



# BOUNDLESS DREAMS

## *Vignettes*

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



*Bellingwood - Book 19*



# Book Nineteen 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](http://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 19 – Boundless Dreams - 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 19 - #1

### I Taut I Saw a Puddy-Tat

"Thank you very much." Simon Gardner waved as the truck pulled away from his back dock. Two of his best scouts, Fred and Lainey Bulster, had called on Saturday with the news that they'd found treasures while digging through an estate sale in Algona. They'd sent pictures of a few of the bigger pieces, but had also picked up boxes of small items he was certain he'd find a home for in the shop.

He and Fred had wrangled the small dresser onto his push cart. A large chest of drawers and matching dressing table were still on the ground. He'd ask Paul Bradford to bring two of his healthy young men over this afternoon to haul those pieces inside.

Simon was surprised at the number of boxes that Fred and Lainey had brought to him. It would take several days to get that many items priced and tagged. He wheeled the cart into his back room. The little dresser needed tender loving care before it was put out in the showroom. He had just the right place for it, too.

Brushing sweat from his forehead after leveraging the dresser to the floor, Simon snarled. It was hot and humid. He didn't mind the heat as much as the wet blanket that covered his body when he went outside. The boxes he'd take to the front counter, where he could sit in relative comfort in front of the fan while working through their contents.

Fortunately, the boxes didn't weigh much and he stacked them onto the cart. When he got to the third box, he thought he heard something scabbling around inside. Its weight moved back and forth and Simon realized that whatever it was, he needed to be careful. It had some heft. He put the box back down on the floor of the dock; he wasn't about to take a rat inside. He had enough trouble with mice.

Bracing himself, he flipped the lid of the box open and jumped

back, concerned at what might leap out. When nothing happened, he tentatively made his way back and peered inside. Two little green eyes peered back at him.

"How long have you been in there?" Simon asked. "You poor thing. Let's take you inside and cool you off." He picked the box up, put it on top of the others, and pushed the cart through the back room and into the main showroom of his antique shop. As he pushed it down the main aisle, he paused at a display and picked up a small crystal bowl. When he arrived at the front, he filled the bowl with water from his own glass, set it on the counter, and lifted the small tortoise-colored kitten out of the box.

Though trembling, as soon as the kitten was in his hands, it purred and rubbed its little head against his chest. Simon had no idea how old the kitten was. He didn't have a thing to help if it couldn't drink from the dish. He put it on the counter in front of the bowl and his heart sank when it collapsed in front of the dish, lifting its head enough to take a drink.

"I need to make a couple of phone calls," Simon said. "Don't you move." Not that he was terribly worried. The kitten had no energy. Its coat was a mess and he'd been shocked to feel how terribly thin it was.

The first call was to Lainey Bulster.

"Hello, Simon," she said. "Did we forget something?"

"There was a kitten in one of the boxes. Did you check them before you left the sale?"

"A kitten?" Lainey's voice went up by at least a register. "Of course we checked them. Which box was it?"

Simon looked into the box. "There are some metal signs, what looks like fireplace scoops, an old green Tonka truck, and metal pails."

"Yeah. I thought you'd like the truck. Everything else was just part of the deal, but there was no kitten when I packed it into the truck."

"When would this poor thing have crawled in, then?" Simon asked. "And why?"

"We parked in my daughter's barn yesterday," she said. "They



have cats out there. I can call and ask if one just had a litter."

"Thank you. I'd like to know how old it is. Do you think she wants it back?"

Lainey laughed her rough laugh. He liked these people. They were retired from a life of driving trucks. She'd stayed home long enough to raise her three kids, but as soon as she was free again, went back on the road with her husband. When finally retired, neither of them felt like sitting still, and loved traveling the region, picking through estate sales and auctions for several dealers they worked with.

"No, dear, she won't want it back. They have plenty of cats. If you'd keep it, we'll find you something special the next time we're out. I promise."

"I hadn't intended to have a cat," Simon said, "but it seems like this little one was intent on finding me. How long do you suppose it's been in the box?"

"We came home last night and then drove right to you this morning. Poor thing. At least it wasn't out in the sun except for the drive this morning. It's too hot for a kitty to be stuck in a box."

"That's what I thought. Let me know what your daughter says. Thanks, Lainey."

She ended the call and he put his hand down on the counter. The kitten made its way over and dropped beside him, resting its head in his palm.

"You're going to be a heart breaker, aren't you?" he said. "Do you talk? I haven't heard a peep." Simon picked the kitten up and brought it close to his cheek, hoping to hear the purr again. It obliged and rubbed its face against him. "We're going to be fast friends."

