



REFLECTING
LOVE'S CHARMS

Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Book 14



Book Fourteen

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 14 – Reflecting Love's Charms - 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 14 - #1

We Are Family

"Hi there, sweetie." Marie Sturtz stood up from the table where she and Molly were seated when Hayden Harvey walked into the restaurant.

"It's good to see you, Mrs. Sturtz," Hayden said. He strode across the room, nodded at someone who waved at him, and accepted the hug from the woman who insisted he was family. He still couldn't get over how this had happened.

"How many times do I need to tell you to stop with that formal nonsense," Marie said. "You call me Marie." She sat back down at the table and gestured for him to sit across from her. "I ordered some of that spinach and artichoke dip for an appetizer. After your recommendation, I introduced it to Bill and we both like it."

He smiled.

"How are classes going?" she asked.

"Good. I'll be glad for summer break, but it's been a good year."

Marie reached across and took his hand. "It *has* been a good year. We're awfully glad you're part of our family now, you know." It was as if she realized she'd pushed too far and drew her hand back. "Molly likes you a lot, too, don't you, sweetie?"

"Hay!" Molly had been squirming in her seat since he'd arrived and once Marie acknowledged her, she thrust her little arms out toward him.

"It might be easiest if we change seats," Marie said. "We can change again when the food gets here."

"I wouldn't mind helping her eat today," Hayden said. "She's a good girl."

"Then I'll let you." Marie turned to Molly. "Just because Hayden is sitting beside you doesn't mean you can get out of your seat, okay?"

The little girl nodded furiously. "K." She sat back and put her

hands in her lap. As soon as Hayden was in the chair beside her, she reached for him. "Lap."

"I don't think so, munchkin," Hayden said with a grin. He put an arm around her back and pulled the chair as close as he could, then picked up the stuffed bear she'd carried in with her. "Who's this?"

"Hay," Molly said.

"That's me, all right, but who is this?" He waggled the bear in front of her and Molly reached for it.

"Hay," she said deliberately.

He glanced at Marie, who shrugged. "It's named something different every day. Yesterday it was Obi. Who knows what its name will be tomorrow."

Hayden reached down into his backpack and pulled out a beanbag Cy-hawk. He held it under the table for Marie to see and when she nodded, he placed it on the table in front of Molly. "That's Hay," he said.

Molly dropped her bear to the floor and grabbed up the beanbag. "Hay!" she repeated.

"You know how to say thank you," Marie said. "Tell Hayden thank you for bringing a present."

Molly opened her arms up for a hug and when Hayden reached in, she said "Thank you" as clear as could be.

"Good girl," Hayden said. "You're welcome."

"Henry tells us you're looking at grad schools," Marie said once Molly focused on her new toy. "Are you thinking of leaving the area?"

"I don't know," he replied. "I planned to since there wasn't anything here for me, but that changed this year. All of a sudden I have a family again and me and Heath are getting along good." He cringed. "That was a terrible sentence. Sorry. We're getting along well. I kind of hate to leave that now."

"It's hard," Marie said. "My daughter is in Ann Arbor and doesn't get back very often. We miss her terribly, but she loves it in Michigan. She would have missed out on her dreams if she'd never left Iowa." She smiled at him. "On the other hand, Henry stayed in the area and found his dream when it showed up out of the blue."

She gestured at him and at Molly. "And I wouldn't have gotten to know either of you if he'd felt like he needed to venture far from home."

"So what do I do?" Hayden asked.

"I probably don't have a good answer for you," Marie responded. "But know that wherever you end up, you'll still have a family here that supports and encourages you. I didn't know I could be so proud of someone I only just met."

"Thanks," he said. "The thing is..." He gave his head a quick shake as the waitress came to the table with their appetizer.

"I'm sorry," the girl said to him. "I didn't see you come in. Would you like something to drink?"

They gave her the rest of their order and Marie waited until she was gone. "Okay. The thing is?"

"What were we talking about?" he asked.

"It was something about you and grad school, either here or somewhere else."

