



# LESSONS *in* HOPE



## *Vignettes*

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



*Bellingwood - Book 22*





# Book Twenty-Two Vignettes

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# CONTENTS

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Vignette #1 You Can't See Me

Vignette #2 Don't Be Ridiculous

Vignette #3 What a Long Day

Vignette #4 Play Ball

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 22 — Lessons in Hope — into one collection. These four short stories feature different characters from Bellingwood who get an opportunity to offer a little slice of life from their own perspective.





## **Vignette #1**

### **You Can't See Me**

Beryl stepped out of her shower and groaned. Dropping her chin to her chest, she shook her head. "You are such an infernal fool."

Oh well. She lived by herself. This was one of those reasons why she loved it. Running around the house naked was her prerogative, wasn't it?

Yesterday she'd finally run out of her wear-it-to-the-studio clothes and tossed everything into the washing machine. That meant everything. Three loads of laundry later, she finally felt like she had enough clothes to last through the next few weeks.

Beryl hated doing laundry. She hated it. She hated it nearly as much as she hated washing dishes. No matter that she had machines to do both of those tasks. The time spent actually doing the work was time she didn't want to afford. There were much more interesting things to be doing. And don't even start with vacuuming and dusting.

Adding those two kittens (they were still kittens, even if they were nearly two and half years old) had brought a huge amount of additional cat hair into her house. Now that winter had finally released its hold on Bellingwood, they were shedding their winter undercoat. She brushed them whenever they let her get close, but no one really enjoyed the process. Miss Kitty tolerated it, but her coat wasn't the problem. May and Hem? Little fuzzballs.

Miss Kitty rolled over on her back on the bed, looking at Beryl with a side-eye, as if to ask when she was going to get to go out to the studio with her. May and Hem sat in front of the bedroom door, the two of them pausing while chasing each other, just to make sure that Beryl wasn't going to do something interesting.

She was about to.

As much as Beryl talked about being naked in the privacy of her own home, she much preferred wearing clothes. There were too many windows and she rarely closed her curtains. As she stood in

the bathroom doorway, she shut her eyes and considered the number of exposed windows she had to pass while going from her bedroom and the basement.

She should be safe. If she sped past the corner at the bottom of this set of steps and headed straight through the living room to the basement, there were really only those windows facing Larry and Vanessa Storey's house. Surely they wouldn't be staring across into her living room this morning.

Gathering her wits about her to take off at a mad dash, Beryl suddenly started laughing. It really shouldn't be this difficult to run naked through her own house.

"You crazy old coot, you," she said to herself, laughing uproariously.

Three cats stopped what they were doing to look at her.

"I'm sorry," Beryl said to them. "But sometimes I crack myself up."

Little May rolled her brother, Hem, over onto his back in order to clean his belly, but he wasn't having any of that. He batted at her and in a flash, the two were wrestling. May squealed and pulled out of his grasp, then ran out of the room. Hem was off, chasing her down. Miss Kitty lay back on Beryl's pillow, doing her best to ignore the crazy antics of the kittens.

With the kittens out of the way, Beryl darted out of her room, down the hall to the stairs, and headed for the main level. Just as she turned the corner to run for the basement, she looked out the window and gasped, dropping to the floor.

What was he doing here? Was it really Tuesday already?

She scooted along the carpet toward the basement steps, praying that young Matthew Evans hadn't looked inside while he was mowing her lawn. He did not need to have that image burned into his head for the rest of his life.

Then the doorbell rang.

Beryl was caught in the crosshairs. If whoever was out there peered in, they'd see her lying naked on her floor. This couldn't be happening!

As soon as she thought those words, the two kittens came flying

down the stairs and pounced on Beryl's back, excited at whatever new game she was playing.

"Get off me," she hissed and continued to scoot for the stairway. When had her living room gotten so big? It shouldn't take this long to cross.

"Beryl?"

Oh for heaven's sake, it was Andy.

"Beryl! Your door is locked. Are you okay? Where are you? I'm checking around back."

Beryl slid to the top step of the stairway on her belly, not daring to stand up and run down. She laughed and snorted as she slid down the steps face first. This was absolutely ridiculous. But Andy was coming around back? Why would she do that?

