



UNEXPECTED RICHES



Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



Bellingwood - Book 13



Book Thirteen 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 I write from Polly's perspective, unless she is directly involved in the action or with a character, we don't see everything. These characters have developed enough that they enjoy telling their own stories, so it's time to make that happen.

I have compiled the vignettes relating to Book 13 – Out of the Shadows - 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 13 - #1

Coffee Jitters

Eliseo didn't recognize the phone number on his cell. "Eliseo Aquila," he said.

"Hello, son. This is Bill Sturtz."

"Good morning, Mr. Sturtz. How are you today?"

"Doing fine. Doin' fine. Say, do you have any extra time today? Len and I could use a hand up at that new woman's craft store by the coffee shop. I wouldn't ask, but..."

"Of course I can," Eliseo said. "There isn't as much to do here during the winter and I could take a break from this. What are we doing?"

"Putting in cases for fabric on the first floor and we want to get that railing in on the second floor before too much more time passes. We'll pay you."

"No sir, that won't be necessary. I'm glad to help. I also know a couple of men that are always looking for things to do. Would you like me to bring them along?"

Bill Sturtz chuckled. "Old Ralph Bedford and Sam Gardner? Of course. But you tell those boys that we are paying them and there's no squabbling about it."

"They'll appreciate it, sir. What time would you like us to be there?"

"We've loaded everything up here at the shop and are heading that way," Bill said. "But Marie is standing between me and the doorway and wouldn't let me leave without asking for more help."

"I'll make some calls and be right there. Tell her not to worry."

"You've saved my bacon, young man. And at my age, a man needs to keep hold of his bacon."

"Yes sir."

Eliseo smiled as he hung up the phone. He'd heard about this new store going in. Sam Gardner thought it was just another place

his wife would spend money, but Sam grumbled about everything. He swiped the first call open.

"What's up, young man?" Ralph Bedford asked.

"Are you ready to work today?"

"The ground's too hard to be doing anything outside. What've you got in mind?"

"Bill Sturtz needs help at that new fabric store. I'm going there now. Do you want me to pick you up or will you drive into town?"

"What if I was sitting around in my winter dighties?" Ralph asked.

"Then you wouldn't be the man I know. You were dressed at five thirty this morning. Shall I pick you up?"

"Nah. I need to put gas in my girl anyway. I'll find my way. Are you going to treat me to a fancy coffee drink from that shop next door?"

"You bet I will. And maybe even one of Sylvie's sweet treats."

"When are you going to do something about that, young man?" Ralph asked. "You're going to lose her to that suave and debonair boy over at the hotel."

"If it's meant to be that she's with him, then I'll have to be happy for her," Eliseo replied. "Now get moving and I'll meet you up there."

He hung up and called Sam Gardner, who welcomed a ride.

Eliseo checked the gates before he left. Kirk and Khan watched him walk away and then sauntered back into the barn. The dogs were used to staying with the horses and donkeys when he had to leave. He wondered sometimes if they weren't just as happy there as anywhere else.

Sam was waiting at his front door and came out when Eliseo pulled into the driveway.

"What do they have us doing today?" Sam asked, once in the car.

"I believe we'll be installing cabinets and shelves. Or at least we'll help get them into place so Bill and Len Specek can do the work."

"A crew of hired hands, eh? Ya think they'll pay us?"

Eliseo chuckled. "I believe they will. Thank you for agreeing to help."

Sam nudged Eliseo's arm. "We're working next door to that girlfriend of yours, aren't we?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean." Eliseo scowled at the old man.

"You know exactly what I mean. It's been a little different since she moved up to the bakery and isn't in the kitchen at Sycamore House every day."

"She's there often enough," Eliseo said. "And you be good."

"Just watching out for you. Seems to me you aren't doing that enough for yourself."

Eliseo sighed and shook his head. "Please be good today." He drove into the alley behind the coffee shop and parked next to Bill Sturtz's pickup.

Bill and Len came back outside and Bill walked down the steps to greet them. "Thank you both for coming," he said. "We've started hauling the carcasses in. I brought the extra two-wheelers. Eliseo, would you lift those down out of the truck to us?"

