



LOVE'S SURPRISES

Signettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Book 20



Book Twenty Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR

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Cover Design Photography: Maxim M. 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 20 — Love's Surprises — 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 20 - #1

Girls Just Wanna Have Fun

"Outside and do your chores first. You know the drill," Elva said when she walked into the living room and found all four of her children sitting on the floor watching television.

"But we worked hard in school today," Gabriela whined. "It's not fair."

Ana picked up on her sister's complaint. "We didn't have to do chores when we lived with Daddy."

"First," Elva said, holding up her index finger, "you were much younger then and chores were things like cleaning your rooms. Second, you've been doing this work every single day since school started. You've also complained every day. I'm tired of it. Third ..." She unplugged the television and left the room, heading through the kitchen to the back door. They all knew there would be further consequences if they didn't follow.

As she suspected, Samuel was the first one out the door. "What was the third one?" he asked, catching up to walk beside her.

"I'll let your imagination create whatever comes next. Now go on. If you all hurry, it won't take long, and I made cheesy chicken burritos for dinner."

"My favorite," he said and took off for the barn.

Samuel reminded her of Eliseo when he was a boy. His easy-going way, and his willingness to get along, just to please his mother. She kept walking, knowing the girls would be the last to come outside. Matty had already run past her. He loved feeding the chickens. He loved being with all of the animals she and Eliseo were bringing out here. If he could skip school and help all day, he'd be in pure heaven.

She felt her temper rise as she waited to hear the back door slam and Gabriela and Ana's footsteps on the sidewalk. Those two girls both had way too much of their mother in them. Independent and

sassy. Though they weren't twins, they were close enough in age to play off each other to get their way.

Gabriela was getting to the age where her looks had become very important. Working with animals and messing up her clothes wasn't something she appreciated. Fortunately, Ana still liked getting down and dirty. She treasured the pair of work boots her uncle had purchased for her last birthday. The more she wore them, the more beat up and comfortable they got. She tried to wear them to school a couple of times, but Elva wouldn't let her. She didn't need her daughters dragging horse manure into the school building. She tried to make them keep those things clean, but that was as difficult with them as anything else.

Ana's asthma made it hard for her to clean out the stalls, but Elva had no issue with the girl hauling the wheelbarrow loads out to the back to dump. Her girls were going to be strong and confident ... well, at least strong.

Elva had forgotten how much work it took to care for horses. She'd had way too many years off and her muscles had gotten soft. The work she'd done preparing the land out here for the stables had rebuilt some of those muscles, but it wasn't until she started hauling bales of hay and bags of feed around again that she felt her body come back to life.

As the kids got older, they might not choose to work at the stables with her. She hoped they would fall in love with it like she did, but she wasn't holding her breath. Matty might. He loved it and the little boy was growing stronger every day.

She was careful with Samuel because of his diabetes. Just about the time they thought things were under control, something else in his body would go out of whack and she was back to fretting over him. He'd learned so much on his own. It killed her that he had to become an adult about the whole thing. All of the kids watched out for him. They'd become highly sensitized to what foods could hurt him. It made her proud that they were willing to forgo things just so he wouldn't feel left out.

Just about the time Elva began to wonder if Gabriela had finally called her bluff, she heard them coming her way. She breathed a

deep sigh of relief. The day that Gabriela decided to challenge Elva for real wasn't too far in the future. She wasn't looking forward to that. Her own mother's inflexible stands on things had finally pushed Elva away from the family. Elva always believed it was because she was a girl and girls weren't supposed to be stable hands - at least not according to her father.

As she grew older and watched her four children come into their own, she realized that much of what had happened when she was young was of her own creation. She hadn't been willing to take much structure from her parents and pushed back against every bit of it they handed out. She worried about crossing that line with her daughters. Gabriela was as rigid as Elva. She'd need to pay attention and not push her daughter too far. But when did you know to stop?

Gabriela had already started in the donkey's stall, so Elva took up a rake and joined her.

"How was school today?" Elva asked.

"Fine."

"How was that math test you were studying for?"

"Fine."

"Did you have music today?"

"No."

"How about recess. Who did you play soccer with today?"

"The same people. Nobody special."

"Did you have pork lips for lunch?"