He did a quick search on his computer for the next call he needed to make.

"Bellingwood Veterinary," a woman's voice said when she answered.

"Hi. My name is Simon Gardner and I just rescued a kitty from a box. Do you have time for me to bring it in? It doesn't seem very strong. Can you help me?"

"Hello, Mr. Gardner, this is Marnie Evans. Bring the kitten right over. Are you planning to keep it?"

"It seems like I am. This little one has come a long way to find me. The least I can do is make it feel at home."

Marnie laughed. "Come over as soon as you can. Doctor Jackson will fit you in."

"Thank you, Mrs. Evans. We'll be there soon." Simon put his phone back on the counter. Still holding the kitten, he walked around, locked the front door, and flipped the sign from open to closed. He patted his jacket pocket to make sure his keys were there, dropped his phone in to join them, and headed down the aisle to the back of the shop.

"We're going to make sure you are healthy. If not today, then soon," he said, holding the kitten close. He locked the back door, ignoring the other boxes still sitting on the dock. He would deal with them later.

Simon was rather proud of his new car. After years of driving an old Mercury, he'd finally made the decision to purchase a car made in the new century. He'd found a good deal on a 2008 Subaru. The hatch gave him room to carry small pieces of furniture when necessary, and it was still a very nice car.

When he was settled with the kitten still in his arms, he wriggled around, fitting the seat belt over both of them. The kitten made no attempt to get away, lying passively on his forearm.

"I hope you get a little more spunk when you are hydrated and fed," he said. "You're breaking my heart." Simon backed into the alley, drove to the street, and made his way to the veterinarian's office. He'd known Marnie and Dave Evans for years and was aware she worked for Doc Ogden. It was a pleasant surprise to know that she'd be there to help him take care of this new addition to his family.

He parked in front of the building and wriggled again to get the seat belt off without disturbing the kitten who had fallen asleep during that short drive. As he was getting out of the car, his phone rang. Hoping it was Lainey, he pulled the phone out of his pocket and answered it. "Yes?"

"I just talked to Debbie. She's sure it's one of theirs. The tortoise colored girl is gone missing. They were born five or six weeks ago and had just got weaned. She says you're welcome to her."

"Thanks, Lainey. We're at the veterinarian's office now."

"She's got no shots or nothing. They don't do that out on the farm, what with all the cats that are there."

"That's good information to have. I appreciate your help today. Thank you."

"I look forward to seeing her next time we're in. See ya."

Simon stroked the head of the kitten in his arms. She opened her eyes and stretched her front legs out. "Oh, you're cute," he said. Then he chuckled. "I don't think I've used that word very often, but it certainly fits you."

Marnie looked up from her computer when he opened the front door. "That was fast."

"I'm concerned," Simon said. "She has no energy. I'm also a little worried that I don't have food or litter or anything necessary to care for a cat."

"We can set you up," Marnie said with a smile. "It will be enough until you start bringing home all of the fancy things you'll spoil that baby with. Have you thought about a name yet?"

Simon shook his head. "We've known each other for less than a half hour and she's not been terribly responsive."

"Do you want to come back to the exam room with her?" Marnie asked.

Holding the kitten out, Simon took a deep breath. "I'm terrified that something is desperately wrong. Maybe before the two of us get too attached, you should examine her. If it's bad, I'll not have given up my entire heart."

Marnie took the kitten from him. "She does feel thin, but that could just be a day without any nourishment. What can you tell me about the cat?"

"I believe she's between five and six weeks old and was living on a farm. She made her way into a box that arrived on my back dock this morning. The people who brought it to me said their truck was parked in their daughter's barn and that her daughter is now

missing a tortoise kitten."

"You're lucky you don't have more kittens in that load."

Simon's eyes grew huge. "I didn't check the other boxes! Please do your examination and I'll be back as soon as I know if she's the only one."

Marnie smiled at him. "We'll get started."

Simon rushed back out to his car and did his best to stay within the speed limit for the few blocks back to his shop. He didn't bother to park properly, just stopped in front of the back dock and jumped out. He opened every drawer in the furniture on the ground, then ran up and opened the three boxes he'd left on the dock. Thankful that none of them contained another cat, he fumbled in his pocket for the keys and unlocked the back door of his shop. The first stop was the back room where he opened the drawers of the small dresser before heading to the front. His heart raced the entire time - he wasn't sure if it was from worry or rushing through the building. He opened the last box that had come from the Bulsters and let out a sigh of relief.

