



MEMORIES
for
TOMORROW



Zigarettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Book 16



Book Sixteen 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 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 16 – Memories for Tomorrow - 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 16 - #1

Never Had a Friend Like Me

"Go on," Joss said, giving her son, Cooper, a gentle nudge.

He toddled over to stand beside his sister, both of them bouncing up and down on their feet. If only she could muster as much excitement about anything as those two did about everything. Her heart nearly burst from her chest when Sophie took his hand. Joss stepped back with her camera and turned on the video, hoping to capture the fun.

Nate opened the front door, saw Joss first and looked down at the two little ones standing in front of him, bouncing up and down in their utter joy.

"Daddy!" Sophie squealed.

He bent over, picked both children up in his arms and waited for them to kiss his cheeks. "I have the cutest kiddos in the world," he said. "What would you say if I told you that I brought you a present?"

Sophie spun to look at Joss, her eyes wide. Then she threw her arms around her daddy and said. "What?"

"Where?" Cooper asked.

Nate accepted kisses from the kids and then put them back on the floor. He and Joss had talked about this for months and she was nearly as excited as the kids. This was one of the reasons she loved the idea of living in the country. They couldn't fill the house with too many kiddos or animals.

He took a little hand in each of his and she followed them out to the front porch, continuing to record.

Nate stood over a blue crate. "What's in there?" he asked.

Sophie bent her knees and peered in through the holes in the side, while Cooper dropped to his hands and knees and looked in through one of the ends. He was the first one to speak. "Puppy?"

Sophie squealed again. "Puppy!"

"That's it exactly," Nate said.

They had talked to the children over and over about how to act around puppies and kittens. Polly brought Obiwan over to the house several times this summer so the children could learn how to respond to dogs and each time they'd been curious, but respectful. Joss was nervous about how a puppy would respond to their excitement, but she hoped for the best.

"Pet it?" Sophie asked her father. She turned to look at Joss. "Please?"

Nate put his hand on her curly hair and lifted her into his arms. Joss had worried for a while that the kids might never learn to walk. Nate loved to carry them and they loved being held by him. But once they started walking, they'd never stopped moving. He gave his daughter a peck on the cheek, then put her back down and ruffled the hair on his son's head. "Let's go inside and I'll let her out of the crate. Can you be good and quiet so she isn't scared?"

Sophie put her finger over her lips and said "Shhh" to her brother. He nodded at her and then looked back into the crate.

"Come on in," Joss said. She'd already put some big pillows in a semi-circle in the living room. "Sit down on one of the pillows."

The children sat down and waited expectantly for Nate to bring the puppy. He closed the front door, put the crate in front of an ottoman, sat down behind it and smiled at the kids. "Don't jump or run. We're going to let her get used to being in a new home. She'll want to smell everything, okay?"

They nodded at him, their eyes still huge.

Nate opened the door of the crate and everyone waited for the puppy to come out.

When nothing happened, Sophie climbed off her pillow and looked into the crate. "Come out, little puppy. Come out." Then she looked up at her dad. "Scared?"

"Maybe." Nate sat down on the floor beside the crate and reached in to take the shivering yellow lab mix puppy out. He nestled it into his lap and stroked its head. "You can pet it really nicely now."

Sophie put her tiny hand on the puppy's back and ran it up and

down a couple of times, getting a feel for the coat. When she realized which direction the fur went, she started stroking it one way. "Soft. C'mere Coop."

Her brother joined her by the puppy and tentatively touched its head. "Soft," he said, looking at his sister for approval.

Cooper didn't do much without his sister. She was fierce and feisty. She loved exploring new things and often got them into trouble, while Cooper was her staunch protector. As soon as she tried something, though, he had to be part of it and Joss would often find him returning to something that interested him long after Sophie had lost interest.

Whenever the two napped together, Sophie snuggled in, while Cooper slept with an arm slung over her. Joss didn't want them to ever grow out of this adorable stage, but at the same time, she could hardly wait to see them grow up.

She turned the camera off, put it on a table, then took a seat behind the kids and scooped Cooper into her lap before scooting forward to touch her knees to Nate's. "What shall we name the puppy?" Joss asked.

Cooper tipped his head backward to look up at her. "Mommy."

Joss kissed his head. "That's my name. I think the puppy should have a different name, don't you?"

"Jasmine," Sophie offered hopefully.

Joss smiled at Nate. "We've watched Aladdin a few times this week."

"I think that's a perfect name," he replied. "Jasmine it is."

Sophie slid in beside her brother on Joss's lap. "Will she play with us?"

"You bet," Nate said.

The dog had stopped trembling and sniffed the floor in front of Nate. Jasmine put her front feet out, then stretched and moved out of his lap, sniffing her way to Joss and the kids. When she put her nose on Cooper's leg, he froze into stillness, but Joss felt him giggling.

"Cold. Wet," he said.

"Let me feel." Sophie put her hand out and Jasmine sniffed it,

then licked the little girl's fingers. Sophie pulled her hand back, tightening her fingers into a fist and releasing them. "She licked me."

"She kissed you," Nate said.

"Kiss?"

