

Book Twelve Vignettes

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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 I write from Polly's perspective, unless she is directly involved in the action or with a character, we don't see everything. 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 12 – Out of the Shadows - 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 12 - #1 Teen Angel

Jason swore as his books tumbled from his arms to the floor. He looked up in time to see a girl with long wavy blond hair saunter past as if nothing had happened. Of course it was her. The one girl he wanted to notice him and she didn't even pay attention to the fact that she'd bumped his arm and created chaos.

He bent over to retrieve the books, grateful his tablet wasn't part of the stack. He'd just gotten it and hadn't invested in a case, even though his mom told him he couldn't carry it to school until it was safe. Why was she always right? Just once he'd like to be able to make his own decision, right or wrong, and not have his mother's voice in his head telling him what to do.

"Can I help?"

Jason stood back up and smiled at the girl who had stopped. Mel was great. She was in most of his classes, but she sang in the choir and played in band. Scar called her a music geek and he guessed she really was. Everything about her screamed musician. She wore t-shirts with pictures of composers on them, carried a music bag with music notes on it, and as Jason looked more closely, those were musical symbols on her earrings. She was really smart, too. In Geometry she always got an A on her papers and tests. Most of the time, he did, too, but when it came to math, she beat everybody out.

"Jason?" she asked, rapping his shoulder. "Are you in there?" He scowled. "Sorry."

"I saw her bump you and then move on like you didn't even exist." Mel put her hand behind her head and posed. "My name is Linda Sinclair and I'm more important than anyone in this school."

Jason grinned.

"But I'm surprised she did that to *you*," Mel said. "She usually flirts with anyone of the male persuasion and ignores any girl who isn't in her clique."

"I must not be good enough to flirt with," Jason said. "We better get to class. The bell's going to ring."

"Did you get your paper written?" Mel asked.

He tapped the notebook. "Finished it last night. You?"

"I emailed it to her yesterday."

They walked into the classroom and Mel strode across the room to her seat. Jason went to his and sat down. Linda Sinclair was ahead of him two rows. Why wouldn't she flirt with him? What was his problem? He tried to think if he'd done anything to tick her off, but they'd never met outside of World History. This was the only class they shared. Maybe he just wasn't worth it.

Then he had a thought. What if he smelled like horses and that offended her? He sniffed his forearm, but didn't smell anything bad. Maybe he wouldn't smell it though, since he was so used to it. But Mel would have told him. She didn't care what anybody thought.

The petite brunette sitting next to Linda was Ariel Braxton. Maybe he'd just ask her. She was from Bellingwood and rode the bus. If she was by herself, she'd sometimes sit with him and make small talk. She was kind of ditzy. His mom said those kinds of girls were all fluff and no substance, but Ariel was nice enough if Linda or her other friends weren't around. Jason had watched her work hard to get in with that clique. She'd changed her hair style and over the last year she'd spent a lot of money on new clothes. At the beginning of the school year, she'd shown him her braces - they were invisible.

If girls didn't think boys noticed when they did stupid stuff like that, they were dead wrong. Nobody cared about Ariel. The only attention she got now was because she was friends with Linda. She hadn't been that bad in junior high. A nice enough girl and kind of pretty. But now she was just another face in the crowd.

Jason barely paid attention through class. This one was the worst. The teacher had obviously written out lesson plans twenty-five years ago and still used the same lectures. And it was the last class of the day. Who was she kidding? Nobody paid attention.

Jason's mind wandered and soon he was thinking about the

costume he was wearing for Halloween. They were doing something different this year. Polly was riding Demi as the Grim Reaper and he was dressing up as a zombie with manacles and chains. It was better than the years he ended up draped over a horse as a dead body. At least this year he'd be able to sit up straight.

"Mr. Donovan?"

Jason looked up at Mrs. Cooley.

"Your paper, please?"

"Oh yeah. Right here." He fumbled around, sorting through the folder until he found it and handed it to her.

She moved on and he glanced at Linda. She'd watched the whole thing and turned to Ariel giggling and whispering. Great. *Now* she finally paid attention to him.

Mel caught his glance and rolled her eyes. "Email it next time," she mouthed.

He nodded in agreement.

The bell rang and he waited until Ariel and Linda left the room before standing up. When he got to the hall, he found Scar and Kent waiting for him.

"Come on," Scar said. "Mom's waiting."