After he finished rushing around, he settled enough and it occurred to him that Lainey would have mentioned it if her daughter was missing more than one cat. But he'd needed to see for himself.

He touched the crystal bowl filled with water. That was it. The cat's name was Crystal. She was going to be beautiful. It had taken that little girl less than an hour to make her way into his heart. He knew that if something happened to her, his heart would be shattered like fine crystal that had crashed to the floor.

By the time Simon returned to the veterinarian's office, his heart was racing again. This time he recognized it as nerves. Even though he'd never had a cat before, he wanted this little thing to be okay - to come home with him so they could start a life together. He approached the front door and said a quick prayer, then opened it and went inside.

Marnie came out at the sound of the bell. "Was she the only one?"

"Yes," he said. "How is she?"

Seth Jackson came out of the exam room, holding the kitten in

his hands. He smiled at Simon. "She's going to be fine. This little girl just ate half a can of food and if we'd let her, she'd have taken down the rest. She needs a few baths since she has fleas. We've combed out quite a few, but baths will help. Marnie will set you up with everything you need. Give her a few days to acclimate and regain her strength, then bring her back and we'll start her vaccinations." He passed the kitten to Marnie. "I look forward to seeing you more often, Mr. Gardner."

Marnie handed the cat to Simon.

He smiled as Crystal settled into the crook he made by bending his arm. "Her name is Crystal."

"That sounds perfect, Mr. Gardner. I'll enter that in her record. If you'll wait here, I'll put together a bag of things for you. Would you like to buy a small bag of litter from us? You can get it at the grocery store if you prefer."

"Just fix me up with everything I need," Simon said. "I don't want to waste any more time today. We're going home so we can get to know each other. This is going to be a long and happy relationship."

Crystal purred as she stretched in his arms.

## Book 19 - #2

### What of Tomorrow?

"I made a mess," Kayla cried out. "I didn't mean to."

Hayden crossed the room to the closet where she was painting and peered at the wall she'd been working on. "I don't see it."

"Right there." She pointed at a drip on the baseboard. "It must have happened when I started and it's all dry now."

He shook his head and smiled at her. "You're fine. Just use your damp cloth. You managed to hit it right below the tape, though. That takes skill."

"I'm sorry."

"I was kidding, Kayla. You're doing a very nice job in here. You're the cleanest painter I've ever met."

"I want it to be nice even if it is the closet. If I learn how to paint well, maybe Stephanie will let me paint my next bedroom."

The two were painting the three bedrooms upstairs at the Bell House, the last rooms in the main wing to be finished. When the paint was dry and the tape removed, Hayden and Heath would move into two of these rooms.

He looked forward to having privacy again. Not that it had been all that terrible living with his brother this last year. In fact, it was better than he expected. If they hadn't spent this time together, Hayden wondered if he would ever have gotten to know Heath well. They talked a lot late at night - about their parents, about Heath's life with their aunt and uncle and Hayden's guilt at leaving him there. They talked about girls. Hayden hadn't wanted to say much about his breakup with Tally at the beginning of the summer, but he finally confessed to Heath how much it had hurt. None of that would have been possible if they'd had their own rooms, so he was glad things happened the way they did.

Heath was out working for Henry today, Rebecca was doing her own thing, and when Polly left, she took Noah and Elijah with her.

He'd been surprised when Kayla asked to help him paint, but it was nice to have someone else in the room while he worked. She didn't talk very much, nothing like her friend. If Rebecca had been in here, she'd be chattering a mile a minute.

He could hardly believe this was his life now. Not only did he have his brother back, but there was a sister, two little brothers, and a passel of people who were always in and out of this house. Hayden liked being the oldest brother. The kids looked up to him and it was nice that Polly and Henry relied on him. They didn't treat him like a kid - not that he was. They gave him a lot of respect and it felt good. There was just no reason to mess with that.

"Hayden?" Kayla said.

"Yeah." He had just stepped up onto an upside-down five-gallon bucket to reach into the corner behind the door.

"Do you ever think about how different it would be if your parents were still alive?"

That was unexpected. It had been hard at first, but when they died, he'd been caught up in college and basketball and girls and, well, everything. One of his coaches had stuck pretty close to him to make sure he didn't get lost in grief, but Hayden didn't know what would have happened if Polly and Henry hadn't shown up when they did. He certainly wouldn't be friends with his brother. By the time he realized what a mess Heath was, he didn't think there was anything he could do and figured he'd have to write Heath off. At the time he was too young to face it all. What a self-centered fool he'd been.

