

Book Seventeen Vignettes

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CONTENTS

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Book 17 - #1 Coffee, Please

Book 17 - #2 Outtakes

Book 17 - #3 Let's Go Out

Book 17 - #4 Dance for It

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 17 – Marks in a Lifetime - into one collection. These four short stories feature different characters from Bellingwood who get an opportunity to offer a little slice of life from their own perspective.

Book 17 - #1 Coffee, Please

"Good morning."

Nate Mikkels' pharmacy tech was generally much too pleasant first thing in the morning. The happy cheerful girl smiled and chattered with everyone. It drove him nuts. No, that wasn't true. He was glad someone behind the counter was pleasant. He didn't want to have to be nice to a soul until after a second cup of coffee. Fortunately, Bobby knew that about him and tried to fend off the worst of the problem customers until he got his wits about him.

Last night had been terrible. Their new puppy, Jasmine, was at Doc Ogden's office after having been spayed yesterday and the twins were inconsolable. He and Joss had done their best to explain that it was necessary, and yes, Jazz would have some pain, but it would go away soon. Coop and Soph were distraught at leaving her alone, and no explanation would soothe them. Joss had stayed in their room until late trying to get them to sleep. She sang every song she knew and read stories until she was hoarse. Each time she left after calming them down, they spun each other back up. He ended up taking Cooper into another room and Joss took Sophie into their room so all four could get some sleep.

That only meant he was extra grumpy this morning. Joss hadn't been any too pleasant either. They usually tag-teamed breakfast, but today, she'd thrown bread in the toaster, put cereal out for the kids and slumped in her chair. He'd offered to make eggs or pancakes and she shook her head. It wasn't worth it. They'd gotten up later than usual and he was in a hurry. Of all days for him to have the early morning shift. Wasn't that the way it always happened?

"You got a delivery," Bobby said as she bounced on her heels, hiding something behind her back.

"What?"

"Shut your eyes and hold out your hands."

"I don't have time for this," he growled.

"You want to make time, you old grump."

She really did not have the proper respect for a man of his stature. If she wasn't so good at what she did and so wonderful with the customers, he'd have to ... He'd have to do nothing. She was fantastic.

He turned toward her, put his hands out and closed his eyes. When he felt her wrap his fingers around a cup, he opened them. "What's this?"

"Your wife told me not to bother you, but she dropped this off. Said you needed it. I tried to tell her that you were fine, but I couldn't even get the words out without laughing." Bobby brought her other hand out from behind her back and presented him with a small bag from Sweet Beans. "You're supposed to share that with me. She said so."

Nate opened the bag and found two of his favorite banana walnut muffins and two warm sausage breakfast biscuits. "She's a good woman, she is. Did she bring you coffee too?"

Bobby nodded. "And coffee for Eva and Dot up front. They got muffins, too. Joss said that everybody who had to work with you probably deserved an extra treat today. What happened last night?"

He shook his head. "The twins. Jazz is at the vet. She was spayed yesterday. I'm not picking her up until I go home tonight. That poor thing needs as much rest as she can get before our two little nurses try to heal her with their loving touch."

"Oh," Bobby said, knowingly. "That's what she's doing. She said that they were going to visit a sick friend."

Nate laughed out loud. "I doubt that Coop and Soph were going to let another minute go without checking on their best friend." He held the bag out to Bobby. "Take what you want."

"This is awesome. I didn't get breakfast either this morning. But that's my own fault. Mom caught me online last night and we stayed up chatting until long after midnight. I finally had to tell her to go away. She was seriously wound up."

"About what?"

"Something silly with my little brother and a girl at school. He thinks he's in love and wants to spend two hundred dollars on a pair of earrings and a necklace for her. When Mom told him that he couldn't, he threw a fit and told her that she was the worst mom he'd ever known." Bobby unwrapped one of the breakfast sandwiches. "Like he's known so many moms. She grounded him and that made it even worse because he'd invited this girl to the winter ball and his grounding includes that date. So he stormed up to his room and then she saw him putting all this stuff online about her and how unfair she was. While we were talking, she went up and took his phone and his laptop away. It was a mess."