"I gotta go to my locker first," Jason said. "I'll meet you out front in three minutes. Time me." He took off at a slow trot, dodging his way around people trying to get out of the school. At his locker, he filled his backpack with books and slid the tablet into the protected pocket. Yeah. He needed to get a cover this weekend.

He couldn't wait until he could drive. Asking for rides was getting old. But Eliseo said something about going over to Ames to pick up feed or medicine from the vet school at Iowa State, so maybe they could make a side trip. He grinned. If Mr. Bedford went with them, there'd be a bunch of side trips. That old man liked to shop.

Jason headed for the front door and gave a quick shiver at the cold air. His mom was going to make him wear a coat tomorrow, he could tell. Nobody but the wimps were wearing them yet. But it was getting colder. Oh well.

He jogged to Scar's mother's van and slid the back door open,

climbing in beside Kent. "Thanks for picking us up today, Mrs. Vasquez."

She gave him a warm smile. "It's no problem. I had errands that needed to be done, so it only seemed fair that you boys didn't have to ride the bus. This will give you more time to finish your work with the horses, no? And that means more time to do your homework."

Scar moaned. "No. I don't need more time to do my homework, Mom."

"You are a smart boy and your father and I want you to go to college, so you will do all of your homework. Twice, if necessary."

Kent and Jason laughed at their friend. This was an old argument.

"Did you hear Linda Sinclair and Cameron Duncan were going together?" Kent said.

Jason's heart dropped. "She's dating Duncan? Since when?" he asked.

Oscar turned his head. "After last week's football game. The way I heard it, she told Sean that if he didn't ask her, she was going to move on." He swished his hands like waves.

"It won't last," Jason grumped.

Kent punched his arm. "Why do you care? Do you have a thing for her?"

"No!" Jason said. "Why would you say that?"

"Because you're always staring at her," Scar said. "You should just give up. Linda Sinclair will never have anything to do with the likes of you." His tone grew mocking. "You're from Bellingwood."

"I know," Jason said. "But Duncan is a jack..." he broke off before finishing the word.

Kent interrupted. "And she's a b.i.t.c.h."

"Boys," Mrs. Vasquez scolded. "Be nice."

"Well she is, Mom. One of the worst."

His mother laughed. "And they say girls are gossips. You boys are much worse." She stopped at the stop sign and turned toward Bellingwood. "You all will find nice girls someday. If not in high school, then in college. You shouldn't worry about it now."

"But we should be practicing. Like dating and stuff. Girls don't even know we're alive, Mom."

"It's best that way," she said. "Keeps you out of trouble. Make friends with the nice girls and when you all grow up, you'll figure out which of them you want to be with. Girls like Linda Sinclair aren't worth your time. Trust me."

Scar gave his friends a huge eye-roll. "Yes, Mom."

"That's my good boy," she said and drove into the driveway at Sycamore House.

Jason slid the door open. "Thanks for the ride."

"Yeah, thanks a lot," Kent said and stepped out behind Jason.

The door slid closed, but not before they heard her say to her son. "You're too smart to worry about silly girls, Oscar, but I will always love you."

The side door slammed shut, Scar opened the front passenger door and got out, his face red. He slammed his door closed and said, "You heard that?"

"She loves you," Jason said, grinning.

Scar swatted him. "Shut up."

Book 12 - #2 Not Quite an Antique

He whistled as he flipped the sign in the front door to "Open." And then he stopped. He whistled through the tune again and then in a gravelly voice that he hated to admit was his own, sang through the lyrics until he could get to the title.

"And that laugh that wrinkles your nose touches my foolish heart."

There it was.

"Lovely, never, never change Keep that breathless charm Won't you please arrange it? 'Cause I love you just the way you look tonight."

Simon did a smooth turn on the hard wood floor, held out his arms as if he were dancing with a partner, and smiled. He was no Fred Astaire, but he'd enjoyed dancing in his day.

The things in this store had lived out their lives in the past. That's why he loved the antique business so much. He opened a box that he'd brought up from the basement and took out a papier mache pumpkin lantern. He was a little late to be decorating for Halloween, but these items had been around for so many years, they wouldn't mind waiting a few more hours.

The four little candles would sit beside his register. He liked them and hoped they'd never sell. Two witches, a ghost, and a pumpkin head. There used to be hundreds of these silly character candles. Now everybody wanted aromatherapy. Why couldn't a candle just be a candle?

"You're getting old and crotchety, Simon," he said to himself.

"You need to get out more."