"I'm sorry," Kayla said. "It probably hurts you more than it did me. Stephanie was always there for me. I wasn't supposed to know about our dad, but I did. I knew she was protecting me. And our mom was okay. Sometimes I wonder what I'd be doing if we had a normal family."

"I don't know if there are very many normal families out there, Kayla," Hayden said. "Everyone has things they deal with."

"You guys have a normal family now."

"In a way, so do you," he replied. "Stephanie is doing her best to give you a happy home where you're safe and have what you

need."

"It's kind of weird that she's my sister, though, isn't it? I mean, she acts like my mom and she's not."

"She's really the best mom you have, don't you think?"

Kayla stepped out of the closet and peered at him. "I only have her."

"Exactly. And she's the best you have."

"Okay. I get it. She acts like a mom, but Sky really doesn't act like a dad. Do you think they'll get married?"

Hayden barely knew Skylar Morris. He saw him at Sweet Beans and when he came over to spend time with Stephanie, but they'd never tried to get to know each other. He seemed like an okay guy and Stephanie liked him. After what she'd been through, Hayden was impressed that any guy got that close to her. That probably meant Skylar was a good person.

"I don't know if they'll get married or not. She's not in a hurry, is she? Is Skylar?" he asked.

"No, but I'm going to high school. That's only four years and then I'll go to college and then I'll get married. I don't want her to be alone."

"Why not?" he asked, grinning to himself.

"She'll be lonely."

It occurred to Hayden that Kayla had no idea how early her sister woke up in the morning so she could be alone. At first he thought she rose at the crack of dawn so she'd be out of the bathroom before he and Heath got up, but that wasn't it at all. Stephanie treasured her solitude. He could hardly blame her. She'd grown up never knowing when her father would show up in her room. There was no place that she could hide from his assault. Every moment of peace and quiet she found now was restorative.

"Your sister is strong and resilient," he said. "Whether she's with you, a husband, or by herself, she will be exactly where she wants to be. You know what she wants most, don't you?"

Kayla had come out of the closet and poured paint from the bucket into her tray. She shook her head. "What's that?"

"She wants you to be safe and happy."



"That's what I want for her, too. You think she can have that if she's alone?"

He chuckled. "What about you? Can you?"

Kayla pursed her lips. "I like having Rebecca and Andrew around. They're my best friends."

"How would you feel if they weren't around?"

"Sad."

Shaking his head, he moved to the corner of the room where she stood. "No. What if you went to college somewhere other than where Rebecca was. Would you be okay?"

"Maybe."

"When you get out of college, do you expect to be married right away?"

"I don't know," she said with a shrug.

"If you aren't, will you be okay?"

"I don't know. I never really thought about it. What about you? Do you want to live by yourself?"

Hayden smiled. "I think so. I like living here right now because it's nice having a family again and I've gotten to know my little brother better. When I'm done with college, I think I'd like to get my own place."

"Really? You don't like having us all here?"

"I like it very much. But I want to have my own life. Buy my own furniture and my own food. Invite my friends over and stay up all night if we want to. Walk around in just shorts and a t-shirt without running into a girl." He chuckled. "Be a slob if I don't want to clean up after myself."

"You always clean up," she said.

"Yes I do, but if I didn't want to, you'd think there was something wrong with me. I'd like to do that and not have to explain myself. I'm not ready to live like that today, but in a couple of years when I'm done with grad school."

"I think you're right," Kayla said.

"What am I right about?"

"I'm not ready right now to be by myself either, but someday it would be okay. Do you really think Stephanie won't be upset if I'm

not living with her?"

"That's something for the two of you to figure out, but my bet is that Stephanie wants you to have your own life. If the two of you have fun, independent lives, think of all you can talk about when you're together. You can tell her everything about your house and your new friends and any pets you have. She'll tell you all about the things she does during the day and the new curtains she bought for the dining room and the information she learned in one of her classes."

"Just like we do now, but even more, right?"

"Right." He patted Kayla's shoulder. "You're going to have so much fun in high school and college and finding your own place to live and meeting new friends and dating boys. Stephanie is going to do some of those fun those things, too. As long as the two of you love each other, you'll be together even if you're a thousand miles apart."

"I could never live that far away from her."

"Okay, a hundred miles."

Kayla giggled. "Maybe just down the street would be enough."

"Baby steps," he said. "The good news is that you don't have to think about this for a long time. First you have to begin your freshman year in high school."

"Do you remember yours?"