Eliseo took his work gloves out of the pocket of his jacket and slipped them on, then jumped into the truck and maneuvered a box to the edge and hefted it to the ground. He pulled a second one off and Bill slid the two onto the dollies. In no time at all, the first load had been taken inside and Ralph Bedford had arrived in his bright orange truck. It was always a spectacle when he drove into town, but he was proud of the flames that had been painted on the side.

The back door of the coffee shop opened and Eliseo glanced up to see Sylvie come out, dragging two large trash bags.

"Excuse me," he said quietly and jumped out of the truck, then ran over to the steps leading up toward her. "Good morning, Sylvie. Let me help you."

"It's no problem. I've got it," she said.

Eliseo took the bags from her and hefted them into the garbage bin. "How are you this morning?"

"I'm good. I haven't seen you up here since we opened. Have you seen the bakery yet?" Sylvie glanced at the four men standing

outside the back of the quilt shop staring at them. "I'm sorry. You're obviously busy. Maybe you could stop up some other time and I'll give you a tour."

Eliseo smiled. "I'm free right now. We're just helping Bill and Len do some work next door, but I'd love to see what you have here."

If the four older men had been twenty or thirty years younger, Eliseo was certain he would have heard catcalls. As he held the back door open for Sylvie, he looked back at them. Ralph gave him a little wave and Sam silently clapped his hands together. He rolled his eyes and shook his head. Men would always be boys at heart.

"I can't believe you haven't been up to see me yet. We've been open for six months," Sylvie said, light scolding in her voice, though she smiled warmly at him.

"Been busy."

She led him into her sparkling kitchen. The appliances were all white and chrome, but she'd framed several of Rebecca's drawings and hung them above the cabinets to give color to the room.

"This is Destry," Sylvie said, indicating a girl kneading dough across the room. "She's just here for a short time, but is good help."

"It smells wonderful," Eliseo said, standing in the doorway. He didn't want to cross into Sylvie's clean space. He'd been working in the barn this morning and wasn't sure what he was carrying on the soles of his shoes.

"That's the chocolate cupcakes we're making for a party this afternoon." Using a spoon, Sylvie scooped cream out of a dish and handed it to him. "Taste this. That's the filling."

Eliseo took the spoon and licked the sugary, white cream from the spoon. It was heavenly. He did his best to smile, feeling the tightness of his cheeks pull when he did. "It's good."

"It's better than good," Sylvie said. "And in the middle of a chocolate cupcake it's practically divine. Come on. Let me show you the rest of the shop. Tell me you haven't been up here and not asked to see me."

He shook his head. He hadn't had the courage to come into the coffee shop yet. How could Sylvie not know how she affected him?

Why couldn't he just tell her?

"But you've met Camille, haven't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "Several times at Sycamore House." Eliseo followed her to the front of the store, amazed at how comfortable the building was. Polly talked about it quite a lot. She enjoyed spending time here and he was a little surprised not to find her here this morning.

Sal looked up from her laptop and waved at him. The clientele was mostly younger people, but a group of older women sat together, laughing and looking at papers on the table in front of them.

"That's the owners of the quilt shop," Sylvie whispered. "They're great ladies. We're glad they're next door." She gestured to a display of baked goods. "This is what I do all day now. I miss Sycamore House, but I'm having so much fun being in the middle of all the excitement downtown."

"You'd have even more fun if you weren't stuck in the back," Camille said, coming around the corner of the front counter. "Hello there, Eliseo. It's nice to see you."

"I'm helping them put in cabinets next door today," he said. "Sylvie wanted to show me around."

"You haven't been up here yet?" Camille stepped back, surprise in her eyes. "I need to make something special for you, then. What do you like?"

He shrugged. "Coffee? Tea? I don't know. I've never been in a fancy coffee place like this."

"Do you like your coffee strong and robust or would you like something sweet and fun?"

Eliseo started to panic. He truly had no idea what to say.

"He likes it strong," Sylvie said. "Try a doubleshot espresso." She looked up at Eliseo. "With cream, right?"

"Sure."

"And a slice of my coffee cake?" she asked.

