

Book Twenty-Three 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 23 — That's What Friends Are For — 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.

Vignette #1 What Is Man?

"Judy, wake up." Reuben shook her arm. "It's time to go."

Judy Greene opened her eyes to peer at her husband who was standing over her. "What? What's going on?"

"You said we were going to start watching the space station again. Remember?"

She nodded while blinking her eyes to clear them. "That's right. It's clear out?"

"Beautiful night for sky-watching. Come on."

"Let me change my clothes."

"Honey, we aren't going to see anyone. You look fine."

Judy sat up and rubbed at her eyes. She hadn't been asleep that long, but she'd been having the strangest dreams. Even as she thought about them, they began to dissipate and the more she tried to remember what they were, the further away they flew. "At least my shoes, then."

"Right here," he said, handing her a pair of leather slip-on sandals. He also held an old, soft Navajo blanket they'd bought years ago in Arizona. "Just in case it's cool."

"What is up with this Iowa weather?" Judy asked as she followed him through the apartment. "I don't remember July ever being this mild when I was young. This year we had a horrible hot and humid spring and now this."

"No complaining." He took her hand after they got downstairs and slipped out the back door of the building.

She looked up into the sky and took in the multitude of stars. "What a beautiful night," Judy whispered.

They got into their car and he started it up, then headed out. "I feel like I'm a kid again, sneaking out of the house."

"I won't tell anyone if you won't," Judy responded, craning her neck to peer up into the sky. "You know this is why our kids think we're odd." "Oh, they love us. At least they know the constellations and how to find the planets we can see."

Bellingwood was peaceful and quiet as they drove through town. They didn't see another car at all. When they'd lived in Oakland, their nightly treks out of town to look at the stars were long jaunts through traffic, no matter the time of day or night.

Judy relaxed into her seat and snuggled against the blanket she held. Things were coming together. They'd been working so hard these last how many months? Seven at least. They were finally settled into the apartment, the gallery downstairs had opened a few weeks ago during Bellingwood Days, and Polly thought the Bed and Breakfast would be open by Thanksgiving. They weren't looking forward to moving their things again, but both of them certainly enjoyed being out in the country every day. Once they got settled into their rooms at the Bed and Breakfast, they'd make it their home. And it was going to be a lovely home.

Right now the gallery was open by appointment only. They both knew it would take time to attract artists and clients. Beryl Watson had graciously given them three paintings to hang on the walls and a local landscape photographer had a series of prints hanging there as well. Reuben planned to meet with a woman who made strikingly gorgeous pottery in the next couple of weeks. They weren't in any hurry. When it came together, it came together. No sense worrying over things.

Reuben drove into the driveway of the Bed and Breakfast and pulled up in front of the walkway leading back to the greenhouse. There was a pretty path leading to the creek and Dick Mercer had built a sweet little bridge that led to the other side. There had been enough rain lately that the creek danced and played across the rocks. Sometimes Judy heard bullfrogs singing in the early evening. There were no trees on the other side of the creek and they'd be able to view everything they wanted to see.

She smiled when she realized that her stomach fluttered with excitement. This was silly. They'd traveled to see the stars hundreds of times throughout their marriage.

Reuben reached into the back seat and took out the lantern. "Are

you ready?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm excited."

He chuckled. "I am too. I don't know why. It's not like this is a first date or even our first time doing this."

"But it feels different somehow."

"We'd better hurry. The ISS should be passing over in about ten minutes."

Judy clutched the blanket as she got out of the car and met Reuben on the sidewalk. He took her hand again and they walked past the greenhouse.

Swinging the lantern, he lit the path in front of them, bordered by white and yellow alyssum. Judy knew this yard well now. She'd been over every inch of it as she brought it back to life. She knew where the roots of the big old elm tree would trip you if you weren't paying attention. She hugged that elm tree every time she passed it. She remembered the devastation of Dutch Elm disease in the 1970s. Watching the stately trees that lined streets throughout Bellingwood, arching their branches to create a gorgeous canopy, come down had been horrible. But this tree had lived through that and stood tall and proud.

Reuben motioned for her to precede him over the little bridge and held the lantern up so she could see. The moon wasn't high in the sky, but the stars ... my goodness, the stars! There were no street lights out here, no artificial light at all other than the lantern Reuben carried. As soon as she put the blanket on the ground, he'd douse that and they would be surrounded by nothing but the darkness of the night and splatters of light across the sky.

