He's always been stupid. We talk about that all the time. He's a boy."

"But this time he was really stupid." Rebecca flung herself on the bed, lying on her stomach. "And I have a bad headache and I feel really gross. He didn't need to be stupid today."

"He can't help himself," Kayla said with a laugh. "Remember what I just said. He's a boy."

Rebecca smiled. "I know. You're right. I just *knew* seventh grade was going to be hard. We have to have all these different teachers and now there's dances and I'm going to be busy all the time. I'm never going to be able to just hang out here with Han and Obiwan and the cats."

"Are you scared?" Kayla asked quietly. "I am."

"To death," Rebecca replied. "What if the teachers don't like me? Mrs. Hastings was really nice, even when I couldn't focus. But what if they see the grades I had before Mom died and think that I'm dumb?"

"Nobody thinks you're dumb."

Rebecca whispered. "I can't believe Mom isn't going to be here this year. We moved all the time when she was alive, but I always came home to her. It's going to be so weird not having her around to talk to."

"You have Polly and Henry," Kayla said. She sat on the edge of

the bed. "And you have me. And even if you don't like him, you have Andrew."

"I just feel like a piece of me is missing," Rebecca said.

Kayla kicked off her shoes and lay down beside Rebecca. "I know. It sucks." Then she giggled.

"What's so funny?"

"I'm not supposed to say *sucks*. Stephanie gets mad when she hears me use that word."

"It sucks, though. Sucks, sucks, sucks," Rebecca said. She rolled to her side so she could look at her friend. "What are you scared about?"

"I'm not as pretty as you are. They call me names sometimes."

Rebecca threw her arm over Kayla's shoulders. "I know. That makes me mad. We'll show them, though."

"How?"

"Jessie is really good with makeup and hair and style and stuff. Maybe if we watch Molly for her, she'll do a makeover on us."

Kayla looked off, her eyes unfocused. "I wonder if Stephanie would let me."

"You're going to be in seventh grade. Of course she'll let you." Then Rebecca whispered conspiratorially. "I'll talk to her." She thought a moment. "No, better yet, I'll see if Polly will talk to her. Polly can talk anybody into anything if she thinks it's the right thing to do."

"Would she?"

"I'll ask. And then I'll ask Jessie. You and I are going to be the best looking girls in the school. And if anyone gives you any crap, I'll deck 'em."

Kayla giggled again. "You said *crap* again."

"We're going to be bad girls, too, aren't we," Rebecca said with a laugh.

"That would be awesome."

Rebecca grinned at her friend. "Bad girls, bad girls. What'cha gonna do?" she sang.

"What'cha gonna do when they come for you," the two girls sang together.

Book 11 - #2

Decisions, Decisions

"I'll be at the barn all day today, Mom." Jason started out the back door while Sylvie was still on her first cup of coffee.

"What time is it?" she asked, squinting at him over her mug. She was in her robe and her hair was all over the place. He didn't see her like this very often, but she'd worked late at the coffee shop trying to put things together the way she liked them.

"About five-thirty. I told Eliseo I'd be there early. We're cleaning out the barn. He said everything was getting cleaned today."

"You don't want a ride?"

Jason shrugged. "It's not that far. Next year, I'm going to have a car, right?"

His mom nodded and dropped her head back into her hands, peering into the mug. "We'll talk about it later. Go on, then. Leave me in peace."

He pulled the door shut and ran out the back door and through the back yard, making sure the gate latch was shut. Padme had gotten out last week and the whole family panicked. She was gone overnight and he never wanted to face that again. His mom and Andrew had both cried and he felt sick to his stomach. They'd walked around the whole neighborhood until ten o'clock when his mom made them stop.

Padme wore a collar with tags and Doc Ogden had put a chip in her, but Jason created horrible images of her lost or stolen and never finding her way home again. He'd had bad dreams too. That night he and Andrew promised each other they would walk her all over town so she could mark her territory and recognize smells. They'd done pretty good so far.