An envelope of paper cutouts of black cats with their backs arched, went on the counter to take to the front window. There'd been a time when he went all out, hanging spiderwebs in the windows and draping sheets to create ghosts, but the kids didn't come in often enough to care and besides, Halloween had become so much more sophisticated. Everybody wanted to see zombies and aliens these days.

He looked up when the bell on the door rang. He loved the sound of a cowbell, even if it was a small one.

"Good morning, Simon," his sister-in-law said. "We haven't heard from you in a while and wondered if you'd like to come over for dinner."

Jean meant well, but her husband, Simon's brother, was a crusty old guy and he always thought he was better than Simon. All of those years as a professor down at Iowa State gave Sam Gardner a big head. Simon could have done more with his life if he'd wanted to. Years ago he thought he would be an anthropologist. He loved understanding people and why societies became what they were.

For instance, Halloween. Humanity's fascination with death and the macabre was quite interesting to him, but he no longer had the passion to do the research and spend time writing the articles that floated around in his mind. He had the degrees, but he'd never gotten a chance to do much with them.

He'd just finished his doctorate when the world turned upside down. It had given him the freedom to live and travel and study, but he could never find the energy to care about those things again. He'd fallen into this antique shop and it suited him.

Sam didn't understand that. And poor Jean, she'd started worrying about him forty-five years ago when his wife died while giving birth to their daughter. Just as their lives were supposed to start, the woman he loved and the baby they'd prepared for were gone. The pain had mellowed long years ago, but Jean still insisted on worrying.

"Simon," she said again. Now she was standing in front of him. "What are you thinking about?"

He gave her a quick hug. "Nothing much. I was just distracted for a moment. What are you doing here other than checking up on me?"

"Sam's over at Sycamore House gathering pumpkins from their garden. He's proud of those beasts this year. He wouldn't admit it, but he loves being around the people over there. Our garden certainly didn't supply us this year like it has in the past, but there's no shortage of good produce."

"I'm glad he has that outlet," Simon said. "He needed to be with people who didn't treat him like a god."

Jean swatted his arm. "Now Simon, you be good. You know you love your brother."

"I know that I think he married the perfect woman. You've always let him be a pushy grump."

"He doesn't get away with much," she said with a small laugh. "No matter how hard he tries. He just never learned all of the niceties of conversation." Jean patted his hand. "Like you did."

The bell rang again and two women came in. They glanced at him, smiled and walked to one side of the shop, touching the furniture and picking items up as they went.

"Good morning," Simon called out to them. "If there's anything you are looking for specifically, please ask. I have items hidden in nooks and crannies throughout the shop."

One of them gave him a sweet smile and then nodded as the other woman handed her a baby doll from a basket in the corner.

The bell rang again and they looked up.

"Good morning, Simon," Joss Mikkels said. "Well, hello, Jean. What are you doing out this morning? It's awfully chilly."

"I'm just checking in with Simon. Trying to talk him into coming over for dinner one of these evenings."

Joss looked back and forth between them, quizzically.

"She's my brother's wife," Simon said.

"Sam and you?" Joss looked him up and down.

Simon knew what she saw. They were very different. Sam was taller than he was and weighed fifty pounds less. Simon liked his dumpy old suits and was rarely in anything but a white dress shirt, tie, and jacket.

"I see it," Joss said. "It's in your eyes." She grinned at Jean. "And they have exactly the same hair. But I would never have put that together. Fun!"

"Is there something you're looking for?" Simon asked.

"Could you keep your eye out for brightly colored vintage pottery? Kitchenware and vases, anything like that? I've been thinking about how to decorate the new kitchen and I've landed on this. We aren't in any hurry, but if you see something, I'd love to know about it."

"Come with me," Simon said and took her arm. He led her to a side table. "Like this?"

"Exactly," she said and picked up a bright yellow canister, the largest of a set of three. "I want these right now. They're perfect!" She pointed at a pair of vases, one pink and one blue. "And those too. Anything like this."

He nodded. "Did you walk down this morning?"

"Yes, would you mind if I came back at lunch with my car to pick it all up?"

"That would be delightful. I'll have it wrapped and packaged for you." He gathered the two vases into his arms. "And I'd be thrilled to look for these types of things for you. Any restrictions on color?"

"Oh no," Joss exclaimed. "I want a riot of spring colors in my kitchen. I can hardly wait until we get the new house built."

"Then this will be fun for both of us."