"You can kiss her back, but you don't lick like a dog. Kiss her head like you kiss Daddy," Joss said, putting her hand out to stop Jasmine while Sophie leaned forward.

Cooper watched quietly, then reached forward and planted a second kiss on the dog's head.

Jasmine clambered over the pillows and wandered around the living room. The two kids craned to look around their mother and when they couldn't stand it any longer, got to their feet and followed the dog out into the kitchen.

"We'd better follow," Joss said. "Who knows what they'll get into and I don't want to clean up after they've played in her ..."

Nate put his hand out. "Don't even say it. We stopped before we got home and she went to the bathroom. I hoped that might give us a little extra time this evening with the kids." He stood, then put his hand down for Joss to hold while she pulled herself up. "You're really ready for this?"

They followed the parade out to the kitchen. Jasmine sniffed every available surface while the kids watched in awe.

"She has to go potty," Sophie announced. "She's hungry?"

Joss smiled. "Jasmine is fine. We'll feed her later."

Cooper sat down on the floor, never taking his eyes off the dog. "Can I feed her?" he asked.

"Dogs feed themselves," Nate said. He slipped his arm around Joss's waist. "You know I'm going to have a hard time kenneling her at night, don't you?"

Joss chuckled. "She's used to sleeping in a kennel. Let's keep it up for a while. At least until I'm confident she's house trained. Please?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." He rolled his eyes. "You're always so smart about these things."

Jasmine wandered through the doorway into the dining room

with the kids close behind her. All of a sudden, Sophie put on a burst of speed and ran to get in front of the dog, then sat down before Jasmine arrived. She put her hand out to touch the dog as Jasmine sniffed the legs of the table. Jasmine sniffed Sophie's head, nuzzling her hair and the little girl giggled. "Feels funny." When Jasmine moved away, Sophie tried to stop her. "Do it again, Jasmine."

Joss was poised to run and intercept, but the dog licked Sophie's face and walked away, startling Sophie.

"Don't grab at the dog, honey," Joss said, walking over to block the dog from entering another room. "We talked about that, remember?"

"Sorry. Forgot."

"I know you did. There are a lot of things you have to remember, but it will get easier. Won't it, Coop?"

He nodded, still following the dog around the room. When Jasmine paused to check something out in more detail, he sat down behind or beside her, watching her with his big, wide eyes.

"Is the meat ready to grill?" Nate asked.

Joss nodded. "On a plate in the fridge."

"What say we take Jasmine outside and introduce her to our back yard?" Nate asked.

"Will she poop?" Sophie asked.

"Or pee?" Cooper asked.

Nate nodded and grinned. "Probably. But don't worry if she doesn't do that right away. She has a lot of exploring to do."

They'd fenced in a large back yard for the children. Even though they lived far from anyone else or even a main highway, Joss wanted the comfort of knowing her kids couldn't get out to the road or head for a cornfield until they were older.

Sophie walked to the kitchen door and patted the side of her leg. "Come on, Jasmine. Come on." When the dog didn't pay any attention to her, she said it again, more forcefully.

Nate walked around Sophie and picked Jasmine up. "Come on, Jasmine. We're going outside." He put his hand on Sophie's head as he walked past. "She has to learn what her name is and what the

word *outside* means first. But one of these days you'll say that and she'll follow you."

"I'll get the meat," Joss said.

The two little ones followed their dad out onto the back porch. Joss was thankful for this big house in the country. She loved their porches. They'd decided against a big deck out back, opting for a cozier porch and more yard. Sophie and Cooper played in their sandbox or ran around the yard while she read on the big porch swing in the afternoons. Nate and Joss spent many an evening watching the sun go down once the kids were tucked into bed.

Nate put Jasmine on the ground and she bounded off across the grass, tripping and falling on her own legs. Sophie and Cooper ran after her and ended up chasing each other through the yard. This was what family was all about.

Joss handed the plate of hamburgers to Nate. "I'm ready for more of this."

"Kids, you mean. Right?" he asked. "Don't you think you should wait for Jasmine to be trained?"

"She'll be fine. It's just a matter of time and effort. We need to talk about starting the process again."

"I'm ready any time." Nate leaned over and kissed her, then scooped burgers onto the grill. "I love this place."

"So do I. Thank you for finding the new puppy for us."

Book 16 - #2

Order Up!

Lucy Parker turned back from the cash register and waved at Joe in the kitchen, acknowledging his call.

She smiled as Dave & Nelly Munson left the diner, Nelly walking slowly enough for Dave to keep up with her. He would never use the walker he should, yet insisted on accompanying his wife whenever he could.

They had to be in their early nineties. Lucy had been serving them for years. Every Monday, promptly at eleven thirty, they came into the diner. Every Monday, Nelly ordered a Cobb salad and Dave ordered a plain hamburger with cottage cheese. The two rarely spoke during their meal, but Lucy loved watching them together. Seemingly out of nowhere, Dave would extend his hand across the table so Nelly would hold it. They'd smile at each other for a few moments and then go back to their meal.