Then Beryl remembered that Andy was coming over with Len and Doug Shaffer, the young man who worked at the shop with him. They were picking up an old table that she had asked Len to refinish.

The kittens were still climbing up and over Beryl as she slid down the steps, finally coming to rest at the bottom. She only had seconds before Andy was at the basement door ... a clear glass sliding door right in front of her that led to the patio and out to Beryl's studio.

And she was with two men who definitely did not need to see Beryl like this.

She sat for a split second on the cold tile, trying to contain her laughter and not lose control of herself while standing up. The laundry room was right over there. So close and yet so very far away.

Beryl hitched in a breath when she heard the mower out back. Matthew was approaching the back patio area, too. How could this be happening? She desperately looked around for anything to throw around herself. Yeah, no. The closest thing was the afghan draped over the back of the sofa ... right smack in front of the sliding glass doors.

Taking a deep breath, Beryl headed for the laundry room, hoping her feet wouldn't fail her now.

Then she felt kittens brush her ankle. Looking down, the two of them were in front of her, Hem stretching his right back leg and then his left back leg.

"You little brats," she said with a groan. "Get out of my way."

She picked her foot up to step over them and as she brought it down, May moved right into her path, yowling when Beryl stepped on the cat's back paw. She hadn't stepped down with any pressure, but it was enough to terrify her poor cat.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," Beryl said, nearly stopping to comfort the kitten. In a split second, she remembered the perfect storm swirling around her and scooted her feet along the tile, brushing the kittens out of the way.

When she hit the door to the laundry room, Beryl ducked inside, slammed it, and leaned back, breathing heavily.

She heard pounding on the glass door.

"Beryl, are you in there? You aren't in the studio and you're not answering your phone."

"Patience, my friend, patience," Beryl muttered. "My lord, give me a minute, will you?"

Andy's voice grew louder as she came into the house.

"Beryl? Why aren't you answering me? Where are you?"

Beryl took a deep breath. "In the laundry room."

She heard Andy's footsteps on the tile.

"Whatever are you doing in the laundry room at this hour?" Andy asked.

The door handle turned. Beryl leaned against it, holding the door closed.

"What's going on?" Andy asked.

As soon as the handle quit moving, Beryl flipped the lock. "Will you give me just a minute?" she said. "I'll be out. Take a breath and hold your horses."

Andy chuckled. "I suppose you're wandering around the house naked. I hear that's what you single women do all the time."

"You have no idea," Beryl muttered as she dug into the baskets of laundry. She found a pair of shorts and a sweatshirt. That would have to do for now. Then she reached up to pat her wet hair. She

had to look a mess.

Laughing, she went back and opened the door.

"As a matter of fact, I was naked, doing my level best to get to this laundry room without the entire town of Bellingwood seeing me in all my glory. What *are* you doing wandering around my house?" Beryl rolled her eyes.

The truth was, she and Andy were in each other's houses all the time, though once Andy married Len, Beryl stopped walking in willy-nilly. She didn't want to have that close encounter - not ever.

"You told us to be here this morning," Andy said, her hands on her hips. "Did you work late last night?"

Beryl nodded, and with a smile, guided her best friend back to the main part of the basement where Len and Doug were waiting patiently. "I knew I should have sent myself a reminder about this. I'm sorry. Let's go upstairs. The table is in the front tea room. It was my grandmother's. I'm hoping you can make it better. The poor thing is falling apart."

She led them upstairs and while Doug and Len took the old table outside to the truck, Beryl turned to Andy. "Don't you dare tell anyone, but I slid down those basement steps face first so you wouldn't be able to see me."

Andy gave her a look filled with both shock and laughter. She reached out and patted Beryl's front. "Are you okay? You don't have a lot of padding there."

"Get your hands off me, you silly woman," Beryl said, batting Andy's hands away. "I'm not saying there won't be bruises tomorrow, but that's probably the funniest thing I've done in a long time." She turned and pointed at her back. "Look down there and see if there aren't cat scratches. May and Hem thought that naked mama on the floor was obviously play-time."

Andy pulled the sweatshirt away from Beryl's back and looked inside. "You look fine."

"Whew. I'd hate to have to explain those scratches."

"To who?" Andy asked.

Beryl shrugged. "I dunno. But that would be an entertaining story, wouldn't it?"