"Yech," Nate said. "I have all of that to look forward to. I don't want my sweet little cherubs to fall in love with idiots and turn me into a tyrant."

Bobby shrugged. "It's harder on Mom with Dad gone all the time. He hates coming home and having to be the bad guy, so she does her best."

"And she talks to you. That isn't easy on you, either."

"It's okay. She just needs to vent when it gets bad. Scott's twelve years younger than me and it's not like Ann and I didn't drive her crazy when we were in high school. We were always grounded and it usually had something to do with a boy."

Nate took a long drink of his coffee and then tapped the cup to his forehead. "I have thirteen or fourteen years before these two start doing this to me, right?"

Bobby grinned. "If you're lucky. Maybe Sophie will meet the perfect boy when she's ..."

"When she's thirty-five," Nate said. "Anything before that and I'll lose my mind."

"Same deal for Coop?" Bobby asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Should he wait until he's thirty-five to date?"

"I suppose. It would certainly make life easier for me and Joss. Yes. Thirty-five for both of them. That's a good round number."

"You're funny. What were your parent's rules?"

"My parents?" Nate looked at her.

"When were you allowed to date?"

He stopped to think. "I don't remember any rules." Then he laughed. "I don't remember dating much, either. At least not in high school. Now college was a different story. When I got to college I decided that I was going to be much more suave and debonair. I was at least going to try to ask a girl out every once in a while. So I did." He smiled. "That was fun. And then I met Joss."

"And it wasn't fun anymore?" Bobby asked, a smirk on her face.

"I walked into that one. No. I didn't need to have fun any ..." Nate stopped and looked at her. "I need more caffeine. Joss was all the fun I needed. There. I'm stopping now. So what ended up happening with your mom last night?"

"I told her she couldn't stop him from going to the dance. If he'd already asked the girl, she couldn't make him be irresponsible like that. He'd made a commitment."

"Did she agree?"

"I think so. I'll probably call Scott after school today and find out what's going on in his head. He's only sixteen. He doesn't need to spend two hundred dollars on a girl at this age."

"Where does he even get that kind of money?" Nate asked.

Bobby looked over her glasses at him. "I think that's what has Mom stymied the most. Scott saves every single penny that comes in. He doesn't spend a thing unless he has to. Everything goes into a bank account. All of his Christmas money, his allowance from when he was a kid, all the money he makes in the summer mowing lawns ... everything. Why would he get all excited about spending so much right now?"

"Do you miss being close to home?"

Bobby laughed out loud. "Nope. Not at all. I go home often enough. I like living in Ames and working here. It's a little bit of a drive, but that's okay. At home, it's twenty miles from our little town just to get to somewhere with fast food or a department store. No movies or shopping, no nothing. Dad says it's a town of three hundred little old ladies and they all want to know what we're doing every minute of the day. Mom won't move until Scott graduates from high school, then she says she doesn't care where

they live. Poor Scott. They'll probably move to wherever he wants to go to college." She laughed an evil laugh. "That would be hilarious."

The bell on the pharmacy counter dinged and both of them jumped. "I better get out there," she said. "Tell Joss thanks for breakfast. This was awesome."

"I will," Nate said.

As she walked away, he shook his head in disbelief. Somehow between his wife and Bobby, they'd managed to jumpstart his morning. The day looked much brighter now. He picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hello there, my gorgeous husband," Joss said.

"No need to be overly effusive. I'm better. Thanks for breakfast and the coffee."

"I thought you might need extra help this morning. I'm back at Sweet Beans with Sal and Polly."

"With the kids?"

"Yeah. They're playing with Polly." Josh chuckled. "Cooper is flirting with her. She's crawling around on the floor with him and he's in heaven. Soph is singing to Alexander. It's pretty sweet."

"How are you doing? You didn't get any sleep either."