"Oh," Hayden said. "It's nothing."

"Honey, it's something. It was on the tip of your tongue. What's worrying you?"

"Finances. It's always finances," he said. "With work, I can swing the tuition, but I'm worried about housing. If I stay here at the university, I either take out bigger student loans or I move in with more guys. If I do that, I'll never have any peace and quiet. And this program is intense."

"Would the commute from Bellingwood kill you?" Marie asked.

His head snapped up. "No, why?"

"You might have a couple of options. If Polly and Henry move into that big old house, there will be plenty of room. I can't promise it will always be quiet, but at least there will be space to move. Now, if they don't move in for a while, Bill and I would love for you to live with us. We still have Henry's room upstairs and it would be an honor to help you meet these challenges ahead of you."

He picked up another piece of pita bread, tore it into small bites and then dipped one in the dip before handing it to Molly. She squealed and took it from him with an adoring gaze.

Marie chuckled. "I don't know if that one would leave you alone during the day, though. That little girl has a crush on you."

"I couldn't let you do it," he said.

"Now why not?" Marie demanded.

"It's too much. I need to pay my own way."

"If you moved in with us, we'd work it out. If you moved in with Polly and Henry, I'm sure they'd work it out as well. But Hayden, you have to realize that you're no longer alone in this world. I know your sweet parents were ripped away from you before it was time and you've had to figure out how to keep everything together for the last few years. You've done a wonderful job with that..."

"Not so much with Heath," he said glumly, dropping his head. "I can't believe I didn't know." He looked back up at Marie. "That's not true. I kinda knew, but I couldn't fix it. Then things just kept getting worse and worse and I felt like my hands were tied. How could my aunt and uncle have done that to him?"

"I've known your aunt and uncle for years," Marie said. "They're hard people, but nobody thought they would abandon the two of you like they did. You were put into an impossible situation. Both you and Heath were. But you can't continue to feel guilt over something that was out of your control. If anything, the rest of us should feel badly for not stepping in and stopping it."

"It wasn't your job," Hayden said. "It was mine. I'm his older brother. I should have said something."

"Hayden, sweetie," Marie said. "You two are part of a community, whether your parents are here or not. This community should have supported you when they were killed, not sloughed off the responsibility onto two people who were never able to handle it. The truth is, there is plenty of guilt to pass around and yet, guilt gets us nowhere. You boys are safe and Heath is growing into himself. Quite well, I might add. You aren't the only one responsible for him any longer. And you don't have to be solely responsible for yourself, either. Let some of us be there for you."

"My friends don't understand why you keep coming over to have lunch with me," he said.

"Because you're my family now." She chuckled. "If I could get to

Ann Arbor in twenty-five minutes, I'd bother my daughter as often as I do you."

"You aren't a bother at all," he said. "I enjoy this." Hayden took a slobbery piece of pita away from Molly and gave her a fresh bite.

The waitress returned with their meals and held out a small plate with chicken strips on it. "Where should I put this?" she asked.

"I've got it," Hayden said, pointing at the table in front of him.

Molly clapped her hands at the sight of her food and reached out to grab Hayden's arm.

"Let me have my arm, Molly," he said patiently. "I have to cut your chicken."

"You know we'd love it if you stayed in the area," Marie said.

Hayden put a few cut up pieces of chicken in front of Molly. "I think I just needed to hear that. This is where I want to be."

"Then all the rest is only logistics," she replied. "And we have plenty of people in our family who are good at figuring things out."

Molly reached out for her sippy cup and Hayden picked it up and put it in her hand. She took a quick drink, then held it back out for him to take.

"That little girl has you completely tied around her little finger," Marie observed.

"I kind of like it," he replied.

Book 14 - #2

Mommie Dearest

Sal Kahane flung open the front door of Sweet Beans and looked around to see who was there. For once, the place was empty. Good. she needed to calm down.

Camille came out from the bakery at the sound of clanging bells and grinned when she saw her boss. "Good morning. How was your weekend?"

