



JUST AROUND THE BEND

Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Book 18



Book Eighteen 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 18 – Just Around the Bend - 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 18 - #1

Then I Kissed Her

"Good morning, sweetcheeks." Betty Mercer tweaked her husband's cheek. She'd teased him about those cherry red cheeks since the day they met.

He looked up from the newspaper, folded it, and put it on the table across from him. "Where'd ya go so early this morning?"

"Wanted to check on Myrtle. She was fussing around last night more than usual." Betty set the bucket of eggs on the counter. She'd clean them after breakfast. "Have you just been sittin' here waitin' for me to come back and cook for you?"

"You know I like my sweet wife's cookin' best of all," he said.

"Lazy bum. What'll it be? Pancakes or waffles?"

"How about some of your famous biscuits?"

Betty shook her head. "You'll be the death of me." She opened the cupboard beside the stove, looking for her favorite biscuit pan. "Where is it?"

"Where's what?"

The twinkle in his eye should have alerted her, but Betty was too busy looking for her missing pan. "My biscuit pan. Where did it go?"

"Maybe you left it in the oven."

Betty turned back and peered at him. "The oven?"

Dick grinned. "Look in the oven. I'm sure I saw it in there."

She opened the oven door and stepped back from the heat. "What is this?"

He stood up and came over, kissed his wife's cheek, and took the top off a pan on the stovetop, revealing sausage gravy to go with the biscuits that were nearly finished.

As she stood in shock, Dick opened a cupboard, took out two complete place settings and put them on the table. He stepped back and smiled again. "Did I do good?"

"I can't believe you did all this. What's the occasion?" Betty raced through all of the possibilities and couldn't come up with a single celebration she might be missing.

"Fifty years ago," Dick said quietly, taking her hand. "Do you remember?"

May 1967. That had to have been around their first date. Betty was terrible with remembering dates. She had a calendar on the refrigerator that helped her with birthdays and anniversaries. Sometimes she wished she was more like her sister-in-law. Marie Sturtz was a gem. She took care of everyone without having to think about it.

"Was it our first date?" she asked.

The timer on the stove rang and Dick nudged her away to open the oven door. He pulled the biscuits out and grinned. "Look at that," he said. "I actually did it. After all these years watching you make biscuits, I knew I should be able to follow the recipe."

He reached into the back pocket of his overalls and took out a folded piece of paper. Gently unfolding it, he turned to the table and placed it there face up.

"What is that?"

"That, my sweet girl, is your one and only love letter to me."

"You kept it all these years?" Betty didn't even remember writing the letter. A lot of life had passed since that day. Dick had always been better at sweet notes and gifts. He was forever coming up with something, even if it was only a dandelion in the bud vase over her sink. Betty might love her flower garden, but Dick loved bringing her bits and pieces of it just to tell her that he loved her. It seemed like every day he did something new for her. She'd gotten used to it over the years, but still appreciated his thoughtfulness.

She looked at the note. The edges where it had been folded were tearing and it refused to lie flat. Betty put her finger on the top edge and smiled. She'd drawn big, colorful flowers and hearts around the edges of the lined piece of paper.

Dear Richard,

You kissed me last night. I've been waiting and waiting for you to finally gather your courage and you finally did it. That was the sweetest,

most tender moment of my entire life. Do you know that I started crying the minute you dropped me off at the front door? Not because I was upset, but because it was wonderful. My heart sang and I began to think that maybe we might have a life together. Is that too much to think about right now? I know we haven't been going out very long, but it feels like our souls have found each other in the midst of all the chaos of this world.

The minute your lips touched mine, I knew that I was completely head over heels in love with you. You told me that I was going to be and you were right. I can't wait to see you again on Friday. Come as early as you can to get me.

I love you,

Betty

Her eyes filled as she read the large scrawling letters on the page. She'd been so young, still in college and dreaming of her future. Little did she know how much was about to happen. Six months later, they were married the week before Dick left for Viet Nam. He was gone eighteen months and she remembered too many nights in front of the television, watching news reports of what was happening over there and praying that he would come home safely. Betty knew how fortunate she was to still have him in her life. Some of their friends didn't return and many others came back a shell of their former selves.

The letter was dated with tomorrow's date, fifty years ago.

"I can't believe you remembered," she whispered.

"It was the best day of my life." Dick chuckled. "Well, the first of many to come. But once I knew you loved me, everything else was gravy." He lifted the lid from the pan, turned the heat back up, and stirred the sausage gravy. "I had to turn on all the fans to get the smell of cooked sausage out of this kitchen. Can't believe you didn't notice."

Betty stood up on her toes and kissed his cheek. "I was too caught up in your sweet cheeks. Fifty years," she mused. "It's hard to believe that much time has passed. I still feel like a kid around you."

"And you still make my heart go pitter-pat." He took her hand up and placed it over his heart. "I'm thankful for every one of these

last fifty years." Turning the heat down under the gravy, Dick touched the CD player Betty had on the counter in the kitchen.