"I'm on my second cup of coffee. We'll take a nap later this morning and I'll be in good shape to work this afternoon. Are you going to make it through until five?"

"Don't tell anyone, but there might be a chair nap during lunch. Are you taking the kids to see Jazz?"

"Marnie said to bring them by. We'll stop for just a minute."

"Anyway, thank you for taking care of us this morning. Bobby thanks you and I thank you."

"I love you, too. No more being grumpy to the help, okay?" "Okay, boss. I love you."

Book 17 - #2

Outtakes

The events of this vignette took place in chapter ten of Book One - All Roads Lead Home.

Polly slung the baskets over her arm to help Sylvie carry things into Beryl's house and cursed when she stepped down on a rock and nearly fell to the ground.

She looked up. "No fair. That wasn't part of the script."

When no response came, she reached into Sylvie's trunk to grab up grocery bags. "What in the hell? These really are heavy."

Sylvie chuckled. "It's real life, girl, not just a story. Come on. Buck up. Your job is to carry my heavy bags in so I can balance this awkward tray. You weren't the one assigned to make petit fours. Now get back on script. The girls are waiting."

Polly shook her head. She'd only barely gotten to know these women and knew that anything was possible with this group. "Fine. I'm supposed to say, 'I feel a little paltry with my pathetic baskets of bread.' What'cha got next?"

"Oh, don't. No one cares whether you bring anything or not." Sylvie smiled. "If we keep messing up our lines, this is going to be a long night."

"I'll be good," Polly said and followed Sylvie to Beryl's front door.

Polly choked on the drink in her hand. "What's in here?"

Beryl gave her a wicked grin. "That tabasco is spicy stuff. I tried to back off, but couldn't." She sighed. "Not my fault. Blame your writer. Try again and do it right this time."

Polly took a sip, "It's pretty good if I sip it. What else is in here?"

This time Beryl laughed out loud. "I found bacon vodka! Isn't it great?" She pointed at the table. "The first game is already in play. You have to figure out where you sit."

Lydia sat down and announced, "I've had a long day. This is where I'm sitting. If you have some other plan for me, bring it."

"Where's your sense of fun, girlfriend?" Andy asked. "Look at these pretty boxes on the plates. Beryl worked hard to make this nice. Now, look in your box and don't you dare tell us what's in there."

Lydia opened the box on the plate in front of her. "Can't be mine. I'm not pregnant." She glanced at Polly. "Are you pregnant?"

Polly glared at her. "You know better than that. And that's not where you were supposed to sit anyway. That was where I was dropping my butt. Will you please stay on task? She's never going to get this book written and we're going to be up all night trying to finish the chapter. Take another drink and loosen up, Lydia. It's a party."

"She's right. You need another drink," Beryl said. "Now everybody knows where they are supposed to go first. Do it." When they were all slow to stand, she rapped a knife on the table to get their attention. "Hop to it, ladies. Get to your marks."

Giggling ensued as they each scrambled to their assigned seats, which was a good thing because they were supposed to be giggling anyway. Polly opened the box in front of her and shook her head. No, she wasn't pregnant. That was never going to happen if she could help it. And besides, didn't she need help with that anyway? So far, the only man in Bellingwood who was at all interesting was Henry Sturtz. She wondered how that was going to work out in the future. Polly gave her head a quick shake. There were so many other important things to take care of first.

Andy picked up a box and nearly laughed out loud. She tried to avoid looking at Polly, which meant that at the next move around the table, Polly took that place. She opened the box in front of where Andy had been and did her best not to burst out laughing. Those silly purple panties had become a much bigger deal than she'd ever expected when she purchased them. The color of the purple bra

was close enough to make it a matched set.

When Lydia ended up back in the seat she'd originally taken, she removed the box lid and gave them all a perplexed look. "I'm still not pregnant," she said.

"Sit down, grandma," Beryl said. "I have some news for you."

Lydia jumped out of her seat, and spun around a few times before hugging Beryl's neck. "You're pregnant? I didn't even know you were dating."