One day Nelly kicked her husband underneath the table and said his name as if scolding him. They hadn't been speaking out loud, but when Dave gave his wife a sheepish grin, Lucy knew she'd missed something.

Nelly stood on the curb outside while her husband made his way into the passenger seat. Once he was settled inside the car, she went around to the driver's side.

They were off to the library next. The new librarian had made it easy for older folks to get their books. Those old steps up to the front door were difficult to navigate and the elevator in the back of the building always seemed to be on the fritz. But the new gal was gracious about bringing books outside. People talked about how well she knew her customers. She was always ready with a new

recommendation. Lucy glanced across the street to the pharmacy. She should remember their names. Nate. Yes, that was it. Nate and Joss. My goodness, they'd lived here for several years. New gal, hah.

She turned to the kitchen and pulled plates off the counter, stacking them on her forearm. When Lucy saw people face to face, she had no problem with their names, but once they were out of sight, names left her mind. Greg had always remembered names for her. She missed going out with him. And if she missed it, she could only imagine how he felt about being trapped in the house all the time. But her husband never complained. He was the most easy going man she'd ever met and made the choice every day to be happy no matter the circumstances. She loved him so much.

Lucy stopped in front of another table filled with regulars. "Here you are, Mary." Lucy set the plate down in front of the woman and handed the rest of the dishes to each of the six women. Every month on the second Monday this group of retired teachers came in for lunch after spending the morning shopping together. They'd been so excited when Sweet Beans opened, allowing them to start their day earlier and with coffee. They believed in supporting all of the shops in town and hit as many as they could each month, shopping and having fun with each other.

After lunch, their next stop was the nursing home where they would play cards and games with the residents there all afternoon. They laughed about how someday that would be them and they hoped someone would do the same thing for them. Lucy thought these women were terrific and she hoped they were right, that someone would do the same thing for them and maybe even for her.

"Can I get you anything else?" Lucy asked.

Della Stimson tapped her plate. "A cup of ranch dressing for the fries? It's my newest obsession."

Lucy chuckled. "Okay. Anything else?"

"When you come back," Mindy Recap said, "Bring another coke. I'll have this finished in just a second. No need for another trip, right?"

Lucy nodded and walked away. She stopped and pulled a chair away from a table. A young woman and her daughter in a wheelchair were coming in the front door. "How's this?" Lucy asked them.

The woman nodded and smiled. "Perfect. Thank you."

"I'll be right back with menus," Lucy said. "Do you know what you'd like to drink?"

"I'll have coffee," the woman said. "Janna?"

"Can I have a pop, Mom?"

The woman nodded indulgently. "No caffeine, though."

"Seven-up," the girl said.

Lucy gave them a smile and headed for the counter. "Cup of ranch, Joe," she said as she poured out the drinks and gathered up menus.

Her first stop was at the table with the girl and her mother. "Here you are. I'll be back in a few moments."

After dropping the ranch dressing and cola with the women, Lucy checked on the table next to them. Three young men had come in for lunch from their work site at the new apartments south of town. She'd already delivered their ticket and saw that three credit cards were resting on top of it. "Are you ready for me to take this?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," one of them said.

Lucy picked it up and silently cringed. She hated being called ma'am. It felt like she aged forty-five years in just a second and all of a sudden had turned into their teacher. She shook her head and ran the cards, then returned the ticket and cards to the table. "Thanks, boys," she said with a grin. If they were going to call her ma'am, they'd be boys. Oh, who was she kidding. They were young enough to have been her sons. Lucy remembered the days when most of the people that came into the diner were older than her.

A few of those moments in her life had alerted Lucy to the aging process. First it had been some of the pop singers. All of those years that they'd been older than her passed pretty quickly. Greg cringed when the major league pitchers were suddenly younger than he was. Then all of a sudden, the pastor of her church was younger.

That one nearly killed her. All of her life, that person had been an older authority figure. Next thing they'd do to her would bring in some twenty-year old girl who would be fabulous in the pulpit and a whiz at managing the church. Hah. That would go over well with people in the church. But when that girl arrived in town, Lucy would do her best to support her. But it would certainly shake things up around here.

"Miss?"

Lucy looked down at the girl in the wheelchair. She'd gotten lost in her thoughts. Whoops. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Can I get onion rings instead of french fries with the cheeseburger?"

Lucy nodded. "Of course you can."

"How about we split fries and onion rings," the girl's mother said.

"I haven't seen you two in here yet," Lucy said. "First time in town?"

"We moved to Bellingwood this summer," the woman said.

"Oh," Lucy put her hand on the girl's chair. "What grade are you in?"

"Eighth. I got out of school today. Mom and I had to go see a doctor."

The woman sighed. "Always another doctor's appointment."

"Mom," the girl said. "It's okay."

"I know, Janna." She smiled up at Lucy. "She's always happy. No matter what she has to go through."

Lucy nodded. "I understand. My husband is the same. No matter what he has to deal with, he's okay with it."

Janna rolled her eyes. "You're being dramatic, Mom." She tapped her mother's hand. "You're the one who taught me, you know. Never give up, you can do anything you want, Janna. Try it again, Janna." The girl laughed. "Mom and Dad always tell me that I can do anything. So a few doctor's appointments are no big deal. Right?"