Gabriela started to speak, then realized she didn't have a good answer for her mother's question. "I don't feel like being funny," she said while lifting a particularly heavy pile of hay and muck into the wheelbarrow. Somehow the girl lost her balance and before Elva could get to her, she'd face-planted right into the top of the pile.

"Gabriela!" Elva cried, rushing across the stall to her daughter.

The shout brought the rest of the kids and Ana lost it when her sister stood up, covered in all sorts of unpleasant things.

"It's not funny," Gabriela yelled and ran out of the stall in tears.

Matty looked up at his mother. "It's kind of funny."

Elva grinned at him. "Go back to your work. I'll take care of this."

All of you, now go." She chuckled to herself. Matty was right. It was kind of funny, but when Gabriela was in a mood, she wouldn't see the humor in this for quite some time.

She found Gabriela in the center of the wash stall. "Look at me," the girl complained. "How does this always happen to me? It's not fair. Why can't I just be a girl? Why do I have to do all of these boy things? I don't like getting dirty, but you make me do it anyway. Why can't I ever do what I want to do?"

Elva grabbed some rags and started brushing Gabby off. "These are your work clothes and it doesn't matter if they get dirty. A quick shower and you'll be as good as new."

"But I never get to wear pretty clothes and go to the salon and have my hair done and wear makeup and all of that. I'm always in dirty work clothes." She slapped at her shirt. "These stupid ugly work boots and worn out jeans. My hair has hay in it and now I stink like sh ..." Gabriela stopped herself, knowing that her mother didn't like hearing those words. "Donkey-poop."

Elva bent down on her knees and took Gabriela's hands in hers. "Everything you are talking about is on the outside. Everything. Whether it's donkey-poop or fancy dresses. Those are all things that can be changed with little effort. You can take a shower and the donkey poop will wash away. You can put on a fancy dress and makeup and doll up your hair. Then you can take those things off, take another shower and you'll be back to my Gabriela. It doesn't matter what you wear or how you look — whether it's work boots or high heels, blue jeans or a fancy dress — as long as you're Gabriela on the inside."

She reached up and touched Gabriela's hair. "Are you asking me to take you to a salon for a haircut and style?"

Gabriela's eyes lit up. "Would you? Could I get highlights?"

"No highlights yet. You're still too young. But I think we could ask a professional to cut your hair." Elva touched her own hair. "It's been a long time since I've done anything other than pull mine back into a pony tail. Maybe I should join you. We can do a girl's day. Well, maybe a girl's morning on a Saturday. What do you think about that?"

"Does Ana have to come? Can it just be us?" Gabriela asked.

"This first time, it will just be us, but later on, don't you think it would be fun if all three of us went?"

"I suppose. Ana doesn't mind her hair like I do. Do I have to go back and finish my work?"

Elva smiled. "What do you think?"

"I might as well. I already stink."

"That's my girl."

Book 20 - #2

Love Your Mother

"What do you think, Jeff?" Lydia asked as he walked from the kitchen to his office.

"About what?"

She tipped her head at his tone. "About the purple monkey hanging from the spiderweb?"

Jeff stopped, turned, looked up at the immense spiderweb in the corner, and then at Lydia. "I'm sorry, what?"

"You're grumpy today. Is everything okay?" she asked.

"It's fine and I'm sorry. What were you asking me?" He dropped the hand holding the note he'd been reading to his side.

"We moved the Dungeon of Horrors into the lounge here." Lydia flipped the light off.

In the darkened room, lights shone around two new displays - a torturer's rack and a display of bloody weapons. The cat-o-nine-tails looked like it had viscera hanging from it. These two new displays joined the guillotine added last year.

"You have a really sick mind," he said. "No one ever sees this side of you."

Beryl tapped him on the shoulder, making him jump. "She doesn't share this side with just anybody. You haven't seen the dark rooms in the basement of her house."

"There are no such rooms." Lydia scowled at her friend. "And don't you dare start any rumors otherwise." She shuddered. "What would Aaron's constituents think?"

"They'd be glad to know he was human after all." Beryl grinned. "So what has you all grumpy, Mr. Boss-Man?"

"I'm not grumpy," he protested.

"Then what has you so distracted?" Lydia asked.

"It's my mother." He waved the piece of paper. "She's coming to visit me this week and I'm not ready for her at all. I knew this visit

was out there on the horizon, but all of a sudden, it's right now. My place isn't nearly clean enough and I know she's going to add chaos to my life and I don't have time for this and why is this happening to me?"