The next morning, Andrew stayed home while he and Sylvie went to Sycamore House. It felt weird to wake up without the dog

jumping on his bed to lick his face. They'd all been quiet that morning, nobody said much. Andrew promised to walk around the neighborhood in the daylight and look in some of the yards, just in case someone took her in for the night and didn't hear them yelling.

Jason was the first person to the barn that morning and when he opened the door, he was barreled over by a very happy dog. He'd called his mom from the barn phone to tell her that Padme was there and she let him call home to tell Andrew. Nobody could figure out how she'd known to come here, but he was glad she considered this place a second home.

He tugged on the latch one more time and when he was sure it wouldn't give way, headed to Sycamore House. Dawn was breaking and it was still cool. Humidity was heavy in the air and he knew that meant he'd be sweating today. Eliseo wouldn't quit until they were done, no matter how hot it was. At least part of the job would be washing out the barn with cold water. That would help. Jason still couldn't believe that Polly had done all this work by herself before Eliseo showed up. She was crazy nuts.

Smiling as he walked, he thought about how his life changed after he met Polly. She was like a really cool aunt. She didn't let him get away with stupid stuff, but she also talked to him like a normal person. He could tell her anything. Jason's face flushed as he thought back to his crush on her. He really thought that she liked him that way. He'd been jealous of Henry, but in the back of his mind, he knew that was dumb. She was like twenty years older than him.

He crossed the highway and walked through the garden on the corner. It was pretty and all, but he was more proud of the work they'd done with the horses - clearing land on the other side of the creek. Eliseo planned to put sweet corn out there and told Jason that if he wanted to make money, they could put in potatoes and sell them at the Farmer's Market. That would be too late for Jason to buy a car, but it would help with insurance and gas. That was the deal he was going to make with his mom. He'd buy the car and pay for the difference in her insurance. She had to let him. He was going to get real tired of taking the bus to school every day.

Sylvie had already told him she wasn't comfortable with letting him ride to school with Kent or Scar. Dang, he hoped she'd get over that before school started. They were here all the time working with him and Eliseo in the barn. Surely she'd see that they weren't the same kind of kids he got in trouble with last year.

Eliseo pulled up beside him as he approached the first gate. He waited for the man to get out of his car.

"Good morning," Eliseo said. "Are you ready?"

Jason shrugged. "I guess."

"What time are your friends coming?"

"I told them to be here about six thirty. I figured that would give us time to make a plan."

Eliseo clapped his hand on Jason's shoulder as he opened the barn door. "That's smart. We always need a plan. Do you think the horses are awake yet?"

"They usually aren't until the sun comes up," Jason said. "We're still a little early."

Eliseo flipped on the lights and called out, "Good morning, Sunshines. Are you ready for the day?" He grinned as they heard horses scrambling for their feet. "They're up."

"Except for Demi. He's a slug." Jason walked over to the horse's stall and pointed. "See, I told you. Get up, you lazy butt. We have work to do today."

Demi came to his feet and walked over for a head rub. Jason thought back to the first time he'd seen these horses. He'd felt small next to them. A couple of years later, he'd gained inches and they'd stayed the same. It wasn't quite so intimidating anymore and he knew them as well as he knew anyone else in his life.

He wished his brother was more comfortable around the horses. He couldn't believe that Andrew was still scared. They couldn't get him to ride for anything. He'd get in the wagon or on the sleigh, but he refused to get on the back of one of the horses. Which was weird, because Rebecca and Kayla loved to ride.

"Let's get 'em fed first," Eliseo said. "They'll be much easier to work with."

"Can we talk for a minute?" Jason asked.

Eliseo stopped walking and turned around. "Sure. About what?"

"Football."

Eliseo gave him an understanding look and sat down on an empty bench. He pointed to the one across the alley. Jason had to move things to find a space. That was one of the reasons Eliseo insisted on cleaning. Today, everything was finding a home or leaving the building. He couldn't take any more clutter.