Beryl licked Lydia's face, sending her friend backwards in paroxysms of laughter.

Lydia swiped at her face, missing both times. "Whoops. Too much bacon vodka for me tonight." She used a napkin to clean the slobber off. "Okay. Which kid is pregnant. Tell me it isn't Jimmy."

"Jimmy can't get pregnant," Andy said.

"I mean, tell me that Jimmy didn't get some girl pregnant." Lydia said with great deliberation, doing her best to enunciate each word. "Can't you see some poor daddy showing up at our front door with a shotgun?" She let out a howl of laughter. "Sheriff Merritt, yo boy is gonna do right by my little princess. Now bring his ass out here so I can marry him off to her right now."

"Sit down, my drunk and silly friend," Beryl said. "It's not Jimmy. Marilyn is pregnant. She wanted me to find a fun way to tell you."

Lydia lifted her head and leaned into Beryl. "I don't think I'm supposed to be this drunk. What happened?"

"While she wasn't paying attention, you poured yourself another one," Andy said. "I saw you."

"While who washn't paying 'tention." Lydia slurred her words. "This is bad. Put me in my chair."

Beryl helped Lydia sit. "What did you get into? And you know who wasn't paying attention. That girlio who keeps putting words in our mouths."

Lydia looked at the ceiling. "Oh. Her. Sorry. I'll be good."

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"It's a good thing I ate so much bread," Lydia said. "I'd never be able to hold this paintbrush, much less pull off something attractive." She tipped her head to look at what Andy was working on and a burble of laughter escaped her mouth. "Beryl, Andy's being bad."

"Of course she is." Beryl shook her head. "It's a strange night in Bellingwood when the two of you are more out of control than me. You two straighten up. We're being serious now." She poked Lydia, who wobbled and nearly fell off her stool. "If you aren't good, there won't be any dessert for you."

"I'd rather have another martini," Lydia said. "That bacon vodka stuff tastes good."

Beryl put her hand on top of Lydia's, lifting both hands back up to the easel. "Paint. Our drunken escapade isn't happening tonight. This is a sweet opportunity for us to get to know each other better. We have years and years of friendship ahead of us and we're supposed to learn things and become close."

"Close like this?" Lydia pulled Beryl in and licked the woman's face. "Turnabout's fair play."

"I deserved that." It was Beryl's turn to look up to the ceiling. "Don't you dare put that in the book. Not yet at least. Let these people think we're really nice people and not some crazy girls. Got it?"

"Like she'll listen to us," Sylvie said.

Polly chuckled. "I talk to her nearly every night."

"No way," Andy breathed. "That's so cool." She smiled. "Do you think you could talk to her about finding me a husband? I miss having someone in the house with me. Bill and I were so comfortable together. The cats are terrific, but I'd like a human being around to talk to."

"Oh sweetie," Lydia said. She reached across the span and touched Andy's arm. "That's so sad. You should move in here with Beryl."

Beryl slapped Lydia's hand away. "No. That's not happening. I love this girl, but no way. We couldn't live together if you paid us." Sylvie huffed. "I don't want a husband. Men suck. I'm doing just

fine by myself."

Polly looked at Lydia, hoping for clarification. Lydia gave a small shake of her head.

Beryl, however, pranced over to Sylvie and wrapped her arm around the younger woman. "That's right. We don't need no stupid men. You've got your boys. I've got my art. That's enough."

"Right," Sylvie declared. "And my boys aren't going to be big, dumb jerks either. They'll be respectful and kind to everyone. Especially women."

"Or she'll lop their heads off in one fell swoop." Beryl stepped back. "We're off-topic again. And we're getting a little depressing. Next time you talk to her, Polly, tell her that when we're together it is only supposed to be fun and lighthearted. All of that sad stuff can be given to other people in town. Got it?"

"I'll do my best. The thing is," Polly said. "She says we're real and that she's only telling the stories we give to her. What am I supposed to do with that?"