Joss smiled. "You go on. I want to wander through the store. I finally have a few minutes to myself and this place is peaceful."

"Let me know if I can help with anything else," he said and went back to his sister.

"I love to see you in your element," Jean said. "It always makes people happy when you find what they're looking for."

"It makes me happy, too," Simon replied. "I'll be there."

"You'll be where?" she asked, then said, "Oh! Dinner? When can you come?"

"You know I have no engagements in the evenings. Tell me when you'd like to cook for me and I will bring the wine." He

grinned. "And ice cream. We have to make sure Sam has his ice cream."

Jean gave him a hug. "Let's make it Wednesday evening. I'll cook your favorite. Pot roast."

"Anything you make is my favorite, Jean," Simon said. "Thank you for caring for me."

"We love you. Even if Sam sometimes forgets that he's supposed to say it."

"Excuse me?" One of the women who had come in earlier spoke up.

"I'll see you Wednesday." Simon followed Jean a few steps to the front door and then veered off down an aisle to answer whatever question might have come up. He smiled to himself. Some days he might feel like the antiques he sold, but friends and family put a spring in his step and a song in his heart. He did a quick two-step skip and came to a stop. "What can I help you with?"

Book 12 - #3 Java Jive

"Good morning," Sal sang out as she walked in the front door of the coffee shop. A lack of response made her look around the room. She saw no one. That was unsettling. No customers, no baristas, no people at all.

"Hello? Is anyone here?"

She breathed a sigh of relief when Camille came running from the back.

"Hi there," Camille said with an easy smile. "I'm sorry. Sylvie desperately needed me to taste a cream filling she made."

"Desperately?" Sal laughed. "I should get in on that."

"Do you want something other than your regular?" Camille asked, stepping behind the counter.

Sal brandished her silver travel mug. "Nope. Just lots and lots of jet black rocket fuel. I have an article to finish before next Monday and I procrastinated too long."

Camille looked around. "It's quiet enough in here this morning. You should be able to concentrate."

"What's up with that?" Sal asked, handing over her mug. "I like having excitement around me while I'm working. Do I need to be worried? Is there something I should be doing?"

"Oh honey," Camille said. "We're fine. We haven't been open two months yet."

"But there's usually someone in here when I'm working." Sal knew she sounded whiny. Polly wouldn't let her get away with it. She chuckled to herself. Sometimes she wanted to strangle that girl.

"We've been having a lot of good days," Camille replied, interrupting Sal's thoughts. "The town isn't used to having something like this. It will take time to build a steady clientele." She smiled. "They aren't used to paying this kind of money for something that Joe's Diner sells for practically nothing, you know."

"Should we lower our prices?"

"No." Camille scowled at Sal. "We've talked about this. You, me, and Jeff. You can't let worrying force you into bad business decisions. Right?"

"I know that," Sal said. "You're right."

Camille smiled. "Of course I am. I always am. Remember who you're talking to, here."

"Just give me my coffee and let me go sit in a corner," Sal said, her grumpy tone not really real. "And one of those chocolate chip muffins." She looked down at the baked goods. "And a cinnamon scone."

"I don't know how you do it," Camille said. She handed the coffee mug back to Sal.

"Do what?"

"Eat all of those calories and not gain weight. You know women hate you, don't you?"

Sal shook her head. "Haters gonna hate." She smiled. "But I don't know how I do it either. I guess I have a high metabolism. Mom does too. She can eat anything."

"It's not right," Camille said with a sigh. "It's just not right. Go on over to your table and I'll bring them to you. You want the muffin warmed a little, right?"

"I'm getting predictable. Yes. Thanks."

If it was available, Sal liked to sit at a table against the east wall, snugged up to the bookshelves. She took her laptop out of its bag, opened it and turned it on. This was one of her favorite times of the day. While the computer whirred to life, she drew in the scent of her coffee before taking a tentative sip. It was hot. Too hot for a long drink, but perfect for the moment. She leaned back in the chair and looked across the room. This place was hers. She knew she wouldn't make any money for a long time, but that was okay. As long as it paid for itself, she was satisfied.

It was incredible how different the cost of living was here in Iowa. Sal knew she had it easy. Mark owned his home, so she didn't have to pay rent. They split the cost of everything else, but even still, it was less than she paid to rent a tiny apartment in Boston.

A young couple came in and Camille glanced over at her. Sal waved Camille off, telling her not to hurry with her food.

