



CAPTURE THE
MOMENTS

Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Book 15



Book Fifteen Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication / use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

Cover Design Photography: Maxim M. Muir

Copyright © 2016 Diane Greenwood Muir

All rights reserved.

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Book 15 - #1 He Ain't Heavy; He's My Brother

Book 15 - #2 No Good Deed

Book 15 - #3 Mean People Stink

Book 15 - #4 With a Little Help From My Friends

Book 15 - #5 Clueless

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 each month.

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 it's time to make that happen.

I have compiled the vignettes relating to Book 15 – Capture the Moments - into one collection. These five short stories feature different characters from Bellingwood who get an opportunity to offer a little slice of life from their own perspective.

Book 15 - #1

He Ain't Heavy; He's My Brother

Heath jiggled the ladder.

"Stop that," his brother said.

"Why?" Heath asked as he jiggled it again.

"Because I'll thump you on the head with the screw driver if you don't."

Heath let out a laugh and jiggled it one more time.

"I said, stop that." Hayden took a step down the ladder and Heath bolted for the doorway. "Yeah, you'd better run." He pressed the button twice more on the driver and came down the rest of the way. "I might as well change the battery. You wanna get something to drink?" He butted his younger brother into the hallway and they headed for the kitchen.

Henry had brought heavy duty extension cords in from the garage, and the kitchen was as far as their length would go, so everything that needed electricity happened in there.

Heath opened the cooler and took out bottles of water, tossing one to his brother. "Do you ever think about what it would have been like?"

"What?"

"You know, if Polly and Henry hadn't taken me in?"

Hayden swapped out the batteries before dropping into one of the soccer chairs. Heath turned the fan so it would hit both of them and sat down beside him. At only nine-thirty, the day was already sweltering.

"I don't think about it too much. But you're lucky they did. I was *not* prepared to visit you in Eldora."

Heath slowly turned his head and glared at his brother. "Do you really think that's where I was going to end up?"

"You tell me." Hayden huffed a choked laugh. "You're the one who hung out with a murderer. What did you think was going to

happen next? Tea parties?"

They'd never really talked about this. Every time Hayden tried to bring it up, Heath either ignored it or told him to shove it.

"I don't know," Heath said. "I kept thinking it had to get better. How could it even be happening?" He turned to Hayden. "I mean, really? How could that have happened? We were like a totally normal family. And then everything fell apart." Heath frowned and sagged. "Maybe I thought that when I turned eighteen, you'd let me move in with you."

"Yeah. That was such a great idea. Me in med school having to bail out my brother, the hoodlum."

"That's how you see me?"

Hayden swatted his brother's arm. "Not anymore. But I kinda did then." He leaned to the side and picked up a box, brushed the top off and handed it to Heath. "There are some donuts left. You know, I wanted to help. I just didn't know what to do. When Polly called to tell me you were at Sycamore House, I was ready to just enroll you in Ames High School and figure it out."

"You couldn't have helped me," Heath said. He took a plain donut out and handed the box back. Henry had dropped those off early this morning. They'd ravaged the box before starting work and there were only a couple left. They hadn't done much work this weekend with all that was happening at Sycamore House. Polly never slowed down. There was always something going on.

Henry said he'd call to tell them when the electricians would be here. It would probably be Doug Randall and Billy Endicott. Even living as close as they did, Heath didn't know them very well. Hayden was about their age, but they'd never been friends in high school. Billy liked that girl, Rachel, who worked in the kitchen at Sycamore House. Polly and Henry were talking about how those two might get married and who was going to live in the apartment. Heath kind of remembered Rachel from when Hayden dated one of her friends. Rachel was way different now. She used to wear all black, and he thought her electric blue hair was cool. She still had all the tattoos. Now her hair color was something like the northern lights. At least that's what she said. Heath liked it, too. Cool colors.

The plumber would also be coming in this week. Everybody in town was gearing up for the sesquicentennial and it felt like nobody should be working since that's all people talked about. The lamp posts uptown were decorated with banners, and the streets and sidewalks had all been cleaned. A bunch of stores painted their doors and the fronts of their buildings. The front windows were cleaned up and the town was looking good. It was weird to walk around up there. It didn't feel normal. Tons of people were in town and every parking spot was always full.

But the celebration stuff didn't start until Thursday. As soon as they could get electricity and water into this house, it would make working here a lot easier.

"I should have helped," Hayden said.

"Helped what?" Heath asked.

Hayden looked at him with a frown. "Where did you go up there?" He pointed at his brother's head. "We were just talking about it. Helped you get through Mom and Dad's death."

"Oh. Sorry. I was thinking about getting electricity in here. Polly says they're installing smart wiring just like at Sycamore House."

"So she can spy on you."

"Do you think that's why?" Heath asked.

"No, you moron. She's not like that. Haven't you heard her complain about the cameras outside the school."

"Yeah. I guess so." Heath put the last bite of donut in his mouth. "What happened to that..."

Hayden put his hand up. "Swallow. I can barely understand you."

He gulped it down. "Sorry. What happened to that girl you were dating in high school. You know, she was friends with that girl, Rachel, in the kitchen at Sycamore House. I thought it was serious."