"Honey, you're always entertaining. I'm just glad you're okay. I started to worry when you didn't answer your phone and your car was here."

"The phone's upstairs. Or maybe it's in the kitchen. I suppose it could be in the studio. I lose track of it when I'm working."

Andy hugged her. "I'm telling Lydia about this, you know."

"Not unless I tell her first," Beryl said. She walked with Andy to the front door and waited as they pulled out of her driveway. Turning to the kittens who were in the living room and Miss Kitty who stood on the bottom step leading upstairs, she said, "I'm glad it's just you and me around here, and I'm very glad that you don't speak human. We have secrets that should never be shared with the world."

## **Vignette #2**

### **Don't Be Ridiculous**

"June!"

"Yes, mother, I'm coming." June Livengood rose from the kitchen table where she'd been sorting medications into pill holders for the week. She headed out to the living room.

"Can you do something about this?" Her mother held up the corner of a lap blanket that had gotten twisted up in the legs of the recliner. Not her mother's recliner, but the one June's Aunt April claimed.

"Of course I can." June took the blanket out of her mother's hand and unwound it from the foot rest of the other recliner, then stood in front of the two women. "Were you two wrestling or what?"

While her question elicited a laugh from her aunt, June's mother glared. "I told her not to sit down before I got it off the chair, but she couldn't wait."

"My knees hurt," April said. "You know that if I'm not careful they'll give out on me. It's not like you'd help me up off the floor." She reached over and patted June's hand. "But you would, dear, wouldn't you?"

"Not if I'm at work," June replied. "You two be nice to each other. I need to finish what I'm doing or you'll be eating Mother's high blood pressure pills while she takes your thyroid medication."

"Don't forget my calcium," her mother called after June.

"Yes, Mother," June said. She hadn't forgotten that woman's calcium pills in fifteen years. Once. It had only happened once and that was just after June had moved back into her mother's home, but May never forgot. They lived together until May's sister, April, had taken a spill the next winter. After much conversation, she agreed to move into May's home as well so June could care for both ladies.

They really didn't require much physical care and both women were as clear-headed as they came, but June felt better knowing that

she was there to keep an eye on them. Even though the two sisters sniped at each other regularly, they loved each other. That was obvious. There was nothing sweeter than seeing April slip an extra butterscotch candy into her pocket so she could surprise May with it later in the evening.

April was a night owl. She hated getting up in the morning, but because June needed to get out of the house to go to work, her aunt loudly complained and dragged herself into the living room before June left for the day. She wasn't much good until about ten thirty, when May was ready to take her first nap of the day.

They argued over television channels and stole each other's magazines when the other wasn't looking. April pulled silly pranks on her older sister, such as laying a damp cloth on the recliner when she knew her sister wouldn't turn to see it. It was never wet enough to soak her sister's pants right away, but fifteen minutes later, May would rise up in a fury. April thought it was incredibly funny and claimed that she did it because May needed more exercise.

June went back out into the cozy living room. The two women had knitted and crocheted their entire lives and the room was covered in blankets and crocheted knick-knacks. Baskets of yarn and unfinished projects filled spaces around the room, as well as in every other room of the house. She put their pill boxes, a yellow marked box for April and a pink marked box for May, on the tables beside each chair.

"I'm thinking about getting a dog," she said and turned to walk out of the room. Three. Two. One.

"What do you mean?" her mother demanded. "Who's going to take care of the thing?"

She smiled to herself as she turned back. She was as bad as her Aunt April. Stirring her mother up before she left the house in the morning was well worth it, though, just for the laugh. "Well, I will when I'm home, but the two of you would let it out during the day. We have that nice back yard. Maybe I should get two dogs. That way you'd each have one to take care of."

"What a foolish idea. We certainly don't need any dogs in this house. Why, they'd knock things over with those wagging tails."



"If you yell at it often enough," April said, scolding her sister, "the dog's tail will never wag. Problem solved." Then she turned to June. "Are you really thinking about a dog? Maybe we should have a family meeting. We could vote on it."

"Maybe we should," June replied. She grinned. "If you don't want a dog, maybe a cat would be a better idea."

"They knock things off shelves and get underfoot. There would be cat hair on everything," May said. "What a mess."