They'd been lucky to find that woman. Camille had great business sense and exuded a sense of family and belonging. It was fun to watch her work. Sal knew that she'd been a little nervous about being one of very few African Americans in Bellingwood. Hmmm. Was there anyone else who lived here other than Joss and Nate's twins? Nope. Wow. Camille had courage. Maybe growing up as the oldest in such a large family gave her an extra dose of confidence. Not much fazed her. Sal hoped she knew that everyone around had her back, no matter what.

Sal entered her password on the front screen and waited a few more moments before opening a browser tab. She didn't want to work today, but couldn't come up with anything better to do. She'd spent the last two days cleaning the house. Worst job ever. Mark tried his best to clean up after himself, but they did live in the house and sometimes there was no helping the clutter and the mess. Early last summer he offered to hire someone to clean on a regular basis, but Sal wasn't ready to admit that she couldn't keep up. It had been a great way to avoid writing, but that didn't mean she liked it.

Her mother would be beside herself if she'd seen Sal yesterday on her knees scrubbing a toilet. Next time she'd take a picture and send it to her father. He'd laugh and understand and then when he wanted to torment his wife, he'd show it to her.

Mark didn't even seem to notice when he got home last night. Sure, it was late and he was exhausted, but Sal had expected some appreciation for all she'd done around the house. He knew that wasn't her thing. At all.

He'd come in, dropped his jacket over one of the dining room chairs, kicked his shoes off in the living room and went into the bedroom. He dropped fully dressed onto the bed with its fresh, clean sheets and turned the television on. Sal had stood in the middle of the living room with her mouth wide open in shock. He hadn't said much other than a mumbled hello. No kiss, no acknowledgment of her work or anything.

Yep. There'd been a fight. She was still a little mad at him, even

though they'd finally talked everything out and he apologized for ignoring her. She'd ended up apologizing for expecting so much from him when he'd put in a rough fourteen-hour day. The next few days were going to be just as difficult for him. She didn't really want to know exactly what he did during the day. Much of it involved bodily fluids that she wasn't prepared to think about.

"I'm sorry," Camille said, putting a plate in front of Sal. "That took longer than I expected."

Sal shook her head. "I probably could have gotten off my lazy behind and come up to get it, but I got lost in my thoughts. Thank you."

"Have you had any luck?" Camille pointed at the computer.

"Not so much. I wasn't thinking about that." Sal looked up at her. "I'm pathetic. I have the perfect life. I'm doing exactly what I want and yet some days I struggle to eke out a few hundred words. I wrote more when I was working every day."

"Maybe you used your writing to distract yourself from work?" Camille asked.

"And now I'm cleaning house to distract myself from writing. Talk about something that just isn't right. That's not right. I hate cleaning." Sal tapped the side of the computer. "And this article is frustrating me. I haven't found the hook to give it life."

"Do you want to talk about it? Maybe that will help."

Sal smiled. "I'd love that. But you're busy."

Two more people had just walked in. Camille waved at them.

"If I'm still struggling tomorrow, I'll ask," Sal said. "I just need to focus."

"Let me know," Camille said. "I'm always here."

Sal watched her walk away with a lilt in her step. She was a genuinely happy person. What would it be like to live that way? Maybe if Sal had grown up in a big family where people were affectionate and loving, she'd be happy all the time too.

"Stop it," she said to herself. "Polly wouldn't let you get away with this. You are happy. You have a good man who loves you even when he's a jerk and you're irritable. Now get to work and quit over-thinking things."

She took a drink of her coffee. Now it was the perfect temperature, but the muffin had grown cold. Oh well. It still tasted good.

Three more customers had come in and were chattering two tables away from her. There it was. The perfect amount of noise. She looked at the screen and had a brainstorm. It was only a matter of time now. The article was practically finished.

Book 12 - #4

More Than Meets the Muffin

Heath turned over in bed and groaned. Another day. They were all the same. He got up, rode the bus to school, spent the day knowing that he'd be harassed by somebody, rode the bus back to Bellingwood, scooped crap out of horse stalls, did homework and went to bed so he could start all over doing the same exact thing the next day.

At least Rebecca liked him. Everybody else either hated him or tiptoed around him, afraid that he was going to turn into a monster or fall apart. Hayden told him that he needed to suck it up because at least he was safe. Polly and Henry tried to be nice, which was better than his aunt and uncle. Rebecca was the only one who understood. Her mom died only a few months ago. He still didn't get why she was so happy.