"Not serious. I've never had a serious girlfriend. Someday maybe. What about you? I heard Polly and her friend, Lydia, talking about how you have girls follow you around at school."

"I think they just like the idea that I used to be bad," Heath said. "I'm not falling for that again. Especially not after Libby."

"But that was clear last fall. You really haven't gone out with

anyone else?"

"Have you seen me with a girl since you've been home?"

"Well, no, but there's nobody you even like?"

"Not really." It felt really good to be talking to Hayden. They talked about a lot of things, but not like this.

"Do you remember that girl who followed me around when we were in Yellowstone?" Hayden asked.

Heath laughed. One of their last family vacations. It felt like every time they got out of the car to see something, she showed up.

"What was her name?"

"Amy Eastbrook. She found me on Facebook."

"No way. She's still following you? How did she even remember your last name? How did you even know who she was?"

"She made me write my name on her hand one night. That was after she kissed me," Hayden said with a laugh. "It's a little creepy. She wanted to know what I was doing and where I lived. I told her Ames. Then she said she was going to make a cross-country trip and would I be available for dinner some night."

"What did you say?"

Hayden shook his head. "That was just on Saturday. I haven't said anything yet. I wish I wouldn't have agreed to be her friend online; it's been ten years. I thought it was just juvenile obsession. Surely by now she would have grown out of it."

"What if she's a really hot chick?"

"Whatever." Hayden scowled. "It shouldn't matter, but she's not. At all."

Heath flicked the last few drops of water from his bottle at his brother's head. "We should get back to that chandelier. It's not going to come down by itself."

"We'd better hope not. Polly would kill us. She loves that thing."

"No she doesn't. Not any more than anything else in this house. She just thinks it's cool." Heath stood up and tossed the bottle into a five gallon bucket. "So what are you going to do about that girl?"

"Probably ignore it."

"What if she's persistent and keeps asking?"

"I don't know. Don't tell Polly, okay?"

"Why not?"

"Because she'll do something. I just know it."

Heath stopped in the middle of the hallway and turned back to his brother. "What do you think she would do?"

"I don't know. Send the sheriff after Amy or even worse, invite Amy over for dinner."

"She wouldn't do either of those things. She'd protect you."

"Just don't tell her, okay?"

Heath shrugged. "Whatever." When they got back into the room, he dragged the second ladder to the middle. "Maybe if I hold it while you work on those screws, we won't drop it."

"Yeah. Thanks." Hayden put the driver on the top of the ladder. "I don't really think of you as a hoodlum. You know that, right?"

"Last year I was kind of a hoodlum. It's okay."

Hayden reached out and grabbed his brother's arm. "No it's not. You're a good guy and I'm sorry that I didn't do more to help you. That's on me. I'm the big brother. I should have been watching out for you."

Heath looked at his brother's hand. "You gotta let this go, Hay. You keep blaming yourself. I don't blame you. Nobody does. I made a bunch of stupid decisions. That was on me."

"I guess we're just the loser brothers of the year," Hayden said.

"I'm not kidding," Heath said, stepping away. "You have to stop taking this on yourself. I'm cool with you."

Hayden pulled his brother into an awkward hug, then released him. "I'm still trying to deal with it. I keep thinking that sooner or later I would have pulled my head out of the sand and realized you needed me. But Polly got there first and then I wonder if I was only kidding myself."

Heath stepped up on the first rung of the ladder, making himself a little taller than Hayden. He popped the back of his brother's head. "What did I tell you about letting this go?"

"Don't you be Gibbs-slapping me, little bro," Hayden said. He jiggled Heath's ladder. "What do you have to say for yourself now?"

"You wanna start something?" Heath asked. "Because I can go for it. Right here. Right now."

"Maybe after we get this chandelier out of the ceiling."

Book 15 - #2

No Good Deed

"We're gone, punk," Jason yelled up the steps. "Mom says don't forget to mow and trim. I'll be back at twelve-thirty. Don't make me wait."

Andrew rolled over and groaned. He hated lawn day. Mowing wasn't that big of a deal, but he hated getting up in the morning. If he wanted to see Rebecca, though, he had to mow before Jason showed up.

Padme stretched out along Andrew's length and he tucked his legs up under her butt, pulling her close. He threw an arm over her shoulder and tucked his face into her neck. Just a few more minutes.

He didn't know what was up with these people in his house who scheduled things before eight o'clock. He was a night person and had to be quiet so that his mom and Jason could sleep. It only seemed fair that they should be quiet in the morning when *he* was sleeping. If he told Jason what to do at midnight, his brother would kill him.

"I'm telling you," he mumbled to Padme. "It isn't fair."

He'd been up late last night working on a story. He wanted to show it to Rebecca when he saw her today. Andrew yawned and turned over onto his back. Padme didn't leave much room, so he turned over onto his other side so their backs were up against each other. She wiggled until she was comfortable and in moments he heard her quiet snoring.

Next week was the sesquicentennial celebration in town. There were four dances happening at Sycamore House. Rebecca didn't know it, but he'd been practicing in the living room every morning after Jason and his mom left for work. He found a bunch of dances on-line, and after he moved the furniture out of the way, he had a lot of room. Girls. Bah. They had no idea what boys did to make them happy.