The Beach Boys' *Then I Kissed Her* came on and Dick swept Betty up in his arms.

"What are you doing?" she gasped.

"I'm dancing with my best girl." He moved her around the kitchen and out into the dining room. "I love you, Betty Mercer, and I want fifty more years of kissing you."

He stopped for a moment and tilted her head up, then gently kissed her, his warm lips firm against hers. Before she could restart her brain, he smiled and swept her around the dining room table.

She felt light on her feet as she allowed him to lead her through the house. When the song ended, he continued to hold her in his arms, pulling her close. She placed her head on his chest, feeling the warmth of his body. They swayed together, his arm at her back, their hands clasped.

"What did I ever do to deserve you?" Betty whispered.

"Well, you're an awfully good cook, from what I hear," he said, a rumbling chuckle reverberating through his chest. "And you're a pretty darned good partner out here on this farm. If you can worry about silly chickens named Myrtle, I'm in good hands."

"Why's that?"

"Because you kissed me. Do you kiss Myrtle?"

Betty stepped back. "Maybe. She needed a little loving."

Dick brushed at his lips. "I've been kissing chicken lips?" He laughed and took her hand as they went back into the kitchen. "Did you ever think we'd end up here?"

"I don't know what I thought," Betty said. "I always knew that I'd be with you, but fifty years ago, I was caught up in so many things, I didn't think this far into the future."

"You always knew?" he asked. "You made me worry a couple of times there."

"Before or after I sent you that letter?"

He nodded. "Before. Once you put it in writing, I knew you wouldn't go back on it. I just had to make sure I earned that love every day."

"You don't have to earn anything with me, Dick Mercer." Betty reached up and kissed his lips. "You had my heart long before that kiss, but that night you sealed the deal. Where did you ever find that song, by the way? I don't have it here."

Dick grinned and popped the CD out of the player. "Kids these days. They play music on their phones. What's an old guy to do?"

"So what did you do?"

"I called Henry. He's halfway between me and the kids. Made him find it for me. The girls at Sycamore House put it on that CD thing. I miss records, that's for sure. They were so much easier."

Betty laughed as she took down a lined basket and filled it with the cooling biscuits. She handed it to her husband who put it on the table. She turned off the stove, gave the gravy one last stir and took it with her, placing it on the trivet they kept there.

Dick reached out for her hand. "I want you to know that I feel the same way about you today that I did that night I kissed you. I will always love you with my whole heart."

She let the tears flow down her cheeks. "I am such a lucky girl. I love you, too. You and your sweet, cherry cheeks."

He brushed back a tear, leaned in and kissed her again.

Book 18 - #2

Of Brutus and Bandages

"It's me," June called out when she walked into the main lobby of Sycamore Inn. The door to Grey's apartment was open; he must be busy back there.

She put her purse into its normal spot under the front counter, pressed her name tag into place on her shirt, and logged onto the computer. They'd had a busy night last night and poor Grey had already checked most everyone out. He would have been flying to keep the place running smoothly this morning.

Glancing at the coffee station, June saw that the pot was low. She rinsed it out, put it back on the warmer, dropped coffee into the machine, and switched it on.

Grey had already cleaned up most of the mess from this morning's breakfast, but she took out another cloth and wet it, then wiped down the counters again. She rearranged the wrapped muffins in the basket and brought out more coffee cups and sugar packets. Taking the wet cloth with her, she wiped off the rest of the counter tops in the lobby before heading back.

"Grey? Are you in there?" she called, poking her head in the door.

"I am in need of your assistance," he yelled back. "Would you kindly give me a hand in the bedroom?"

She chuckled. That was weird, but she'd worked with Grey long enough to know that he wasn't up to anything untoward. "What happened?"

"Please do not ask embarrassing questions."

June glanced at the front door just to make sure no one was coming in and went into the apartment. She headed through the living room and peered at the closed bedroom door. "Are you sure that you're decent in there? You don't want to give an old lady a heart attack, you know."

"I'm decent," he said. The tone of his voice sounded more

annoyed than anything else so she opened the door only to be rushed by three dogs, a yapping chihuahua named Brutus and two bloodhounds, Lady and Tramp, who were very happy to be released.

"Shoot," she said. "I didn't shut the main door." She looked around for him, knowing he was here even if she couldn't see him.

"They'll be fine."

"Where are you?"

"Come to the other side of the bed."

June saw his head first and the scowl on his face was priceless. "What have you done? How did you get yourself stuck like that?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Grey said.

She could barely contain her laughter, especially when she realized that he wasn't hurt or dying. Grey was lying on his left side, his right arm and shoulder under the bed. He looked as if he'd twisted himself around several times, but she couldn't understand how he had gotten himself trapped in that position.

"You really have to tell me what happened here. How am I supposed to help you escape if I don't know what's going on?"