"Let's go, sleepyhead," she yelled after knocking on his door. "Don't wanna be late for the bus!"

He smiled and sat up. He couldn't believe he had a sister. Then he felt his face return to normal, the smile long gone. She wasn't really his sister. And if she knew all of the things he had done when he was with Ladd and Abby and Andy, she wouldn't like him. Bile rose in his throat. Abby was dead. Ladd would have killed them all if he thought they were going to tell on him. At least the cops caught him before he hurt anybody else.

Heath pushed the sleeve of his pajamas back and looked at the scar on his forearm. That was from the night they broke into the old shoe store the first time. Ladd made him punch through the glass. It bled all over the place. He'd wrapped it up with rags they found in the store, but it didn't heal for a long time. He couldn't tell his aunt about it. She would have poured alcohol on it while he stood there trying not to cry.

He'd stolen her antibiotic cream and ripped up old t-shirts for

bandages. He still wore long sleeves so no one would see the scar. Even Polly hadn't seen it yet.

"Move it, you bum," Rebecca yelled. She rapped on the door again. "Polly made breakfast. You don't want to miss this."

"Coming." He grabbed jeans up from the floor and shook them out. They'd be fine today, but he took a fresh t-shirt out of his dresser. Polly caught him every time he tried to wear one a second day. He hadn't had this many clothes since...

He couldn't think about that. Every time he thought about his parents, he had a hard time coming back to the real world. He missed them so much. His mom loved getting ready for school in the fall. She took one whole day with him and they went to Des Moines. Their first stop was always for clothes because he hated that the most. Then they'd buy shoes. His favorite stop was Office Depot. It wasn't because he loved paper and folders, pens and pencils; it was because she did. He smiled and brushed away a tear. The last time they went, she'd grabbed his hand and tried to skip with him through the front door. He was too old for that. But deep down inside, he wished he'd just done it. She was so happy.

Heath lifted a stack of t-shirts and touched the blue spiral notebook he'd managed to keep hidden from his aunt. His mom had written a note in the middle of it, assuming that he'd find it one day when he was working on an assignment. She'd drawn a big smiley face and put curly hair on it. Then she drew a bubble with the words, "I love you, Heath. Always do your best - it's what you are meant to be. Remember that I'm proud of you every minute of the day."

He couldn't look at the page anymore. It hurt too much. Heath slammed the drawer shut and put his t-shirt on.

Rebecca pounded on his door. "Are you going to make me come in after you?"

"I'm here, I'm here," he said, pulling the door open.

She gave him her best innocent face and then crooked her finger for him to bend down. He wasn't that much taller than her, but he did what she asked. She ran her fingers through his hair, straightening it around his face.

"That's better," she said. "Seriously, Heath, use a brush, will

you?"

"Whatever."

"Don't whatever me. Did you finish your book last night?"

He stepped back into the bedroom and grabbed up his backpack. "I finished what I was supposed to read."

"Was it good?"

"Yeah. It's okay."

"I want to read that when you're done. And then we should watch the movie."

"There's a movie?" he asked. "Why can't I just watch that?"

Rebecca glared at him and he grinned. "Because reading is better for you. And it's a classic."

He really was enjoying the book. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was much better than *King Lear*. Heath couldn't believe all of the books Polly had on her shelves. When he came home with the reading list at the beginning of the semester, she showed him where each one was located. And she'd read them all. But then she had been a librarian. That was probably required for her to get a degree.

His mom read books, but mostly she went to the library for them. She always wanted him to check out books with her, but he didn't do that either. Wow, he'd been a terrible kid. All of those years he could have made her life easy and he didn't. It wasn't fair. He wanted to tell her how sorry he was, but it was too late. It was always too late.

"Good morning," Henry said when they walked into the kitchen. Heath nodded. "Hey."

Polly stepped out from the kitchen. She always looked like she wanted to hug him. He wished she would sometime. Just do it and get it over with so he could hug her back. But she stopped herself. "Juice?" she asked.

He dropped into the chair where he always sat and nodded again, then took the glass from her.

"I made muffins and there's egg casserole. I tried a new recipe and it smells wonderful," she said. "Rebecca, will you get plates and silverware?"

Heath stood up. "I can help."

"Thanks," Polly said. She nodded at the stove where the casserole dish was sitting. "It should be cool enough now. But hot pads are there. Would you grab it?"

He brought it over to the table and put it on the trivet she'd set in front of his place.