Lydia laughed. "Your mother loves you and wants to know that you're happy."

"You didn't torture your children when they moved out, did you?" Jeff asked.

"Sure she did," Beryl said. "Have you noticed that the only one who lives close is Marilyn? The others moved far, far away."

"I'm not going to dignify that with a response," Lydia said. "That was mean and not true."

Beryl put her head down. "I'm so ashamed."

"No you're not." Lydia swatted at her friend. "Though sometimes it is difficult for mothers to let their children grow up and be adults." She smiled. "My mom drove me nuts those first few years Aaron and I were married."

"Not your mom," Beryl said in surprise. "She was really cool."

Lydia nodded. "She was a great mother, but for some reason, she wasn't ready to believe I could manage a life with a husband and a new baby. Every week, for no reason, she showed up at our house. Sometimes with food, sometimes with toys or clothes for the baby, and once she had new clothes for Aaron because she was afraid I wasn't doing the laundry. There for a while, she showed up every single day, no matter what I might be doing. I always had to just put up with her in my space. She never asked if I wanted her to come over, she just showed up. I'll admit to being a little overwhelmed the first few weeks after we brought Marilyn home from the hospital, but I certainly didn't need her to buy my husband new clothing."

"It wasn't his birthday or anything?" Jeff asked, his mouth open as he listened.

"Nope," Lydia said with a laugh. "Mom was worried that I couldn't do it without her so she dropped in every chance she could. If I sat down for a minute when Marilyn was napping, I'll be doggoned, but Mom was there telling me that I should use that time

to get some of the things done around the house that I couldn't do when the baby was awake. Then she'd pick up any laundry that was dirty and start a load, staying long enough to run it through the dryer, fold it, and put it away."

"I'd have killed her," Beryl said.

"I was so tired I didn't have the energy to protest. Not only was I trying to do everything, but I was doing more than necessary just to make sure she wouldn't catch me being lazy or not being a good wife and meeting all of Aaron's needs."

"What did you finally do?" Jeff asked.

"One afternoon, Aaron came home early and found me sobbing into Marilyn's fuzzy little head. He thought he'd done something wrong or that maybe I was facing postpartum depression - and I very well could have been. He took the baby out of my arms, and since she had fallen asleep even in the midst of my crying jag, took her upstairs and put her into the crib. Then, he came back down and literally picked me up." Lydia glanced down. "I was a bit smaller back then. Anyway, he carried me over to the sofa and held me while I fell apart. I told him everything." She looked at Beryl. "He was as surprised as you about Mom's behavior. I didn't realize that I'd been hiding my frustration with her so well. He was so busy that he hadn't paid much attention to anything beyond the fact that there were meals on the table, the baby was happy, and the house wasn't falling apart."

Jeff was nodding in sympathy with Lydia's story. He looked up when she paused. "What happened next?"

"He and I talked for hours. He told me that I needed to make her stop her bad behavior. If I didn't, he would. And if he had to talk to my mother, she'd get angry with both of us. Mom adored Aaron and I didn't want anything to come between them, especially since I was the one who needed to put on my big girl pants and have the conversation."

"I don't remember this," Beryl said. "You actually told off your mother?"

Lydia nodded with a small smile. "I sure did. The next day, she was back with a whole load of baby clothes that I didn't even know

she'd taken with her. They were all fresh and clean. I asked her to sit with me in the living room. Then I put Marilyn in her arms so she couldn't get mad and stalk off."

Beryl laughed. "She would never have done that. She was as reasonable as you are."

"I wasn't sure," Lydia said. "This behavior from her was so strange. We talked all afternoon. I found out that she had felt like a failure as a mother when her babies were born. Her mother told her that she was on her own the day she married Dad." Lydia shrugged. "I didn't know Grandma was that crazy. She must have mellowed by the time I was old enough to know her. My poor mother was all alone and had no idea what to do. Grandma had done everything in the house, so she didn't know how to clean or do laundry or cook healthy meals - nothing. When she got pregnant, she was at a complete loss until a couple of friends offered some advice. But they had babies of their own and she hated to admit how scared she was of raising us. And then ..." Lydia looked straight at Jeff. "Then my mother - my strong, capable mother - told me how much she missed me. She was afraid that when I made my own home, I would be too busy for her. She missed me. That was the biggest part of it. She wanted to be involved in my life."