He sagged to the floor. "It's quite embarrassing."

"As long as there isn't a dead body or drugs under there, it's just crazy, not embarrassing. Why is your hand stuck in the underside of your bed?"

Grey refused to look at her. "The fault belongs to Brutus. He trapped himself within its confines."

"Didn't I just see him run past me?"

"Yes you did, but of course that was after I released him from the clutches of the dreaded box springs," Grey said. "Until this morning, I was unaware of a hole in the underside. Of course, it is quite probable that my dear, precious beasts created the very hole that trapped the tiny dog. Brutus climbed inside and couldn't find his way out."

"I see." June was still having trouble containing her laughter.

"Yes. I returned to the apartment after checking out an extraordinary number of guests ..." He looked up at her. "You must have put a sign out on the highway last night. That was the best

regular night's business we've ever had. Be that as it may, when I opened the door to my apartment, I heard dear Brutus whining and crying. Lady and Tramp dashed back and forth, trying to let me know that their tiny brother was in great distress. At that point, I hurried to find the problem and discovered what my little beast had done."

"That explains why you are on the floor, but how did you get stuck?"

"This is where we enter the ridiculous stage of the story."

The insistent ringing of the bell at the front counter startled June.

"I'm sorry," she said, still trying not to laugh. "I should probably help our guest."

With his free hand, Grey waved for her to go. June was relieved to see that Brutus and Lady had curled up on the sofa in Grey's living room. At least she only needed to track down the third pup. As she went into the lobby, she pulled the door to the apartment closed behind her.

"I'm so sorry," June said to the young man at the front counter. "Are you ready to check out?"

"I was ready three minutes ago," he muttered.

"I do apologize, but appreciate that you rang the bell to let me know you were here. We had a small emergency in the back. Let's see, you registered as Logan Avery, if I recall." June tapped his name into the computer and waited for him to nod or say something in response. When he stood staring at her, she said, "I'm right, aren't I?"

"That's a good memory."

June smiled, typed again and printed the invoice. Pulling it out of the printer, she placed it in front of him. "I took five percent off your bill because I made you wait just now. I do apologize for that. I hope the rest of your stay with us was pleasant."

Logan Avery sucked in a deep breath and handed her a credit card. "That wasn't necessary."

She swiped the card, waited for it to clear, and handed it back to him. After the receipt printed, she placed it on the counter with a pen. The amount that she had refunded was negligible, but the fact

that she'd been able to stop his bad behavior in its tracks was worth it ... and all with a smile. "We strive to offer the best service you will find in the area. I hope you choose to stay with us again when you come through Bellingwood."

He nodded, picked up the paperwork and his card, then bent to pick up a suitcase from the floor. "Is the coffee fresh?" he asked.

"I just made it twenty minutes ago, and help yourself to a muffin." June watched him head for the coffee and typed a few notes into his file so they could track what she had done. Before she went back into the apartment, she had to find the other dog.

The startled look on young Mr. Avery's face when he wandered over to the fireplace told June exactly where the dog had gotten to. When the fire was going, it was a favorite place for the dogs to sleep. She'd long since moved the dog bed back to Grey's apartment, but evidently, Tramp felt the need for company.

"Did you know there's a dog here?" the young man asked.

June made her way to him. "I do now. He escaped from the apartment and thinks he needs a fire in the fireplace." She put her hand on the dog's collar. "Come on, Tramp. Your dad is going to wonder where you are."

When he stayed put, she tugged. "Tramp. Come."

He was usually responsive to her commands. She tried once more. "Tramp. Come." Since he still didn't want to obey, she finally bent over and lifted his big bloodhound ear and whispered, "Treat."

That got his attention and he lumbered to his feet. She kept her hand on his collar and the two went behind the counter. She opened the door into the apartment and followed him, closing it as they went through. Tramp sat down in front of the cupboard where his treat container resided and June shook her head. "You are a smart boy, even if you don't like to obey."

At the sound of the container being opened, Brutus and Lady yipped and barked while running into the kitchen.

"I don't know if I should reward you all, especially since you managed to put your father in a precarious position," June said. She handed a large treat to each of the big dogs and took out a much smaller treat for the dainty Brutus.

"I found my own way out," Grey said, coming into the kitchen. Blood streamed from his elbow and forearm into a towel.

"Grey," June gasped. "What did you do?"

"The only way I could release myself from that spring was to rip my way out." He shuddered. "This hurts like freakin' hell."

June bit her lips together. The man's speech patterns were usually quite formal. He had to be in pain for him to curse like that. She turned water on in the sink, bringing it to a tepid temperature. "I've never understood why, but every time I see a wound, it must be washed. Can you tolerate this?"

The beginning of the tear in his skin was on the back of his elbow and traveled across the front of the forearm, stopping about halfway down.

"I'll try," Grey said. "Please tell me that you don't believe this requires a trip to the hospital."

June looked over her glasses at him. "When was your last tetanus shot?"