He nodded. "I was scared to death. I had a bunch of friends there with me, but don't let anyone tell you that you won't be nervous. It's okay. Every other freshman in that school is nervous. Some of them will act all cocky, like they don't have a care in the world, but trust me, they're shaking on the inside. The second day will be easier and the day after that will be even easier. Before you know it, you'll have your own seat in the cafeteria and you'll know which drinking fountain shoots out the best stream of water and you'll be able to open your locker in under ten seconds flat."

"There's just so much," Kayla said with a sigh.

"About high school?"

"About everything. Rebecca says we're supposed to grab it with abandon. I don't even know what that means."

"I think she means you should worry less and enjoy more."

"That's hard for me."

"I have every confidence you're going to be just fine."

"Hayden?" she asked, looking at the floor. She stopped talking for the longest time.

"What are you thinking about, Kayla?"

"If you wouldn't mind, could I think of you like my big brother, too?"

He put his arm around her and gave her a quick squeeze, a little embarrassed that her question brought tears to his eyes. "That would make me proud. My family just keeps getting bigger and bigger."

## Book 19 - #3

### Boys and Their Toys

"Will you tell us a story?" Elijah asked Marie. He scooted across the bed, coming to rest practically on top of Noah.

Marie Sturtz sat on the edge of the bed near the headboard, Noah nestled in her arms. She reached out and rubbed Elijah's shoulder. "What story do you want to hear?"

"Tell us about the storm again," Elijah said.

"You've heard that one before. Let's see." Marie looked up at the ceiling. "What would be a good story to tell two little boys who should be going to sleep."

"A long one," Noah said, his eyes twinkling.

"Did you have fun today?" she asked them. The boys were happy to do anything and today they'd helped her can tomatoes, make tomato sauce, and put up frozen corn.

Noah nodded. "I liked the corn the best."

"Yes you did," Marie said with a laugh. He loved eating corn on the cob. Both boys had gotten their fill today and she still managed to put plenty in the freezer.

"I like tomatoes," Elijah said. He held up his index finger. "That pan was hot, though."

"That wasn't a fun lesson to learn, was it?" she asked.

Elijah shook his head, looked down and then brightened up. "At least it was only one finger, right? It could have been much worse."

Those were the exact words she'd use when he'd burned himself by reaching out to touch a jar after she pulled it out of the boiling water bath. He knew better. She'd told him to be careful, but hadn't been surprised when he had to try it for himself. Marie nodded and brushed her finger along his cheek.

He bounced up and away and ran over to the dresser where they'd made room for extra sets of clothes for him and Noah. Polly had dropped fresh clothes off for them earlier this evening with a

couple of extra items so they could establish their territory here.

Elijah opened the drawer and took out a t-shirt. "Is this a good shirt to wear tomorrow when we pick raspberries?"

"It will be fine," Marie said. "Why don't you put it on the chair over there so it's ready for you in the morning."

"Should I take out socks, too?"

"Maybe just the shirt for now," she said. "Come on back to bed. It's time for you to wind down so you can sleep. You don't want to stay awake all night." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she knew she'd made a mistake.

"Yes I do," Elijah countered. "I could, too. I've done it before."

Marie patted the pillow. "Come on back up here beside your brother."

When Elijah jumped back on the bed, he bounced a couple of times and then climbed across Noah to get close to Marie. Noah, ever-obliging, just moved to make room for his brother.

Giving him a snuggle and a kiss, Marie pointed to the other side of Noah. "Climb back over to where you belong," she said.

Elijah gave her a quick look to see if she was serious, then clambered across his brother and scooted up close to Noah's back. "Where's Grandpa?" he asked, looking pointedly toward the bedroom door.

"Right where we left him," Marie replied.

"Watching TV?"

Marie nodded and grinned. "Yes."

"Do you think he misses us? Maybe we should keep him company."

She laughed out loud. It had been years since she'd had children this age. Too smart for their own good, yet still so innocent. She had never wanted to pressure Lonnie and Henry to have babies. They had their own lives to live. She wasn't sure if Lonnie would ever settle down and have a family. But if that's what her daughter wanted, then Marie was thrilled to support her. When Henry met Polly, Marie knew right away that babies were either out of the question or would be a long time coming. Those two were so happy with their lives, how could she even think to pressure them just

because she loved having little ones around. Who would have thought that her life would be filled with children of all ages within only a couple of years of meeting Polly, though. Marie's life was so full right now, she went to bed exhausted and satisfied every night.