Lydia put her hand on his arm. "We needed to have that conversation and we needed to find a way to move forward so both of us would be happy. Mom could no longer just assume that I didn't know something and she had to ask if I wanted her help. But she could also come over whenever she wanted company. I learned that I didn't need to be strong all by myself. If I wanted her to help me, I needed to learn to ask. It took a few weeks for the two of us to learn new behaviors, but we got there."

"So what you're telling me is that I'm supposed to talk to my mother," Jeff said.

Lydia laughed. "It's probably a good place to start."

"I don't know," he said. "She's opinionated and not prone to listening to me when I disagree with her. The woman always knows what's best. It's easier to just ..." He stopped and shook his head. "I won't fight with her."

"You don't have to fight with her." Lydia smiled at him. "You just need to talk to her. She's coming to see you because she misses you. You were a big part of her family and then five years ago, you up and left. I think it's amazing that she didn't push harder to visit those first couple of years. Your mother wants to be part of your life. After all those years she spent caring for you, did you really expect her to stop because you moved out?"

"No, but I hoped she'd change. I did."

"We're older. Change is harder for us," Beryl said. "You just wait until you're her age and see if you can turn your feelings on and off so easily. Give the poor lady a break."

"You two make me feel guilty." He laughed. "I don't know if I'll stop complaining about her, but at least now I feel guilty about it."

"We've done our job then," Lydia said, laughing with him. "If there's anything else you need, let us know. We're good at this."

"Thanks," Jeff said. "If I run out of courage to have this conversation, I'll at least try to understand why she does the things she does." He turned and headed for the office. "And I do like the dungeon," he tossed over his shoulder. "Though I worry about what's going on up there in your head that you come up with these sick and twisted ideas."

Beryl flipped the main lights back on in the lounge after he was gone. "We probably shouldn't tell him that the idea for the bloody weapons came from sweet Andy, should we? And what's up with you? You've never told me that story about your mother."

"It wasn't a story that needed to be told," Lydia said. "We worked it out and it was over."

"What did Aaron say when he came home that night?"

Lydia smiled. "He was home on time that day and quite relieved to find a happy wife and a happy baby. Nothing was ever said about it again. I hope Jeff works things out with his mother."

"Oh, he will," Beryl said. "I'd lay odds that much of his complaining is all for show. If they didn't like each other, she wouldn't come to visit."

"I'm sure you're right."

Beryl crossed her arms. "You know better than that. Of course

I'm right. I'm always right."

Book 20 - #3

Happy Anniversary

Rachel woke up to a cold wet nose nudging her cheek.

"Nudge her again," she heard Billy whisper.

"What time is it?"

The dog pushed at her again and Rachel opened one eye to peer at him. He was sitting on the floor beside her, his head on her pillow.

"What are you doing, you goofy dog?"

Big Jack put his paw up beside his face and she realized that he had something tied around his neck.

"What is this?"

"Untie it," Billy whispered.

Rachel pushed the blankets back and pulled herself upright, then looked around the room. Billy had brought in several lit candles and stood in the doorway holding another candle.

He smiled at her. "Happy Anniversary. Untie the note."

"Happy Anniversary," she replied and reached around Big Jack's neck until she found the bow, then untied it. "Good boy." Rachel patted his head and he wagged his tail.

"Come here, boy," Billy said, and bent to give the dog a treat. "We've been practicing this all month."

"Practicing?"

"Yeah. I knew he was smart enough to do what I asked. We just had to figure out how to get him to wake you up. Whenever we were here alone, I had him push at your pillow. I wasn't sure if he'd actually nose your face. I guess he thinks you smell good, too."

"What is this?" she asked, holding up the envelope. Billy had sealed the back of the envelope over a long ribbon which he'd then tied around Big Jack's neck. "That was kind of clever."

"It's our first anniversary. Mom said it's supposed to be paper. I didn't know what kind of paper thing you'd want, so I wrote you a

letter."

That got Rachel's attention. "You wrote me a letter?"

"Yeah. It's nothing. No big deal. It's on paper, though." He'd come over to stand beside her and put the candle on the bedstand.