"Two years ago," he responded. "Does that get me out of trouble?"

She nodded. "I'll get the first aid kit. Don't move. You've dripped blood all over the floor."

The only problem with that was that the dogs were lapping their tongues across the kitchen floor, making sure that nothing was left.

"Well that's disgusting." June shook her head and went back out to the main lobby where she knew there was a fully stocked first aid kit. She rustled through it, took out an antiseptic spray, a roll of gauze strips and tape, and went back to Grey. He'd managed to get another towel out of the drawer next to the sink and was patting the wound dry. The blood flow had slowed significantly, except for the largest gougé at the base of his upper arm, next to the elbow.

"I can't reach that."

"I've got it. Sit down." She pointed at the table and he sat. "Now, are you going to ever do something like that again?" June asked.

"No, ma'am. Brutus can find his way out on his own."

"Good boy." She patted his shoulder. "What am I going to do with you?"

He chuckled. "You wouldn't have wanted to be around when I was playing hockey. There was much more blood than this."

"I wouldn't have expected such violence in a man such as you."

"All part of the game." Grey winced as she pressed gauze into the wound.

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine. You know, I assured the beasts that you would arrive soon to rescue us."

"How long were you stuck like that?"

"Only five or ten minutes. I do appreciate your punctuality, June."

"It's my superpower." She finished wrapping the arm. "That is an ugly cut. If I were you, I'd ..."

He put his hand up. "You aren't me and I've had much worse. This will heal in no time."

"Let me change the bandage again before I go home this evening." She placed the gauze and tape on the table in front of him. "I've not gotten to mother you before. Let's not do it again."

Grey smiled and took her hand. "I'll do my best." He flinched as he tried to bend his arm. "That's going to put a crimp in my day."

"You just tell me what you need and I'll do what I can to help."

"No," he said. "I must learn to work through it. This is nothing."

June reached out to press her fingers on the wound again, then snapped her hand back before she made contact.

"I saw that," he said.

"Oh, the temptation."

The bell on the front counter dinged again.

"Go ahead. I'll be fine." Grey stood and walked with her to the doorway. "I'm glad you work here, June. Thank you."

She glanced out and nodded at the guests standing there, two small children and their parents. "Thank you for entertaining me this morning."

Book 18 - #3

Let's Go Out

"Polly's going to take you to the ballfields after school today," Elva said. She put a bowl of cereal in front of her oldest son, Sammy. "Show me your numbers."

He held the meter out so she could read it.

"Good job," Elva said. She bent over and kissed his forehead. "I'm proud of you."

Sammy worked hard to stay ahead of his diabetes. It wasn't easy - he wanted to do what every other boy in his class did, but of all her children, he was the one who took responsibility for himself. On the other hand, Ana hated managing her asthma. It infuriated her when she had to slow down because she had trouble breathing. But they managed.

Elva's three oldest played soccer after school. She and Polly traded moving them around. Noah played soccer with Sammy, and Elijah played baseball. Luckily the practices and games were all held in the same location.

Little Matty wasn't interested in either soccer or baseball. He couldn't get enough of the horses at his Uncle Eliseo's barn. When the kids discovered that there were going to be horse barns going up at the house, Matty was the most excited. Gabby and Ana thought it would be fun - especially if they could bring their friends out. Sammy thought it was cool, but Matty wanted a horse all his own. He was a boy after Elva's passion.

She did her best not to spend much time with the big Percherons at Sycamore House. She didn't want to fall in love with them. They weren't hers. Besides, Eliseo had them so well trained, they didn't need anything she had to offer.

At this point, Elva wasn't even sure that she remembered what it took to spend time with problem horses. Those days on her father's farm were in the past — far in the past. So much had

happened in her life between the day she left home and today.

"Can I have some more cereal for my milk?" Gabby asked, interrupting Elva's train of thought.

"We aren't starting that this morning."

"Then I'll have to do this." Gabby brought the bowl up to her lips, daring her mother to scold her.

"Do it," Ana whispered. She patted the table. "Do it. Do it."

The boys picked up the chant. "Do it. Do it."

Elva crossed her arms and looked down at Gabby. Her daughter lifted her eyebrows to look up, lowered them and put the bowl back on the table.

"Chicken," Ana said.

Elva put a firm hand on Ana's shoulder. "You shouldn't encourage bad behavior in anyone, especially when I'm standing right here. You know what that means, don't you?"

Ana slumped in her seat. "Fine." She picked up the dirty dishes from the table and scuffed her feet across the floor as she carried them to the dishwasher. "Hey. You didn't put these away. There are still clean dishes in here."

"Hmm," Elva said. "Guess that's what happens when you are in trouble."

Sammy giggled until Elva put her hand on his shoulder. "Since you and your brother were part of the problem, you can help your sister empty the dishwasher. Now go."

"Aw. Come on. We didn't start it," Sammy whined.