"I should take the coffee and go to work," he replied. "The boys won't like it if I'm goofing off over here while they're working."

Camille handed him a cup with a lid and he lifted it to smell

the coffee. It was as full-bodied as he'd expected.

Eliseo reached into his pocket for his wallet and Sylvie slapped his hand away. "Your first experience at Sweet Beans is on me. If you have time, stop back when you're finished. I'd like to buy you a piece of coffee cake to go with the coffee. I can take a few minutes any time today."

"I, uh." He tried to make his mind work. "Sam Gardner came up with me. I'll need to take him home. Maybe another time." He turned to head down the hallway and stopped. "Thank you, Camille."

She smiled and nodded, then turned back to a customer who had just approached the counter.

"Thank you for showing me around," he said to Sylvie. "This is a very nice place."

When they got to the back door, Sylvie put her hand out. "I miss seeing you every day. Thank you for everything you do for Jason. I can't say that enough, but I mean every word."

"He's a great young man. I enjoy having him around." Eliseo held up the coffee cup. "Thanks again." He put his hand on the back door and went outside; it seemed colder than earlier. He went down the steps and into the alley over to the back side of the new quilt shop. "I miss you, too," he said quietly.

Book 13 - #2

A Handshake Deal

"Careful!" Camille yelled.

Her warning didn't do any good, as she and Elise tumbled to the floor; books, purses and backpacks flying everywhere.

"I'm so sorry," Elise said. "I wasn't paying any attention to where I was walking."

Camille grinned. "That was obvious." She pulled her leg out from under Elise, stood up and reached down to give her neighbor a hand up. "What has you so engrossed?"

"Some of my students are asking deep questions about the new information regarding gravitational waves and I was just looking through the study."

"Oh," Camille said, nodding slowly. "That's cool?"

Elise looked up from pushing books back into her bag, surprise on her face. "It's amazing! Einstein predicted it a hundred years ago and this information proves his general theory of relativity." She sat back down on the floor to rearrange papers that had spilled out of a folder. "We're living in an amazing time of information right now. Anything is possible. Now we know that black holes really exist."

"And this is important," Camille said.

Shock overcame surprise and Elise opened her mouth to speak, only to see Camille's eyes lit up with laughter. "You're teasing me."

"A little bit. But it's cool that you know how all of this works."

"I'd give anything to work on one of those teams," Elise said breathlessly. "So many brilliant minds all in one place."

"These are the people who probably need someone around to make sure they eat and take showers." Camille put her hand out and helped Elise stand up again.

"Sometimes I need that too," Elise said. She looked around the floor to see if she'd missed anything.

Camille bent over, picked up a pencil and put it in Elise's hand.

"I think you have everything now."

"Are you going up to Sweet Beans?" Elise asked.

"Yes. I didn't have to open this morning. It was nice to sleep in."

"Do you want a ride?" Elise stepped back. "I'm sorry. I don't want to intrude on your morning walk. I shouldn't have asked."

"No, that was very nice. I'd love to ride up with you. How do you like living in Bellingwood?"

"I love this little town. I didn't think I would," Elise said.

"Why's that?"

"I was afraid people would always want me to do things. I'm really a hermit, you know. I don't like being with a lot of people. My parents tell me that I should get out in public more often, but it makes me sick to my stomach."

Camille pressed the button for the elevator. "You do fine with me and Polly."

"That's because I know you."

They walked outside to find Elise's car covered in snow from the storm the previous night.

"I really need to find a place with a garage," Elise said, brushing aside the snow so she could put her things in the back seat. She took out the snow scraper and pushed snow off the back window and walked around to Camille's side. "Actually, I just need to get my own place. Polly's been really good about this. She doesn't charge me nearly enough, but I'm starting to miss having my things around me."

Camille stopped Elise with her hand. "Are you serious about moving?"

"It has to happen sometime. I can't keep doing what I've been doing. Ignoring it won't fix the problem. It isn't like the perfect house is going to jump out at me and invite me to move in." She brushed off the windshield on the passenger side, walked around the front of the car and cleared the lights, then ended up back in front of the driver's side door. "Why do you ask?"