"You wrote me a letter?" she asked again, rather surprised. Of all the things she expected Billy to do on their anniversary, a handwritten letter to her was the last that would have come up. Rachel began to carefully unseal the letter. She didn't want to mess this up.

Billy reached out and took the letter out of her hand. "It was a dumb idea, wasn't it. I should have spent more time thinking of a better present. I'm sorry."

"No, this is amazing." Rachel snatched the letter back and unfolded it. "I'm just surprised. She patted the bed beside her. When Billy sat down, she leaned into him, then looked up. With a quick move, she kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

"You haven't even read it yet. I made coffee and bought some of your favorite cinnamon rolls from the bakery yesterday. You read and I'll bring those in for you. It's okay if we have breakfast in bed, today, isn't it?"

"Oh Billy." Rachel couldn't believe she was about to cry. He never did things like this.

"Do you want some coffee and a roll?" he asked, standing up. He rubbed Big Jack's head again and pulled another treat out of a pocket in his pants for the dog.

She nodded and leaned toward the candle so she could read the letter.

Dear Rachel,

Can you believe it's been a whole year since we got married? I can't. I can't believe you ever agreed to marry me. You are the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. I always thought that I'd end up as some old man, living alone. You know, like one of those guys who everybody feels sorry for? But I won't ever be that old guy because you said I DO a year ago.

I was so nervous that day. You made it as easy as it could be and didn't have a lot of weird expectations that I had to live up to. You just let me be

who I am. When I saw you that day, instead of getting more nervous, I felt myself calm down. That's what you do for me. Whenever I worry about something, all I have to do is look at you and I settle down because I know that I'm never alone.

I know I'm probably not the best husband. We don't like the same movies or read the same books and I know I drive you crazy because I still like to hang out with Doug and play video games, but I am so glad that you put up with all of that and I am glad that you always tell me I can be better and do big things. I don't know what those will ever be, but I'm glad that you're on my side.

Just so you know, I will always be on your side, too. I've never really said it, but I'm proud of you. I know how much you love your job and it's way cool to see you so excited about going to work every day, even when the hours are crazy and clients are mean.

Our life is just starting. I never thought that I'd be lucky enough to have such a wonderful person standing beside me.

I love you, Rachel Endicott. This has been the best year of my life and it's all because of you.

Your husband,

Billy

"Is it okay?" he asked, standing in the doorway again, this time holding a tray with mugs and plates on it.

"It's beautiful," she said. "I love you, too. I can't believe you wrote all of this down. I want to frame it."

The look of shock that passed across his face made her laugh. "No," he said. "You can't do that. I don't want anyone else to ever read that letter. You can burn it." He put the tray on a desk in their room, then held his hand out. "Give it to me and I'll burn it."

Rachel clutched the letter to her chest. "You'll do no such thing. This is the sweetest thing I've ever gotten in my life. I'm keeping it forever. When we have kids and they think you're an old fuddy duddy because you won't play video games with them, I'll show them this letter and tell them what a cool guy you used to be."

"They won't believe it." He held out a mug of coffee. "Are we talking about having babies now?"

This time it was Rachel's turn to look at him in shock. "Right

now? No! I'm just getting started with the catering business. I don't have time for that. Besides, we're really young. Aren't we? Are you ready for babies? We've never really talked about this."

"I'm not ready. You're the one who brought it up."

She shook her head furiously. "I was just talking about someday in the far future when we had kids. Remember? I said you would be an old fuddy duddy. That means you'd have to be in your forties at least."

Billy breathed a sigh of relief. "I think it would be awesome to have kids with you, but yeah, we're still young." He held out the mug to her again.

"Maybe we should get a cat." Rachel sat up and took it from him. It was still too hot to drink, so she put it beside the candle.

"I don't know if Big Jack would like having a cat around," Billy said. "He's kinda possessive."

"He did great with Obiwan and when Doug got a dog, he was great then, too."

"But those were dogs. Why do you want a cat?"

"Just because. Can we?"

"I don't know, boy," Billy said, rubbing Big Jack's head. "What do you think about having a feline around here?" He looked up. "He's pretty set in his ways."

Rachel smiled at him. "I think you're the one who's set in his ways." She picked up the letter again. "Except for this. You really outdid yourself with this present."

"It was really okay? You didn't have something else in mind that I should have done for you?"