Elva just stood there, saying nothing. The kids were pretty good most of the time. She didn't have any complaints. She'd raised them by herself. Their father had rarely been at home, much less taken time to interact with them. At least now, with Eliseo in the house, there was another adult who bothered to pay attention to them. They loved their uncle. She couldn't believe how easily they'd accepted him, scars and all. None of them were afraid to touch him or give him a quick kiss on his cheek.

The boys picked up their bowls and walked across the room to help their sister. Gabby giggled. She opened her mouth to say something, took one look at her mother and closed her mouth just

as quickly.

"Good girl," Elva said. "But since you tried to get away with something you know I don't like right in front of me, I think you should help, too. Go on."

The kids all had plenty of chores to do around the house, both inside and out. Elva was glad to take on responsibility for the kitchen. She was teaching all four how to cook. None of her kids would go out into the world without knowing their way around spices and flavors. With Sammy's diabetes, they'd all learned more about healthy eating. The younger three paid more attention to what was safe for him than he did some days.

While they ran around the kitchen putting things away, Elva rinsed out a dishrag and cleaned the counter and then the kitchen table. She couldn't wait to get them off to school today. As nervous as she was about training horses again, she couldn't wait. Every day she didn't have to wait tables at the Alehouse downtown, she cleared more brush off the land where they were planning to build the barns.

Eliseo and his friend, Ralph Bedford, had brought two of the Percherons out to pull trees down. Then she and Eliseo spent several days with chainsaws cutting them into pieces. He'd brought the bobcat out from Sycamore House and taught her how to use it. The logs that could be cut into firewood went in one section of the property and the rest she dumped out back. Things had been so wet lately they hadn't burned the pile, but Eliseo promised the kids it would happen soon.

Every day that Elva traversed the land with that bobcat or walked through it picking up stray branches and sticks, she felt herself relax. Sometimes it felt like a calm before the storm because of the excitement building inside her. At night she slept better than she had in years. Her kids were happy, and she was preparing to do something that she never dreamed she'd be able to do.

"Get your backpacks," she said. "Gabby, put your shoes on, please. I'll meet you at the back door in ..." Elva pointed at the clock above the kitchen cabinets, "... eight minutes. The last one there sits on the hump in the back seat."

They had worked out a plan for who got to ride shotgun to school. Each kid had their own day of the week and on Fridays, the one with the most checkmarks beside their chores list got the honor. There was a lot of catch-up cleaning and work on Thursday nights before bedtime, which was just fine with Elva. She worked the evening shift on Fridays and Saturdays and appreciated having all of the work done so Eliseo didn't have to manage the kids.

"Can I go see the horses after school?" Matty was at the kitchen door, backpack hanging down beside him. It was his standard question every morning.

"That's up to Polly," Elva said. If his sisters and brother didn't have ball practice, they all walked down to the barn. Those were his favorite afternoons. "You really are my boy, aren't you."

Matty gave her a confused look. "Of course I am. Who else would be my mommy?"

"No one. No one at all. It's just that you love those horses so much, just like your mother."

"I like Tom and Huck, too. They're short like me."

She chuckled. "We might have to get a donkey or two out here when the barns are built."

"But I want a horse."

"Oh you'll have a horse, sweet boy. I promise. You might have to share it with your sisters until we can afford more than one, but you will have your own."

"Will you have one, too?"

She nodded as she thought back to the horses she'd loved. She never fell in love with the easily tamed, passive horses. Her favorites were always the ones who fought and fought for control. It was almost as if they wanted to make sure that she earned their trust; they weren't giving it up easily. But once they'd broken through together, those horses were hers.

A tear fell from one eye as she wondered what had happened to those animals after her parents died. Elva had taken off as soon as she could, tired of being under her parents' control. She wanted to make her own life, to live the way she wanted to live.

She was as bad as some of those rebellious horses, but no one

had ever spent time trying to gain her trust. She married her husband, Larry, because she'd gotten pregnant. He was a nice enough man, but he was too much like those easily tamed horses that she never respected. When he had an affair and let her and the kids go, it hurt, but not as much as some might think. The only thing she had to come to grips with was that she'd given up her whole self to that fake life she'd lived with him.

It was Eliseo ... her brother ... who had finally given her the time she needed to trust again. They fought a lot in those first few weeks she'd been in Bellingwood, but he never pushed her harder than she could handle. People in town thought he was a quiet, nice person. They didn't know the steel that was inside that man. She was so proud of him and now she wanted to make him proud of her. She'd work hard for that.

Today was Matty's day to be in the front seat, so she sent him on out to the car. Elva put her hand on the back door handle when she heard the other three come running through the house. First Ana, then Sammy and then Gabriela.

"Matty's already in the car," Elva said, pushing the door open. "Go on."

"Do I have to?" Gabby asked, whining.

"You had eight minutes to get here. After an entire year of this, I don't know why you're whining now."

"Because I hate that bump."