"Right," Lucy said. "You said you're in eighth grade? Do you know Rebecca Heater or Andrew Donovan or Kayla Armstrong?"

The girl nodded wildly. "Yes. They're in my grade. Do you know them?"

"Pretty well. I know their moms better, though." Lucy looked up at two more groups coming in the front door. "I should get your order in. I'm glad you're in town. I hope you come in and see me more often."

She slapped the order ticket on Joe's counter. "Order in," she said. "Extra rings on me, okay?"

Joe grinned at her. "Got it. Playing with your friends today?"

"Every day," Lucy replied. "Making some new friends, too."

"You always do." He snapped the ticket into a clip. "You always do."

Book 16 - #3

Never Give Up

"Paul will be here at five to pick you up," Lisa Bradford said as she dropped Simon Gardner's mail on his countertop. "We're grilling chicken tonight."

Simon took a deep breath. "What can I bring?" he asked, knowing full well she wouldn't allow him to bring a thing.

Lisa stood in the front door of his antique shop. "You know better than that. We'll take care of everything."

He smiled patiently at her as she left. Paul Bradford owned the hardware store and came in every day to make sure Simon was still alive. At least that's what Simon believed. Paul always had some excuse to be in the store. He checked windows and light fixtures, made sure the shelves were sturdy and stable. Anything to be *much* too helpful.

Simon had known the Bradfords for as long as he could remember. He'd known Paul's father, Peter, when they were young. Old man Bradford had started the hardware store long before Simon was born and when Peter was old enough to take over the store, he did so. Then, Paul came along and brought the store into the twentieth century ... the late twentieth century at least. Paul was still making changes. He believed that if you didn't stay ahead of the game, it would catch up and take you down. It was too easy for people to go to the big box stores in Ames or Boone. Paul had been approached over and over by several of the smaller hardware chains and he was holding out as long as possible. Simon didn't think he'd last many more years on his own.

Luckily, that Henry Sturtz fellow, good man that he was, did quite a bit of business with Paul. Whenever he could, he shopped in town. And he made sure to let his clients know that Paul and his people would take good care of them if they wanted to do projects

around their homes on their own.

Things were slow downtown this morning. Simon hadn't seen any customers at all. Mornings were usually slow, giving Simon time to rearrange his displays and do a little cleaning. He'd brought in items last week from an auction and should spend time in his storage room cleaning those up to bring them out front. He glanced back that way and shook his head. That didn't sound like fun. He'd have to drag a fan around to make the room tolerable. It could wait for another day.

He chuckled to himself and slipped his suit coat on, then went out the front door and turned to lock it. A short walk and a cup of tea was the perfect antidote for a grumbling old man's attitude. It didn't hurt that the short walk ended up in a coffee shop with a sweet young woman who was kind to him. She didn't treat him like an old man; she just served him with kindness and respect.

Simon trudged down the sidewalk and crossed over to the corner in front of the pizza shop. One of the young waitresses caught his eye and waved as he walked by. Four cars passed in front of him as he waited to cross over to the coffee shop. That much traffic could create a traffic jam in Bellingwood.

The familiar ring of the bell in the door at the coffee shop made him smile. The young lady who owned this place had gone to great lengths to make it feel comfortable and familiar to people in town. Even if she was from Boston. Warm hardwood floors, shelves overflowing with books, wooden tables of all shapes and sizes with mis-matched chairs. It was all enjoyable.

"Good morning, Mr. Gardner," the young woman said from behind the front counter.

"It's Simon," he said. It was an old conversation, sure to be repeated many more times in the future.

She smiled as he approached the counter. "You know I have a terrible time with that. My mama taught me to treat people with the respect they're due."

"Your mama is a good woman, I'm sure," he said. "But I will continue to insist that you call me by my first name."

"And I will continue to try," Camille said. "What would you like

this morning?"

"Last week that young man of yours introduced me to a Scottish breakfast tea that you have in stock. It was delicious. I'll have a cup of that." Simon stepped in front of the display case. "What interesting goodies did our Miss Sylvie bake today?"

"How about a buttercrumb danish?" Camille asked, tipping up a tray so he could get a better look.

Simon nodded. "And a croissant. I'm feeling cantankerous and need to work it out."

"Cantankerous?" Camille laughed out loud. "What's making you grumpy today?"

"People trying to take care of me."

"Why, that's awfully mean of them," she said.

"My thoughts exactly." He paid her and then picked up the plate which held the sweet treats. "I'll be back for the tea."

"If you can wait a moment, I'll pour myself a cup of coffee and join you. Do you mind?" she asked.

Simon lifted his eyebrows. "A pretty young thing like you wants to have coffee with this old man? I do not mind at all. I would consider it an honor."

"You're funny."

He made his way to a table not far from the counter so that if Camille needed to take care of a customer, she wouldn't have far to go. This was one of the joys he had on slow mornings. Camille always took time to listen to him. She asked the most interesting questions and made him feel as if he still had something to offer the world.

She set his mug, a small pot of hot water, and the tea in front of him, then sat down across the table. "Who's trying to take care of you?"