"Weekend was fine. The morning? Dreadful. I need coffee. I've tried to be good, but if my doc says I can have a cup once in a while and not hurt the baby, today's the day. I need it."

"Bad morning?" Camille asked with a smile. "What happened?"

"My mother," Sal spat. "She's always what happens. I was having a perfectly happy pregnancy and now she wants to come to Iowa and upend my life. She's a menace."

Camille chuckled. She'd heard plenty of stories about Lila Kahane from Sal. "When is she coming?"

Sal pointed to a glass-covered cake stand. "Big chocolate muffin. In my mouth. Right now."

Camille pushed the coffee cup forward on the counter and put the largest chocolate muffin she could find on a plate. "Will that help?"

"For about three minutes is all." Sal reached across the counter, picked up the muffin, took a large bite, and mumbled through the cake. "I can *not* believe this is happening to me."

"Go sit in the booth over there. I'll pour myself a cup and join you. Nobody's here this morning."

Sal put the muffin back on the plate, sighed and picked it up with her coffee. "You're going to have to listen to me complain, you know."

"I think I can handle it. If you get too far out of line, I'll call in reinforcements. Sylvie has plenty of help today and can come

rescue me."

"Not Sylvie," Sal said with a laugh. "Please not Sylvie. She always tells me to straighten up and stop feeling sorry for myself. Her and Polly. They just don't appreciate a good pity party. And today? I'm really feeling pitiful."

Camille followed Sal to the booth with a mug of black coffee and slid in, watching Sal negotiate the table with her pregnant belly. "So why is your mother coming to Iowa?" Then she dropped her mouth open into a round "O". "This is my fault, isn't it."

Sal slid her a glare. "Yes it is."

"But I was only being polite," Camille protested. "And besides, you're the one who gave me her address. You said there was no possible way she'd come."

"I thought I was safe. She can't miss a single prep school, high school, or college graduation if one of her friends' children or grandchildren are involved. There are teas and parties for the young women who are coming out and then it's also Mother's Day. She always makes Dad take her someplace elegant for Mother's Day."

"Wait. Back up. Coming out? Real, live debutantes?" Camille asked.

"Real. Live," Sal replied. "Even though the balls don't happen until next December, these women have to make sure their little protégées are properly trained."

Camille shook her head. "I'm speechless. Did you go through that?"

"It had fallen out of favor when I would have been at the height of it, but I learned plenty of society rules and mores. My mother would have been quite disappointed in me. I'd never have played that game. But anyway." Sal gave her head a quick shake. "I'm back to being mad at you. Mother is coming to Iowa this Friday. I have to pick her up in Des Moines and then entertain her until she leaves on Monday."

"That's a long weekend," Camille said. "How can I help?"

"You're putting the baby shower together. That's enough. Just don't do anything cutesy or weird, okay? I want to get through it

with as little pain as possible."

"So, no games."

Sal's eyes grew huge. "Games? Oh please no. Just food and friends." She leaned her head on the back of the booth. "Camille, you have no idea how awful this woman is. She criticizes everything."

"It can't be that bad."

"Yes it can." Sal looked around the coffee shop. "She'll make a comment about how quaint this is, but what she means is that it's low-class and common, not worthy of her. When she tastes Sylvie's wonderful creations, she'll tell me later about a famous chef on the East Coast who makes something so much better and it's too bad that we can't have that kind of quality here in the Midwest. If only chefs everywhere were required to have the same level of training. She'll comment on the clothes people wear and how they carry themselves. She'll make snide remarks about education and financial worth. I lived that life, and now I see why Polly was scared to let me loose among her friends. She warned me over and over when I came out here that I couldn't say bad things about her town."

"My mother can be just as bad," Camille said. "For someone who has grown up with a huge family and experiences racism and bigotry every day of her life, that woman can be hard to get along with. She has a set of rules that people must abide by and if you don't, she can be pretty judgmental." Camille chuckled. "The thing is, you aren't always sure exactly what those rules are until you cross one of them."