"Do you have time to take a ride before going up to Sweet Beans?" Camille asked.

"How far?" Elise brushed off the rest of the snow and banged the

brush on her tire to clear it.

"Just down the road past the hotel. I want to show you something."

"Sure. Are you looking at a house?"

Camille nodded. "I am. But I can't afford it by myself. Well, I can, but I won't be able to do anything else." She opened her mouth to say something more, then stopped. "I just want you to see it."

Elise put the brush behind her seat and got in, turned the car on and rubbed her hands together to warm them up as she waited for Camille to put her seatbelt on. "It will warm up in just a minute. Why do you want me to see it?"

"Because if you moved in with me... No, just look at it before we say any more," Camille said.

She directed Elise down the road and they turned south on the street beside the hotel. Another block and Camille pointed to a small white home with a *For Sale* sign in the front yard. "That's it. What do you think?"

"It's adorable," Elise exclaimed.

"Pull into the driveway," Camille said. "See, there are even two garages."

Elise pulled in, stopped and parked, then turned her car off. "Is there enough room inside for two independent people to live comfortably?" She looked at the ignition and turned the car back on. It was too cold not to.

"Absolutely. There are two big bedrooms upstairs. One has a bathroom attached and the other one would have to use the bath in the hallway. The kitchen isn't real big, but it's open to the dining room and the living room is across the front here."

Elise nodded, trying to take it in.

Camille pointed again. "The basement is finished and has two rooms and a bathroom downstairs. We could figure out exactly how we wanted to do this. We could turn those into offices or you could have the basement rooms and I'd live upstairs or whatever. There's a lot of living space in that little house."

"If I took the basement, I could hide," Elise said.

"Sure," Camille replied. "You'd never have to see me unless you

came up to use the kitchen."

"It's been so long since I cooked anything, I'm not sure if I even could," Elise said with a smile. "I usually just eat what's around."

"Well, I miss cooking," Camille said. "I'd love to have someone eat my food."

Elise leaned against the driver's door and looked at the woman in her passenger seat. "Are you sure about this? I'm kind of strange."

Camille grinned. "I have a huge family. There's a whole lot of strange with them. You and I have been getting to know each other since you moved in. We both want to move out of Sycamore House, but neither of us wants to live in an apartment."

"What if it doesn't work out?"

"We'll talk about things when they come up."

Elise rolled her eyes. "I'm bad at that. I don't talk."

"I do. About everything," Camille said. "It comes from being the oldest in a big family."

"It would be wonderful to have all of my things in one place again. Half of my books are still in storage." Elise chuckled. "I haven't even really moved into my office at work. Everything is so unsettled right now."

"What do you think?"

Elise looked longingly at the little home. "I'm more worried about what you're going to think after living with me for a while."

"Are you messy?" Camille asked.

Elise shook her head.

"Do you pay your bills on time?"

"If I don't," Elise said. "It's only because I forgot. This is what I'm talking about. I get distracted by my work and lose touch with reality."

"Then we'll come up with a plan so you're taken care of. Do you have loud parties?"

Elise just laughed. "Every single night. Sometimes until five o'clock the next morning."

"I won't have to worry about men sneaking in and out of the basement?"

"Not right now," Elise said. "But if there is a man, I can guarantee

we won't be sneaking around. I'll be shouting it from the housetops." She looked down. "That won't ever happen, though. I can barely have conversations with normal people, much less a man."

"We're having a conversation right now," Camille said quietly.

"But you're easy to talk to." She looked at Camille. "Oh. I see."

"It's going to take practice."

"But I hate to make you put up with my practicing," Elise said. "I don't want to drive you batty."

"How about we don't worry about those things today. I'll call the realtor and set up a time so you can look at the house, too."

"I trust you," Elise said. "And it's your house."

"But you're going to make it possible for me to buy it and still have a life," Camille replied. "Let's go up to Sweet Beans and drink some caffeine to jump start our day and then we'll figure out when we can both look at the house. Are you ready to try this with me?"

Elise backed out of the driveway and headed for downtown Bellingwood. "My parents will never believe it when I tell them."

"Why not?"

