



# JOY IN THE JOURNEY

## *Vignettes*

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR



*Bellingwood - Book 25*





# Book Twenty-Five Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR

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THANK YOU!



## 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 this is their little bit of fame.

I have compiled the vignettes relating to Book 25 — Joy in the Journey — 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**

### **Home Sweet Home**

"And who is this little charmer?" the waitress asked, placing menus in front of Danielle and Gary Mixan. She put crayons and a coloring page in front of their son, Carter. "My name is Lucy. Would you like a minute before we start the whole spiel?"

Danielle smiled at the woman who looked much like her Aunt Norma. "A few minutes would be great. Thank you."

Lucy smiled back down at them. "The pork tenderloins here are the best in Iowa."

"Pork tenderloins?"

With a small chuckle, Lucy said, "I should have heard it in your accent. You're not from Iowa, are you?"

Gary nodded. "Texas. We moved to Bellingwood a couple of months ago."

"And this is the first time you've made it into Joe's Diner? Welcome. I'm glad you're here." She pointed to an item on Danielle's menu. "Pork tenderloin. A quarter pound of pork loin, pounded flat and thick, breaded in Joe's specially seasoned coating, and deep fried. He makes 'em up every Thursday. If you don't try one today, you'll have to put it on your bucket list." Lucy glanced up. "I need to take care of a couple of my regulars. If I'm not back by the time you're ready, just wave me down." She bustled off and stopped to talk to people at several tables on her way to where she was heading.

"She's been doing this for a while," Gary said. "Nice lady."

"What do you think," Danielle asked. "Do you want to try the tenderloin?"

He shrugged. "We could split it if you want to try something else, too."

"You know me so well," she said, nudging his arm. "What about the hot beef sandwich?"

"Sounds great." He put his menu back on the table. "Carter, what

about you?"

"Hot dog," the little boy said. He hadn't looked up since the moment their waitress had put the coloring sheet in front of them.

"That was easier than usual," Gary said.

Danielle agreed. "He's been on a kick lately. At least they have something he'll eat."

The bell on the door of the diner rang and she looked up and smiled. "That's her," she whispered to her husband.

"Who's her?"

"The girl who invited me and Carter to Thanksgiving dinner. Stephanie. She works at that old school building. I think it's called Sycamore House, right there on the highway." Danielle waved at Stephanie Armstrong, who limped into the diner with a man who looked to be several years older than her.

"Danielle," Stephanie said. "I wondered when I would see you again. How are you?"

Carter grinned when he recognized Stephanie. "Hi there."

"Hello, Carter."

"We're settling in," Danielle said. "This is my husband, Gary."

Gary had stood and shook Stephanie's hand. "Thanks for taking care of my family last Thanksgiving."

"We were glad to have them join us. It was a fun day," Stephanie said. She took the arm of the man with her. "This is my boss, Jeff Lyndsay. Jeff, this is Danielle, Gary, and Carter Mixan. Is that right?"

Danielle nodded. "Do you want to join us? We can make room. We haven't ordered yet."

Stephanie looked at her boss. A quick frown flashed across his brow, then he smiled and said, "Why not? It never hurts to meet new friends."

He waved at Lucy and called out, "Can we push tables together here?"

Lucy strode over and pulled a chair away from the table beside them. "Jeff Lyndsay, I don't know why you even bother to ask. You'll do what you want and you know I don't mind. How do you know these folks? I'm given to understand they're new in town."

Danielle felt a little overwhelmed by the attention, but she scooted Carter's chair back so they could put the two tables together.

"Stephanie met them at Thanksgiving and now she's introduced me," Jeff said. "I think that means we're friends now. Thanks, Lucy." He gave her a quick hug before sitting down beside Carter. "A purple alligator? Is he more ferocious than a regular green alligator?"

Carter pushed his paper closer to Jeff. "He's a nice alligator."

"That makes sense. Have you ever seen one up close?"

The little boy looked at Jeff, his eyes wide. "No. Have you?"

"Not me. We don't have any of those in Iowa." Jeff sat forward. "It's Gary?"

Gary nodded.

"What brought you to Bellingwood?"

"My job. I'm a salesman and my company is looking to expand its territory into Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Nebraska, and Illinois. Dani and I stuck a pin in a map one day and came up with Bellingwood."