"Fish, then?" April asked with a glare.

"Why do we need ridiculous pets? I have enough trouble keeping you out of trouble." May's face broke into a grin. She wasn't quite as severe as she wanted people to believe.

June shook her head. They'd gone back and forth about pets for years. It wouldn't happen this year either. "Do you remember that Sherry is picking you up this afternoon?"

April's eyes glinted. "May's going to get to see her boyfriend."

May glared again at her sister, but didn't say anything.

While Bellingwood didn't have a senior center, once a month, a group of older adults met in the Catholic church's hall. There was bingo and refreshments, some played card games and others were grateful for an opportunity to leave their homes for the afternoon. Sherry West, a young woman whose little boy was in a wheelchair, volunteered her accessible van to pick up those who needed a ride.

April could get around the house with a walker, but if she went much farther, she needed the safety of a chair, so Sherry picked the two women up every month. She was as gentle with June's family as June was and greatly appreciated.

June had become a master of folding the chair into the trunk of her car. Whenever they went anywhere as a family, she planned for a ridiculous amount of time. It took forever to get those women in and out of her car and then in and out of wherever they were going, but it was worth it to see their faces light up when they saw their friends. She tried to take them to the coffee shop or the diner at least once a week and she always made sure to take them to church on Sundays unless the weather was bad.

"You should stay home from work today," April said. "Go play

with us and meet your mother's boyfriend."

June lifted her eyebrows at her mother. "How serious is this?"

"Phil isn't my boyfriend," May said.

"So it's Phil, is it?" June asked. "Is that who you're texting with all the time?"

May looked at her in surprise, then glanced at the phone sitting on the table beside her. "Have you been snooping in my phone?"

"No, Mother," June said, with a laugh. "I was just teasing you. But if you'd ever like to invite him to come for dinner ..."

"We could never," May said, interrupting her daughter. "This place would need to be cleaned up."

June creased her forehead in surprise. "Would you like to invite him over? The house is just a little cluttered. I could ask Misty if she'd come over to clean. You enjoy having her in the house."

May glanced at her sister and then back to June. "No," she said. "That's ridiculous."

"It is not. Just think," April said. "You could have a date in the safety of your own home. If you get tired of him, June drives him back to his apartment. Boom. Easy as that." She took up her own phone. "I'll call Misty and schedule her for later this week. I'll even pay for it. Anything to get that grumpy look off your face. What shall we make for dinner? I found a new recipe for Chicken Kiev on Pinterest the other day. It looked interesting."

"He's lactose intolerant," May replied. "And his teeth aren't very good so he can't eat steak."

"Mush food," April said. "Fabulous."

June laughed. "Okay, ladies, I need to go to work. Call Misty. Put your grocery list together. You know how to order groceries online. Schedule it so I can drive to Boone after work some night to pick them up."

"This isn't happening," May Livengood said.

"Whether it's a date or a night of fun for the three of us, something is happening," April said. "We'll talk to Phil this afternoon. Maybe he has a friend who can be my date. You'll ask him for me, won't you?"

"I've always had to find dates for you," May said. "Nothing ever

changes."

"I love you two," June said. She waved as she walked back into the kitchen. "Be good today. I'll see you tonight." She laughed as she went out to her car. Some people might see her as an old maid. She'd never been married, but the truth was, her life was full and happy. Those two women might not get out of the house or do the things they'd done when they were younger, but their hearts and minds were still the same. As long as she could, she would make sure they had fun ... even if her mother thought it was all ridiculous.

## **Vignette #3**

### **What a Long Day**

Rachel Endicott flipped the lights off in the kitchen at Sycamore House. Billy had stopped in to see her when they got back to town after work. He and Doug were playing baseball tonight out of town somewhere and wouldn't be back until late. She'd promised to check on Doug's dog before going home to take care of Big Jack, the dog Billy brought into their marriage. She'd never expected to fall in love with a dog, but Billy had warned her that it wouldn't take long.

It hadn't. The goofy dog was as much a part of her family now as Billy was. There was nothing quite like coming home to the joy of a furry beast racing across the room to say hello.

She was exhausted. This had been one of those days that wore her out and it had gone on much longer than eight hours. The perks of running a business. She couldn't complain too much, the salary was awesome, but still. Long days like today wore her out.