"Where's it coming from tonight?" Judy asked, her voice a reverent whisper.

He pointed off to the southwest. "The chart says we should be able to see it for about six minutes."

They'd had these conversations more times than she could remember.

Psalm 8 would reverberate through their minds. "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the

stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?"

"We're so small," she said softly.

"And yet we reach for the skies," he replied. He pointed at a tiny streak of light moving across the sky. "People just like you and me are out there among the stars right now. Who knows what they're doing. Do they think about those of us who are here on this globe looking up as they pass by?"

Judy couldn't help herself. She reached a hand up and gave a small wave, then giggled and leaned against her husband. "Maybe this year we should finally invest in a small telescope. Wouldn't it be fun to see things we've never seen in all these years?"

"I could create a mount for it," he said, his head rubbing against hers as he nodded. "When we live out here, we'll only be a few steps away rather than having to drive here."

"This was the shortest drive we've ever taken and I did it in my pajamas." Judy laughed as she looked down at herself. Only in Bellingwood could she get away with this and not worry about being seen. Sure, she could have gotten away with it in Oakland, but only because people expected the natives there to be a little off-kilter.

They watched the station fade away into the blackness and Reuben lay back on the blanket. "I'll never be tired of looking at the stars. Ancient Greeks, Native Americans, Mayans, Neolithic people in Great Britain. They all looked up at these same stars to find answers."

She huffed a small laugh. "We have so many more answers, but they still entrance us, don't they?"

"We don't have all the answers. I wonder what they'll reveal to future generations."

Judy lay down beside him and scooted over until she lay against him. "God gave us infinite curiosity and then made sure we had an infinite universe to discover. Seems pretty awesome."

"That's a good word for it." Reuben turned her head so he could kiss her lips. "Thank you for coming out here with me tonight."

"It's the beginning of something wonderful."

Vignette #2 Cookie Monsters

"Me next," Elijah said as he pushed Noah out of the way.

Cat Harvey put her hand on his shoulder. "Slow down. You'll all get a turn, and then Noah is in charge of it."

Elijah flipped the lever on the mixer and watched the beater go round and round. "I wish I was in charge."

"Another time," Cat said. She waited for him to turn it off, then step aside for Caleb and then JaRon to take their turns at the mixer. The last thing she wanted was for the kids to play with it while ingredients were in the bowl. Maybe one day she'd let them destroy the kitchen, but not today. There just wasn't enough time for the cleanup that would require.

When she turned back around, Elijah emerged from the pantry struggling with a ten-pound bag of flour. "What are you doing?" she asked with a laugh.

"Everything uses flour. Whenever Polly makes cookies, she gets this out. It's heavy."

She cackled. "I'd guess so, but we'll start with what's in the canister today. If we need more, we'll open the bag. Here, I'll take it." Cat pushed it to the back of the counter out of the way and brought the canister over to the island. "JaRon, do you know where the measuring cups are? Get them all out. Caleb, can you find Polly's measuring spoons?"

The two little boys looked at her and shook their heads no.

"Elijah, do you know where they are?"

"They're right here." He opened a drawer at the end of the island. Taking out a stack of white measuring cups, he handed them to JaRon. "The spoons are in this drawer." He opened it and pointed, letting Caleb take them out.

She winked at him. "Thank you. Okay, Elijah, you're in charge of the recipe. Which one should we start with?"

"Snickerdoodles," he said with a giggle. "Snickerdoodle. Doodle.

Doodle. Doodle. That's funny."

"Climb on up, boys. Here's a bowl for the dry ingredients. Elijah, bring the recipe and help me in the pantry. We need to find what?"

He followed her over, holding the recipes she'd printed out last night. "Flour."

"Got it."

"Cream of tartar. Is that like tartar sauce for fish sandwiches? Gross."

"No, not at all. Go on. What else."

"It says baking soda and salt and sugar and eggs and butter."

"Sugar is in one of the canisters on the counter," Cat said. "Baking soda, salt, and cream of tartar. Got it. Eggs are in the fridge and the butter is already out. Back we go."

Noah came up behind Elijah to look over his shoulder. "What do I do?"