Andrew turned over onto his stomach and smacked the pillow to make a hole for his head. Who was he kidding? He'd do anything to make Rebecca happy. He lifted his head and dropped it into the pillow. He was such a sap. His buddies thought he was crazy, spending so much time with her during the summer. But she was more fun than they were and interesting things always happened around Polly.

Padme turned over and licked Andrew's face.

"I know, I know. I might as well get up and mow the lawn. I can't stop thinking about stuff." Andrew gave her a little push and she sat up beside him. He swung his legs out of bed on the other side and stood up, then looked around for clothes. Polly yelled at Rebecca all the time about her room. Andrew tried to keep his clean, but sometimes he wore his shorts more than one day and where else should he put them? Not the laundry basket and not back in the dresser. He picked them up off the floor and looked around for a not-too-dirty t-shirt. He wasn't putting a clean shirt on to go outside and sweat.

"You can play in the back yard while I mow," he said, then he grumbled. "I better clean your poop up first. Someday I'm going to get a real job and then nobody will tell me that I'm the only one who has to do all of your work."

Padme wagged her tail.

Andrew laughed. "Yeah. I know. You like to eat your poop, but that doesn't help me. It's gross and you just poop it out again." He rubbed his hand across her head. "A real machine, you are."

He grabbed up his phone from the dock on the kitchen counter before heading outside and sent Rebecca a good morning text. She'd be surprised to see it come in so early. He told her what he was doing and then unbuttoned his back pocket and dropped the phone in. Just in case she texted back.

Padme nipped at his feet while he cleaned up the back yard, and when he was finished, he chased her around before throwing her favorite ball. She'd gotten better at playing fetch, finally figuring out that if she brought it to him, he'd throw it again.

Andrew tossed it one more time and then slipped out of the back

gate to get the mower out of the garage. He checked the gas level. Jason was supposed to make sure that it was full and ready to go every time after Andrew used it. That was their deal. Eliseo had taught Jason how to do maintenance on the mowers at Sycamore House and Sylvie decided he could be responsible for the mower here, too. Andrew pushed it out of the garage and pulled the cord to start it. He always did the side and front yard first. The back yard was a pain with all of Padme's toys.

Lately he'd been mowing Mrs. Cameron's lawn next door, too. She never said anything and didn't offer to give him any money, but the one time he saw her out there pushing a mower, he told his mom he'd just do it himself. She was old and he could tell that it hurt her knees when she mowed. He was crossing back into his yard after finishing hers when he thought he heard someone yell. Andrew turned the mower off and stood stock still, waiting for the sound again.

"Help me!" a voice called.

It sounded like it came from behind Mrs. Cameron's house, so he ran down the side of his fence to her back yard. He didn't mow back here. Everything was a garden. Even though he mowed for her, the last thing he was doing was weed her gardens. She had flowers all around the fences and somebody - Sylvie thought it was her son - helped her build raised garden beds for vegetables.

"Mrs. Cameron?" he called.

"Andrew? I need you. Help me."

He stopped at the edge of the sidewalk that ran alongside her house and looked around. "Where are you?"

"I'm inside. Please help me."

Her voice grew more pitiful and scared the closer he got. That first holler must have taken it out of her.

Andrew leaped over a bushy plant and landed on the walk that led to her back door and ran up the steps. "Are you in here?"

"Come in," she said.

He opened the door and found her lying on the floor of the back porch, garden utensils all around her and two empty pails on the floor behind her head. "What happened?" he asked.

"I fell and I can't move anything."

"You can't move anything?" He knelt beside her.

"I can't move my neck and my leg hurts when I try to move it."

The leg was definitely broken. It was twisted in a really bad way. Andrew took his phone out of his back pocket, thankful that he'd thought to bring it with him. "I'm calling 9-1-1," he said. "Don't try to move anymore."

"They're going to send an ambulance, aren't they?" she asked.

He nodded while waiting for the call to connect. Once they answered, he gave them the address and what he thought had happened, then answered their questions, wishing they'd just get off the phone and send someone. He knew better, but waiting with Mrs. Cameron wasn't going to be easy and he wanted them to hurry.

Mrs. Camera looked up at him after he put his phone back. "Did you mow my yard already?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You're a good boy. While we're waiting, could you go out to my garden in the back and pick the red tomatoes that are there? That's what I was going to do before I fell down. You might as well take them home. If they haul me away, I won't be able to do anything with them."

"How did you fall?" he asked.

She lifted her hand and pointed at the inside door. "I forgot there was a step there and my leg twisted when I went down."

Andrew picked up the buckets. "I don't want to leave you. I'll pick the tomatoes when the EMTs get here."

You might as well do it now," she said. "I'm not going anywhere."

"No, the operator told me to stay. Who built your gardens?"

"I paid a young man to do that. At least I don't have to bend over all the time."

Andrew took a deep breath. No thank you, no money, nothing but that he was a good boy for doing her lawn. However, she could pay someone to build a garden for her. He sat in a chair beside the back door. "Are your cats inside?" he asked.