"You'll live." Elva pulled the main door shut behind her and let the screen door close on its own. "You all have everything you need?"

Book 18 - #4

While You Sleep

Mark kissed Alexander's cheek before putting him in the playpen, then bent over to kiss his wife.

Sal was not a morning person and it looked like Alexander was going to be more like his father, up at the crack of dawn, ready to greet the day.

Now that the boy was older, Mark enjoyed spending these early morning hours with him. Sal was thrilled when Mark started taking this shift. He made sure Alexander was fed and clean, played with him in the living room, and now that the weather was warmer, took him outside while the dogs played and ran in the back yard.

The two dachshunds had already climbed back up on the bed with Sal and were doing their best impressions of slugs, burrowing into the blanket beside their mother.

He knew Sal was mostly awake, though she'd pulled the blanket up to her shoulders and buried her face in the pillow. Alexander would give her another twenty minutes or so before his playing became too noisy even for her.

Mark stood in the doorway of their bedroom, something he did nearly every morning. His wife was even more beautiful when she slept, and their son was pure perfection. He was such a lucky man.

The first time he met Sal, he knew that he wanted to know her better — whatever it took. She'd been such a surprise. From Polly's description, he had expected to meet a wealthy, spoiled princess who had little time for the slow, laid-back lifestyle he loved here in Iowa. That had been far from her reality.

Now, Sal knew what she liked and was intent on getting it. She was focused and driven, but she was also generous and kind. The woman was an absolute live-wire. He assumed that at least forty percent of her blood consisted of one hundred percent caffeine. When she was awake, she moved ninety miles an hour in every

direction, but once she wound down, she became easygoing and snuggly, even. She also deliberately slowed her actions whenever Alexander was in her arms, and sometimes Mark caught her gazing at her son with a face that radiated love and adoration.

It was all of those moments that still surprised him. They were some of the many reasons he loved this woman. Sometimes he couldn't believe she had chosen to give up her cosmopolitan life in Boston for him. They'd gone back and forth about how to make a relationship work across the country. She hadn't been prepared to leave her job and he couldn't imagine giving up his practice. But Mark didn't want to ask her to give up the life she loved and had begun researching veterinary positions in Massachusetts, though he could barely stomach the thought of living in a big city again.

Then out of the blue, Sal told him she was done fighting it — she wanted to come to Bellingwood. He chuckled to himself. If Polly hadn't been living here, he wasn't sure Sal would have been so ready for the move. But then, if Polly wasn't here, he'd never have met this amazing woman. His deepest darkest fear was that she would wake up someday and realize that her life with him wasn't enough.

When she invested in the coffee shop downtown, his heart settled some. That seemed to be the thing she missed the most. He knew the hustle and bustle of activity stirred her to life, even if Sal insisted that she was becoming accustomed to the slower pace of Bellingwood.

Mark's family had been hesitant about him marrying Sal. He gave his head a quick shake. That wasn't it. They were worried that she wouldn't make the transition to rural Iowa life well. A smile crossed his face. Bellingwood really wasn't all that rural. It could be if that's what you wanted, but there wasn't a single community in this state that didn't have access to theaters, museums and excellent restaurants and shopping. It might require a short drive, but even when he'd lived in the Twin Cities, things that were important required you to leave your neighborhood and drive. You just traveled on city streets rather than peaceful country roads for forty-five minutes.

They'd talked about finding an acreage in the country so he could have horses and maybe even a few goats. Looking at Sal sleeping so peacefully he thought she'd make a great country mother. No, he couldn't even think that with a straight face. When he first brought it up, the look of terror and shock on her face was priceless. He'd backed far away from that conversation as soon as he understood what she would lose. No one else knew, though, that she had returned to the conversation the next night, apologizing for letting her fears stop her from trying something new. If he really wanted to move out of town, she'd support him. He loved her too much to ask that of her again. Maybe someday she would seriously consider a move to the country, but that would surprise him.

The first time Sal's mother came to Bellingwood, she was aghast at how simply they lived. Where was the nanny to take care of Alexander or the housekeeper to help Sal around the house? Mark joked about hiring a cook because of Sal's less-than-stellar kitchen skills and received a swift kick under the table. If Mark hadn't met Sal's father, he would have had to assume she was adopted. That old biddy was a shrew. She'd criticized everything about their life, couching her nastiness in polite conversation, as if the entire world didn't understand exactly what she was saying. The only person she was kidding was herself.

Now that he thought about it, Iowa was probably an escape for Sal from an interminable lifetime of torture with that woman in charge of the rack. Sal didn't say much about her life in Boston any longer. When they'd first gotten to know each other, she told him more than he cared to know about the woman who raised his wife. How she'd grown into such a self-confident young woman, he didn't know.