One of her servers, Leslie, had called in sick at the last minute. She hadn't bothered to find someone to cover for her, and it was too late for Rachel or Lindy to make any calls. They were both slammed with getting food out of the kitchen on time. She'd begged Kristen to come in from the office. Kristen could only be there for a little while. There were too many meetings happening on site today and she was busy enough without having one more thing to do, but she'd helped them get through the luncheon.

Then one of the freezers started making a horrible noise, and before Rachel could call the repairman, it stopped working. They'd madly moved everything upstairs to the extra freezer. That was fine, except it was going to take two weeks for someone to get here to fix the thing and that just meant extra steps for everything she had to do. If that wasn't enough, when Lindy opened up a package of laundered table cloths, they were wrong. No one in Bellingwood used blue checked cloths, especially not Sycamore House. She'd

called the service about it and was assured that it would all be sorted out tomorrow. Fine, but that didn't help her today. They'd used a different color and got through it.

Early this morning she'd met with a bride who had no idea what she wanted to serve at her reception. No idea at all. Rachel had remained calm, though she wanted to shake the girl. It was only the first meeting with this bride. There would be more. She only hoped that the next meeting would be more productive.

After that, she'd met with a young woman to plan meals for a three-day conference. The host of the conference was a non-profit group and the young woman doing the planning wasn't happy with Sycamore Catering's prices. She expected Rachel to give her a discount since the event was *so very important*. Rachel sent the girl off to Jeff for that one. He insisted that she let him handle the difficult negotiations. If it was something that he and Polly wanted to support, they would. Otherwise, he'd work it out. The thing was, Rachel had seen the names of some of the speakers they were bringing in. She recognized one of them - the man had spoken here before and she knew exactly how much he charged to speak at events like this. If they could afford him, they could afford to pay for food.

Her mind was ready to turn off. She was grumpy. She was also really hungry. People thought that she ate her own food while she worked, but after cooking all day and then having it come back into the kitchen in all manner of disgusting ways on people's plates, she rarely wanted to eat it. Extra food that hadn't been served was packed into freezer containers. Two different pantries picked up Sycamore House's and Sweet Beans' extras on Fridays and Saturdays.

She unlocked the door to Doug's apartment and started up the steps, surprised that Doug's dog, Hawkeye, wasn't waiting to greet her. On the nights the guys played ball out of town, Rachel took Hawkeye for a quick walk so he wouldn't have to wait.

"Hawkeye, are you here?" she called out. She grabbed the railing to stop herself from falling backward when she saw a figure out of the corner of her eye. Then she laughed. "What are you doing here?"

Anita Banks, Doug's mostly-regular girlfriend, stood at the top of the steps with Hawkeye at her side. She grinned at Rachel. "Sorry about that. I didn't mean to give you a heart attack. I was in Webster City and decided to stop by and check on Hawkeye before going home. We just got back inside a few minutes ago. I should have told you."

"No, that's okay." Rachel took a deep breath waiting for her heart rate to lurch back to normal. "I'll just head home, then. It's been a long day."

"Yeah. I know about those. Today wasn't, but yesterday sucked," Anita said. "It was like three Mondays all in one day. I swear I ate every single bag of Cheetos in the machine. The orange ..." She rubbed her fingers and thumb together on her right hand. "Oh, the orange. It was everywhere."

Rachel laughed. "And the Mountain Dew?"

"So much Mountain Dew. Do you need one of those right now?"

"I should just go home," Rachel said.

Anita nodded. "Yeah, I get it. You're tired. I'm not tired, but I am starving. All those Cheetos yesterday and I skipped lunch today. That makes all sorts of sense."

"I'm hungry too," Rachel said. She really didn't want to go out, but on the other hand, if she did, she might actually eat better than a peanut butter sandwich and bowl of popcorn. "Do you want to get something in town?"

"Yeah. What are you thinking?" Anita sat down on the top step, letting Hawkeye climb on to her lap.

"You want to go to the Alehouse or Mexican?"

"Doug and I had Mexican last night. Do you mind going to the Alehouse?"

"That sounds great." Rachel laughed. "I could use some onion rings. And fried pickles. And french fries. They just put soft pretzels on their appetizer menu, too."