"You did not," Stephanie said.

Danielle laughed. "We really did. We could have moved to Ames or Des Moines, but after a little research, we decided that a small town was where we wanted to raise our family." She gave a small shrug. "Now that we're settled in the apartment, though, I'm ready to figure out what else Bellingwood has to offer. What kind of jobs are available?"

Jeff and Stephanie looked at each other and he smiled. "Depends on what you want to do. Unemployment is low in town. We're always looking for people. What are your interests?"

Lucy came back to the table. "Are you ready to order?"

Jeff grimaced and picked up his menu. "Bad Jeff."

"Do you want me to pick from your favorites?" she asked him. "We have a meat loaf sandwich on special today. Mashed potatoes and gravy."

Danielle looked at Gary, her eyes wide. He shrugged in agreement.

Lucy patted Jeff's shoulder and walked around to Danielle. "I'll give him a minute. How about you?"

"I have to try the meat loaf sandwich special," Danielle said. "That sounds wonderful. And Carter would like a hot dog. Do you have any fruit or fresh vegetables?"

"Carrots? And I have apples and grapes back there," Lucy said.

"Which would you prefer, Carter?" Danielle asked.

He ignored her, caught up in the conversations around the table.

"Charge me whatever, but if you'd bring the apple and some grapes, that would be great."

"Perfect. No pork tenderloin today?"

Gary put his hand up. "I'm ordering that. However it usually comes, that's how I want it."

Jeff and Stephanie gave her their orders and she was off again.

Turning back to Danielle, Jeff asked again. "What would you like to do in Bellingwood?"

She turned to her husband. He smiled and nodded. "If I were dreaming, I'd like to open a small boutique gift shop, but we don't have the resources to invest in that yet, so it's just a dream."

"For now," Jeff said.

"I suppose. The General Store across the street has some cool stuff. I want to find something to do during the day. We enrolled Carter in preschool at the Lutheran Church. It's time to get busy."

Lucy came back to the table balancing a tray filled with drinks.

"What's the good word, Lucy?" Jeff asked.

"About what? I have a lot of good words."

"Who's looking for help in town."

She chuckled as she put a glass in front of Danielle. "Are you looking for a job? Anything special you want to do?"

Danielle shook her head. "I'm up for whatever comes my way."

"I could give you a long list. Practically everyone downtown is looking for help. The quilt store, the hardware store, the jewelry store. Both banks. Mina at the salon is looking for stylists since they're moving out to that big new place west of town. She might even be looking for a second receptionist. The convenience store is starting interviews." Lucy put a drink down in front of Jeff. "What

about you all?"

"We're always hiring," he said. "Front desk at the hotel and our catering business needs more help. Camille could use at least two more baristas and we're interviewing for an HR / Financial person, as well as a custodian and grounds keeper at Sycamore House."

"Those are just the jobs I know of off the top of my head," Lucy said. "If you give me fifteen minutes, I'll write out a list. But first, let me check on your lunch."

Danielle watched her walk away. "Wow."

"Lucy doesn't miss much in town," Jeff said. "Any job she tells you about is real, too. She's better than the online job sites by far."

"Wow," Danielle said again. "I wasn't expecting that kind of service when I suggested lunch at the diner."

Stephanie leaned across Jeff. "You're in for it now. Once Lucy and Jeff get their hooks into you, you're officially part of Bellingwood. The only one you're missing is Polly Giller. That woman is relentless once she gets to know you."

"I've heard her name," Danielle said. "She owns the hotel and that Sycamore House?"

Jeff nodded. "She's our boss and kind of a whirlwind when it comes to helping people discover where they belong. There isn't much that slows her down."

"A local celebrity, eh?" Gary asked.

Jeff laughed out loud. "She'd hate to hear you say that. She believes she's just as common and normal as the rest of us."

"But she isn't," Stephanie interrupted.

He turned to look at her, concern creasing his forehead. Danielle wondered what he thought Stephanie was going to tell them.

"I just mean that she doesn't let anything stop her from doing the right thing. It's like she isn't afraid of people gossiping about her, she just keeps moving forward. When I hear the bad things people say about me, I can't hardly move for a day or two, but not Polly."