Sal had told him that a lot changed the first day of college when she met Polly. After years of living to please her mother, she discovered that she could be her own best self without any regrets. He wondered if she'd ever told Polly how much her life changed because they lived together all those years and continued their friendship even after leaving the university. It had nearly killed Sal when Polly moved back to Iowa. The one person she trusted to

show her what normal looked like was gone and Sal had done her best to stay out of her mother's clutches, but it hadn't been easy.

He smiled again, wanting to lie back down beside her and gather that strong confident woman into his arms. She had so many broken bits and pieces within her, but Sal was determined to find her way. She wanted to love freely and exuberantly without fear of rejection. Polly showed her every day what that looked like and sometimes Sal would talk about her friend for hours in the evenings. The funny thing was, Mark watched the two of those girls when they were together and saw how envious Polly was of her tall, brilliant, gorgeous friend. If only Polly knew. Both girls would be surprised at how they perceived each other.

"What are you doing over there?" Sal mumbled, lifting herself up on the bed. She turned over and dropped her hand into the playpen beside her to stroke Alexander's hair.

"Just watching you sleep."

"That's creepy. Aren't you going to be late to remove an abscess or castrate some poor pig?" She blinked her eyes, trying to come awake. "My friends at home think you play with cute puppies and kitties all day long. I hate to tell them what you actually do."

"I run into cute puppies and kitties out on the farms," he said.

She worked to untangle herself from the sheets and the two dachshunds, who refused to move away from her. "I keep telling these dogs they're going to be the death of me. So really, why are you still here?"

"I wasn't joking. Just watching you sleep. Do you know how much I love you?"

Sal peered at him and pushed her long black hair back, tucking it behind her ears. "It's a good thing. Otherwise what we've been doing around here would be quite scandalous." She sat up on the edge of the bed and stretched her arms, yawning. "I'm feeling awfully sexy right now. Wanna get you some of this?"

Mark walked over, slid between the bed and playpen and sat beside her. He pulled her into his arms, crushing her against him. "I'd take you any time. You are every dream of mine come true. I love you, Sal."

"I love you, too." Sal pushed back from him and blinked again, then rubbed her eyes. "What brought all of this on?"

"Just watching you sleep. You make me happy."

Reaching down to pick Alexander up, Sal leaned toward him. "I'm not a normal wife."

"I wouldn't want anything different. You're perfect for me."

"I think we're pretty perfect together." She bounced Alexander in her arms. "We make pretty babies, that's for sure."

"Didn't mean to wake you up," Mark said. "I'll go to work."

Sal lifted her face so he could kiss her. He held her for just a few more moments and then got up and headed back for the door.

"How often do you do that?" Sal asked.

"What?"

"Watch me sleep?"

"Every once in a while."

She shook her head. "You go to work and be good today. We'll talk about this later."

"I can't wait."

Book 18 - #5

Ooh Baby, Baby

"You're home!" Two of his boys — Ryan and Joshua — ran up the basement steps and stood in front of Stu Decker.

He patted their heads and nudged them forward through the foyer.

"Let Daddy change his clothes," his wife said, coming out from their home office. "He'll find you when he's done."

The boys ran back downstairs. He didn't know what they were up to today, but was sure he'd find out later.

Mandy followed him up the steps and blocked the bedroom doorway. He smiled and kissed her. It was their thing.

"How was your day?" she asked, dropping onto the bed.

Stu shrugged. "Just another day at the office, you know." He spun the lock on the safe, opened it and put his gun inside, then closed it again. "How about you?"

"Same here, but then mine literally was at the office." She worked as an administrative assistant for a small medical practice in Boone. "So you didn't catch any bad guys?"

"Sent two drunks packing, caught a kid shoplifting, broke up a fight at a bar, and stepped in front of a woman who was threatening her husband with a cast iron fry pan. Run of the mill stuff, I guess."

Mandy had been picking at the quilt on the bed and looked up at him with a grin. "Are you kidding about the frying pan?"

"Nope. Not kidding. She was steaming hot mad. Found out he was sleeping with some chick down the road."

"Who called you?"

"He did. She chased him outside. He locked himself in his truck, but she stood in the driveway waving that fry pan and he couldn't back out without running her down. Funniest thing I've seen in a while. This big old hulk of a guy with tats and leathers, terrified of a woman about your size. I had no trouble understanding why. She was scary."

"What did you do?"

"I took her frying pan away and told him to find someplace else to stay tonight. And not with the girlfriend."

Mandy laughed. "Do you think you'll be back there tomorrow dealing with the fallout?"

"I don't know. By the time I left, the wife was sobbing and crying. I think she got most of her mad out. Where's Brett?"

"He stayed at Alicia's. They're building a fort in the back yard. Jackson begged him to stay until after dinner. I'll pick him up later."

Alicia was Mandy's sister. She picked the boys up every day after school and took them home until Mandy or Stu gathered them after work. It was a pretty sweet deal. The boys were friends with their cousins and had a safe place to be every day. "A fort?"

"Yeah. Charles is helping them."

Charles was Alicia's husband. "So it's a real fort?"