Lydia stood and brandished her paintbrush. "Bring me another drink. Tonight we paint."

"Yeah. I don't think that's what she had in mind."

## Book 17 - #3 Let's Go Out

"Mom?" Sylvie heard the back door crash open and her oldest son's yell. She wasn't going to move.

"Mom!" he yelled again. "Mom. Where are you?"

Sylvie walked into the doorway between the living room and kitchen and planted her hands firmly on her hips. "What?" she snapped.

"Can I go with Mel to Ames? She wants to go to a movie."

"For that you needed to yell? You couldn't come find me?"

He dropped his backpack on the kitchen table. "Sorry. I didn't know where you were."

"The house isn't that big. Good heavens, what is it with you two boys. It's like your legs quit working."

"Can I go?"

She nodded. "Who else is going?"

He glanced sideways. "Just us."

Sylvie raised her eyebrows. "Just you two? Really?"

"No big deal."

"Have you finished your work for Eliseo?" She looked at the clock on the stove. "You're home early."

"It's Friday night. We'll do the rest of it tomorrow. He said I could leave. So can I? I have to text Mel to tell her whether or not it's okay to pick me up."

"Sure. Have fun. What time will you be home?"

"I don't know. Maybe ten thirty? Eleven? Is that okay?"

"If you're going to be home after ten thirty, I want you to call me. Don't text me. Call me."

He nodded furiously while entering the text to Mel. "She's going to be here in twenty minutes. I need to take a shower. Thanks." Jason grabbed his backpack and dashed past her to head upstairs.

Sylvie gave herself a quiet smile. Both boys were going to be

busy tonight. She took her phone out and quickly sent a text. "You let Jason off early so he could go out with Mel. Andrew's at Polly's house. What should we do tonight?"

"Dinner?" Eliseo texted back. "A movie? Horseback riding?"

That made her laugh. For as much as her son and her boyfriend loved horses, she hadn't ridden those Percherons yet and was in no hurry to start. Boyfriend. It still sounded weird. She was much too old to have a boyfriend.

"Horseback riding sounds fun," she sent.

"Really?"

"No, you nut. Not really. Maybe someday I'll let you get me up on one of those horses."

"How about I take you out to dinner. What time is Jason leaving?"

"Mel will be here in twenty minutes. Then I'm free."

"I need to run home and take a shower and change clothes. But I'm leaving now."

"Perfect. See you then."

Sylvie smiled. That would give her enough time to wash the filth of the day off and find something nice to wear. She went upstairs and stopped for a minute outside Jason's bedroom door. He was actually singing to himself as he got ready. She liked Mel, even though Jason insisted they were only friends. They were pretty good friends if spending an evening with the girl caused him to sing.

One of these evenings when Sylvie had time with him, she was going to have to press for more information. He wouldn't be happy about telling her what was going on in his personal life, but he'd do it anyway. At least after she pushed and embarrassed him. She knew better than anyone that her sons wanted desperately to tell her their stories, but sometimes didn't know how to start. Jason especially was trying so hard to be independent.

She tapped at his door. "Jason?"

"Just a second, Mom."

"It's okay. I just wanted to tell you to have a good time tonight. I'm going to take a shower and get ready myself, so I won't be downstairs when you leave."

His door flew open. "Cool. Thanks."

It nearly killed Sylvie to see him growing up like this. She wasn't ready for it. His mop of thick dark hair had been out of control for as long as she could remember. When he was just a little boy, she loved stroking his head and feeling that thick hair run through her fingers. Now, he stood in front of her with no shirt on and water from the shower dripping from that head of hair. He'd gotten so strong since he started working with Eliseo. His shoulders and upper arms rippled with muscles and his hands were strong and powerful. Those same hands that had once been so tiny when she reached to hold them as they crossed the street.

"Mom?"

Sylvie nodded. "Have fun tonight." She bolted for her bedroom, shut the door and leaned on it as tears threatened. She couldn't do this every time something new and wonderful happened for him. She knew he had to grow up and away from her, but no matter how true that was, she wasn't ready. Andrew was going into high school next year. She wasn't ready for that, either.