"That's it exactly," Sal exclaimed. "It isn't like they're written down on a list somewhere."

Camille leaned forward and said quietly, "I think Mom's might be. I'm pretty sure she keeps them in a locked journal inside a locked box in the bottom of a locked drawer in the desk in her locked office."

Sal laughed until she snorted. "That's hilarious. But you aren't like that at all. Aren't you the oldest?"

"Yes, but the other thing my mother has is an overabundance of love. That tempers much of her critical nature. And with so many

kids in our family, she spread it out on all of us, so it wasn't focused on only one person."

"I'm not having only one child," Sal declared. "Mother did that whole focusing thing on me. Poor Dad was already a lost cause, so I had to be a perfect daughter for her to show off."

"It would be tough being an only child sometimes."

"For some people, it's fine. I just managed to grow up with a mother who is an inconsiderate snob. Dad's nothing like her. I've watched him cringe at the things she says to people. She's utterly cruel sometimes." Sal shook her head slowly. "She's going to come out here and denigrate everything I love and tell me how bad I look - how I've put on too much weight with the baby."

"You've hardly put on any extra weight," Camille said. "You're gorgeous."

Sal's eyes crinkled into a smile. "Thank you. I wasn't fishing. It's just what I get to experience while she's in town." She wadded up her napkin and threw it at the plate. "I need activities that will distract her."

"There's always Polly," Camille said with a laugh.

"She loves Polly," Sal lit up with a hopeful smile. "Absolutely adores her. Polly is the only one of all of my friends that Mother accepted as she was."

"So make Polly entertain her."

"That might be difficult," Sylvie said, coming up behind Sal from the kitchen.

"Why? What's going on?" Sal asked.

"Polly's had a wild morning so far and it sounds like it might be a long week."

Camille slid over and patted the seat beside her. "Sit down and tell us."

Sylvie placed her hands on the edge of the table and leaned in. "I can't," she said. "I'm late for a meeting in Boone." She grinned at the two of them. "So I'll leave you with the mystery and see you both tomorrow morning." She stood back up and waved toward the kitchen. "They can handle anything that comes up today and you've got my cell."

As she walked away, Sal looked at Camille in annoyance. "What was that about?"

"I don't know. She's not usually a tease. What do you suppose is going on with Polly?"

"It can't be good," Sal said. "It's never good. But I can make an assumption. Now, how am I going to explain to Mother that Polly found another dead body?"

"If she likes Polly so well, it won't be that bad, will it?"

Sal grinned across the table at Camille. "In fact, it might be pure entertainment."

Book 14 - #3

Never Say Never

"Do you hear something?" Marnie Evans asked her husband, Dave.

He was already up and heading for the kitchen. "Sounds like someone at the back door," he replied.

She shook her head. Barrett and Ella knew better than to have people over after nine o'clock.

"Marn?" Dave called a few minutes later. "You wanna come out here?"

She set her tablet on the table and groaned as she stood up. It had been a long day at the office. Trouble always seemed to come in waves and today was a day filled with trouble. She'd even had to call Doc Ogden back in because they'd been so busy. Dr. Jackson had been stuck in emergency surgery most of the morning with Mrs. Denoro's young dog. Poor thing. He'd gotten into the trash and busily ate everything in sight while the woman had been at work. She'd come home to find a dog that got sicker throughout the night. This morning, Mrs. Denoro and Dooley were waiting for Marnie to open the front door. The day had gone downhill after that.

"What's up?"

"Someone needs to see you," he said, looking downward.

She followed his eyes. "Devon Rittenhouse, what are you doing out at this hour? You should be home and in bed."

The little boy lived two houses away, but his mother never paid attention to where he was. Marnie had sent him scurrying home many a night, making sure to watch until he waved at her from his front door.

"Mom said I can't keep it." He held out a small orange kitten. "She said I had to bring it to you."

Marnie glanced up at her husband who gave her a mock scowl.

"Where did you find it?" Marnie asked. "Were there other

kittens?"

"No, just this one." His lower lip puffed out. "Well, we all took one home."