Rebecca put plates down beside it and Polly brought over a basket covered with a cloth. She pulled back the cloth and Heath sat back in his seat.

"What are those?" he asked.

His voice must have sounded off because they all looked at each other and then at him.

"Lemon poppy seed," Polly said. "Are you allergic?"

"No." He was afraid he'd cry if he tried to talk so he bolted out of the room. He stood in the doorway to his bedroom, his hand on the door sill, trying to slow his breathing.

"What's wrong, Heath?" Rebecca asked from behind him. "Do you really hate lemon poppy seed muffins?"

"They're my favorite," he replied. "It just brought back a memory." Yeah. A memory of every Sunday morning when his mother made them. She always put three on his plate because she knew just how much he loved them.

Rebecca came up beside him and put her hand on his back, rubbing it slowly. "I hate those memories. Polly didn't know."

"It's okay. I just need to breathe."

"We'll take them away if you don't want them."

"No, I love them. Just give me a minute. I'll be back."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Tell Polly I'm fine. I'll be right there."

"Do you want to talk about this?"

He shook his head. "Not now. Go on. I'll be there in a minute."

"It's okay to be normal. I cry a lot when I think about my mom. You should try it sometime."

Heath looked at Rebecca and smiled. "I don't think so. Come on. I'm fine. Let's go have breakfast."

"I'm not kidding. You should cry."

"Maybe sometime I'll let you hit me in the gut and then I'll cry

because you're so strong and you really hurt me."

Rebecca swatted at him. "Now you're just being silly." She pushed him back into the dining room.

Polly and Henry were still sitting in the same place. He could tell they'd been talking about him because they stopped in the middle of a sentence and looked at him.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Polly asked. "What did I do?"

He sat back down in his seat and took a muffin, split it open and breathed in the scent. It threatened to overwhelm him again, but he choked back the tears.

"They're his favorite," Rebecca said. "I bet he hasn't had them in years."

Polly reached over and touched his arm. "Someday you'll have to tell me some other things that are your favorites."

Heath nodded and took a bite of the muffin. It was perfect.

Rebecca put two more on his plate and winked at him. "You have a few years of these to make up for."

Book 12 - #5 The One That I Want

"I'm home," Lucy called out when she walked in. She took off her coat and draped it over the chair beside the front door. "Is anyone here?"

Her friend, Donna, came out from the hallway. "Still here. I was just finishing up."

"How is he today?" Lucy asked.

Donna smiled. "About the same. How was your day?"

"It was good," Lucy replied. "Your boyfriend had lunch at the diner. I had his table."

"He's not my boyfriend." Donna bumped her friend into the wall of the hallway. "Stop that. You'll start rumors."

Lucy walked into the bedroom. "Hi there, honey."

The man she'd loved for thirty-five years grunted. She'd finally saved enough money to purchase a lift chair and it gave all of them a great deal of freedom. It was comfortable for him during the day and she could finally help him get into his wheelchair.

"I was just telling Donna that her boyfriend was at the diner today," Lucy said.

Greg grunted again. A faint smile crossed his lips and he moved his arm toward Donna.

"She swears he isn't," Lucy continued, "but I've seen the way she looks at him. Joe made a burger for you - just the way you like it. He said he'd come over tomorrow night if you want to watch the game."

Her husband's head snapped up and he attempted a smile. She'd gotten to know his limited facial expressions over the years. Whenever she could coerce a smile, it filled her heart.

"I'll get a plate and fork," Donna said.

Lucy sat in the chair in front of her husband and reached for his hand. "Aaron Merritt was in today asking how you were doing. He

wondered if you'd let him help get you to church next Sunday. I think he misses you."

Greg dropped his head. No. He didn't want to do that.

"Honey," Lucy said. "We go through this all the time. You love going to church and seeing your buddies. Aaron doesn't mind giving me a hand. He misses you."

Greg looked at her, his eyes filled with sorrow, and then dropped his head again.

"Tell me you'll think about it."

The car accident three years had taken so much from her husband. He'd lost the use of his legs and the fine motor skills in his hands. After he'd come out of the coma and they realized that he could no longer speak, that had been the most difficult thing for them to overcome.

Donna came back into the room with the burger cut up on a plate. She put it onto the tray table and watched to see if Greg was ready to eat. He gave a slight nod and she pushed it in front of him, then helped him lift his right hand onto the table. From there, he could fumble food into his mouth. Physical therapy and re-training had helped, but every additional movement he made came with a struggle.