She went into her bathroom, stripped down and turned on the shower. Sylvie didn't know what to think about the next few years. Jason was taking his ACTs this spring and in another year or so, he'd head off to college. Maybe. Eliseo had talked to her about Jason working at the stables full-time once he and Mark Ogden had them in place. As long as Jason was happy, she didn't care too much what he did. College hadn't been that important to Sylvie. She'd gone to nursing school until Jason was born and then her life grew so out of control, she'd never considered a degree. Going to culinary school as an adult had worked out beautifully. She'd found something that she was passionate about and could be successful. If Jason wanted more education when he got older, he could certainly do that.

Checking the water temperature, Sylvie climbed into the shower and let it wash away the day. Her mornings started early and some days she felt as if she didn't stop moving until she dropped into bed, usually by eight or nine o'clock. With Rachel taking over more and more of Sycamore House's catering, the pressure on Sylvie was

beginning to ease. They needed to hire one more full-time person over there to help Rachel. That way, Sylvie would only have to help with the largest events. Since she'd hired Marta at the bakery, much of the pressure had been taken off there, too. The woman was a treasure. Eager to learn and willing to work hard, Marta made the running the bakery much more fun.

They'd had several new contracts come in and Sylvie was considering another part-time employee. That was the problem with a growing business. It was hard to balance that moment when you desperately needed another employee against the fact that you could barely afford them. They weren't there yet.

"I'm leaving, Mom," Jason yelled into her bedroom. "See ya later."

Sylvie realized she'd spent too much time musing and rinsed the rest of the shampoo out of her hair. She needed to hurry. After a quick towel-dry of her hair, she walked over to stare at the clothes in her closet. It was too cold to wear a skirt, and besides, Eliseo rarely took her anywhere that nice pants wouldn't be appropriate. She took down a pair of blue woolen slacks and a loose powder blue sweater. Her mother's pearls would be pretty with that. She put the pants on, zipped them up and went back into the bathroom to finish drying her hair. Not too much makeup. She'd never been one of those women who couldn't leave the house without her face on. Her mother had been.

Eliseo didn't help. He complimented her whether she was wearing makeup or not. When she'd asked him one evening after spending extra time in front of the mirror, he told her that she was always beautiful. Sylvie went back to what she was comfortable with.

Padme pushed Sylvie's bedroom door open and jumped up on the bed, landing on the sweater.

"Get off, you mutt," Sylvie said, pushing the dog back. "I never had hairy clothes until I met you and now every time I look down, I'm brushing bits of you off me." She shook out the sweater and pulled it over her head. "What are you doing up here anyway? Lonely?"

A yip and once around Sylvie's bed didn't give her much of an answer.

Sylvie picked up her phone to make sure that Eliseo hadn't sent her a text that he was here. No, but there was a text that had come in from Jason.

"Took Padme out before I left. Thanks for everything. I hope you and Eliseo have a nice evening."

She was so lucky. Her boys were turning into nice, responsible young men. Sylvie bent over and picked up her black flats and headed downstairs. Just as she hit the living room, she saw headlights as Eliseo turned into her driveway. She slipped her feet into her shoes, picked her coat up from the chair where she'd dropped it and headed for the back door.

He stood there with his arm upraised to knock when she waved at him through the window. Eliseo came in, his eyes twinkling. "You look beautiful, Sylvie Donovan."

She looked him up and down. He was dressed in a black western style shirt and new blue jeans. "You look pretty nice yourself, sir. Where are we going?"

Eliseo walked across the kitchen floor, wrapped one arm around her and pulled her close, then tipped her back and kissed her lips. When he broke the kiss, she sighed.

"I missed you today," he said.

"I guess so. I missed you too."

He helped her put her coat on and walked to the back door with her. "Do you want to stay in town or go for a drive?"

"I don't really care. A drive would be wonderful, though."