"Who is *we all* and when did this happen?" Marnie reached out to take the kitten from him and ran her fingers over the little body, checking for anything that might be a problem.

"After school. And it was just me, Gabe, Luke, and Hunter."

The kitten looked old enough to have been weaned from its mother, but Marnie still worried. "Where did you find them?"

He looked up, bright-eyed and excited to tell her the story. "Somebody left them in a box at school. You know, under that big tree on the corner? Since there were four of them and four of us, we just knew they were ours to take home."

Dave reached over and put his hand on Marnie's shoulder, fully aware that her anger would be rising. There was nothing she hated more than abandoned animals. Either neuter your pets or be responsible for their litters.

"Did you see who left the kittens there?"

"Oh no," he said. "They'd been there for a while. We saw the box when we went out for recess, but couldn't go look at it until after school. Somebody had to take them home, didn't they?"

"Yes they did, and I'm glad it was you. That was a really good thing to do. Have you fed him anything?" She turned the poor kitten upside down to make sure she had gotten his gender correct.

"He ate some milk. That's all we had. I named him Chester."

"That's a great name."

"Will you keep him?" Devon asked. "If I can't have him, somebody nice should."

"Somebody nice will keep him, even if it isn't me," Marnie said. "Now you go on home and tell your mother that he's safe. Do I need to go outside and watch you walk home?"

"No, I'll go. I promise."

"Devon?" Marnie said.

"Yeah?"

"When you see your friends tomorrow, tell them to bring their kittens in to see the doc. If their mothers say they can't keep them

either, tell them to bring them in to us. We want these babies to have good homes, okay?"

"Okay. But their moms aren't as mean as mine," Devon said.

"Just be sure to tell them what I said," Marnie replied and stood at the back door as he opened their back gate and headed home. She watched until he crossed into his own yard and then stepped back inside.

"Marnie," Dave said. He only needed to say her name. She knew what he meant.

"Don't you think it's time? Slim died two months ago. This place is lonely without a cat."

"We have two dogs. We don't need a cat."

As if they knew someone was talking about them, Rocky and Groot came racing into the kitchen. Barrett had chosen their names after watching the movie. Both dogs had come into the vet's office one day; a bonded pair. Groot was a Great Dane mix and Rocky, a Papillon. They couldn't have been more different. When their owner died, the son brought the two dogs in to have them put to sleep. He wasn't taking them and didn't want to spend time trying to find the dogs a home. It had seemed quite obvious to him that the only option was euthanasia. Fortunately, Doctor Jackson had been in the office and Doc Ogden had been out on a call. Marnie was certain that Mark would have done something unspeakable to the man. But Seth Jackson had asked the man to surrender the animals to him without putting them to sleep. As long as they were someone else's responsibility, that was fine. The man signed them over with no more argument.

The dogs lived at the office for a few days until Marnie couldn't stand it. It had been a couple of years since they'd had a dog in the house. Slim was enough. As the kids got older, they'd gotten busy and hadn't pushed for another pet. One night after work, Marnie dragged Dave to the office and introduced him to the dogs. He'd fallen in love with Groot right away. It wasn't really fair. Dave didn't have a chance. He'd always expressed an interest in having a Great Dane. The two dogs had gone home that night with them and settled right in.

Barrett had been beside himself with joy and immediately gave the two dogs their new names. Ella tried to act as if she didn't care; she'd been attached to Brando, but it didn't take long for her to fall in love. Rocky usually slept on her bed, while Groot couldn't be persuaded to sleep anywhere but beside the man who chose to bring him home. Dave finally built a dog bed for Groot and put it beside his side of their bed. Otherwise, that big ole thing insisted on sleeping between Dave and Marnie. Groot just couldn't be too far away from his favorite person. Barrett came in a pretty close second for the big dog, but hadn't yet convinced him to leave Dave's side at night.

"I'm going to check the gate that kid came through," Dave said. "Tonight is not a night to chase after lost dogs."