"The Bradfords."

Camille smiled. "They're wonderful people."

"Of course they are. That's what makes it so damned annoying. But Paul sees me like he saw his doddering father. We were the same age you know."

"I should have realized that," she replied. "Where is his dad?"

"He died a few years ago. Both of Paul's parents had Alzheimer's Disease and he had a terrible time with his father. His mother died pretty young, but his father was a healthy man until that terrible thing took his mind. He made life pure hell for Paul until they figured out what was wrong, and then it wasn't much easier, but at least there was an explanation."

"That's too bad. I don't have much of that in my family."

"You're lucky. We didn't either. Well, there was one old aunt. We weren't sure whether she had dementia from hardening of the arteries or because she'd killed all of her brain cells with alcohol. That woman was a crazy old drunk. Nobody went near her house after dark. She'd as soon shoot you with her crossbow."

"Her crossbow? In Bellingwood?"

"I told you. She was a crazy old drunk." He grinned. "Aunt Milka learned to shoot a crossbow when she was in China with her father. She was proud of the skill and set up a target in her back yard. It's a good thing she was an excellent shot. My mother kept taking Aunt Milka's bows away from her, but another would always show up. We never did find out where they came from."

"Do you still have any of them?"

"I must," he said. "I've never really given it any thought until just now." Simon shrugged. "They're probably down in the cellar at the old house."

Camille put her mug down. "Simon, do you have interesting items stored in nooks and crannies everywhere? Did your parents have antiques?"

"They were new to my parents, young lady," he said. But then he gave her a gentle smile. "Yes, they had quite a few old pieces that their families had saved over the decades. You know, my mother was born in the early nineteen hundreds. Her mother was born in the late eighteen hundreds. That's a lot closer to the Revolutionary War than your birth date is. Even still, though, for my mother to have had a hundred and fifty-year old piece of furniture was quite a feat."

"That would make some of her things nearly two hundred and fifty years old now," Camille said.

Simon had watched her calculating years in her head. "I have an old three-legged table that is in beautiful shape. It's one of my oldest pieces and will never leave my home. It came over with one of my mother's relatives in the mid-1700s. A wedding gift that had been made and packed gently for the long voyage."

"It's hard to fathom that there are pieces that old here in Bellingwood. Iowa was still just prairie when they were made."

"History is a fascinating thing."

They both looked up as the bell rang on the front door. Simon shook his head. "I'm in trouble," he whispered.

"Your door was locked," Paul Bradford said, striding over to the table. "It's a good thing I know where to find you. Leave a note, would you?"

Camille stood up. "What can I get for you this morning, Mr. Bradford?"

"A cup of coffee. The dark stuff. Black with a dash of sugar."

"Bring him a danish, too," Simon said. "Maybe it will sweeten his temperament with me."

Paul walked over to the counter, paid for his coffee and danish, then came back and sat down.

"I worry about you," he said.

"There's no need," Simon retorted. "I've been taking care of myself for decades now."

Paul laughed and took a bite of his danish. "Mmm. That's good." He put the danish back on the plate and reached over to brush the top of Simon's hand. "I don't think I ever told you about one of the last coherent things my father said to me."

Simon frowned. "No. You've never said anything."

"He told me to watch over you. That you were his best friend and if I took care of you it would be like I was taking care of him."

Simon was at a loss for words. He felt tears jump to his eyes and quickly blinked to push them away. "Well isn't that a pip?"

"What?"

"You've made it really difficult for me to be angry with you for hovering over me." Simon grinned at the younger man. "But not impossible."

Book 16 - #4

The Body Electric

She wasn't expecting anyone this morning, so when Andy's doorbell rang, she dragged herself away from the book she'd been lost in and dashed through the house to the front door.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, not even bothering to wonder why her best friend was leaning against the storm door, her hands and feet splayed out to the doorframe. There was no telling what that woman might do next.

"I'm bored." Beryl said. She stepped back so Andy could open the door and gestured down at herself. "I have my 'I'm bored' clothes on. You have to entertain me before I completely lose my mind." She knelt on Andy's threshold. "Help me, Andy-kenobi. You're my only hope."

Her 'I'm bored' clothes consisted of tight yoga pants in wild galactic colors and a flimsy, flowy, knee-length tunic with crazy flowers all over. She had a hot pink floppy hat on and matching flip flops.

"Your wardrobe might make me lose my mind," Andy retorted. "Get in here before anyone sees you." She reached down to help Beryl stand back up.

Beryl spun around in Andy's foyer. "You don't like?"

"I like. You're just a little too electric. Why are you bored? Just last night you said that you had enough work to keep you busy until after Christmas."

"That was last night. Today I'm bored."

"Come on in," Andy said. "I was quietly reading on the back deck. Apparently, I'm finished with that today."

"Oh joy," Beryl said. "I'm bored and you're boring. How are you supposed to help me now?"

"I'll make coffee and feed you coffee cake. Will that help?"

Beryl flounced along behind Andy, flopping her feet loudly on

the floor. "If that's all you've got, I'll have to suffer. We should go somewhere fun. Do something exciting. Go out and be someone other than ourselves. Please?"