Her eyes misted up. "Dino and Sammy. I hate to ask, but will you watch over them while I'm gone? I don't have anybody else."

"Of course I can," he said. "Where's the cat food?"

"It's in a cupboard beside the stove. You have to sit with them while they eat so they don't eat each other's food. Dino gets the Prescription Diet regular and Sammy gets the diet food. He's my little tubby boy. There's a little cup in each bag. One in the morning and then half of one at night. Sometimes I like to put some canned food in at night for a treat. But you do what you want. The litter box is in the downstairs shower and the litter is in the cupboard under the sink. I changed it last weekend, so it should be okay unless I'm gone for a long time." Tears started to run down her face.

"It's okay, Mrs. Cameron. I'll take care of them for as long as you need me to."

The siren that had been sounding through town came to a stop in front of the house.

"I'm going to go out and make sure they know how to get back here," Andrew said. "Don't worry. You'll be fine." He ran out the back door and around the house, catching the EMTs before they went up onto Mrs. Cameron's front porch. "She's back here," he said.

He stood outside while they went in and after a few minutes, they brought the gurney down the steps.

She called his name.

"Yes, Mrs. Cameron?"

"Don't forget the tomatoes," she said.

"I won't. I promise." He didn't want to tell her that it had left his mind within seconds of her saying something the first time. "Is she okay?" he asked one of the EMTs.

"We'll let them decide all of that at the hospital," the young man said.

"Are you taking her to Boone?"

"Yes," Mrs. Cameron said. "That's where my doctor is. Boone. Tell your mother I'm there. Maybe she'll want to come see me."

Andrew nodded and watched as they left. Cats and tomatoes. He was pretty sure his mom would find more ways he could help

Mrs. Cameron when the old lady got back home. It sure would be nice if she'd say thank you. He shrugged. Sylvie would tell him to get over himself, that it wasn't about him. He started the mower, finished the front lawn, and went into the back yard. Padme jumped around enough that he finally put her inside so he could finish his work without worrying that she'd get hurt.

His mom was going to laugh if he brought home a lot of tomatoes. She'd been canning tomatoes all summer. Eliseo's garden at Sycamore House was exploding and they couldn't sell them or get rid of enough, fast enough. He parked the mower back in its spot before going to Mrs. Cameron's. He picked up her tools and put them on the table, then gathered the buckets and went out to the garden. Sure enough, the tomato plants were bulging with big red tomatoes. They were going to eat spaghetti all winter long.

Andrew filled both buckets and looked around. She had peppers and cucumbers and even a few onions. Maybe Eliseo could tell him when they'd be ready to pick. His phone buzzed and he took it out, then smiled.

"What are you doing up so early?" Rebecca asked in a text.

Before he responded, he realized that he was glad he'd gotten up so early. If he hadn't, who knew how long Mrs. Cameron might have been on the floor, worrying about who would ever find her.

"Helping a little old lady. I'll tell you about later. 143," he typed.

"143, too. See ya. Polly's making breakfast."

He and Rebecca thought they were the only ones who used those numbers, but then she did a search on-line and found that other people knew about them too. One for I, four for love, three for you. He hoped they'd always remember those numbers.

Book 15 - #3

Mean People Stink

Jeff acknowledged Kristen with a wave as he walked past her. Once inside his office, he carefully shut the door so no one could accuse him of slamming it - even if he wanted to. He dropped into the sofa and stared out the window to the parking lot.

Why in the world was it so difficult for people to see the truth of what was right in front of them?

Screaming "You're wrong, you stupid idiot" seemed inappropriate, even though it would have made him feel so much better. Everyone else in the room knew it, but no one dared say anything. There were times he missed the city. Small towns were great and all, but sometimes they could be so narrow-thinking.

The fear of all of these new people moving into Bellingwood and the surrounding area had a few folks on the city planning committee in a complete panic. Hell, he couldn't even figure out how they'd gotten on the committee. They didn't want to plan for the city, they wanted to stop any plans that might mean something great was going to happen. They flat out refused the proposal to purchase land on the south side of town, just beyond Sycamore House, to put in a new park. It didn't matter that a new development was going to go up right behind it. One man had the audacity to tell the assembled group that he saw no signs of growth in Bellingwood and refused to approve any project that would cost the city money.

It didn't matter that the city's revenues were stronger now than they had been in the last ten years. What was he planning to do with all of those funds anyway?

A soft knock at his door caught Jeff off guard. "What?" he snapped.

Stephanie opened the door, her eyes flitting from his desk where she expected him to be, to the couch. "Are you okay?"

"I'm mad."

"Bad meeting?"

"Stupid, small-minded, rural Iowans who can't see the beauty of the forest because they're stuck trying to decide whether they can afford to water the damned tree."

She chuckled. "So, bad meeting."

"I want to know what that man thinks we're going to spend the money on. Does he have a better plan for it? No. He just doesn't want to see any change. He even fought the re-zoning of that land for the developments."

"Who is this?" she asked, pushing the door closed as she came in and sat down at the table.

"Gary Lyle."