At her back door, he stopped once more and kissed her. "It's good to see you."

## Book 17 - #4

## Dance for It

Lisa Foster turned and put her feet up on her husband's lap. "Please?" she asked, simpering.

"Long day at the studio?"

She shrugged. "Not too bad. Do you know Arnold Faber?"

"Tall skinny guy with that streak of white in his hair?" Dylan rubbed his thumb along the bottom of her foot. She shuddered and relaxed.

"Yeah, that's the one. You would not believe how adorable his daughter is. He brought her in to register for dance classes today. That little girl has big old cherub cheeks and her hair just naturally falls into goldish brown ringlets. I wanted to squeeze her." Lisa giggled. "But I thought that would be weird. She doesn't look a thing like her father."

"And her mother wasn't there?"

Lisa shook her head. "I don't think there is a mother. I'm not sure where she's gone, but he didn't put a mother's name on any of the paperwork."

"I can't even imagine raising a child all by myself." Dylan sat back on the sofa and put his feet up on the coffee table. He chuckled. "You and I can barely take care of each other and we're all grown up."

"How was work today?"

"It was fine. You know. Pizza. Oh. I talked to Sal. She wondered if we wanted to come over for dinner on Wednesday or Thursday. What do you think?"

"Where did you see Sal?"

"She was at the coffee shop."

Lisa laughed. "They should never have put that in across the street from you. You're in there all the time."

"It's not that bad. It gives me a break from the shop."

She pushed at him with her foot. "I'm just kidding you. It's fine. And sure. We can go over. Wednesday would be best, though. I might have a couple of girls stay longer on Thursday." Lisa maneuvered herself to get her phone off the coffee table while leaving her feet firmly planted in her husband's lap. "Want me to call her?"

"Sure."

Before she dialed, Lisa put the phone in her lap. "Sal's inviting us to dinner? At their house? She doesn't cook."

Dylan laughed. "I know. Maybe you better ask. Maybe she meant that we were supposed to go out to dinner. Or maybe Mark's cooking."

Lisa nodded and wiggled her toes when he tickled them. "Stop that. Rub those babies."

"Too many pliés and pirouettes today?"

"It's Monday. Little kids. Too much running around and chasing." Lisa giggled again. "But I can hardly stand it. They're so flippin' cute. All of those little girls in their pink tights, leaping and jumping and spinning around. I just want to let them go crazy."

"Mommies would hate that."

"You've got that right." Lisa rolled her eyes. "No, no, no, little Maisie Ann. Point your toes. Not that way, point them straight," she mimicked. "They're little girls. They're supposed to enjoy themselves at this age. Fortunately, most of the moms are just great. Now what was I doing?"

"Calling Sal."

"Oh yeah, right. Did she have Alexander with her today?"

"Yeah. He was asleep, though. I don't know how she does it."

"I know, right?" Lisa said with a laugh. "Sal? I couldn't believe it when Mark said he was in love with some girl from out east. Next thing they were having a baby and getting married. He was like, the most normal of all of us and he did that. But how in the heck did she get all baby-mommy? If you asked me to bet on who would be a great mother, I wouldn't have even had that girl in consideration. I thought all she ever did was buy fancy clothes and go to events." Lisa put air quotes around the last word. She huffed.

"I never thought I'd like her either."

"But you do."

She swatted at him. "I know. I do. I actually like her a lot. Except for that whole getting her body back into shape after having a baby and looking sexy again. How in the heck did she do that? When I ever have a baby, you are going to have a tub of lard lying around on the sofa for the next three years."

"Yeah, because you're so out of shape. You'll be a gorgeous mommy and you know it. You take after your own mother."

Lisa sat forward, then wiggled so she could kiss him. "You say the smartest things sometimes."

"So I can stop rubbing the feet?"

"Not on your life, buddy. Remember? You signed up for this." Lisa pointed at the desk across the room.

"I can't believe you still have that."