Andy took two matching mugs from the cupboard. "I have to be at the library at one. There's no time to go anywhere."

"That gives us three hours. We could be hula dancers or boatswains in three hours."

"Boatswains?" Andy asked. "Where are you going to find a ship that needs two old ladies to do that job?"

"I don't know," Beryl retorted petulantly. "It was just an idea. Better than your idea." She pointed at the coffee pot. "Coffee and cake? How boring are you?"

The doorbell rang again and Andy looked at Beryl. "Now what?"

Beryl pulled her shoulders up to her ears. "How would I know?" She gave Andy an ornery grin.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing much. Got more of that coffee cake?"

Andy pushed past her friend and went to the front door.

When she came back into the dining room, Lydia followed, carrying a bag and cup carrier from Sweet Beans.

"I have your favorites," Lydia said. "And some croissants. They just came out from the bakery when I got there."

Beryl looked back and forth from the coffee cake on the counter to Lydia's bag. "Can I have both?"

Lydia looked Beryl up and down. "What are you dressed for?"

"Apparently that's her 'I'm bored' look," Andy said. "You two head out to the deck and I'll bring plates and napkins. So much for a quiet morning of reading."

"Are you really complaining again about that?" Beryl asked. "Why wouldn't you rather spend time with your friends?"

"We were together last night. Now go and make yourself comfortable. I'll be right out."

Beryl opened the sliding glass door to the deck. "I think she's mad at me," she announced to Lydia, loud enough so Andy could hear. She promptly closed the door to eliminate the possibility of a response.

"She's not mad," Lydia said. "She's never mad. We just disrupted her morning and she needs time to assimilate it." Lydia waved her hand at Beryl. "And look at you. Who could be mad at that? You're a party."

"I am, aren't I?" Beryl replied. She floofed out her tunic. "I didn't think I'd ever find an opportunity to wear this. Picked it up from a street vendor in New York a few years ago. Who'd have thought I'd ever find a good time to wear it in Bellingwood, but here I am, wearing it like a rockstar."

"From one of the eighties hair bands, right?" Lydia asked, laughing at her friend.

"I'm not wearing a hair band, I'm wearing a hat." Beryl winked at Lydia. She waggled her hand. "Are you planning to share that coffee or do I need to sit on your lap and beg for it?"

Lydia let out an "oomph" when Beryl dropped into her lap, but promptly wrapped her arm around the woman and kissed Beryl's cheek. "I love you too, you nut."

They both looked up when Andy coughed in the doorway.

"What are you two doing? What will the neighbors say?"

Beryl pointed at the cemetery behind Andy's house. "That we're having more fun than they are. Do you want to join me here? I can make room." She scooted around until she was perched on one of Lydia's legs. "You can have the other leg."

"You're my friend and I love you," Andy muttered as she set plates down on the table. She sat down opposite the two women and opened the bag of croissants, then looked at them. "Is that how you're spending the morning?"

Beryl craned her neck to look at Lydia. "I'm good. You?"

"Get up. You may be the skinniest thing I've ever seen, but your hiney is boney."

"Fine then." Beryl moved to the chair between Andy and Lydia and put her hand out. "I'd best start drinking down some of that coffee, then."

"Because?" Lydia asked.

"Because my friends are old fuddy duddies and ... well, I just need coffee."

"I'm not a fuddy ..." Andy started. Then she looked at Lydia. "I really am, aren't I."

Lydia chuckled. "Compared to this one, we're the queens of fuddy duddy." She handed Beryl a cup of coffee and then put her hand on Beryl's arm. "Why are you so bored, dear? After what you said last night, I didn't think we'd be seeing you for weeks."

"I went out to my studio last night and stood in the middle of the room trying to figure out which project to work on. I was so overwhelmed, I walked out, went inside and went to bed. That usually helps. I use the time before I fall asleep and before I get out of bed to let my mind loose. Something always shows up and nothing arrived," Beryl said. "I need help."

"It will come," Lydia said. "You do this all the time. All you really need is to relax."

"That's why you're here, isn't it?" Andy asked. "I'm sorry I gave you trouble about showing up."

"Ahhh, no," Beryl snapped. "No getting all sweet and sentimental on me."

Andy pushed a plate in front of Beryl. "Then what in the hell do you want from us?"

"That," Beryl said, pointing at Andy. "Sass and trouble. I'm feeling so owly, I just want to do something crazy." She sat forward. "I want a tattoo."

"You want a what?" Andy asked.

"You heard me. I want to get a tattoo. My mother told me that I couldn't have one, that only bad girls had tattoos. I want to be a bad girl."

"That isn't the way it is these days," Lydia said. "Both of my younger girls have tattoos. In fact, Sandy has a few. She loves 'em."

Andy nodded. "Mel has a frog on her ankle. But that's the last thing I want."

"It's what I want to do," Beryl said.

"Put someone else's artwork on your body?" Lydia asked.