Marnie opened the pantry door. She hadn't yet thrown away any of Slim's cat food. In fact, she probably still had kitten food. There was a nearly full box of litter on the shelf in the garage beside Slim's old litter box. She'd cleaned it and kept it, knowing there was no way she'd be without a cat for long.

"Here you go, Chester," she said, taking out a box of canned kitten food.

"What's all the noise down here, Mom?" Barrett asked, coming into the kitchen. He pulled up short when he saw what she was holding. "Did we get a new cat? What did Dad say?"

She chuckled. "Dad's outside with the dogs. He hasn't said much yet." Marnie popped the top off the can of kitten food and gestured with her head toward the cupboards. "Get me a fork and a plate, would you? And put some water in one of those little white bowls."

Instead, Barrett walked back through the door he'd come in and yelled up the stairs. "Ella, we have a cat. Get down here."

Marnie shook her head. "Food and water first. And you know better than to yell."

Thundering feet on the stairway announced Ella's arrival.

"We have a cat? Where'd it come from? Does it have a name? Can we keep it? Let me hold it." Ella had started talking before she even got into the room. That was standard Ella. She was Marnie's live wire.

"Barrett," Marnie spoke a little more sharply. "Please with the fork and plate."

"Can I hold it?" Ella asked again.

Barrett opened the drawer and took out a fork, then reached up and pulled down a plate. A complete opposite of his sister, the boy moved slowly and deliberately, something that nearly drove Marnie to distraction some days.

She shoved the cat into Ella's arms and crossed the room, taking the plate and fork from him. "Slow as molasses in January," she muttered, then said aloud. "A bowl of water, please."

The kitten had been mewling all this time as it smelled the cat food. Marnie emptied the can onto the plate and mashed it up, then slid it across the table to where Ella was sitting. "Feed him up here," she said. "The dogs will be back inside any second."

"Can we keep him?" Ella asked.

Marnie made a quick decision. "Yes. We're keeping him."

"I heard that," Dave said, coming in the back door. "But I draw the line at moving out to the country so we can open an animal rescue, got it?"

Marnie grinned, then reached up to kiss his cheek. "You really shouldn't lay down ultimatums. You know what kind of trouble that always causes."

He laughed. "Oh yeah. We weren't going to live in a small town and we were going to stop having children after Ella. And when Brando died we weren't going to have any more dogs."

Barrett looked up at his parents in shock. "You didn't want to have me?"

"Apparently, I wasn't thinking straight at the time," Dave said, ruffling his son's hair. "I wouldn't have missed out on you for anything."

Groot pawed at the back door and woofed a plea to be let in. "And I wouldn't have wanted to miss having those two around either." He leaned forward and rubbed his thumb down the kitten's back. "It looks like Chester is part of our family now."

"Yay," Ella said, jumping up. She sat back down quietly when the kitten startled. "Sorry, little baby."

Marnie sat down across from her daughter as Dave opened the back door, letting the dogs in.

Groot was always interested in what might be happening at the kitchen table, so rushed over and set his chin beside the cat's dish, trying desperately to be inconspicuous.

"Groot, down," Dave said. The dog picked his head up and looked at Dave, then back at the cat, while Rocky yapped and danced around Groot's feet. "It's going to be a long night," Dave said to Marnie.

Today had defined chaos and it looked like chaos wasn't finished with her yet. Tomorrow would be better. Marnie reached out and Ella gave the kitten back to her. A satisfied tummy brought on quiet purring as Marnie snuggled the kitten to her chest. She hadn't realized exactly how much she had missed having a cat in the house. A little chaos tonight would be worth it.

Book 14 - #4

No Zombies, Please

"It's such a beautiful day," Andy said. "Let's eat lunch on the patio."

Len looked over his glasses at her with a scowl and attacked a second tomato with his knife, slicing thin pieces for sandwiches.

She grinned. "Why not?"

"You know why not."

Andy laughed. "You are being silly about this. I don't understand why you're uncomfortable relaxing out there."