Stephanie frowned in thought and shook her head. "Do I know him?"

"He's got that garage on the north side." Jeff snarled. "He doesn't even live down here. His kids don't live down here, his mother doesn't live down here. That man got involved because he has a nasty mouth and likes to hear himself complain."

"But he wasn't the only one if he managed to kill the proposal," Stephanie said.

"That's because people are too wimpy to stand up against him and his big mouth. They were fine with it until he started talking about money." He slammed the arm of the sofa. "Damn it. The reason it failed was because he told them that we couldn't guarantee that in five years the city wouldn't run out of money, so we should put it in a bank, rather than invest in the kids of our community. Bah," he spat. "Because Bellingwood isn't going to continue to grow and we're obviously going to be strapped for cash in five years." He shook his head. "I need to let this go."

"You can't fix it," Stephanie agreed.

"No. It was just so ugly. There was no reason for it and he turned everything sour and mean. People walked out of that meeting worked up into a lather because of a park. No need. No need." He looked up at her. "Did you want something?"

Stephanie smiled and pushed a piece of paper across the table.

"I got them."

"Got who?"

"The big band I wanted for the dance. They agreed to come up for a mid-week gig."

"But I thought ..." Jeff smiled. "What did you do?"

"They were worried about the late drive back to Des Moines because most of the band had to work the next morning. The band leader hadn't even really asked anybody else because whenever they tried to do this in the past, it fell apart. But I called that friend of Ryan Williamson's."

Jeff nodded. Ryan was one of the owners of Secret Woods Winery and had one of the biggest networks he'd ever known. "Okay?"

"He plays trombone in the band. I met him in Des Moines for lunch last week. Remember when I took Kayla for the afternoon?"

"I thought you were just taking some time off," Jeff said with a grin. "It appears you need to actually take time off now."

"Well, I took him out to lunch and explained what we wanted and he hadn't heard anything about it, so he was going to do some checking."

"And?" Jeff said.

"And I have a signed contract. I just got back from meeting with the band leader and this guy. They had a conference call with the band members and everybody thought it would be fun. So they're coming."

Jeff laughed and jumped up from the sofa. "I can't believe you did it. I'm so proud of you. And you didn't say a word."

"I didn't want to jinx it. We already had a 'no' response, so what else could happen?" She rolled her eyes. "I was so nervous. That's why I took Kayla. I needed someone with me who thought I could do it. She believes I can move mountains."

"Apparently you can," Jeff said. "This is fantastic. Good job, Stephanie."

"Thank you. I just had to put on my big girl panties and face down the monster."

"Do you want to face down my monster? I can drop you off at

Gary's Garage and let you take him out. I'll even bring Kayla along if that would help."

She shook her head. "I don't think so. The only monster I had to face was my own fear. If it were an actual monster, I might have tried to lie down and whimper."

"Grrr," he growled. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Why don't you call Ryan?"

He looked at her, tilting his head in confusion. "Williamson?"

"Yeah. Those kinds of guys are always looking for ways to help the community. It's a tax break for them. I'll bet that if you talked to eight or ten businesses in town, you could convince them to buy the property and give it to Bellingwood. Then ask them to help build the playground and put a big entrance stone or something with the names of all the donors on it. If the only reason you can't put a park in out there is because you don't have funding, it's ridiculous to let that stop you. People want to help. They just need to know about the opportunity."

Jeff smiled and shook his head. "I let my anger shut down my good sense. Of course you're right. The thing is, everyone in town knows now what a jerk Gary Lyle is."

"They already knew," Stephanie said. "He's not going to change. But you don't have to change either. You just have to keep doing what you know is right."

He hugged her and then headed for his desk. "You are amazing. Thanks for bringing me back from the brink."

"Just another reason for you to keep me."

"One in a very long list."

Book 15 - #4

With a Little Help From My Friends

"I'm so glad you're still open," Stephanie said. She dropped her overstuffed messenger bag on the floor in front of the counter.

Skylar laughed. "Hello to you." He gestured to the customers still sitting in booths and tables. "You're fine. We're open late the next two weeks until Bellingwood Days are over. What can I get for you?"

"One of those mocha caramel frappe things with an extra shot of espresso." Stephanie stepped over to the dessert display, shook her head and walked away from it.

"Did you want something else?" he asked.

Camille carried a tray of rolls and muffins out from the back. "Hi Stephanie, how are you doing?"

"Okay." Stephanie lowered her eyes. "Actually I'm exhausted. I just got back from a meeting in Perry. I had to be there at seven o'clock and then I listened to the worst speaker ever blather on for five straight hours."

"No break?" Skylar asked.

"Yeah. A break, but not nearly long enough. Then I raced back to take Kayla to Boone for an eye appointment, and then Kristen called and said I needed to rush home because Jeff scheduled a meeting with someone who wants to rent the classrooms. He forgot about it and is in Webster City or Clarion or somewhere up north."

Skylar pushed the coffee across the counter to her. "Are you nearly done with your day?"

"I hope so." She glanced at the baked goods one last time and gave another quick shake of her head. Things were going so well and she didn't need to mess up her diet with anything more than the frappe. It was bad enough. Stephanie tried to justify it by telling herself she hadn't eaten anything except for an apple at the break this morning.