Bill had found Henry's old red wagon a couple of weeks ago, and when he brought it out for the boys to play with this afternoon, it was like brand-new. Noah had been over the moon. The boys took turns pulling each other and Bill even pulled the two of them a couple of times around the parking lot in front of the shop.

Then, Noah discovered that he could be helpful. After securing an old tarp from Bill to keep the wagon bed clean, he'd helped pick up branches and sticks around the yard, then helped Bill transfer river rock from the back of the shop to spots around the house. Elijah ran alongside, asking a million questions of Bill. The boy never ran out of questions.

Bill loved spending time with these two little boys. He'd been so busy trying to make a living when Henry and Lonnie were children that he'd missed out on some of these wonderful moments. She couldn't wait to sit with him tonight and listen as he went on about their day. Every time the boys spent a night with them, Bill turned into a kid himself. He had just started talking about a dream he'd had ever since he was a young man - setting up a model railroad in the basement where they'd once had all of the cars and race tracks. When Henry was young, they couldn't afford the time or the money to build out a railroad, so he'd purchased the plastic track and cars, winding racetrack all over the place. Once Henry was out of school, Bill hadn't wanted to do it alone. When he had time and the money to work on it, he figured he was getting too old and no one would be around to enjoy it anyway.

Now he was dreaming about it again and Marie was thrilled. They'd taken the boys down to the Boone and Scenic Valley Railroad twice this summer. She was sure that if Bill had his way, he'd take them down every weekend. They were the perfect excuse for him to ride that train. Maybe she needed to ask more questions and find out which scale train he would like to start working with. That would make a fun Christmas gift for him.

She looked at Elijah, who yawned as he leaned on his brother. "You two have had a busy day, haven't you?"

"It was a fun day," Noah said. "I like coming over."

"Me too," Elijah said, yawning again. "I miss Obiwan and Han. You should get a dog."

Marie chuckled. Bill had been talking about getting a puppy. She didn't know if she could handle one more animal in her life, but if she was honest with herself, it sounded like a lot of fun. "Maybe someday," she said quietly as Elijah's eyes fluttered.

He opened them wide and shook his head, refusing to accept that he was falling asleep. "You were going to tell us a story," he said.

"I was, wasn't I?" Marie yawned. "What if I tell you a story tomorrow while we're making raspberry jam? I'm awfully tired."

Elijah nodded in understanding.

She looked down at Noah, who just watched her with a smile. "What are you thinking about, Noah?" she asked.

"I love you," he said so quietly she wasn't sure she heard him.

Marie leaned down and kissed his forehead. "I love you, Noah." She stood up and bent over to kiss Elijah's forehead. "And I love you, Elijah."

He reached up with both arms and wrapped them around her neck, then kissed her cheek. She couldn't help the tears that sprang to her eyes as she held on to him in a tight hug.

"Go to sleep, now," she said, releasing him.

Elijah dropped back down and scooted away from Noah, snuggling his face in his own pillow.

Marie walked to the doorway, flipped the overhead light off, and stood watching the boys in the warm glow of the nightlights on either side of the bed. She was thankful they were comfortable enough here to sleep on their own. Polly and Henry had been worried the first night the boys spent with Marie and Bill since it had taken them so long to feel safe again after moving into their new home. Marie had stayed in their room that night until they fell asleep. She hadn't slept well, waking with every sound, worrying

that they would be frightened. The second time had been easier, and each time they'd stayed, all of them grew more comfortable.

A noise on the stairway caught Marie's attention and she smiled at Bill who came to stand beside her. He put his arm around her waist as she put a finger up to her lip.

He whispered in her ear. "The house is all closed up. Are you ready to be finished with the day?"

Nodding, she took his hand and they walked into their bedroom. Once the door was closed, he grinned. "They wore me out today. How about you?"

"I'm exhausted," Marie agreed. "This is really early, but I'm ready to lie down and read for a while."

"That's what I figured."

She sat down on the edge of the bed and removed her shoes, rubbing her feet as she did. "That feels good." Smiling at him, she said, "I think you should consider building a model railroad. Those boys would love to do that with you."

"Really?" he asked, taken aback.

"We could clear out the basement again. There's no reason to keep all of that junk. Lonnie can take her boxes home. She's never moving back. Henry has a huge house now and he can haul his own boxes around from now on."

"You don't think I'm too old for a model railroad?"

Marie wagged her eyes at him. "I don't think you're too old for anything."

"Honey, I'm awfully tired."

"I was just talking about model trains," she protested with a laugh. "I think this might be the perfect time for you to start building them. I'll bet you could get quite a bit of help from all your buddies."