"They worry about me." She grinned. "I can't wait for you to meet my cousins. They'll come down to help me move my things in. You'll like them."

"And my family," Camille said. "I should take you back to Omaha some weekend so you can meet my parents. Mama won't know what to do with you."

"Why's that?"

"Because she'll want to take care of you and then you'll say something really brilliant and intimidate her all at the same time." Camille chuckled. "If you live downstairs, that means Mama will think the upstairs bedroom is available to her. I might have to get another roommate."

Elise turned to look at her after she pulled into a parking space. "Another roommate?"

"Wait until you meet Mama. You'll see why I don't want her coming over to spend a month with us." Camille poked Elise's arm. "Maybe you should act really weird and scare her a little so she

stays away."

"Are you serious?"

Camille smiled. "No. She'll do whatever she wants. She's a wonderful woman and I love her."

"Are we really going to do this?" Elise asked.

"I can't see why not." Camille put her hand out and Elise shook it. "There. It's a handshake deal. I think those are as solid as any contract. Shall we have some coffee to toast the deal?"

Elise nodded. "It's on me."

Book 13 - #3

And They Called it Puppy Love

"Wait up, you guys," Kayla yelled.

Mr. Smith stepped in front of her and she pulled up short. "No running in the halls, Miss Armstrong."

"Sorry," she muttered.

Rebecca had stopped in front of the girls' bathroom to wait for her friend. "Slow down, Andrew. We have to wait for Kayla."

"Whatever," he muttered. "I'll just be at my locker. Find me when you're ready to go."

She turned and watched him walk away. "What's his problem?"

"Where'd Andrew go?" Kayla asked.

"I don't know. His locker, I guess." Rebecca shook her head. "What did Mr. Smith want?"

"Told me not to run." Kayla huffed a laugh. "Like I run. I hate running. Why would I run in the halls when I don't even like to run in gym?"

"I know, right?" Rebecca said, laughing. "Let's get rid of some of this stuff."

The two girls walked down the hall and turned the corner. Andrew was at the far end, leaning against his locker, watching them come his way.

Rebecca stopped in front of hers. "You go on. I just need to get my coat."

"I'll be right back," Kayla said.

"Stupid boys," Rebecca grouched. She opened her locker and put books on the shelf and shoved things around so she could get her coat. It made her laugh. Polly was always complaining about how messy her room was. If she could see this, she'd go bananas. Kayla's was way different. It was clean and really cute. She had Disney paper on the inside of the door and a sweet little white board and even a calendar hanging there. All organized and neat. Rebecca

yanked on her coat and pulled it out from under the books she'd jammed in there all day, then dug around for her scarf.

Even there, Kayla was smarter than her. She always pulled her scarf through the sleeve of her coat so that she could find it right away. Polly would have a cow if Rebecca came home without it. No, that wasn't right. She'd have the cow in the morning when Rebecca tried to leave without it on. She wrapped it around her neck twice and pushed her hair away from her face.

"Are you ready?" Kayla asked.

"Not hardly. How'd you get your stuff so fast?"

Kayla just laughed. "You should let me do up your locker for you."

"You'd have to do it every week. I'll just make a mess again."

"Why don't you hang any pictures up? Or even some of your drawings? Those would be really cool," Kayla said.

Rebecca bent over and dug around on the floor of the locker, underneath a pile of folders. She pulled out a bent and broken corkboard. "Because everything breaks. I don't even know where the pins are for this. Polly bought me some cute cat pins and they're hiding somewhere in the mess."

"You should just throw that away."

"Here." Rebecca shoved it at her friend. "Throw it away."

Kayla took the three steps to a trash can and lifted the corkboard high, then let it drop. "See how difficult that was?"

Rebecca looked down at Andrew, still standing beside his locker. He was doing his best to ignore them. He spoke to some of the boys who were putting coats on, but kept a steady eye on what she and Kayla were doing.

"What did he do to you?" Kayla whispered. "Did he say something stupid? Are you guys breaking up?"

"No. He didn't say anything stupid and we aren't breaking up." Rebecca kicked the bottom of her locker. "I hate this thing. I can't ever find anything."