Beryl cackled. "I'm certainly not putting one of my paintings on this canvas." She slowly swept her hand down her torso. "It might be skinny, but it would hurt like hell to put something I painted on

here. No, I want something fun. Maybe on my boob." She cackled again. "Oh, how I love the idea of making some poor young man tattoo my old lady boob. I'm doing it."

"I'd like to," Lydia said very quietly.

"You?" Andy asked, her eyes huge.

"Yeah. My mother wouldn't let me do it either, but I've always kind of secretly thought it would be fun. That's why when Jill asked if she could do it when she was in college, I just said yes. She'd done her research and found a reputable tattoo parlor. It was her money and something she really wanted. How could I say no?"

"You'll do this with me?" Beryl asked. "Really?"

"Sure."

The two women looked at Andy.

"No way," she said, putting up her hands. "No freakin' way." She pointed at Lydia. "What will Aaron say?"

Lydia waggled her eyebrows and grinned. "Maybe I'll put it somewhere that he won't see until he's thinking of other things."

"No, no, no, no, no," Beryl said, laughing as she put her hands over her ears. "Please don't do that to me when I'm eating. I'm going to choke."

"There," Lydia said. "Are you more relaxed?"

Beryl nodded. "Much more. I think I know what my next piece is going to look like. Thank you."

Book 16 - #5

Christmas Time is Here

Stephanie Armstrong rolled over in bed, stretched, and relaxed back into her pillow. She was surprised Kayla wasn't in here already. Moving her feet, her toes nudged something at the end of the bed. Surely it wouldn't be Kayla's kitten. Little Luna had made her nest on Kayla's bed and it suited everyone just fine.

"What is this?" Stephanie whispered as she sat up. There wasn't much light to see by, so Stephanie twisted around and put her hand on something soft and fuzzy. Still not a cat, though. "You silly girl," she said as she pulled a stuffed Christmas stocking up from the end of her bed. "What did you do?"

Rather than open it, she pulled on her robe and slid her feet into the slippers beside the nightstand. Stephanie reached under her bed and pulled out a stocking she'd filled for Kayla. She tiptoed down the hall, avoiding the one place where the floor squeaked, then turned on the Christmas tree lights before heading back to Kayla's bedroom.

Stephanie tapped at the door and whispered, "Kayla, are you awake?"

There was no response, but Stephanie couldn't wait any longer. She opened the door and went over to Kayla's nightstand to turn on the low light of a Nativity scene before crawling into bed with her sister. "Wake up, you goose. It's Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," Kayla said. She turned over and pointed at the stockings Stephanie had in her arms. "You found it?"

"You're awesome." Stephanie put Kayla's stocking in her sister's arms. "I have one for you, too."

"I knew you would. You always do." Kayla sat up. "Can we open them now?"

Stephanie nodded and sat up, too. "Do you want to do this in

here or out in the living room."

"In here," Kayla whispered. "Let's just be here for a little while. This is enough light, isn't it?"

"You first."

"No. Let's both go."

The girls dumped the contents of their Christmas stockings out into their laps. In seconds, Luna was in the middle of Kayla's lap, pawing at the pile of goodies.

"Get away, you silly," Kayla said, pushing the cat back. It didn't work.

"Do you want me to put her on the floor?"

"No, she'll just climb back up. It's okay." Kayla picked the little gray furry kitten up and tucked her under an arm. "Stay," she said.

Stephanie laughed. "I think she's a cat, not a dog."

"I bought you a Hershey kiss, too," Kayla said, pointing at the box in Stephanie's lap. "And the same bottle of lotion."

"We're just like twins." Stephanie pulled Kayla in for a hug. "I love you."

"I love you too. Did I get ...?" Kayla moved things around and finally landed on what she was looking for. "A new pen!"

"You'll have to wait until we get into better light to see what it is. I got it down at the train station in Boone. There's a little train that runs in it."

"So cool." Kayla slumped. "I could only get things for you in town, but I bought you a pretty pen at the drug store. It's swirly purple and pink. See. Right there."

Stephanie had always put practical things into the Christmas stockings for Kayla. She'd been doing it for years, even before they ran away from their home in Ohio. Her mother would give her a few dollars to get things like nail clippers, a new brush, some lip balm and pens and pencils. They'd added candy bars and an apple or orange to fill the rest of the stocking. Now that Kayla was older, it was easier to find stocking stuffers that she'd enjoy. There was a pretty journal to go with the new pen, some new fingernail polishes and nail stickers and a couple of pairs of brightly colored socks. Kayla hadn't gotten to the big stocking gift yet, though.

"This is so much fun," Kayla said. "Thank you for these presents. Do you like what I got for you?"

"I love it all. But there's still something you need to open."

"What's left?" Kayla patted around on the bed and picked up the small jewelry box. "What is this?"

"Open it."

Kayla unwrapped the paper, then tossed it to the other end of the bed and waited for Luna to pounce on it. She opened the box. "I can't read in this light."

"It says *Little Sister. I love you to the moon and back.* And that charm has your initial on it."

"That's really cool. Thank you."

"I have the other one for me." Stephanie lifted the chain out from under her night gown. "This is the same thing except it says *Big Sister.*"

Kayla flung her arms around Stephanie. "Will you wear yours all the time?"