"I guess. I didn't go outside to look at it. But I heard a saw and hammering."

"How about I pick Brett up tonight instead. I want to see what they're doing."

"That's cool."

Stu pulled his shorts on and slid a t-shirt over his head, then sat down beside his wife on the bed. "Is something going on? You aren't your normal self."

She took his hand. "I have something to tell you."

"Something good or something bad?"

Mandy nodded slowly. "That's a good question. I don't know how to answer you. It all depends."

"On what?"

"On how busy you'll be after Christmas?"

He laughed. "That all depends on Polly."

"Polly Giller?" Mandy looked at him, confused.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That was a dumb comment. Now that Aaron assigned Tab to take Polly's calls, I don't have to be first up for the murders in the county. Not that there isn't plenty to deal with. Sometimes it's even bigger than women with cast iron frying pans." He grinned at her. "So what's going on at Christmas? Are

you planning a trip? Do I need to schedule vacation?"

"Vacation isn't a bad idea," Mandy said. "If you haven't kicked me out of the house by then."

He shook his head. "What are you talking about?"

Mandy took both of his hands. She touched his thumb and said, "May." Then she went ahead, touching each finger as she counted off the months. When she got to the ninth finger and said, "January — after Christmas," he stared at his fingers.

"That's nine," she said, breaking his concentration.

"Nine?" He grabbed her hands. "You're pregnant again?"

"Yeah. Are you okay with this? I know we said we were done after Ryan was born."

"He's five," Stu breathed. "I hope I haven't forgotten how to do this."

She laughed. "Me too. Are you okay?"

He pulled her close. "Of course I'm okay. But what about you? You're the one who has to take care of this baby for the next nine months. I can't do that for you. Are you ready for this again?"

"Probably more than you. I've kind of thought maybe I was for the last couple weeks, but didn't want to say anything until I knew."

"So you're sure?"

"I peed on a stick and then Doctor Lawrence did blood tests. They came back positive. We're pregnant."

He drew her back in a hug. "I'm excited. What's our odds of getting a girl this time?"

"Fifty-fifty," she said, laughing. "Sorry I can't guarantee it. But you'd be a great daddy to a little girl. Think how scared her would-be suitors will be. Big bad deputy. None of them will show up at the door to take her out on a date."

"Damn straight. She won't date until she's forty-two. By then I won't have to worry about it because she'll have long since moved out and run away from the crazy daddy with a gun. How do you want to tell the boys?"

"I don't know. Do you want to tell them tonight?"

"Let's wait until it's a little more obvious on you," he said, tapping her belly. "Brett is old enough to get it, but Josh and Ryan

— who knows?"

"They were old enough to pay attention when Alicia had Brady."

Stu sat back and looked at her. "Oh!" he said. "That's why you said something about me kicking you out."

"I can't stop myself, you know. Those crazy hormones mess with me. I wake up in the morning and swear that I'm going to keep them under control. By the time we're home at the end of the day I know that I'm being a bitch, but I can't help it."

"It isn't every day of the pregnancy. We'll be fine. But I have to tell you, when you were pregnant with Brett I thought you'd been taken over by an alien invasion force. I didn't know you had that much mean inside you."

"Dark days," she said, laughing. "Those were dark days. It wasn't as bad with the other two, was it?"

This time it was Stu's turn to laugh. "It's probably best that you don't remember all of the details. I'll just take the boys over to Alicia's or to your mom's house when it's really bad and come home with chocolate and flowers. Your family knows the drill. Have you told them yet?"

Mandy look at him in surprise. "Of course not. I wanted to tell you first."

"Why don't you call Alicia and tell her that I'm coming over early to get Brett. Then you can tell her your news. You know you won't be able to sleep tonight until you've talked it out with her."

"That's okay?"

"Have you started supper?" he asked.

"No," Mandy looked at the floor, then back at him. "Sorry. I know it's my night, but I couldn't think straight until I talked to you. I'll figure something out."

"Don't worry about it. Brett and I will drive into town and pick up pizza and maybe even some ice cream. We should celebrate, don't you think?"

Tears spurted from Mandy's eyes.

"Come here," he said, scooting so he could envelop her. She leaned against him as he wrapped his arms around her. "It's going to be wonderful."

"I was nervous all day about telling you. We weren't planning for this. I didn't know what you'd say."

Stu kissed the top of her head. "Mandy Decker, you and I are in this for the long haul — no matter what comes at us — good or bad. This right here? This is good stuff."

"It really is, isn't it?"

"So if it's a girl, where are we going to put her?"

"I don't know," Mandy replied, resting against his chest.

"What should we name her?"

She tipped her head up trying to look at him. "Are you kidding me?"

"Do you think she'll look like you or me?"

"You. Definitely you. But what if it's a boy?"

"I'll hire Henry Sturtz to build bunk beds. That one's easy. The rest will all come together." He kissed her head again. "This is going to be a heckuva Christmas present."

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>