Stephanie gave him her credit card and picked up her bag, slinging it over her shoulder.

"You should have whatever you want," Skylar said quietly. "You look great."

She took the credit card and receipt and gave him a perplexed look. "Thanks. It's okay. I just need to sit in peace and quiet with caffeine. Are you really going to be open for a while?"

Camille grinned. "We're open until seven o'clock for the next two weeks. You have hours and hours."

"Good. I'm hiding in that booth over there with my laptop," Stephanie said. "I told Kristen that I couldn't take any more today." She picked up her drink, gave Skylar another confused look, then headed for a booth in the corner, out of the way of everyone else.

Even though the speaker had been incredibly boring, he'd given them great ideas for running small hospitality businesses, how to market Sycamore House, and ways to find out who might be looking for their services. She wanted to make sure her notes were in order before presenting them to Jeff, Sylvie, and Rachel.

She pushed her drink off to one side and set up the laptop, cursing when she realized that the power was so low. She'd have to work fast.

"Hey." Skylar slid into the bench across the table from her and held out a plate with a chicken salad croissant sandwich on it. "I know you like these. It didn't sound like you had time to eat today."

Stephanie frowned. "You don't have to do this."

He grinned. "Yes I do. If I don't take care of you, who will?"

She knew that Sky was being flippant, but his words took her aback. Nobody except Jeff had ever taken care of her, and in the last couple of months, he'd gotten so busy that even he didn't have time. It was really okay. That just meant that he trusted her and believed she was handling things on her own.

"Thanks." Stephanie breathed out a sigh. "I don't think I realized what I was getting into. It's all so much fun and totally crazy, but sometimes I don't breathe until I drop in bed at night."

"What 'cha working on?" he asked.

"Just organizing my notes from this morning. If we use any of

this guy's ideas, it will only make my life busier, but we could increase Sycamore House's business by ten to fifteen percent over the next year."

"Wow. Do you have a business degree?"

Stephanie shrugged. "Not yet. Maybe someday I'll find time to go to college."

"You should totally do it. Even if you start at DMACC in Boone. I heard that's how Sylvie got her degree. And look what she's doing." He smiled. "But then, you're already doing what you want without it. Maybe it doesn't matter."

"I know, but I wonder what I'm missing," Stephanie said. "Jeff knows so much." She shook her head. "I was never a very good student, though. I'd probably screw it up and get F's."

"Yeah, right. You're helping run one of the growing businesses in Bellingwood. You ain't no dummy."

"What are you going to school for?" Now was as good a time as any to change the subject.

"Sociology."

Stephanie had glanced at the laptop, frustrated at the falling battery level. She waited for him to expound on his degree and when he didn't she looked up. "What do you want to do with that?"

Skylar shrugged. "I don't know. It's just interesting. I like statistics and digging into data. I wouldn't mind getting into a big law firm and doing research. Something like that."

"You're kidding." Stephanie laughed at him.

"Why?"

"You? Stuck in a little room doing research? That would kill you."

"It wouldn't be so bad. I really like the work."

She blinked at him. "You're weird. You love people. You should totally be on the opposite side of that. Like working as a counselor or in family services or something."

"It makes me mad when people keep doing stupid things and don't try to fix themselves. I'm bad with those kind of people," he said. "If you can't figure out how to get yourself out of a bad situation, I'm not the guy with the right words."

Stephanie swallowed and took a deep breath. "Oh." She turned in her seat and looked down.

"Did I say something wrong?"

"No, that's okay. Thanks for the sandwich. I need to get to work," she said.

Her laptop sounded an alert, telling her that it had crossed its last boundary for battery power. She cursed and slammed it shut.

"I said something to upset you." Skylar put his hand out. "What did I say?"

"It's nothing." Stephanie jammed her laptop back into the bag. "I should go back to the office. I'm out of power."

"There's a plug right here." He pointed at the power block on the wall. "But tell me what I said."

She gave him a small smile. "Don't worry about it. It's my deal. Really."

The front doorbell dinged and he frowned at her. "I don't usually screw up this badly with people. Don't leave. Plug your laptop in and eat your sandwich. You deserve a few quiet minutes. I'll leave you alone." He jumped up from the seat and ran over behind the counter.

"He didn't know, you moron," Stephanie said to herself. "Nobody knows. And when they do find out, they just pity you. Grow up and let this go." The last place she wanted to be was at the office, but now she'd embarrassed herself and didn't want to stay here either. Why couldn't she just have a quiet hour with her frappe and laptop with no one bothering her?

When Skylar brought the sandwich over, Stephanie had been so happy that he was paying attention to her. He was really cute, and such a nice guy. But she sabotaged herself. That's what her counselor warned her about. She didn't trust men and so she'd find ways to make sure that no one could ever hurt her like her father had.

Except Jeff. But then, he would never do what her dad did to her. She chuckled. Last year she'd been infatuated with Jeff. He was kind and never threatened her. He just took care of her. It hadn't taken Stephanie long to realize that he would also drive her freakin'

crazy. She knew Polly had worried about her and Jeff, but Stephanie wasn't stupid. She knew he didn't like girls that way. She loved him more than anyone else but Kayla.