"Not at all. This is really the sweetest thing. I love it. And you brought me breakfast and you're sitting here talking to me." Rachel scooted over in the bed. "I'm so lucky to have you. Come snuggle with me for a few minutes before you have to get in the shower."

He looked at the coffee and rolls on the desk, then moved over to the bed and lifted the blankets to crawl in beside her. "You aren't going to make me late, are you?"

"Who knows?"

Book 20 - #4

You Better Be Good for Goodness' Sake

"Good morning," came a whisper from the doorway

Lydia looked up from her coffee. "Good morning, Trinity. You're up early."

It was Christmas eve morning and Lydia's heart was as full as her house. All of her children and grandchildren were here for the long weekend and she was enjoying every moment she could spend with them.

Yesterday, their oldest daughter, Marilyn, and her husband, Brian, had taken the grandkids to Sycamore House for a ride in the sleigh, leaving the rest of the adults to wrap gifts and put them under the tree. Santa's gifts were all safely stored in the garage for delivery after the little ones were in bed. This last month had been filled with a flurry of deliveries at the Merritt household. It was easier for her kids to ship things to Lydia and Aaron, knowing they'd be there in plenty of time to make sure everything was assembled and ready to go on Christmas morning. The process had required every bit of Lydia's organizational flair, but if she was honest, it had been great fun.

When the grandkids came home, the tree in the basement was surrounded by gifts, and several new Santa's hats had been hung on the branches for those who wanted to be a gift delivery person on Christmas morning. Trinity was the oldest of the children, but Marilyn and Brian's twins were in the first grade and filled with wonder at everything they encountered.

"Sandy ..." Trinity paused and smiled as she corrected herself. "Mom told me that you'd be in the kitchen and I should come downstairs instead of bothering her. She said she got to sleep in and even I couldn't stop her."

"She was absolutely right. I'm here in the kitchen, just waiting for someone to show up. What would you like for breakfast?"

The girl shook her head. "I'm not hungry. It's okay."

"Well, I have two breakfast casseroles ready to put in the oven and I thought I'd make pancakes for anyone who wants them. Would you like to help me get things ready?"

Trinity nodded. "Sandy says that I'm a good helper in the kitchen."

It would take time for Trinity to make the change from Sandy to Mom, but Lydia knew how much the two loved each other. The change would come.

"Terrific. We'll put the first casserole in right now so that it will be ready when the early birds wake up. Would you like to mix up the pancake batter?" Lydia opened the refrigerator and pulled out a casserole dish and slid it into the pre-heated oven. She went back to the fridge and gathered ingredients to make pancakes. "Are you ready for this? We're going to make a lot of these."

"Yes, please," Trinity said. "I've never done that before."

"Good morning, Mom." Lydia's son, Daniel, came in from the basement stairs.

Trinity spun at his voice and rushed to hug him. "Uncle Dan!"

Dan was big and tall like his father. With a thick black beard, curly hair, and a predilection for flannel and jeans, he looked like a mountain man just in from felling trees. In reality, he sold fine papers to printers and publishers around the state.

"Hey squirt," he said, swinging her up into a hug. "Are you helping Grandma make breakfast? I'm starving."

"We're making pancakes and casserole." She turned to Lydia. "Right?"

Lydia held out a cup of coffee. "Right. If I know your uncle, he's going to need coffee first. Do you want to give this to him?"

Trinity gave her a grateful smile as she took the mug and turned back to hand it to Dan. "Will you stay out here and talk to us while we work. Please?"

"I was kind of thinking about going upstairs and pushing Sandy out of bed. What do you think about that?"

Lydia chuckled. He and his younger sister were close enough in age that they'd done everything together as kids. They had grown

up beating the tar out of each other, but would brook no offense from anyone else, including their other siblings. They didn't see each other often now that they lived in separate states, but from the moment they walked into a room together, it was game on.

Trinity looked to Lydia, wondering if this was appropriate behavior.

"He's going to do it even if I tell him not to," Lydia said. "If you follow him up the stairs real quietly so you don't wake Sandy up, I think you'll get a kick out of it."

"Maybe I can talk you into opening the door so she doesn't know it's me," Daniel said, taking Trinity's hand. "Would you do that?"

Trinity looked at Lydia again, her brown eyes wide with surprise ... and no small amount of questions.