The donkeys came in to see what was going on and Jason scratched behind Tom's ears. When Huck realized his buddy was getting attention, he wandered over to see what Eliseo might offer.

"What about football?" Eliseo asked.

"I don't want to."

"Okay, that's fine. You shouldn't have to."

"But coach says I'd be good at it and if I work hard, I might get a college scholarship."

"Is it the hard work that scares you?" Eliseo grinned as he said the words.

But Jason didn't understand the grin. "No! You know I don't mind hard work. I do stuff down here all the time that most city boys never do."

"I was kidding," Eliseo said. "I do know that. So tell me what's on your mind."

"If I go out for football, I won't have any time to be here. There are morning practices and every day after school and then it's Friday nights and if I play JV, it's other nights. How will I ever have time to get everything done? I mean, a scholarship would be great, but you have to have grades too and I won't have time for school work and what if I want to date? When will I have time? And I was just starting to make some money here with the extra jobs you've been giving me. And Mr. Bedford asked me to help over at his place..."

"Whoa," Eliseo said. "Stop talking for a minute. All of those are reasonable objections, but none of them make any difference if you want to play ball. Do you want to?"

Jason took a deep breath and wrinkled his nose. "Not really."

But Mom signed the permission paper for me. Do you think she wants me to play? She said that Dad played when he was in high school. And you did too. Am I a wimp if I don't?"

Eliseo chuckled. "No, you're the farthest thing from a wimp that I know. If you don't play, will you feel like you missed out?"

"Miss out on what? Getting smacked around on a football field under bright lights so we can take a ball over a line?"

"Okay, I guess not," Eliseo said, laughing. "That's one way to look at it. The game doesn't hold any appeal for you?"

"Not playing it. I like going to the games with my friends and I think I'd like to watch more college football. But we don't do that at my house."

"Then I don't think football is for you," Eliseo said, leaning forward. "You're a big kid with great coordination and a lot of heart. That's what your coach sees. What he doesn't see is that you don't love the game - you don't even really like it. It's okay to have other things you like to do. I'd just hate to see you miss out because you think you can't fit it in to your life. There's always room in your life to do things that you really want to do."

Jason nodded. "I really don't want to. I'd rather be here."

"Well, I'd rather have you here, then," Eliseo said with a smile. "I've gotten quite used to your help and your company. It would get lonely without you. And I haven't climbed up into the hay mow in months thanks to you. Don't want to start that again."

"Do you think people will be disappointed if I'm not on the team? I heard Henry and Polly talking about coming down to the games if I played and I know Henry likes football."

"Nobody will be disappointed," Eliseo said. "Especially Polly. She just wants you to be happy and doing what you love."

"So," Jason's voice grew quiet. "Even if I don't go out for the team, would you teach me the rules and how to play?"

"You've never played football?" Eliseo was surprised.

"Not really, just kid stuff. We tossed it around some on the playground. Mom didn't let us do much."

"She didn't?"

Jason thought about it, then shook his head. "No, that's not

right. She just didn't know all of the things we should be doing. She had it pretty rough raising us by herself. She worked all the time." He glanced toward the main building. "She still does, but now it's because she likes it, not because she has to put food on the table."

"I'd love to teach you how to play football."

They looked up at the sound of the door opening.

"In fact," Eliseo said. "Maybe we'll get a big screen down here and watch some college ball on Saturday afternoons this fall. And if you like it, I'll introduce you to my Chargers on Sundays."

"San Diego?" Kent asked. "We watch the Vikings at my house."

"Packers at my house," His buddy, Scar, said, punching Kent's shoulder.

"There's plenty for everyone." Eliseo stood up. "It's good to see you boys. We thought we'd have everything ready when you got here, but you're early. Are you ready to work?"