"You really should let me clean it out for you. I could at least get you organized," Kayla pleaded.

"I'm just going to throw everything away." Rebecca bent over

and picked up a stack of paper.

When she started toward the trash can, Kayla jumped in front of her. "No. You'll be mad if you throw away some of your drawings. And there might be pictures in there and some of your stories." She pulled out a piece of music. "And this was supposed to be turned in before Christmas."

"They don't care."

"Yes they do. I was in the band room when Lisa and Sheena were sorting things. They were missing a bunch of parts. How are we supposed to play that again?"

"Then take it back."

Kayla held onto it. "I will. Is there more in there?"

"Here." Rebecca held out the stack, waiting for Kayla to extend her arms. When she did, Rebecca pushed everything at her friend. "You do whatever you want with it. Throw it out, color on it. I don't care. Just get it out of my sight."

"Why are you in such a bad mood?" Kayla asked, following Rebecca back to her locker. "What did Andrew do?"

"Who said he did anything?"

"I said. You only get like this when you and him are fighting."

Rebecca shot a glance down the hall, turned her back on Andrew and bent into her locker. "It's embarrassing when he gets all lovey-dovey," she said in low tones, checking the hallway around them. Most of the kids were gone by this point. "I don't want people teasing us because he's always trying to sit beside me or..." she kicked the bottom of the locker again. "Whatever."

"I wish I had a boyfriend try to get all lovey-dovey with me," Kayla said. "You're lucky. You shouldn't be mean to him. What if he breaks up with you because you aren't very nice?"

"I'd still have you," Rebecca said.

Kayla didn't respond, but looked down at the stack of papers in her hands.

"I'm mean to you, too. Is that what you're thinking?" Rebecca asked.

Shaking her head very slowly, Kayla just smiled at her friend. "You're never mean. Just a little volatile."

"Where did you get that word?"

"Stephanie's word-of-the-day calendar at home." Kayla laughed and then looked worried. "But I didn't think of you when we talked about the word at breakfast. I promise."

Rebecca took the stack of papers back from Kayla and jammed them into the bottom of her locker. "You can fix this up if you want," she said. "But not tonight. Everybody else is gone. We should go."

"Are you taking this?" Kayla asked, holding out Rebecca's sketchbook.

"Yeah, I better." Rebecca pulled her coat on, slung the backpack over her shoulder and then took the sketchbook from Kayla. She reached back into her locker and picked up her pencil case and kicked the door shut. "We're leaving, Andrew. Are you coming?"

He trotted down the hall toward them. "Are you going to be mad at me all night?" he asked.

"I'm not mad," Rebecca responded. She shook her head when she caught him giving Kayla a look. "I'm not," she repeated. "Let's just go."

They walked out of the front door of the school and she shivered as they hit the cold air.

"It's cold," Andrew said. "Let me hold your hand."

Rebecca held up her hands, one with the sketchbook and the other with the pencil holder. "I have stuff in my hands."

"You could put it in your backpack."

Kayla laughed. "No she can't. There's no more room. Will you let me clean that out sometime, too?"

"At least let me button up your coat for you," Andrew said.

"Fine." Rebecca stopped in the middle of the street, planted her feet and turned to face him. "Button my stupid coat."

"It's really hard work being your boyfriend," Kayla said. "He needs a medal."

Rebecca watched her two friends try hard not to laugh and she shook her head. "I'm high maintenance?"

Andrew and Kayla looked at each other and then turned to look at her, innocence pasted on their faces.

"Of course not," Andrew said.

Kayla spoke over him. "Not all the time."

"But I don't want to be high maintenance. I hate high maintenance girls." Rebecca slumped her shoulders in defeat. "I'm sorry. You guys are my best friends. Here." She handed the pencil holder to Andrew.

He took it and frowned at her until she held her hand out. "Oh." Andrew smiled and took it in his.

"But just until we get to the highway," Rebecca said. "I don't want Polly to see it."

He nodded. "This is good enough."

Book 13 - #4

Choices and Consequences

"I like that one," Nate said, pointing at a countertop sample.

Joss shook her head. "Are *you* going to wax it every few months? It will take a lot of effort to keep it looking nice. That's not a good idea."