Bill took a catalog off the bottom of a pile in the nightstand beside the bed. "I've been waiting to show this to you." He opened it to the first page. "Look at everything that is available nowadays. They make it so easy for you to be creative. And I've been looking at videos online. There are guys out there who will teach me how to do it all."



"I'm not surprised," Marie said, laughing out loud. "And if I'm honest, I can't wait. It sounds like a lot of fun."

"You'll help me?"

"Absolutely. Which train gauge do you want to work with?"

He sat beside her and the two lay back on the bed, turning on their sides to look through the catalog together. "I think HO. It's the most common and I want to be able to easily find the things we need to work with."

Bill flipped a couple of pages and Marie stopped him, pointing at a river scene. "I want to build a campground."

"Honey, you can build anything you want. I will start clearing out that basement on Monday. Before you know it, we'll have train track running all throughout the basement."

"Henry's going to laugh at us."

"Let him." Bill leaned over and kissed her. "I feel like a kid."

## Book 19 - #4

### Ghost Stories

"I'll go down and check on them," Heath said to his brother.

"Thanks," Hayden replied.

Heath went to the basement and headed for the Whiskey Room where Noah and Elijah were playing with the Dexter kids from across the street - Jeremy and Aiden. He grinned to himself as he heard screaming and yelling coming from the tunnel.

If he'd grown up with a tunnel under his house, he would have found a way to play in it all the time, too. He walked into the room where so much had been uncovered when they first moved into the Bell House. They'd done a lot of work in this room since then - cleaning it and making it more livable. The old tally boards were still hanging on the walls - minus the weird personal talismans that had been inserted in the backs of each board. Those were over at some guy's house now. Heath was glad of that. The whole thing was kind of creepy.

When he heard the screams approach through the tunnel, he slipped to the other side of the room and stood beside the doorway, hoping to startle whoever came through.

Heath jumped when the first two crossed the threshold. Jeremy and Elijah both let loose a shrill scream, then Elijah fell to the floor, laughing and laughing.

"You scared me," Elijah said, rolling around, holding his tummy.

Jeremy just looked at Heath in shock.

Noah and Aiden were the next two in the room and they looked around, trying to figure out what had happened.

"He scared us," Elijah yelled. "It was so funny. I want him to do it again."

"I can't do it again," Heath said. "You already know I'm here. What have you four been doing?"

"We're playing whiskey runners," Elijah said. "Jeremy and I try

to sneak past Noah and Aiden without them seeing us. They have to start in the upstairs of the little house and look for us up there first. When they find the stairway that comes downstairs, we have to wait until they are on the third step before we can start running."

Heath shook his head. "How many times have you done this?"

"Only two times," Jeremy said. "This tunnel is the coolest, though. Do you think there are more in town?"

"I don't know," Heath said with a shrug. "There could be all sorts of things in town that are hidden from us. Did Andrew tell you about that stairway at Sycamore House? It was all blocked off until Henry found it. Then he built Andrew a reading nook there."

"Why did they block it off?" little Aiden asked, his eyes wide.

Heath sat on one of the crates. Polly had stowed the dishes from the crates in the massive cupboards of the kitchen upstairs. The crates were still here, used mostly to sit on. "Well, you know that Sycamore House used to be the high school here in town, don't you?"

The boys nodded and sat down on the big braided rug Polly had placed on the floor in this room. They watched him and waited for more of the story.

"Many, many years ago, there was a very mean, very old math teacher," Heath said. "He was like the villains you see in cartoons and hated every child that walked into his classroom. When kids in his class didn't know the right answer, he'd slap their hands with a wooden ruler. He didn't care whether they were a boy or a girl, everyone got rapped with that ruler. If anyone was ever caught chewing gum, he made them put the gum on their nose and then put their nose on the wall and stand there for the rest of the day."

"Could they go to the bathroom even?" Noah asked.

Heath shook his head. "Not at all. That's how mean he was. If a student passed notes in class, the mean old teacher made the kid come to the front of the room and write their note on the blackboard over and over and over again. If kids talked to each other, he would make the two students stand beside his desk facing the rest of the class, completely silent until class was over."

"He was really mean," Elijah said, his head bobbing up and

down.

"Yes he was," Heath agreed. "You didn't want to cheat in his classroom either. He tied cheating kids to the door handle and hung a sign that said 'cheater' on it. They had to wear that sign all day long."

"That would make me sad," Noah said. "Nobody should have to do that."