"Appetizers and a burger?" Anita said dreamily. "I'm in heaven."

Rachel heaved a big sigh. "I should take Jack for a walk first."

Anita smiled down at her. "Tell you what. How about I pick up the food and bring it to your place. Last night when I was out of my

mind, Doug brought dinner to me and let me sit in my shapeless clothes in my own apartment on my big ole comfy couch. I could do that for you tonight, especially since the boys are out of town. When do they usually get home?"

"Not until late."

"See, you need some pampering. You can complain about your day to me while I keep filling your plate. You deserve it."

"You'd do that?" Rachel and Anita were friendly, but Rachel always figured that was because Billy and Doug were such good friends. Anita was a few years older than all of them and she'd never felt like they were close.

"Absolutely. Tell me there's a trashy movie on that we can watch. Do you have wine?"

That was a funny question, though Anita didn't realize it. Rachel had *so* much wine. Working closely with the owner of a winery meant that gifts came in the form of a variety of flavors and pretty bottles. She and Billy didn't drink that much unless they had people over. "Yeah. I have wine."

"Cool. So, you're going to walk your dog and I'm bringing way too much food for the two of us to consume. Unless we do. Then we just don't tell anyone what we did. And I want to talk to you about going up to Minneapolis this fall."

Rachel frowned. "Minneapolis?"

"Or Kansas City. I'm dragging Doug to a Ren Faire this year if it kills me. It would be easier if you and Billy went along. We'd have so much fun. Have you ever been to one?"

Rachel's eyes grew big. "Uh, no?"

"Seriously, girlfriend. You have to experience this. Especially one of the big ones. We'll have to get you guys a costume. I've already got mine."

"If it's on the weekend, I can't leave."

Anita glared at her. "You're kidding me, right? You can never take a weekend off? That's cruel and unusual."

Rachel glanced away. She could take time off, she just needed to schedule far enough in advance that she and Lindy had enough help on hand. Of course, Rachel hated worrying whether or not

everyone who was supposed to show up, would show up. Who would have thought that Leslie would duck out on her today? She hadn't been sick yesterday. Ten to one she was in Ames with one of her girlfriends.

"I don't know. It's hard around here Everything happens on the weekends."

"What if we went Labor Day weekend? We could go up on Sunday and come back Monday? You don't do weddings on those days, do you?"

Anita wasn't letting her off the hook. She really wanted them to go.

"We could maybe do that. I'd have to talk to Billy."

"Fantastic." Anita jumped up, gathering Hawkeye into her arms. She put him down on the floor. "You go home. I'll get food. Then we'll sit in your apartment and get silly-drunk and I'll have to beg Doug to come get me." She waggled her eyebrows. "He likes it when I'm a little silly."

"Don't all boys?" Rachel asked with a giggle.

Anita rolled her eyes. "No kidding. They're so shallow."

Rachel laughed and let out a snort. "Ahh, no kidding." She put her hand on the door handle. "I'll see you in a while."

"Crocodile," Anita called out, turning away. "Later, gator!"

Rachel got into her car and looked at herself in the mirror of her visor. She was a sight. Her hair was all over the place. She'd rubbed the eyeshadow and mascara off her right eye this afternoon, so she looked really lopsided. When she'd dropped a pan into the sink, it had splashed up and she'd gotten soap in that eye. This was why she scheduled meetings with clients in the mornings before everything fell apart and she turned into a filthy mess.

The thing was, though? She was smiling again. She laughed at her cockeyed face. It was hard to imagine Anita Banks being grumpy because she'd had a bad day. The girl was always happy. She was good for Doug, who still wasn't sure if he was ready to grow up and be an adult. She let him be exactly who he was, knowing that in time, he'd figure it out. He was such a good guy. Just because he wasn't ready for a life-time commitment didn't



change that about him.

She pulled into the parking lot at her apartment. Big Jack would be ready to go out. Just a few more minutes and she could change her clothes and collapse on the couch. When she got to the front door, she heard him panting on the other side.

"Are you ready to go outside?" Rachel asked the dog. She bent at the knees and hugged him, letting the dog shower her with love, then sniff her to see where she'd been. He was in the hallway before she put her hand on his leash. His tail wagged so hard, he threw himself into the wall as he turned to make sure she was following him.