Jeff would tell her to buck up and not let her embarrassment drive her away from the moment. She dug down and pulled the power cord out of the bag, attached it to the laptop, and brought everything back to life.

She'd get lost in her work. There was no reason to acknowledge that anyone else in the coffee shop even existed.

"Stephanie?"

She looked up and smiled at Sylvie. "Hi there. I'm just trying to get my notes together from this morning. You're going to love some of the things I learned."

Sylvie sat down across from her. "I'm butting in."

"Oh no, what?"

"Skylar said he upset you. That boy wears his heart on his sleeve," Sylvie said. "Well, at least he talks about everything that bothers him."

"He talks a lot." Stephanie nodded in agreement.

"Sky doesn't know about your past."

"Nobody does. But it's not his fault. It's mine. I overreacted and then I didn't know how to get out of it."

"Are you okay?"

"Sure." Stephanie lifted a shoulder. "Sometimes I think everything is just normal and for a few minutes I don't think about my father or get sick to my stomach at the things he did to me. And then, boom, it's all right there in front of my face again. I'm never going to be free of that."

Sylvie's eyes filled with tears. "No honey, you won't. But I learned that I don't have to let that hurt and pain destroy my life. He took the years he took and the rest are mine. I won't give anymore up to him."

Stephanie looked at her in surprise. "You? Who?"

"My husband." Sylvie leaned across the table. "Jason and Andrew's father. He beat and raped me repeatedly until the day he threatened the boys. Then I left."

"That's when I left, too," Stephanie said. "When he threatened Kayla. I didn't know that about you. You seem so happy and normal."

Sylvie laughed out loud. "Yep. That's me. Normal. My friends keep trying to set me up with a man."

"Eliseo," Stephanie said with a nod.

"But I'm not ready to be married again," Sylvie said. "I finally feel like I'm my own person. I can take care of me and my sons. I really am happier every day. I like being just me."

"Do you think about what your ex-husband did to you all the time?"

"I used to." Sylvie reached out and took Stephanie's hand. "I'll bet that if you're honest with yourself, you'll realize you think about your father less now than you did when you moved to Bellingwood. Am I right?"

"Probably." Stephanie smiled. "You're right. It's a lot less. Sometimes I just get hit with it and memories flood over me."

"But even right now, they're easing away, aren't they?"

"Yeah. I guess they are."

Sylvie gave Stephanie's hand a quick squeeze and then sat back in the booth. "I think Skylar might like you."

Stephanie's eyes grew huge. "What? You're kidding me."

"Nope, I'm not."

Stephanie giggled. "I'm never going to be able to come in here again."

"You'd better," Sylvie said. "You need to give him an opportunity to ask you out on a date."

"I've never been out on a date."

"Well, you'd better figure this out."

"Like you and Eliseo?"

"Aren't you the smart-mouthed little girl," Sylvie said with a laugh. "If Skylar asks you out, you have to say yes. And I promise, if Eliseo ever gets up the courage to ask me out on a date, I'll say yes, too."

Stephanie looked at the counter and caught Skylar glancing their way. "This is just weird. I don't know what to say now."

"Say nothing. Just be your normal self."

"You mean the girl who turns into an blithering idiot because he made me remember my dad?"

"No, the wonderfully bright and beautiful young woman who has a huge future in front of her, despite what she faced in the past." Sylvie stood up and stepped forward to give Stephanie a hug. "Don't you dare believe anything other than that about yourself, either."

Stephanie watched her walk away. Life was so strange now that she lived in Bellingwood. This group of people that she'd fallen into was like no one else she knew. They just took care of each other. She'd never have known that about Sylvie. Andrew and Jason seemed really normal and Sylvie was always so happy. Maybe it would end up being okay.

"I'm sorry," Skylar said, showing up in front of her again. "I don't know what I said to upset you, but I'm sorry."

"It's really okay. I'm not upset." She checked her watch. "But I do need to get this done. I have to get back to Sycamore House before Jeff leaves."

He looked a little stunned, then backed up. "Okay. I'll see you tomorrow, then?"

"Yeah. Probably. Gotta have my fix, you know." She held up her nearly empty glass. "Thanks for the sandwich. I really did need it."

He smiled at her and turned away.

All Stephanie could think was, "What in the world?" She chuckled to herself. This was nothing like what she had pictured for her future.

Book 15 - #5

Clueless

"What do you think?" Rachel did a quick spin and stopped to face Doug and Billy. When they ignored her, she spun again, the long skirt of her black dress billowing out. Since that didn't raise a response, she snapped, "Hey!"

"It's cool," Doug replied, glancing up before looking back at the screen. "Go left!" he yelled. "No, the other left! Don't you see the hordes coming? Take another left!"

"I got it, I got it," Billy said. "Just let me get my great sword out. We'll take 'em." He looked up for a second and nodded at his fiancé before pressing buttons on the game controller.