"You're right," Heath said. "But this mean old man did all of those terrible things over and over again to students every year. He looked like a mean old man, too. His black hair was slicked back on his head and he had a skinny face with a big crooked nose like a hawk. His eyes were dark and sunken in, his fingers were long, and his fingernails were like claws. He always wore a black suit with a white shirt and a skinny black tie. He also had a limp. Somebody said it was because he broke it when he chased a mangy dog away from his house. The dog was only looking for something to eat. The mean old man didn't go to the hospital and the leg was never right after that. When he walked across the floor, it sounded like ker-thump, ker-thump. That was good for the students, because at least he couldn't sneak up on them.

"Then it finally happened. The last day of school and all of the kids had gone home for the summer. He got so mad that he wouldn't have any children around to bully for three months that he stormed around the room, rapping his ruler on the desks, getting angrier and angrier. But there was nothing he could do. Everyone was gone. He finally stomped his ker-thump, ker-thump over to the back stairs - that was his classroom at the top, you know. He wouldn't let anyone else ever use those stairs. He thought they belonged to him personally. Because he'd made himself so angry about not being able to push kids around, he had a terrible heart attack and died. And his body fell down those stairs."

"Didn't he have any family?" Elijah asked.

"No. He was too mean to have family." Heath realized that these boys weren't ready for ghost stories. They made everything too real, so he softened the story a couple of notches. "The doctor said that he died right away and didn't even know that he'd fallen down

the stairs. Anyway, after they found his body, the school had to block off the stairway because they said that his ghost kept trying to get back up to his classroom. Even though they finally got to use those stairs, kids were too scared because every time they did, a chill went up their spines, like someone was trying to hitch a ride to the top step. The old man just couldn't make it up all the way. The ghost was stuck on those steps forever."

"I never felt the ghost when I used those stairs," Elijah said, his brow furrowed.

Heath nodded. "That's because when Henry knocked out that wall, he replaced all of the steps. The ghost didn't recognize the new stairs and so he went on his way. But can you imagine? Polly lived in that room for all that time with a ghost trapped in the wall behind her."

"I would have been so scared," Elijah said. He turned to Jeremy. "Wouldn't you?"

"No," Jeremy said, shaking his head. "There's no such thing as ghosts. My dad told me."

Elijah turned back to Heath. "Are there such things as ghosts?"

Heath lifted his shoulders and smiled. "What do you think?"

"I think you're telling us a story," Noah said. "Was there really a mean math teacher who did all of those bad things to naughty children?"

Heath leaned forward and patted Noah's shoulder. "You're right. I made up a story. No, there wasn't a mean math teacher at the Bellingwood High School. At least I don't think so. I was just messing with ya."

"So why did they block those stairs off?" Jeremy asked. He put his hand up. "No more ghost stories."

"The stairs were in bad shape," Heath replied. "They weren't safe for kids to use, so they closed them off. From what I hear, Andrew was kind of hoping that there might be zombies or aliens using that as their hideout when they uncovered them."

Jeremy stood up. "That would be cool. We should play zombies next. This room is the safe room and they can't get in here." He shambled around, his arms hanging loosely. "Do you guys wanna

play chase again?"

"I don't want to chase you," Aiden whined. "I'm too little."

"We'll say that if you're a zombie, you can't run, you can only walk fast," Jeremy said. "If you're a human, you can run. Let's go pick sides." He looked at Heath. "You pick. Make a number between one and ten. Whoever is closest gets to be a zombie."

Heath stood up, took a zombie-like stance by tilting a shoulder forward and screwing up his face. "I'll be the first zombie," he said, slurring his words. "The first person I touch has to stand still and silent for ten seconds. Count quietly in your head. One-Mississippi, Two-Mississippi. Like that. If one of your friends can get to you, you become a human again. If they don't, then after ten seconds, you're a zombie. If I get all of you, I win. If you all stay human, then I lose and I'll serve up some ice cream when we go back upstairs. You can only be in this room, the tunnel and the downstairs room of Rebecca's studio. You can't go on the stairs or upstairs. Deal?"

They all jumped up and took off running around the room, jumping close to him and then away. Heath shambled off after Jeremy, who bolted for the tunnel. Elijah let out a scream and followed his friend. When Aiden tried to duck around him, Heath let him go. It was much too early to grab the youngest. Noah got to the doorway, then turned and waved at Heath before running after his friends.

Heath enjoyed being a big brother. He still couldn't believe all the fun he got to experience with his new life. Sometimes it felt unreal. He shambled into the tunnel and headed for the other room. It was on.

## 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](https://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>