Jeff shrugged. "Polly would tell you that she managed to surround herself with good people. She has great friends and we've built a strong team. What I know is that she makes us want to do good work. If you come to work for Sycamore Enterprises you'll see

what we mean. If you work anywhere else in town, you'll also see it, but it won't be as obvious right away." He took out his wallet, removed a business card, and slid it across to her. "Send me an email with your resume. I'll see what we've got that might be a fit for you."

Danielle put her hand on Gary's leg. "I think we moved to the right town in Iowa."

"Home sweet home," he said.

## **Vignette #2**

### **Pretty Is as Pretty Does**

"Oh honey, no," Jessie moaned. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, hoping desperately that if she opened them again, things would be as she'd left them not fifteen minutes ago.

"I'm pretty, Mommy," Molly said.

Jessie Locke opened her eyes and moaned again, this time inside her head. She had exactly fifteen minutes before their friends arrived.

"Let's get you into the bath, Molly."

Her daughter looked up at her in shock. "But I'm pretty."

"Yes you are, but that's too much pretty for tonight. Up with your arms."

Molly held her arms tightly to her side. "I don't want a bath."

"Well, you're getting one, whether you want it or not." Jessie moved right from cajoling to demanding. She didn't have time to deal with this. "You know better than to get into my makeup. What were you doing in my room, anyway?"

Molly looked right at her, lipstick covering her lips, her chin, her elbows, and even the back of her dress. How did she get it there? Not only had she covered herself in lipstick, but she'd gotten into the eye shadow, as evidenced by the deep blue streaks across her eyelids, eyebrows and most of her forehead. She'd also managed to open Jessie's mascara and painted ridges of black up and down her forearms and her thighs. "I'm pretty," Molly stated categorically. "I want Grandma to see."

Grandma was Marie Sturtz. Jessie chuckled at what Marie would say if she saw this mess. She wouldn't be upset. That woman handled Molly so well. Better than Jessie some days. Marie was the only grandmother Molly knew since Jessie's own mother had little to nothing to do with them. Her father would love to be part of their lives, but he didn't have the strength to challenge his wife's stubbornness. He'd done more than anyone expected the day he

packed Jessie's belongings and brought them to her in Bellingwood.

Kelly Locke had declared Jessie dead to the family when she left home with a boy. So many difficult things had happened in Jessie's life between leaving home and the day she met Polly Giller. Even after she met Polly, she'd made some horrible choices, but the one good thing that had come from those rough years was Molly. So now, Jessie refused to complain about her life. Not with this little girl filling it with joy.

"Pretty little girls don't need makeup," Jessie said, picking her stubborn daughter up in her arms. She took Molly into her bathroom and pushed the door shut, then placed herself in front of it. They'd been through this before. Molly would take every opportunity to get out of taking a bath. This would make the second bath of the day and that was far too many for one little girl.

She'd been acquiescent enough during the first bath, knowing that she was preparing for a special afternoon. This one was going to go badly and Jessie needed to work fast.

Jessie turned the water on while holding her daughter as tightly as she could. Then, stripping Molly's dress off over the top of her head, she plopped Molly on the sink, taking her shoes and socks off. Before Molly knew what happened, she was set down in the tub, underpants and all. Her eyes grew wide in shock.

"Mommy!" she yelled.

"Yes, honey, I know. We're in a hurry."

"But they're wet."

Jessie chuckled. Those would come off in a flash once Molly was out of the tub. There'd be no fighting that last layer of clothing. While she scrubbed her daughter's skin clean, in her mind's eye, Jessie scanned Molly's closet. She'd bought the beautiful red dress for today's party, but it wasn't going back on, not in the shape Molly had left it.

There was another cute little dress hanging on the left side of the closet. Molly wore it a month ago. Hopefully, she hadn't outgrown it yet.

"Why, Mommy?" Molly whined, working herself up into tears.

"Because you had makeup all over and as pretty as you are, you



were a mess." Jessie shook her head. "I love you very much, little one, but getting into my makeup fifteen minutes before your birthday party was a bad idea. I'm not happy with you."

"You gonna spank me?" Molly wailed.

Jessie sat back, looked down at herself and realized she was drenched. She'd need to change, too. But wait, what? "Spank you? When have I ever spanked you? What gave you that idea?"

"Ben."

"From pre-school?"

Molly nodded, tears streaming down her face. "He said bad girls get spankings."