He pointed out the kitchen window to the cemetery that bordered their yard. "There's no relaxing when they watch everything I do."

"It's a good thing the bedroom is on the front side of the house, then," Andy said with a giggle. She reached up and kissed his cheek. "It would be awful if they saw what you do to me in there."

Len's eyes grew big in shock. "Andrea Specek, what has gotten into you?"

"Well, last night it was ..." She stopped to wait for his response. Maybe she'd spent too much time with Beryl and the woman was finally rubbing off on her. Or maybe Len was even more uptight than she was and it was fun to tease him.

It took a moment for her comment to sink in and he sputtered. "You embarrass me sometimes."

"There is no one else around." Andy reached up and unhooked the ties from the curtains on the kitchen window before pulling them closed. "There, now even *they* can't see us. Is that better?" She dropped the spatula into the bowl of chicken salad and, reaching up, took his chin and turned his face to her. "Maybe lunch isn't even important. I could be talked into doing something else."

His face turned bright red and he leaned in to kiss her. "I'm supposed to go back over to the shop this afternoon. We can't be

doing this."

"Why not?" she asked. Andy slowly drew her finger down her own chin, to her neck and then on down to her cleavage, separating the top of her blouse as she did. "Are you going to tell Bill what you did at lunch?"

"He always asks," Len said. "He'll know something's up if I don't have a good story."

"You tell him a story every time you go back to work?"

"You know what I mean. We just talk about things. What I had for lunch, what was on the news, other things like that."

"Maybe I should whisper today's news in your ear while we're in bed, then," she replied, waggling her eyebrows at him.

He released a sigh. "We can eat on the patio, I guess."

Andy laughed out loud. "I love you, Len Specek. You're so easy to tease."

"You were teasing me?"

"Of course I was." She glanced at the doorway. "Unless you'd like me to have been serious. I could absolutely be serious."

He put his hands up. "No, no, no. Teasing is fine for now. But let's eat on the patio."

"You can always sit with your back to the cemetery," she said.

He grimaced. "No way. I want to see them coming."

"See who coming?" Andy asked. "The zombies?"

"Well, it sounds ridiculous when you say it like that."

"Yes it does." She laughed at him again. "You're not going to be allowed to watch television any longer. No more zombie shows for you. There is no such thing as the walking dead."

"You don't know that," he replied. "If it happened, we'd be their first meal."

"Bagel or bread?" she asked, shaking her head.

"Bread, please." Len opened the refrigerator and took out the neatly sliced and packaged bagels. He knew which she preferred. He popped a bagel into the toaster and took two plates out of the cupboard, then went back to the refrigerator for lettuce and a jar of pickles.

While Andy built his sandwich, he assembled the ingredients for

hers, waiting for the toaster to finish its task. Andy filled two glasses with ice and sun-brewed tea, then put a pickle spear and a handful of potato chips on each plate.

Len waited until she finished wiping her hands on the towel tucked into her waistband, before grabbing her upper arms and turning her toward him. He leaned in and kissed her, not releasing her until she melted in his arms.

"What was that?" Andy asked breathlessly.

"You should never think that I don't love you and want to be with you," he said, a little breathless himself.

"Oh-ho-hokay," she said. "Are you sure about not doing the other?"

He chuckled and popped the bagel out of the toaster, tossing it back and forth between his hands to keep from burning his fingers. "Lunch is ready. We should eat. Then I'll go back to work and think about you all afternoon."

"I will too," she replied, fanning her face. "About you."

They were having the time of their lives. They'd talked about it quite a lot this last year. Neither of them had thought there would ever be another chance for love, but they'd been wrong. Len was so different from her first husband. Bill Saner was a sturdy, strong, and kind man, and was much more gregarious than Len. When he'd been alive, Bill commanded a room. Andy was content to sit back and let him shine. She'd spent her life as a very happy wallflower. Her lifelong best friend was Beryl Watson who was as flamboyant as they came, letting Andy stay in the background. When Andy married Bill, she knew she would be safe in his shadow.