"I will."

"I will too. Here, help me put it on." Kayla turned around so Stephanie could help her put the necklace on. "This is so awesome. I'm never taking it off."

"Do you want to have breakfast or open presents first?"

"Presents!" Kayla yelled. She jumped up on her bed, startling Luna who bolted for the floor. "Sorry. Let's do presents before breakfast. It's our first Christmas in this apartment. We should make up some traditions. Like always having presents first."

"You wanted to have a tradition last night that we open one present on Christmas eve."

"That didn't work out so well," Kayla said, dropping back on the bed. "You made me go to bed."

"Yeah. About that. When did you wake up to put the stocking on my bed?"

Kayla pointed at her alarm clock. "I set it really quiet for two o'clock." She giggled. "I slept through it until like quarter after."

"Because it was so quiet?"

Kayla nodded. "But then I had to get out of my room and into

yours without Luna coming too. You should have seen me tiptoeing down the hall with the stocking in one hand and Luna in my other arm. I was trying not to laugh. Then I stubbed my toe on one of your shoes and I wanted to cry, but I had to get out of the room first. I can't believe you never woke up."

"You're stealthy." Stephanie put on her serious face. "Don't you dare ever use that stealth to sneak out of the apartment or I'll kick your butt, okay?"

"Okay. I promise. Now let's go open presents." When Stephanie didn't get right up, Kayla pulled at her sister. "Come on. Let's go."

"I'm coming." Stephanie let Kayla pull her out into the hallway and then out into the living room. This was the first Christmas they'd had enough money to really have a nice Christmas. Stephanie didn't want to think about the horrible Christmases with her father. He wouldn't let them put a Christmas tree up and the only gifts they received were little things that their mother could sneak into the house for them.

Once they'd gotten to Iowa, Stephanie swore that Christmas would be different for Kayla and she did everything possible to make it fun. The first two years had been sparse, but at least they'd been able to celebrate together. Last year had gotten a little better and now this year she had purchased a beautiful artificial tree, lights, garland, and icicles. They had a few ornaments that the two girls made the last couple of years and she purchased some pretty glass balls. They talked about what color they wanted for their Christmas tree and decided together that they were going to go with the traditional red, green and gold. Kayla insisted on having multi-colored lights. Whatever she wanted ... that's what Stephanie was going to do.

"Isn't it pretty?" Kayla asked.

"Beautiful."

The sky outside was lightening up, though it would be a gray day in Bellingwood. The balcony of their apartment had some leftover snow on it and Stephanie opened the sliding door to plug in the outdoor snowman they'd purchased. She knew they had many years ahead of them to collect Christmas decorations. In all

of those years living in that dark and ugly house, she never thought to be living this life of freedom and joy.

"We're so lucky," she whispered, then turned around at Kayla's giggle.

Kayla had found the Santa Claus hat and pulled it on as she dug presents out from under the tree. "This one's for you," she said, pushing a big present over to Stephanie.

"Where'd it come from?" Stephanie asked. "You?"

"No. Not me. Santa."

"Does he look anything like my boss?"

Kayla gave her an innocent grin and lifted her shoulders. "Maybe." She pushed several other wrapped packages toward Stephanie and sat down in front of the boxes Stephanie had wrapped up for her. "You first. Open that red one."

"This one?" Stephanie held up a flat red box.

"Yeah."

She carefully slit the tape off the paper and smiled at poor Kayla who was dying to dig in. "Should I go faster?"

"It's okay," Kayla said, rolling her eyes dramatically. "We have all day. But I might die if you don't hurry."

"I'll hurry. I want you to live forever." Stephanie tore the paper away and opened the box, then pulled out a beautiful black sweater. "I love it. Thank you. This will be pretty with those red pants I have."

"That's what I thought. My turn. Which one?"

Stephanie shook her head. "I don't care. Just dig in."

The first package Kayla opened was a bead and bracelet kit, then she opened books from her favorite series, a couple of coloring books and markers and some new winter clothing. For Stephanie, Kayla had purchased a pair of pretty gloves and a matching scarf.

Kayla could barely contain herself when Stephanie reached for the package from Jeff. She ran over to get her phone and sat poised with it while Stephanie pulled the paper off the box.

"What did he do?" Stephanie breathed.

"Put it on."

Stephanie stood up and pulled the black woolen coat on. She

was worried that it might not fit properly. Nobody ever knew how to buy her size, but Jeff did. It was perfect.

"Here. Put the gloves and scarf on, too," Kayla said. "I bought them to go with it."

Stephanie obeyed and Kayla snapped a picture. "I'm sending this to Jeff. He said I was supposed to."

"I look terrible. I haven't even had a shower yet," Stephanie protested.

"You look beautiful. And now you have a great coat for all of those business meetings you have to go to."

"Thank you," Stephanie said. "I love you."

Kayla jumped up, startling the cat again, but Luna simply snuggled back in on the little pile of clothing. "I love you too," Kayla said. "Thank you for doing so much for me." She backed up and spun around. "I love our life here."

"So do I, sweetie. So do I."

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>