Book 11 - #3

Home is Where the Heart Is

"Get off, you furry beast," Beryl grumped. She lifted Miss Kitty from her stomach and put her down on the bed beside the pillow. "What time is it anyway?"

The cat made one more attempt to crawl back into the spot she'd claimed, but Beryl turned on her side to see the clock.

"Six o'clock? Why are you doing this to me? Don't you know I need my beauty sleep?"

"Meowrowrow," came the reply as Miss Kitty pushed her nose into the crook of Beryl's arm.

"Not funny. Go back to sleep." Beryl wrapped her arm around the cat and tucked her in close to her stomach, knowing full well that wouldn't solve the problem. All she wanted was a few more minutes and maybe she could drift far enough away the cat's antics wouldn't bother her.

"Meowrowrow," the cat said again, pushing herself away with all her strength. She slithered out from under Beryl's arms, climbed up onto the woman's hips and meowed as loudly as she could.

Beryl harrumphed and swung her legs over to the edge of the bed so she could sit up. Miss Kitty followed, staying close to Beryl's body.

"What in the world?" Beryl muttered. She finally got up and followed the cat to the kitchen. Miss Kitty jumped up on the counter where her food dish sat and looked at Beryl expectantly.

"You have plenty of food in there. You've only eaten a little bit," Beryl complained. She looked at the nearly empty water dish on the floor.

"You could have just told me," Beryl said. "If you'd said something last night, we wouldn't be having this problem right now." She rinsed it out, refilled it, and put it back down. "Is that enough?"

Miss Kitty padded her way over to Beryl and rubbed her face on Beryl's arm.

"I'm not too happy with you right now. It's been a long week and now you want attention?"

Beryl had just returned from a week on the east coast. She'd met with several gallery owners and her agent had set up two meetings with corporate clients. There was some big money available if she wanted to do the work. And she would. She'd learned long ago that staying busy meant keeping the fear-of-going-broke monkey off her back.

Miss Kitty jumped to the floor, wove her way in and out of Beryl's legs and then walked to the water bowl. She sniffed it and hunched down in front of it, waiting for something to happen.

"You're a strange cat. It's fresh water. I promise." Beryl sat down at her table, glancing toward the kitchen door. She wondered if she'd be able to go back to sleep.

Her agent wouldn't quit trying to get her to move out east. How long had they been working together? Twenty years now? And he refused to believe that she was happier in Iowa than she could ever be anywhere else. One week in that chaos reminded her why she loved Bellingwood. There had been meetings and lunches and parties and breakfasts all day long, every day. He assured her that if she lived in the area, those would be spread out to be more manageable, but she knew better. One lunch would lead to another and she'd never have time to actually work.

The parties were the worst. That scene was not a place Beryl was comfortable in. She couldn't bear the fake kiss-kiss greetings or the blatant self-promotion people did at any cost. In all her years of being part of that crowd, she'd made very few real friends.

She chuckled to herself. She didn't have many real friends here in Iowa either, she supposed. But it was certainly easier to get a handle on people's intentions and agendas.

Miss Kitty had quietly been lapping at the water in her bowl and jumped up on Beryl's lap, nudging her hand. Beryl stroked the cat's head, down her back, and up the tail. She took a deep breath as her hand rubbed the soft coat over and over. "It's why I come back

here," Beryl said quietly. "I can be as crazy and wacky as I want and nobody tries to one-up me. They just let me be who I am. No pretense, no fake lovey stuff, just real. I'll never leave Iowa."

Before the cat got too comfortable on her lap, Beryl stood and carried Miss Kitty out of the kitchen, flipping the light back off. Sunlight was coming through the windows, but there were no plans for today, so it wouldn't matter how late she slept.

Lydia had learned not to call Beryl in the morning unless she wanted to get an earful. There were plenty of times the woman didn't care. Beryl had learned that if Lydia needed her, she needed to wake up and get on board.