Rachel took two steps and planted herself directly in front of the large flat screen. "Look. I have ten minutes before I have to be downstairs in the kitchen. You can turn off your damned game for ten minutes and talk to me." She glared at Doug. "Yeah. You too. You live in this house, you can be polite."

Doug leaned to the side to see around her. He didn't want to get involved in this at all.

Billy slumped in his seat. "Sorry," he said, chagrined. "Turn it off, Doug." He put the controller on the table beside him. "She's right. We're being rude."

"Great. Are you guys going to have a fight about a dress now?" Doug asked. "I don't mind the fights as much as I hate the making up." He covered his ears with his hands. "I hate the making up. You two are not quiet about that. It's just wrong."

Rachel started to amp up, but Billy lifted his hand and gave Doug a sly grin. "You're just jealous."

"Not likely," Doug retorted. "I could have a girlfriend if I wanted one, but I'm not ready to give all this up." He stroked the leather of his recliner and smiled. "I'm living the good life. You're the one who's jealous. I get to keep all of this when you attach the ball and

chain. I don't ever have to give it up if I don't want to."

"Billy's not giving anything up," Rachel said with a snarl. "And anyway, do you want to end up like old Doug Leon? All alone and collecting everybody's throw-aways so you feel like you're part of the community?"

"Whatever." Doug pursed his lips. It wasn't worth it.

She spun again, gesturing to the dress. "So do you like it?" Rachel touched the black, lacy sleeves that fit snugly to her arms, then lifted the lace overlay of the skirt.

"Yeah," Billy said. "It's fine. What's it for? Are we going out somewhere? Aren't you going to be hot and sweaty in that thing?"

She glared at him before stalking back into their bedroom. The door slammed and both boys heard her muttering in fury on the other side.

Billy followed her with his eyes, a look of confusion on his face. "What'd I say?" he asked.

"I don't know," Doug said with a shrug. "It's not like I'm the girl-whisperer. You told her it was a nice dress. What more does she want? Women are hard to figure out." He wagged his controller at the screen. "Ready to go again?"

"You're kidding, right?" Billy asked. "The last thing I need to do is piss her off even more." He leaned toward Doug and whispered. "She leaves for work in five minutes. We can wait until she's gone."

Doug waited to see what his friend was going to do next and finally said, "Well are you going to find out what that was about?"

"Yeah, I probably should, but I don't want to." Billy sighed. "Am I always going to be this clueless?"

"From what I've seen, you don't have much hope," Doug replied with a laugh. "You are kind of an idiot. It's a good thing she loves you."

Billy was just getting out of his recliner when Rachel came back out of the bedroom, this time dressed in her Sycamore House uniform: a white blouse and black pants with a royal blue belt.

"You look nice in that, too," he said. "You always look nice in everything you wear."

Rachel walked past without acknowledging his words and

headed for the door. She stopped to give the two dogs a quick pat on the head.

"What did I say now?" Billy asked her. "I don't know how to fix this. I told you I liked the dress."

"Thanks for nothing," she retorted. "So glad you deigned to get involved in the planning."

"Planning?" Now Billy really was confused. "For what?"

"The wedding, you moron," Doug said quietly, finally understanding. "You are *so* clueless."

Billy looked back and forth between the two of them. "Wedding? But that's not until October."

"I'm planning for it now." Rachel rolled her eyes. "I've been planning for months. Did you think we'd wait until the week before?"

He frowned. "But we decided to get married in October so we could use the Sycamore House decorations and you have the food handled. What else is there to think about?"

"The dress." Doug leaned his recliner back and tucked his hands behind his head.

"Wedding dress?" Billy flipped his head to look at Rachel. "That was your wedding dress? How was I supposed to know? It isn't white and frilly. And anyway, aren't you supposed to hide that from me until I see you at the ceremony?"

Rachel scowled and put her hands on her hips. "In what universe do you ever think you'll see me in a white dress?"

"It's our wedding. I just thought ..." Billy's words drifted away. "Sorry."

"Yeah. We're getting married on Halloween weekend. White wouldn't fit with the decorations or theme." Rachel pointed at her black fingernails and then tugged at a lock of bright blue hair lying on her straight black hair. "I don't do white."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know," Billy said. "I just assumed. That was stupid of me."

"Have you ever seen me wear anything white?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I didn't get a very good look at the dress. Will you show me later?"

"I guess. And superstitions like you not seeing me in it before the wedding, how silly do you think I am?"

"You aren't silly at all," he said. "I just thought you'd want to ..."

"Be like everyone else?" Rachel barked out a laugh.

"I should quit assuming anything about you, shouldn't I?" Billy asked. "The wedding won't be like anything I've ever seen before. Right?"

"You know," she said, smiling at him. "If you want to be part of the planning, all you have to do is ask."

"All you have to do is tell me what you want me to do. I'll do it." He turned to Doug. "And so will he. Forgive me?"

"Of course." Rachel put her hand out.

Doug sighed loudly. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know what that means. I'm going to be wearing headphones again tonight. Have I told you how much I hate it when you two fight and make up?"

Billy crossed the room and hugged Rachel. She tilted her head up for a kiss.

"Come here, Jack," Doug said. "You shouldn't have to watch that."

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>