"Stop. Sit," she said and held out the leash. The dog saw what she had and obeyed. When she leaned over to snap it onto his collar, he leaned up and slurped his tongue across her cheek. Rachel wiped it off and laughed, then kissed the top of his head. "Big ole goofball. I don't care what kind of a bad day I've had, you make it better. Now we need to do this thing because we're about to have a guest."

She took him outside and waited while he marked the first corner. There were several dogs in the building and Jack needed to make sure that every blade of grass was marked as his own.

Tonight would be fun. In fact, she could hardly wait. Billy always said she worked too hard. A renaissance festival? In Minnesota? That was just crazy stuff. If he wanted to go, she'd make it work. They might actually have a great time. Rachel chuckled to herself as she wondered if they'd be cool with an electric-blue-haired gothic vampire. She'd have to see what Anita thought about that.

## **Vignette #4**

### **Play Ball**

Charlie Heller smiled as he slowed the mower and peered around a headstone. That's what he thought he saw. He turned the machine off, straightened an arrangement of flowers that had been left last weekend, and picked up the baseball.

Young Elijah Sturtz was getting to be quite the hitter. Fortunately, by the time the balls sailed from their back yard into the cemetery, they'd lost their momentum. Henry had come running the first time Elijah hit one of the balls over the fence, but Charlie had watched it happen and knew it wasn't going to be a problem. None of the balls that came across were a problem. At least not yet. Maybe when the boy got bigger and stronger, they'd have to have a different conversation, but for now, it was okay.

Charlie knew people from town thought he was an old codger. The thing was, he liked the quiet of his work out here. He liked the peace and beauty of the cemetery and the folks who were buried here told stories of Bellingwood's history like no one else.

He should write a book. Over the years, he'd absorbed so many stories. Mostly good, some not so good, and even some stories about folks whose family didn't miss them at all. But they still put up nice headstones. Even the worst of them needed a final resting place, he guessed.

"Charlie!"

He looked up and waved at Andy Specek, who was walking with the new puppy they'd gotten just after Christmas. He was surprised not to see Len's old dog with them.

"Good morning, Mrs. Specek," he called back. "It's going to be warm today."

She walked through the cemetery every day, sometimes more than once in a day if it was nice out. He walked toward her; the mowing could wait a few minutes more. Not so long ago, he wouldn't have felt that way. Completing his daily tasks was

topmost in his mind and any intrusions were annoyances. Maybe he was mellowing as he got older.

He laughed at himself. He'd been getting older for a very long time. No, this behavior started when Polly Giller moved into that big old house with those little boys who weren't afraid of a grumpy old man. Noah and Elijah came running to greet him every chance they got. Whether they were with Polly and Henry or just outside on their own, they made him feel like a king with their excitement at seeing him.

"How are you today, Mrs. Specek?" he asked, stopping in front of Andy. He shuffled the baseball into his left hand before shaking hers.

"I'm doing well." Andy pointed at the baseball. "Another one of Elijah's?"

"Must be. I've collected enough that he'll be down soon to retrieve them. It's a little game we play. I do believe that boy has taken to hiding them around the place just to make sure I have something to look for."

"Like an Easter Egg hunt?" she asked with a laugh.

"Exactly like that."

"The cemetery was busy this last weekend," Andy said.

"Memorial Day weekend is like that."

Andy nodded.

"And it will be busy again next weekend," he went on. "All those folks who were out of town visiting relatives will be back and want to spend a few moments with their own family. They're good folks around town here. Not too much trouble when they come to visit. Sometimes little ones run around and break things when they don't pay attention, but I shouldn't complain, I guess. Better to have them here than not. Plenty of people whose families are long gone after all these years."

Her dog was pulling at the leash and Andy bent down to scratch the pup's head. "I shouldn't keep her in one place very long. She's got an awful lot of energy. I'll let you get back to it."

"Everything okay with Len's dog?" Charlie asked.

Andy nodded. "She was enjoying a ray of sunshine when we left."

I think she likes having a little bit of peace from this one, even if it's short-lived. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Nice to see you." He wandered back to his mower and climbed on, powering it up again.