Len was physically a smaller man than Bill and though he was comfortable around their friends, he never went out of his way to engage with those he didn't know well. He enjoyed watching Andy reach out to others. The funny thing was, in the last year, she'd become involved in so many different things in Bellingwood. She'd always loved teaching, but after retirement, Bill had never thought to encourage her to do anything other than stay at home and be a mother and grandmother. She loved doing both of those things, but

felt like her life had stopped.

Now though, it felt like she was fully alive again. She and Len traveled around the state whenever they had a chance. She'd seen more of Iowa in the last year than ever before. As quiet as Len was when they were out with their friends, he loved to travel and meet new people in countries she'd never expected to visit. He'd been the perfect companion for their European trip. He wasn't shy about getting them where they needed to go, but had just as much fun encouraging Andy to try new things, and laughed with her when she discovered the pure pleasure of discovering the world.

The afternoon that she'd stood in front of the Basilica of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona with tears streaming down her face, he'd held her hand and waited until she could move again. The entire trip had been overwhelming and he promised to take her back as often as possible. It was helpful that his daughter, Ellen, lived in Barcelona. Andy really liked the girl and Ellen was thankful her father had found someone to be happy with.

"Where did you go?" Len asked, holding a plate in front of her.

She took it from him. "Sorry. Just thinking about how much I love you."

"Don't be sorry for that," he said. "I love you, too." He walked over to the glass doors leading to the patio and nudged one open with his elbow, balancing a plate and glass in one hand and a tin of cookies and napkins in the other.

"Are you ever going to be okay with living next to the cemetery?" Andy asked with a wicked grin.

He waited for her to pass through the door, then put things on the table and pushed the door shut before the cats could escape. "I doubt it. It's strange to think about those people who lived all over Bellingwood and now they're contained in such a small space."

"They aren't walking around," Andy said. "They don't need much space."

"Why did you buy this house in the first place?" he asked.

Andy shrugged. "It was the right price. It was available when I needed a house in town. And it was the perfect size for me." She pointed off to the northwest. "Bill is buried back there in the Saner

family plot. When I first moved in, I'd walk over to his grave and talk to him. He left a big hole in my life and I needed to figure out how to fill it back up. He was the only person who would have understood."

"Marian is over there," Len said, pointing toward Polly Giller's new house. "It feels strange to be living here, eating lunch and talking about things in the world, when she's..." he sighed, "not here anymore."

"I know you miss her," Andy said.

"That's not it." Len nodded. "Of course I miss her, but it's just hard to put it all together in my head. Those people lived and now they don't. It's kind of right in my face all the time."

"I look at it differently," Andy said. "I see hundreds of stories. Stories that have been told and are still being told. And then I think about how our story is just beginning. We'll tell it for as long as we have together. And besides," she said with a grin, "their lawn is always perfect, the trees are gorgeous, and I don't have to worry about loud neighbors."

"No, just brain eating neighbors," Len said with a laugh. "You still can't make me love living next to a cemetery."

"Wait until Beryl decides to dress up in zombie makeup and scare the bejeebers out of you."

Len put his sandwich back down on the plate and glared at her. "You wouldn't. You didn't."

"Who, me?" Andy batted her eyes at him. "You know I love you too much to do something that rotten."

"I don't know..."

She reached out and put her hand on top of his. "You'd be bored without me, you know."

"Yes I would, Andy. Yes I would. If the only way to live with you is to live next to the cemetery, I'll do it. But I won't be a fan of the back yard anytime soon."

"We could put a blanket out in the corner over there some night and try to make you a fan of it," she said, her lips spreading into a smile.

He looked up in shock again and then laughed. "I swear,

sometimes you act like you're twenty years old."

She gave him her best coy grin. "I'm *much* better now than when I was twenty years old."

"Do you think Polly knows you behave like this when we're alone?" he asked.

It was Andy's turn to look shocked. "Oh, I hope not. How embarrassing."

"Exactly. Now you be good."

She laughed and sat back in her chair. Love, the second time around, was a whole lot of fun.

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>