Elijah yanked the recipe away and turned it upside down. "I'm reading this."

"Boys, we're going to make cookies, not argue. Arguing gets nothing done." Cat stared at them until Elijah sighed. The boy was terribly dramatic, but he was so stinking cute.

"Noah, you're going to cream the sugar and butter together in the mixer. Elijah, tell him how much of each."

Elijah grinned up at her. "Kinda like I'm in charge."

Cat showed the kids where the measurement marks were on the sticks of butter and waited for the two older boys to figure out how many sticks made up a cup. She helped Noah make sure the right amount was in the mixer and let him turn it on.

Caleb had lined each of the dry ingredients up in descending height in front of him. Great, an organized boy. While Elijah read out the quantities, she showed the younger two how to measure ingredients. Having to teach the basics of measurements really threw Cat, but then she realized that these boys hadn't yet done anything with fractions. For the most part, she had them match what was in the recipe to what they read on the measuring spoon.

Before they knew it, the cookies were mixed up and it was time to roll out little balls.

"Everyone into the bathroom to wash your hands again," Cat said.

"Aww, come on," Elijah moaned. "We just did that before we started."

"And now you're going to do it again."

"But I haven't done anything to get dirty," Caleb complained. "I swear."

Cat grinned at them. "Tell me," she said, pointing at each boy in turn. "Which one of you is going to lie down and die if you wash your hands again?"

Elijah's hand shot up into the air. He clutched his chest, then stepped down from the stool he'd been sitting on and fell to the ground. "I'm dying. I'm dying."

JaRon watched him, his eyes wide, then when he saw that Cat was still smiling, followed suit. Soon, all four boys were writhing around on the kitchen floor, doing their best suffering and dying bits. Cat looked at them, went to her knees, let out a wail, and fell on her back with her eyes closed and her arms outstretched.

She held perfectly still. Moments passed.

"Cat?" JaRon asked, touching her arm. "Are you in there?" She said nothing.

"Cat, are you okay?" This came from Noah, who shook her arm. "She might be really dead."

"No she isn't," Elijah said derisively. "She's just playing. She's not dead."

Cat felt him come closer. She waited.

"Cat, quit teasing us. You're scaring the little boys," he said.

She held her breath as he bent over her.

"She isn't breathing," Elijah said with a small gasp.

In a flash, she wrapped her arms around him and squeezed. "Got'cha."

He laughed and laughed and laughed. "I knew you were playing. You had them all fooled."

"Had you fooled, too." Cat sat up, still holding him close. "Okay, you've all been playing on the floor. Now you have to wash your hands before we make cookies that we're giving away. Go on."

She patted each of the boys as they filed past her to the bathroom. JaRon's little face was alight with laughter. Even Caleb came close enough for her to touch.

"You were funny," he said quietly. "That made me laugh."

Cat touched his shoulder again and watched as he did his best not to duck away. The poor child was learning to accept affection, but he struggled with it.

While they cleaned up, she filled four small bowls with sugar and rolled four cookies into balls so they'd have a size to match.

Noah came back into the kitchen, holding his hands out and away from his body. "I'm clean. What next?"

Cat grinned as each of the youngsters wandered in, holding their hands out. "I'm going to show you how to make a cookie and roll it in sugar. Then you'll put it on the cookie sheet." She'd placed a sheet between each pair of boys. "Ready?"

Wide-eyed boys nodded enthusiastically as she pulled out a small piece of dough, rolled it in her hands and dropped it into the bowl of sugar. "You try," she said.

The initial results were hilarious, with everything from tiny little peanut-sized balls to practically golf-ball-sized, and not a one of them perfectly spherical.

When Elijah popped a ball into his mouth, she gasped in shock. "Elijah!"

His eyes grew big and he grimaced. "I'm sorry."

Cat laughed. "I'm kidding. But if you eat all the dough, there won't be any cookies."

"You're mean to me today," he said, promptly snagging another sugared ball and popping it into his mouth. "I deserved that one."

Caleb held the ball he was rolling in his hands and glanced between the two of them. She could tell how badly he wanted to eat it.

"Go ahead, honey," Cat said and watched as each of the boys, including Elijah, ate a sugary ball of yummy cookie dough. "Now that you have that out of your system, don't you think we should finish these for your friends at the nursing home?"