"I need to take off," she said to Lucy. "I'll see you in the morning." She turned back to Greg. "And you need to listen to your wife and your friends. Let Aaron take you to church."

He scowled at her. That was a facial expression he'd found early on.

"You can tell me to shut up all you like," Donna said. "I still think you should go. How many times do we have to talk about you playing the part of a victim?"

He looked down at himself and then back at her, the scowl returning.

"Uh huh," Donna said. "Not buying it. There are people who have been through much worse and they don't let it stop them from being around people who care for them."

Greg stabbed a piece of the hamburger and brought it up to his lips, effectively ignoring her.

She bent over and gave Lucy a quick hug. "You need to get out of those clothes, girlfriend. The smell of grease is worse than usual."

"It was catfish day," Lucy said with a laugh. "And it's time for Joe to change the grease. These days are always bad."

"Call if you need anything."

"Thanks, hon," Lucy said. She sat back and looked at her husband after Donna left. "I stopped at that new coffee shop this morning before I went to work. We should go up there sometime. There are shelves and shelves of books on the walls and it smells so good. You know I told you about Sylvie Donovan? She's running a bakery in there, too."

Lucy slipped her hand into the pocket of her sweater and pulled out a brownie. "I brought this home for you. I think these are better than what your sister makes. I got a fancy coffee drink with chocolate and whipped cream. It felt so decadent."

He brushed at his lips and Lucy picked up a napkin and wiped the corners of his mouth.

"There's a young kid working there. He had his hair up in one of those man-buns today. I wanted to tell him how silly he looked, but just between you and me, he's adorable." She caught her husband's glance. "Yeah, whatever. He's thirty-five years younger than me."

She took a deep breath and thought back over her day. "Oh. I forgot. That friend of Polly's from Boston came in with her boyfriend. You know, the veterinarian. I've talked about her before, haven't I?" Lucy waited for him to look at her. He'd finished the hamburger and pushed the plate away. She took it into her lap. He hated having clutter anywhere near because of his fear that he would knock something off and break it.

"Anyway, she was crying because her mother had yelled at her on the phone. Can you imagine that? A young accomplished woman and her mother is mad because she wasn't flying back to Boston for her own birthday. No wonder the poor girl doesn't want to go home. Why would you willingly subject yourself to an old hag like that?"

Lucy chuckled. "I don't think she's as bad as your mother was." She reached out and grasped his hand. He held tightly to her for

just a split second.

"Do you remember that first Christmas we were married? You had to work Christmas Eve and then it snowed so much that we were stuck, but she still blamed me for ruining her holidays. Have I ever told you how much I loved you for standing up for me?"

Greg's eyes grew soft and he squeezed her hand again.

"We've been through some stuff, haven't we, babe," Lucy said.
"But I wouldn't want to have faced it with anyone but you."

He grunted and looked away.

"Don't even think that," she said, running her hand up his forearm. "This isn't your fault any more than missing Christmas at your mother's was my fault. I'll spend the rest of my life telling you that and hopefully someday you'll finally believe me."

Lucy pulled away and started to stand up, but Greg stopped her with a grunt and tilted his head to the side.

"What is it?" she asked.

He repeated the gesture twice more and Lucy thought back. He was telling her to go back to an earlier conversation.

"Donna?"

No, that wasn't it.

"Aaron?"

He smiled.

"You'll let him help take you to church on Sunday? Really?"

Greg gave her his 'whatever' look and she sat down again and took his hand. "You know they love seeing you. They're still your friends."

He pointed his head to the doorway and grunted.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm going," she said. "Do you want to watch television or listen to a book?"

He put his hand on the small table beside him and Lucy set the plate back on the tray table before moving it out of the way. She reached over and pressed play, then walked out as the narrator said, "When Lewis arrived in Washington, he and Jefferson went to work immediately on the instructions..."

Greg loved history and she'd purchased Steven Ambrose's *Undaunted Courage* last weekend. If only he could talk about all that

he learned. But it was enough that he could escape the confines of his body for hours at a time.

She put his plate into the dishwasher and then went into the laundry room to strip out of her uniform. She pulled on a robe and headed back. Greg's room was the most comfortable room in the house. All of their pictures and memories were on the walls and the shelves. She had a comfortable chair to sit in, her knitting was at hand, and she could put her aching feet up on the seat of his chair beside him, just to maintain contact.

People might never understand why she was truly content with her life. She had all she needed and she still had her husband. That was what mattered.

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