Now that Andy was happily married, she didn't call quite as often. Beryl grimaced. It really wasn't about being married. Andy was busier now than she'd been when she was raising kids and teaching. Between working at the library, maintaining the odd little pop culture museum at Sycamore House, her grandchildren, and responding when Lydia needed something, Andy was always going.

"Old ladies, huh," Beryl said, sitting down on her bed. She lay back and let Miss Kitty get comfortable on her stomach. "This is the best time of our lives."

The cat purred loudly as Beryl pulled the sheet over the top of both of them.

"Gonna be okay under there?" Beryl asked. Miss Kitty wasn't much for being under the covers during the summer time, but they'd missed each other this last week.

This really was the best time of her life. She lived where she wanted to live, had great friends who understood when she needed to hide out and work, but jumped right in when she was free to spend time with them. And that little Rebecca was such a joy. Beryl had never taken a student as young as her, but the child was a sponge. Maybe they really would go to Paris and Venice, to Rome and Cairo together someday. Rebecca continued to talk about it and one day showed up with a travel book for Europe. Beryl would love to travel with someone who saw the world with such joy.

Beryl smiled as she thought about the book she'd brought back

from New York. Rebecca would love looking at it. They didn't have much street art in Bellingwood and graffiti was only seen on the trains flying through Boone. They'd been talking about graffiti and murals that Rebecca had seen on television. Anything to keep that little mind's creativity at its peak.

The cat moved off Beryl's stomach and curled up beside her head.

"Okay," Beryl said. "We're going to sleep now. Lydia called last night and there was an accident on the highway in front of Polly's house. You know what that means, don't you?"

Miss Kitty purred and pulled her paw over her face.

"That's right," Beryl said. "It means we're in for a crazy couple of weeks. I can hardly wait. How about you?"

Book 11 - #4

Good Morning Sunshine

"Come on, boys. Let's go to work."

Eliseo held the back door of his car open and both dogs leaped in, excited for their day. If he hadn't already been a morning person, Khan and Kirk would have turned him into one. They loved mornings. And he loved waking up with them. He rubbed Khan's head before closing the door. It had been a long time since he'd gone to sleep with someone warm in his bed. Now, it hadn't been that long since he'd slept with the warmth of a horse beside him. He couldn't say that this was better, but it was more socially acceptable.

The dogs could barely contain their excitement as they waited for him to open the barn door at Sycamore House. He flipped the lights on and they tore for the back room where he kept their dog food. It was part of the routine he'd set up for them, making the barn as much their home as he could.

Nan was already up and awake. She seemed to know what time he'd be there and liked to greet him each morning. He stopped to rub her shoulder and she wrapped her head around his neck.

"Good morning, girl. Are you ready for another day of work? We're nearly finished with the rocks in the far meadow. Just one or two more days."

Daisy and Nat had come to their feet and Eliseo glanced back at Demi's stall. He was always the last one up; the horse was so laid back that nothing much stirred him.

"Hey old man," Eliseo said. "Git yerself up and moving." Cats scattered and Demi heaved himself to a standing position, huffed once or twice and came over for some attention.

Eliseo stopped to spend a moment with each of the horses and then opened the donkey's stall to the main alley as he walked through to the feed room. When he didn't see them, he gave a whistle and heard their hooves coming across the pasture. Turning

lights on usually got their attention, but sometimes they found other critters to talk to over by the creek.

"Good morning," Jason called out as he came into the barn. "Sorry I'm late. Mom needed me to..."

Eliseo put his hand up to stop him. "No worries. We just got here. Take care of Tom and Huck while I feed the dogs."

"Are we pulling rocks again today?" Jason asked.

"A couple more days of it and we'll be done. Nat and Nan are doing the hard work, though."

Jason grimaced at Eliseo. "They have four legs and I only have two. All they have to do is pull a cart."

Eliseo reached over and ruffled Jason's hair. "It's good for you." He reached down and tapped Jason's shoulder. "You wouldn't have those muscles if you weren't working this hard."