They filled their cookie sheets and Cat put them into the oven

and turned the timer on. Having them help made this task both go faster and take longer. It took forever to get them on task, but with four boys working through the batch of dough, the cookies were shaped in no time.

She soaked a couple of washcloths and put them in front of the boys. "Clean up the messes, we're making molasses cookies next. More dough-rolling to come."

"I'm getting good at that," Noah said.

"Yes, you are," she agreed. "Why don't you and Elijah take the recipe into the pantry and see if you can find the right ingredients. Figure out what we already have on the counter here and what else we might need."

"We should sell cookies," Caleb said. "This is fun. I could do it all day."

Cat laughed. "Maybe when you're older, you can become a baker. For now, we'll give our cookies away to make people happy. How does that sound?"

"Do you think they'll taste good?" he asked her, staring at the oven window.

"Did you like the dough?"

His little head went up and down. "It was good."

"The cookies will be good too. What do you think? Will your friends at the nursing home enjoy this?" Cat took the mixer bowl out of the sudsy water and rinsed it, then handed it to JaRon.

He gave her a funny look.

Tossing a dish towel at him, she smiled. "Dry it. Then you can come over and help me measure the butter and sugar for the next batch of cookies."

"Why won't Polly let us help her make chocolate chip cookies?" Elijah asked, coming back with several spice containers.

"Would you let you help?" Cat asked. She checked the names on the containers and nodded.

"Of course! I'm good help."

"How many cookies would you eat before they went into the oven?"

He laughed again. "As many as I could."

"Me too," Caleb said.

JaRon nodded, and Noah shrugged. "It's my favorite ever," he said.

"That's why," Cat said. "You all love chocolate chip cookie dough." She bent over the island and looked at Caleb, then let loose with a loud roar. "You're cookie monsters."

Vignette #3 Fun and Games

Mark Ogden frowned as he looked at his cell phone. Why was Sal calling? She never bothered him in the middle of the day and she usually spent Tuesdays at Sweet Beans, working on one of her many writing projects. This couldn't be good.

"She did it again," Sal's frustrated voice said before she even greeted him. "Damn it, Mark. She did it again."

"Who did what?" he asked. "Where are you?"

"I'm at home. Mrs. Dobley called me in a panic and I had to run home to sign for a stupid delivery. Where are you?"

"I'm actually just pulling into the office. Do you need me? I've got time."

He could have sworn that he heard her sigh with relief.

"Do you really? I'm sorry. I know you're busy."

"Not so bad today. Seth and Marnie have everything handled at the office and there aren't any big crises out there in Farmland, USA." He swung through the parking lot and drove out the other end. He'd call Marnie after he figured out what the problem was at home. There weren't many things that Sal couldn't handle.

"Okay," he said. "Now tell me what's going on?"

"There are four huge boxes in our front yard."

"Boxes of what?"

"I think it's a stupid playset."

"Did you order something?" Mark turned a corner. Only a few more minutes and he'd be there.

Sal practically growled at him. "Do you really think I'd order something like this without talking to you first?"

"No. You're right. I know better. Where did it come from?"

She growled again, a low and deep sound. That was all the information he needed.

"Your mother?"

"Without even asking. She's going to expect me to call her and

tell her how wonderful she is for doing something so extraordinary for our children. What I want to do is call her, reach through the phone, and drag her back here kicking and screaming, then tie her up outside with a few tools until she puts it together herself."

He held back a laugh at the image of that. Prim and proper Lila Kahane tethered to the fence in their back yard. Dressed in her fancy designer shoes and perfectly tailored dress with a shop apron tied around her waist.

One more corner and Mark could see their house. Sal stood outside on the front lawn with four long brown boxes laid out beside her.

"I'm here, honey."

"Oh, thank goodness." Sal ended the call and stood waiting as he pulled into the driveway. He was barely out of the truck when her face screwed up and she burst into tears.

Mark rushed to her. "It's okay. I'll deal with these boxes," he said as he put his arms around her.

"I don't know why I'm crying. That woman frustrates me to no end. Alexander isn't old enough for a playset this size, but she doesn't care. I'm glad you're here." She held onto him for a long moment, then pushed away.

He took a well-worn bandanna from his back pocket and handed it to her.

"Thanks. I'm sorry I cried. I was so relieved to see you, I lost control."