"If you don't like it, why is it even an option, then?" he asked. "I don't care which one you choose, just decide and I'll like it."

She swept the brochures to the floor in disgust and walked away from the dining room table.

"What?" Nate asked. "What did I do? I just want you to be happy."

"You've left every decision about this house to me and won't get involved in a single one. Even when I ask for your help. This is supposed to be *our* dream house, not *my* dream house," she said, dropping onto the sofa. Joss pulled her legs up, tugged a quilt off the back of the couch, and wrapped it around herself.

"But if you're happy, then I'm happy," he said. "I don't know why you're making such a big deal out of these things. They're only things." He swept his hand around the room. "Half of them will probably be replaced if we're going to have a lot of kids in the house. It's just not worth the stress."

She slammed her hand down on the arm of the sofa. "I don't understand why you don't care. We're going to live in that house for a long time and I want it to be right. All I'm asking is for you to put some effort into the decisions. You haven't done a thing with them since we started the process. I feel like I'm all by myself and no one is helping." Joss flicked an imaginary piece of lint off the blanket. "Except Henry. He listens to me and helps me think through these things."

Nate turned and walked back into the dining room. "Patience of Job," he muttered. He picked the brochures up off the floor and

went back out into the living room, then put them on the table in front of Joss and said, "Don't go anywhere."

When he came back out the second time, he carried the plastic tote that Joss had organized all of the house planning into. Putting it on the table in front of her, he unlatched the top and set it aside. "Okay. What do you want me to decide on." He flipped to a tab. "Bathroom fixtures. Are we done with that?"

Joss nodded.

"Kitchen cabinets. Did we figure out what those are going to be?"

She nodded again. "The hardware for the cabinet doors is still undecided."

Nate tugged the folder out and put it beside the tote. "Okay, what else?"

"There's just so much," she said.

"Let's look at hardware for the cabinet doors." Nate flipped the folder open.

Joss watched his face and waited. Within seconds, he flipped through the sheets she'd printed out and turned to her with his classic deer-in-the-headlights look.

"I don't even," he said.

"Which one do you like?" she asked.

Nate glanced at her and then pulled out a page with antique brass hardware. "This one?"

"There are five different styles on that page. Which one?"

He looked at the page again and, shaking his head, pointed at one of them. "How about this?"

"Okay fine," she said. "But what if we put a gray countertop in? Don't you think that the satin nickel or polished chrome would be better? Or if we choose a butcher block countertop, then maybe wooden pulls?" She leaned forward and took out another folder. "And what about the flooring? We don't even know what that's going to look like. Chrome wouldn't look great with the wood floor, but would be gorgeous with this tile." Joss yanked a sheet out of the folder and put it in front of him.

"Okay..." He drew the word out.

"And then what kind of chairs do we want around the bar in the

kitchen? Do you even know what color we're painting the walls?" Joss slumped back in the sofa. "You're leaving all of these decisions to me and I don't know what you want."

"Just do what you want. I don't care," he said.

She jumped to her feet and stalked out. "That's what I mean. You don't care. This is the biggest decision we've ever made and you don't care about any of it. If you don't care about these things, then what *do* you care about? I know you care about your shop and how that's designed. You spent hours planning the layout - exactly where everything was going to go. But our home, the place where you and I live together, where we raise children, where we live. Now you tell me that you don't care. What am I supposed to think? How am I supposed to feel about that? It's like you don't care about me or the kids. You just want to blow it off."

Joss was doing her best to keep her voice low. She'd finally gotten Cooper and Sophia to sleep after a long day. Fortunately, they'd had plenty of activity and were exhausted by bed time. She stood at the base of the stairs and looked up. All she wanted to do was make a nice home for her family. Someday she wanted to have more kids in the house. Lots of kids. Coop and Sophie were wonderful. Oh, they were normal children and alternately made her cry tears of joy and tears of frustration at any point during the day, but being their mom was an important part of her life.

"I don't want to blow it off," Nate said quietly. "But you have to see my side of this."

"The side that tells you I'll take care of it if you ignore it long enough? The side that won't even take a half hour to sit with me and talk about the pros and cons of these decisions? Which side is it?" Joss asked, spinning back around to look at him.