"They haven't found me a girlfriend yet." Jason had to sit down on a bench as the animals found him. Khan and Kirk barreled into him in their joy and the two donkeys were begging for their breakfast.

"Khan. Kirk," Eliseo said quietly and clicked his tongue against his teeth. Khan gave Jason one last lick on his cheek and jumped to the floor, following Eliseo into the feed room, wagging his tail with excitement. Kirk was more conflicted, finally following his master.

They'd had to install the bottom half of a Dutch door on the feed room so the donkeys didn't ransack it. Jason pushed them out of the way and slipped in.

"We're here," came two voices.

"Tell them to come on back," Eliseo said. Two of Jason's friends had asked to trade riding lessons on the Percherons for work around the place. They had been pretty responsible, coming in early in the morning to help kick the day off. As part of a bargain with their parents, the boys had promised to spend this summer learning what they could from Eliseo before buying horses of their own.

Eliseo chuckled to himself. What parents put their kids through. His father had just expected him to dig in and do the work. But having extra help meant he'd gotten quite a bit more done in the

fields across the creek than he'd expected. The horses were fed faster and their stalls cleaned out sooner than usual and since he tried to keep everyone as busy as possible, they'd all managed to bring the barn back to its nearly new state. He'd had them painting doors and scrubbing walls, cleaning tack and maintaining the equipment he used with the Percherons to work in the big gardens. It had been a successful summer.

Kent Ivers' dad had approached Eliseo about finding a horse for his son. There were plenty in the state to choose from. He'd seen some beautiful animals, but the ones that tugged at his heart were those who had been rescued. Polly had built a good-sized barn, but he'd give almost anything to put another building up and take care of some of the more problematic rescues he'd seen. Eliseo glanced at the boys as they moved in and out of the feed room. There were plenty of kids around who would love to help.

Doc Ogden kept mentioning the possibility of another barn, too. Every time he saw Eliseo, he asked him to consider expanding the work he did. But Eliseo didn't want to work for anyone else. Polly gave him all the freedom he wanted. He didn't even really feel like he was employed. If it weren't for the paycheck that showed up in his bank account every couple of weeks, he'd swear he wasn't working.

"Do you want us to bring the cart out?" Jason asked.

Eliseo stood back up from crouching on his haunches. "Pull it into the pasture. I want you boys to make sure the rigging is clean and sweep out the bottom of the cart. We pulled a lot of dirt and weeds yesterday and put it away dirty."

Jason shivered and reached into his back pocket, pulling out his phone. He looked at it quickly and said, "Mom says there's breakfast in the kitchen. It's just something she's trying out for the coffee shop. Bacon and cheese rolls or something. Can I go up and get 'em?"

"Sure. Tell Kent and Scar to clean out the cart and then we'll stop for breakfast. I have juice in the refrigerator."

Jason took off at a run. If Sylvie was offering food, it was a good idea to say yes. She was an amazing cook ... no, chef. Eliseo felt such

pride when he thought of what she'd accomplished. One of these days he was going to have the courage to repeat that kiss they'd shared last year. Sylvie hadn't shut him down, but she hadn't encouraged him either. He knew she was busy, trying to regain a life that she'd lost for too many years and he was willing to give her as much time and freedom as she wanted, but he liked spending time with her. Those weeks she and the boys had stayed at his house were as nearly perfect as any in his life. They'd stayed up late into the evening talking about their lives, their hopes and dreams. He missed those evenings. He missed waking up and knowing that there were people around him.

The time wasn't right yet, but one day it would be. She didn't need him to press her right now when she was in the middle of opening this new bakery. But their lives had to slow down one of these days.

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.

Follow Diane on Twitter at twitter.com/nammynools for regular updates and notifications.

Recipes and decorating ideas from the books can often be found on Pinterest at: <http://pinterest.com/nammynools/>

And for Sycamore House swag, check out Polly's CafePress store: <http://www.cafepress.com/sycamorehouse>