"You aren't pregnant again, are you?"

She glared at him and snapped, "No." Then Sal gave him a grin. "At least, not yet, anyway. I thought maybe we'd wait at least a year."

Mark kissed her forehead and waited as she brushed the tears from her face. Sal blew her nose, a loud, unladylike sound. She winked at him, then held out the dirty bandanna.

"Thanks, you keep it. I'll get a fresh one before I go back to work. What is up with this?"

Sal brandished her phone. "Look. I already checked it out. That's why I'm sure it won't fit. Just look at this thing. It's a monster."

His mouth dropped open as he took in the image of a gigantic outdoor play set. A fort in the middle with a slide and a climbing wall. It had a set of monkey bars off one end and off the other end, a swing set with not one, but two swings and a glider. There looked to be a picnic table on the bottom floor of the fort and good heavens, there was a crow's nest off the clubhouse. Lila Kahane was insane.

"She didn't tell you this was coming?" he asked in disbelief.

"I'd have told her not to. Am I right? This is the most ridiculous thing you've ever seen, isn't it?"

Mark laughed out loud. "It is absolutely ridiculous. I have no idea what we're going to do with it. How much money do you think she spent?"

Sal took the phone back, swiped to another screen, and handed it over again.

"Fifteen hundred dollars?" He was aghast. "I'd rather that money went into a college fund. Fifteen hundred dollars?" Mark grabbed Sal's arm, as if to steady himself. "We don't dare return this, do we?"

She shook her head. "No. She'd never forgive us and she'd never let us live it down. Every time we saw her, she'd make some reference to the wonderful gift that we'd refused. She'd also be sure to tell Alexander and Theodore that they could have had a wonderful outdoor play set, but Mommy and Daddy were big old jerks and sent it back."

That sounded exactly like Lila, except Mark couldn't imagine the woman would deign to use the word jerk.

"What are we going to do?"

"That's why I called you. I have no idea. Whatever we do, it has to be something I can explain to Mother without her accusing me of betraying her."

"Betraying her?"

"I wish I could make you understand," Sal said, weariness filling her voice. "I wish I could make everyone understand. Everything revolves around Mother. If we don't do exactly what she wants us to do, she takes it personally. It would be one thing if she quietly stewed about it, but the woman will touch on this for the rest of her life. How many times have you heard the story about how I broke

the crystal vase that she received as a gift from Helen Claflin?"

He nodded. Whenever they were with Lila, she brought that story up and slyly watched Sal for her reaction. Sal generally apologized again for breaking something that had been so important to her mother. He didn't understand it. He'd never heard of Helen Claflin, but evidently, she'd been part of an important Boston family.

"And the time I rushed into the house with a bloody knee while she and Daddy were entertaining trustees from the hospital board?"

Mark nodded again. As Lila told the story, she'd expected Sal to be in attendance, quiet and demure. When Sal was late because of an activity at school, Lila had left a message for her daughter to stay far from the dining room and parlor - she wasn't welcome. But Sal had never seen that message and in her rush to be on time, had fallen up their front steps. Lila took her daughter's messy entrance as a personal affront and continued to remind Sal that she needed to be prepared at all times for important guests.

He took the phone from Sal again and looked at the layout of the play set. "I have an idea," he said.

She looked up at him with such gratitude in her eyes that he wanted to hold her close and never let her be wounded again by that woman.

"Why don't we built the center structure? No slide, no climbing wall. You can take Alexander up to the fort every once in a while until he's old enough to climb up by himself. We'll stow the extra pieces. When he gets older and we want to add the swing set or slide, we'll figure out how."

"Yeah?"

He looked down at the boxes and kicked at one of them, then drew his foot back. The thing was solid and heavy. "This is going to take forever to lay out and assemble. I'm betting that the parts are spread across the boxes. I won't be able to just open up one and discover that it's the fort."

"I can help you."

Mark tugged her close. "We'll do it late at night when the boys

are sleeping."

"You won't be able to see the labels on the parts if it's dark." She grinned up at him coyly. "Or maybe that's not what you mean."

"Maybe I could hire one of Sylvie's kids or even one of Polly's boys to put this thing together. That way you and I could do something more fun in the backyard late at night."

"That sounds much better. Now, how are we supposed to drag these to the backyard? I watched the guys take them off the truck. They're heavy."