Charlie hadn't gotten through half of his mowing when he saw his favorite boy come tearing through the bushes that separated the Bell House from the cemetery. He headed to the shed, hoping to beat Elijah there.

He turned the machine off and heard the little boy yelling his name. "Charlie, Charlie!"

Polly had tried to insist that Elijah call him 'Mr. Heller,' but he'd put the kibosh on that right away. He was just Charlie. Anybody who got to know him well, knew that.

"Hello there, Elijah," Charlie said. He held out the ball he'd picked up. "Found another one today."

"I know," Elijah said, his face filled with a big smile. "I hit it over last night. Henry said it was the hardest hit I've ever made. Where did it end up?"

Charlie pointed. "At Martha Miniver's grave. Right there. You're right. That's the farthest in I've ever seen one." It really wasn't that far into the cemetery, but Elijah had gotten a good hit.

"You should come up to the ball field and see me play someday," Elijah said. "Would you?"

"I might." Charlie turned into the shed so the little boy couldn't see that the request had choked him up. He couldn't remember ever having someone invite him to a local event. He'd wandered past the ball field several times over the years. He knew everyone who was there, but he didn't know them well enough to join them. There wasn't anyone he wanted to root for from the stands. If Elijah asked him to attend a game, he'd certainly do just that and he would be that boy's biggest supporter. Well, except for his family. That Polly Giller could raise a ruckus when she was excited.

"I'd wave at you if you were there," Elijah said. He held out the plastic bucket he'd carried down from the house. "Time for a trade?"

"You ran out of balls again, didn't you?"

"Henry told me that if I hit a home run last night, I'd have to

come see you today. We are out!" Elijah announced. "I waited until it was getting dark before I let this one go." He grinned up at Charlie. "I wasn't ready to go inside."

The bright little boy had timed his home run hit to extend his play time? Charlie just shook his head as he took the bucket from Elijah.

"Polly says that if I keep hitting balls over here, she's going to buy stock in butterscotch candies."

Charlie pulled a small bag of candies out of the plastic bucket. He'd once laughingly told Elijah that he was going to hold his baseballs hostage. Elijah understood right away that he needed to find something to trade for them and had showed up the next day with a handful of butterscotch hard candy. The trades had developed from there. A small bag of candy traded quite nicely for a bucket of baseballs.

"Here, hold the bucket," he said, handing it back to Elijah. He dropped today's baseball in and then reached into the shed for the pail where he kept the others. They'd started out with twenty-four balls, but over the last month, more and more of them became permanently lost. Charlie was pretty sure they weren't hiding in the cemetery, but he wouldn't swear to it.

He poured the baseballs into Elijah's bucket and then took it back from the boy, setting it on a shelf. "Have a seat." Charlie pointed at a pair of old stools he'd scrounged up. He ripped open the bag of candies and offered it to Elijah, who took one.

"Thanks," Elijah said.

"Did ya watch the game last night?" Charlie asked, unwrapping a candy and popping it into his mouth. This was one of their favorite conversations.

"Nah, I was playing and then I had to go to bed. Polly told me that we might go to Des Moines to see the Iowa Cubs this summer. That's going to be awesome. I've never been to a big-time game."

"Been a long time for me, too," Charlie said, leaning against the shelves behind him. "You'll like it, though. It's some good baseball."

"You should come with us." Elijah jumped up from his seat. "I'll ask Polly. Would you come?"

"I don't think so," Charlie said. He felt awful when Elijah sagged back down onto the stool. "Your family is looking to do family stuff."

"But you and me would have fun. Our family is made of extra people, anyway. If I ask Polly and she says yes, will you come with us?"

"Let's see how it plays out." Charlie patted the boy's shoulder. "For now, how about you and me just sit here and talk about those Cubs. They're not going to win the World Series again this year, am I right?"

"There's always hope," Elijah said. Charlie's rejection had taken the boy down a notch or two and it was hard to watch.

"You know what?" Charlie asked. "You're right. There's always hope. And if your Polly wants me to go see a ball game with you, I'd be glad to tag along. Maybe the two of us should go to a few games around here. Bellingwood's team is doing pretty good from what I hear."

Elijah's eyes lit up again. "I know Doug and Billy. They play ball."

"That's right, they do," Charlie said. "We should go watch them some night. I'll buy the popcorn."

## 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>