Lydia smiled. "Go ahead. It will be fun." She chuckled to herself. After they'd started up the stairs, she muttered, "At least until Sandy tries to take him down."

"Hi, Mom."

Lydia turned to see her youngest, Jim, come into the kitchen from the basement. He and his girlfriend, Kate ... hopefully soon to be his fiancée, were staying in a room downstairs. They'd flown in on Friday from Atlanta. It had been much too long since she'd seen her baby boy.

She opened her mouth to speak and was interrupted by a yell from upstairs. Hysterical laughter soon followed and the next thing they heard was the thunder of Dan's feet on the steps. He burst into the kitchen and rushed over to Lydia, dragging her in front of him.

"Hey," she yelled. "What are you doing?"

Sandy and Trinity came into the kitchen, Trinity's face dripping with tears as she laughed and laughed.

"Don't you protect him, Mom," Sandy said. "He deserves everything he's going to get from me."

Lydia laughed. "Be quiet, all of you. You'll wake your father."

Dan dodged back and forth behind her as she moved to the counter. "Nope. Not getting away with that one. Dad's already up. I heard him in the shower."

"Then you're going to wake the girls and their families."

"They're up, too," Sandy said. She rushed at her mother, who squealed and pulled away from her son.

Plastering herself against the counter as Sandy pushed past her, Lydia turned to watch them. Sandy threw herself at her brother and he hit the floor with her on top. Before Lydia could say anything, the two of them were wrestling with each other, scrabbling to get a purchase and the upper hand.

"Oh God, stop! Stop!" Sandy finally cried, laughing so hard, she couldn't breathe.

Dan sat up, helping her to an upright position. "What's the matter, girlie? Gonna wet your pants?"

"Maybe," she said.

When he stood and held out his hand to her, she slapped it away. "Get away from me, you lout. I don't trust you."

"Do you need my help?" Trinity asked in a small voice.

Sandy smiled at the girl and, grabbing the counter, pulled herself up. She lunged at Dan, who jumped back, out of her reach. "Trinity, I think you should come over here and kick your Uncle Dan in the ankles. That would be very helpful."

The girl's eyes grew wide again and Sandy laughed. "I'm only kidding. I don't want to really hurt him."

"You did once," Dan said. He bent over and pulled back the curls at the top of his forehead. "Do you see that scar, Trinity?"

Trinity came closer and peered at the nearly inch-long scar. "What happened?"

"She hit me with a baseball bat."

Sandy's face contorted. "I did not! Tell her the truth. You did it to yourself. If you would have been paying attention, you wouldn't have run into the stupid tree."

"But I did run into the tree and you didn't warn me. I had to have six stitches."

"You dork," Sandy said. She walked past him and thumped him on the head. "I can't believe you still blame me for that. Mom, can I help with anything?"

Lydia pointed at the mixing bowl. "How about you and Trinity start mixing pancake batter. Dan, wash your hands ..."

"Why didn't you tell Sandy to wash her hands?" he whined.

"Because I know that she'll do it without a reminder. You and Jim are going to cook the pancakes that the girls mix up. You two know where the aprons are. Get going."

"I should probably check on Kate," Jim said, moving toward the basement stairs.

Dan sprayed water at his brother from the kitchen sink. "No you don't. Mom told us to do something and you're going to help. No more of this running away to hang out with your girlfriend. You did that all the time in high school. Kate can sleep in. She's a smart girl and knows the way to the kitchen."

Jim rolled his eyes and looked at Lydia for help.

She just shrugged and pointed at the kitchen sink. "If you two boys start a water fight in here, I will call your father down on you, so be good." She took out the second breakfast casserole and slid it into the oven. With all the noise, everyone was going to be up and moving soon. She could hardly wait for the rest of her family to join the fun. Walking past Dan, she tugged at his ear.

"What?" he asked.

"You only live in Des Moines. I miss having you around. Find a way to come home more often."

"Yes, Mom."

Aaron came down the stairs, his hair damp from the shower. "Why am I up so early?" he asked. "It's Christmas Eve morning and I'm on vacation. Who hates me?"

"Is his fault, Dad," Sandy said, pointing at Dan. "He's the brat."

"Always is," Aaron said with a laugh. "It's good to know nothing ever changes." He ruffled Dan's hair as he walked past. "Good to have you boys home."

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>