"I'll figure that out. Marnie's boy, Barrett, is working at the office today." He chuckled. "Maybe he'd like to earn some extra money before school starts. He's a bright boy. He could build this. Now, what are you doing about the call to your mother?"

The grin she gave him this time was almost wicked. "I believe I will write a formal thank you note to her and put it into the mail. She didn't bother to call and let me know this was coming, I don't need to be bothered with alerting her to its arrival. I will thank her in the proper manner and then we'll be finished."

"You know you won't be finished, don't you?"

"There isn't a thing that she can say about it if everything I do is proper. That's her problem." Sal hugged him tight. "Thank you for putting up with me and my crazy mother."

"I love you. Her? Well, I love you." Mark replied as he tightened his arms around his wife.

Vignette #4 All By Myself

Tab Hudson sank into the soft wing chair in her boyfriend's office at Secret Woods Winery. She shouldn't be this exhausted. As a deputy, she prided herself on being in great shape. On the days she wasn't in the gym working out, she made sure to run at least five miles. But helping JJ work a wedding reception this afternoon had nearly destroyed her.

He'd told her to wear comfortable shoes and she thought she had, but evidently, she and her shoe collection needed to have a long discussion about what that word meant. She slid her feet out of the shoes, rubbed her toes up and down the side of the other foot and sighed in relief. How did he do this all day, every day?

JJ Roberts, the sole owner of Secret Woods Winery, after his friends, Patrick Stephens and Ryan Williamson decided to go back to their old lives, worked hard to keep the place going. He wasn't out of the woods yet, but he projected that the light at the end of the tunnel would be strong and brilliant by the end of next year.

His hostess for this weekend's events had bailed on him at the last minute. Tab didn't know the details; he hadn't said much when he called her in a panic early this morning. Of course she'd agreed to help. He needed her. But this wasn't something she enjoyed. She wasn't used to smiling and escorting half-drunk aunts and uncles back to their tables after they got lost outside on the grounds of the winery. She usually had other ways of dealing with drunks. Her jaw hurt from all the smiling.

"Hey," JJ said as he came into the office. "You were fantastic this afternoon. I can't tell you how much I appreciate you being here."

"You'd better," she said with a grin. "My feet are screaming."

He peered at her. "Are you going to be okay for this evening?"

"Can I go barefoot?" Tab shrugged. "I'll be fine. I'm a tough girl. I've been through worse."

"And tomorrow afternoon?"

She laughed. "You're killing me. But yes, I told you I would be here for all of it. I'll paste my pretty smile back on, suffer through the uncomfortable shoes, and be nice to your guests. Was everyone happy by the time they left?"

"Yeah, and we sold several cases of wine. Get 'em just a little happy and they'll buy nearly anything. I even sold two of those beautiful wooden wine racks. One was for someone who forgot to buy a wedding present. Who comes to a wedding without a gift these days? How do you forget that?"

"Busy lives, I guess." Tab reached down and rubbed her toes. "Who's playing tonight?"

Every Saturday evening they didn't have a wedding reception here, JJ scheduled musicians to play out back. The southwestern view of the setting sun was romantic and gorgeous. He had several small groups and soloists who entertained his guests. Tomorrow afternoon he had several wine tastings scheduled and an office party starting at three o'clock.

He hadn't heard her question, so she went with another one. "What happened to Jillian?"

JJ rolled his eyes as he tapped his keyboard. "I'm going to have to find someone to replace her. She's done this to me a couple of times this summer, but Missy Raeburn was available to fill in at the last minute. Missy's in Oklahoma this weekend at her brother's wedding."

"Why don't you hire Missy full-time?"

"She doesn't want to work that much. Not with three kids. She can bail me out when I need her, but she only wants to work the weekday tastings and the big events."

"So, are you letting Jillian come back to work?"

JJ took a deep breath. "I don't know. I don't want to, but right now I don't have many options. Maybe you should come work for me."

Tab looked up at him. He had to be kidding. "I don't think so."

"Worth a shot." He winked at her. "We have an hour before Mooncow gets here. What would you like to do? Do you want to get something to eat?"

"Mooncow? Where do these bands come up with their names?"

"I dunno. They're pretty good, though. Are you hungry?"