"When my future husband promises to sign a contract that he will rub my feet any time I ask, I'm keeping it forever."

"Pretty sure I was drinking that night."

Lisa laughed. Dylan just didn't drink. Ever. When his buddies took him out for his bachelor party, he'd ended up coordinating things to get everyone home because he was the last one standing.

"Nope," she said. "You promised." She sat back and picked her phone back up. "Who was I calling?"

"You're a dingbat."

"Oh yeah. Sal." Lisa pulled her feet off Dylan's lap. "Okay, now my feet are cold. You weren't rubbing them fast enough." She dropped the phone on the sofa and jumped up. "I'm getting my slippers. You want anything while I'm upstairs?"

"Are we watching television?"

She stopped and turned to look at him. "I don't know how to answer that."

"If you want to watch something, that's cool. But if not, bring my book."

"Ooh yeah. And a blanket. That sounds good. What if you heat up some hot chocolate and popcorn?"

He stood and turned for the kitchen. "We have the weirdest life."

"Well, it's not like we're going to go out and get pizza," she yelled as she walked up the steps.

"We could," he yelled back. "I know this great pizza joint downtown. I hear the owner is really hot."

"Only when he opens the ovens."

"That's because he polishes them so much that he can see his reflection."

Lisa showed up in the kitchen, carrying a big quilt. "Wait. What? I don't even know how that works."

"I got lost in the conversation, too." Dylan handed her the first mug of hot water from the microwave.

"You want marshmallows?"

He reached up into the cupboard. "Duh."

"Are you ever jealous of Mark and Sal?" Lisa asked.

"What? Where did that come from?" Dylan took Lisa's mug back and set it on the counter. He opened a package of cocoa mix into it and stirred.

"He's my big brother. They're starting their family. Does that make you jealous?"

Dylan blew out a laugh. "No. You and I don't have time for that right now. When we're ready to take on that responsibility, we will, but no I'm not jealous. Are you?" He took out the second mug and put a bag of popcorn in, then pressed the button to start the microwave.

"I think I might be," Lisa said. "Alexander is going to grow up really fast and what if our kids are too young to enjoy having him as a cousin?"

"Sal and Mark are going to have more kids. Trust me. Our kids will fit in with them somewhere along the way, and even if they aren't the same age, they'll have these really cool older cousins who teach them how to live in the real world. Not the nutty Dylan-and-Lisa world that we're going to offer." He stirred the second mug of cocoa. "Are you really starting to think about this now?"

She shrugged. "Would that be a bad thing?"

"No. Not at all. I'm ready whenever you are. Maybe we should go to Paris or something crazy before we get pregnant, though." Lisa stepped back and wrinkled her forehead. "Really? Paris?" "Yeah. And London and Berlin and Vienna and Salzburg." "Can we afford it?"

He laughed. "Probably not. I haven't really checked. But your parents have done it. Don't you want to?"

"More than anything. You'd take me?"

"Well, I'm not sending you without me and I'm not going with some other chick. Should we do that before we start having babies?"

Lisa lifted up on her toes. "I could go to the Opéra de Paris and the English National Ballet."

"Yeah," he said, breathing out. "We could see all of that."

She swatted him again. "You love it and you know it. You love *me*, don't you?"

"I do love to see you dance."

Lisa wrapped the quilt around her shoulders and then wrapped her arms around her husband. "You really do say the smartest things to me. Shall we plan this for a year from this summer?"

"You can wait that long to start a family?"

She nodded. "I think this is just the right motivation for me to start thinking about a lot of things. But tonight, let's drink hot cocoa and talk about where we want to go. I want to see everything."

Dylan opened the package of popcorn, shook it and held it out. "You take that and I'll bring the cocoa. But first you have to call Sal."

"She'll be the one who's jealous now," Lisa said. "I'm going to Paris."

## 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: <a href="http://nammynools.com/">http://nammynools.com/</a>

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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 <u>Amazon Author Page</u> is a great place to watch for new releases and to find all of the books she's written.

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

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

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