"It takes more than a half hour," he said. "And I spend all day long helping people make decisions about things that impact their lives. Real things that could help them live better or if they do it wrong, die. Then I come home and you want me to make a decision about whether we're going to have chrome or brass or whatever hanging on cabinets in the kitchen, when in truth, all I care about the kitchen is that we eat in there."

"Fine," she spat. "Your patients are more important than your family. I'll make all of the decisions about the house and you can come home every night, eat your damned meal in the kitchen and then go out to your shop so you don't have to participate in this family because it's too difficult." Joss snarled. "But don't blame me when you don't like something. It's not like you cared enough to help me."

She turned to walk out of the room and Nate spoke slowly and deliberately. "Don't you dare leave right now."

"Why not?" she taunted. "Would you have to make a decision whether to come after me or sit here by yourself? We all know you don't want to do that."

"I will come after you," he said. "It's not even a decision. And you're not being fair. Please come back and let's talk about this."

"I'm done talking to you tonight."

"Oh no you're not," he said and stood up. "Wherever you go, I'm following. We're talking about this whether you want to or not. It might be easier here in the living room than in the bathroom or your closet." Nate gave her a small smile. "Come on. Talk to me."

Joss crossed her arms in front of her and planted her feet. "I don't want to talk."

"Yes you do. Come on." Nate tugged on her folded arms. "Sit down. Please?"

She let him tug her to the couch, sat down, pulled her feet back up underneath her, and then re-crossed her arms.

"Honey," he said as he sat down beside her, "I love you very much, but you need to understand that I don't have the capacity to make these decisions. I don't know what you like or what you want. This house is our home, but it's your design. Your tastes are what I want to see fill the home, not my stupid ideas. You and I both know that I wouldn't care if I sat on an orange sofa in a lime green room with a purple ottoman." He shuddered. "Okay, maybe I'd care about that. But you know what I mean. I'm terrible at this." He looked at her. "Right?"

When she didn't move, he tapped her shoulder. "Come on, you have to give me this. I mean, who is the man who bought you the

ugliest blouse in the world and thought it would be perfect for you?"

Joss chuckled. "You did. That thing really was ugly."

"See what I mean? I have no taste and just because you think I should, it won't change. I trust you to make the right decisions about what color the kitchen should be and how all of it should match. Honestly, I'm fine with chrome on the handles and a wood floor and white walls."

"No," she said. "That will never happen."

"Again. See what I mean?"

"But why don't you care about this?"

"You misunderstand. It isn't that I don't care, I just trust you. Do you care what kind of car you drive?"

Joss frowned at him. "I want it to work."

"Exactly. I like thinking about cars and looking at the specs and spending time with those things."

"But you asked me to pick out the color."

Nate sat back and rolled his eyes. "I did, didn't I. That was a bad example." He sat forward again. "Okay. When you're ready to paint the master bathroom, I will care about the color of the walls. Is that enough?"

"Not really," she said, shaking her head. "I just want you to be more involved in what we're doing here. I feel like I'm all alone. What if I really screw this up?"

"I'm sorry that you feel alone, but you can't screw this up. First of all, you're too smart for that, but secondly, you also have Henry watching your decisions. If he thinks you've made a bad choice, he'll stop you. Right?"

"I hope so. But you have to start talking to me," she said. "I need you to be part of this." Joss frowned at him again. "And we're just as important as your patients."

He nodded. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Of course you are."

"I'm sorry, too." Joss leaned against him. "I feel really overwhelmed and I worry about making poor decisions. We're going to have to live with some of them for a lifetime."

"I'll never complain," Nate said. "I promise. How's that?"

"It will do for now," she said.

"So what are you going to do about the kitchen counter?" he asked.

Joss swatted his belly. "I don't know. This is a big one and I want to get it right."

He reached for the pile of brochures that he'd gathered from the kitchen floor. "Tell me the pros and cons. If I can't make a decision, at least I can be a sounding board."

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/>

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for news about upcoming books, conversations while I'm writing and you're reading, and a continued look at life in a small town.

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