"I'm starving." Tab slipped her feet back into her shoes and moaned. "Do you see what I go through for you?"

"You're a real hero," he said. "How about my place? I'll grill steaks and throw together a salad. Everything is there."

She smiled at him. The man was great in the kitchen, and his refrigerator and cupboards were always filled with everything he needed to make a meal. On the other hand, she had pizzas and breakfast sandwiches in her freezer. If she was lucky, there was bread in the house and if she was really lucky, she could find lunch meat that didn't have green and white ugliness growing on it.

"I'd love that."

"You should think about moving up here sometime. You're always in town."

"Unless I'm working," she retorted. Tab gave JJ her hand as she stood up and wobbled on her feet. "I don't want to look for another apartment. I'm perfectly happy where I'm living now."

"I didn't mean look for another apartment. You should move into my house."

She blinked at him. He'd hinted at this several times, but had never come out and asked. "Move in with you?"

JJ laughed as he held the door open. "Move into my house, move in with me. Yeah. That's what I'm saying."

"Now? Like soon?"

"Whenever your lease is up. It's only twenty minutes from my house to Boone."

"But my apartment is right there. I roll out of bed and I'm at the gym in less than five minutes."

He waited while she got into the passenger side of his car, then walked around. They drove to his house in silence and after he parked the car, he waited for her to get out and they went inside.

"You're quiet," Tab said.

JJ nodded. "Sorry. Just have some things to figure out, I guess."

"You're upset with me."

"No. That isn't it. No big deal. Let me turn the grill on."

"Wait a minute," Tab said and caught his arm. "I feel like we're in the middle of one of those romance movies. This is *the* moment." She put air quotes around the word 'the.'

"What moment?"

"The defining moment of our relationship. If I don't move in with you, you're going to move on without me."

"I don't want to make any ultimatums," JJ said. "I'm a little taken aback, but I'll get past it." He headed for the doors to the deck.

Tab followed him. "You don't understand."

"Yeah. I do," he replied patiently. "You've told me over and over how important your independence is. How much you love being alone in your apartment. I get it. I really do. But how long do you want that? Forever?"

"I don't know." She frowned. "I hadn't really thought about it. Things were going along just fine."

"You've never thought about living here?"

"Not really," she said. "I enjoy spending time here with you, but it never occurred to me that I'd move in. We have two separate lives. I didn't realize you were thinking about blending them together." Tab wondered if other women were this dense when it came to relationships. She liked things as they were. It was simple and easy. But suddenly she realized that he might view their relationship differently. She needed to step back and look at it from his perspective.

"We do everything together outside our jobs," he replied.

"Not really."

"Maybe it's just because I think about you all the time." JJ gave her a slow smile. "Even when you aren't here in person, you're here." He tapped his heart. "And here." He tapped his head.

Well, that was just about the sweetest thing in the world. Tab looked at him. He was always sweet. He always thought about her when he made plans.

"Now I feel like a heel for enjoying my solitude and being all self-centered."

"I didn't mean to make you feel that way."

"It's okay. You're really sweet." Tab linked her arm in his as they

went back into the kitchen. "Can we just call this the beginning of the conversation? Take some time for me to get used to the idea?"

JJ brushed the back of his index finger along her cheek. "Sit there. Take your shoes off."

She sat while he wandered around his kitchen, pulling out vegetables from the oddest nooks and crannies. He had a place for everything.

"If I move in, will you cook for me?"

"I certainly don't intend to eat frozen pizza every night," he said with a laugh. "I'm sorry if I scared you with this. I thought you ..."

"It's okay," she said. "I know. I'm sorry that it freaked me out. Most couples would probably be married with kids by now."

JJ blinked at her in surprise. "Kids? Now we're talking about kids? You want them?"

"I suppose. Someday. Don't you?"

"I just want you to move in with me. Marriage and kids? Aren't those things like down the road a ways?"

"Ahhh," Tab said, letting out a happy sigh. "I'm glad I could throw you as badly as you threw me. My lease is up in a few months. We'll keep talking. Maybe by then I can wrap my head around moving to Bellingwood."

"What if I threw in a couple of dogs and a cat? Would that get you up here?"

She shrugged. "It wouldn't hurt." Tab waggled a finger at his knife. "I can chop. Let me help."

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 <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: http://pinterest.com/nammynools/

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