Jessie remembered getting quite a few spankings from her own mother, but had resolved not to raise her daughter that way. Thankfully, Marie agreed, though the two also agreed that there were times they wanted nothing more than to swat the child and walk away. Jessie chuckled to herself. Sometimes it stunk being a responsible adult.

"I have never spanked you before, I'm not starting today. Stand up." She held out her hand and Molly took it, using it to balance herself. "Turn around so I can make sure you're all clean."

A dripping-wet, perfectly clean child stood in front of her.

"That's better." Jessie pulled a towel down and wrapped it around Molly and lifted her up and out of the tub.

"You're wet," Molly said, poking at Jessie's sopping stomach.

"Yes I am. I was in a hurry."

"I'm wet."

"We're drying you off," Jessie said.

Molly pointed to her bottom. "Still wet."

"Oh," Jessie said, laughing out loud. She set Molly on the floor and said, "Pull 'em off and leave them on the floor. We'll clean up after the party." She opened the bathroom door. "Off to your room."

Molly took off, flailing her arms and running as she screamed happily. There was something wonderful about a happy naked toddler.

Jessie stopped in front of her own closet and snagged a sweater off a hanger. Her jeans would have to dry on their own. She

followed Molly into the little girl's bedroom where her daughter was bouncing up and down in front of her closet.

"Fresh underpants," Jessie said, opening the dresser. She tossed a pair at Molly and they both laughed when the undies hit Molly in the head.

Her tears forgotten, Molly pulled the underpants down over her face. "Like this?"

"If that's how you want Grandpa Bill to see you," Jessie said. She opened another drawer and took out a pair of socks.

That was all it took. Molly pulled the underpants off her head and sat down on the floor, putting one leg through and then the other. While she was down, Jessie quickly put her socks on and then stood the child up, fluffing out her hair.

"You are the prettiest little girl in the world. You don't need makeup. I promise."

Molly patted her tummy with both hands. "What dress, Mommy? I'm naked."

"Yes you are. Let's see how this one looks on you." Jessie stood up, and took down the blue dress, which was exactly where she'd pictured it. "Arms up."

Molly obeyed and Jessie tugged the dress down over her head. Thank goodness it still fit. One more crisis today and the two of them would be in a puddle before anyone arrived.

"Look how pretty you are." Jessie closed the bedroom door so Molly could see herself in the full-length mirror.

Molly turned around, craning her head over her shoulders to watch herself move. The child could spend hours playing in front of that mirror. She made faces and she danced and she played with her dolls, having them look at themselves. She made up stories and pretended to read out loud to her stuffed animals. All in front of the mirror. It was really kind of cute.

"You're wet." Molly pointed at Jessie's stomach.

"Yes, I am. But I can fix that." Jessie stripped off her red blouse and before Molly could say anything else, which often happened when the girl saw Jessie's body, tossed the sweater over her head and pulled it down. Molly was fascinated right now with her

mother's body, questioning every wrinkle, stretch mark, scar, mark, bulge, and flaw. She wanted to compare herself to Jessie and as patient as Jessie was with all of the questions, this afternoon wasn't the time.

The doorbell to their apartment rang and Molly tore out of the room. Jessie thought about the pretty black patent leather shoes lying in the bathroom and shrugged. It was too late now. She closed the door to Molly's bedroom, walked past the door to her room, and closed it as well.

When she got to the living room, Marie and Bill were standing inside the door, each of them holding a package.

"You've done a lovely job decorating for today," Marie said. "This is so festive."

Bill handed the package he was holding to Marie and pulled Molly up into his arms. She settled there, turning to look around.

"I'm loved," Molly said.

He chuckled. "Yes you are, little one. You're loved very much. Is that what this all means?"

Molly had been born on Valentine's day four years ago. Rather than fight the holiday, Jessie appropriated it for her daughter, filling the apartment with red and pink hearts, colorful Valentine's streamers, and signs of love that covered every horizontal surface. She'd ordered a heart-shaped cake from Sweet Beans and made up pitchers of pink lemonade. The birthday party was as sugary sweet as you might expect and Jessie loved every bit of it.

Her life had changed in one heartbeat that evening. This little girl's birth had transformed how she felt love. Everything she'd thought she'd known up until they laid Molly in her arms was tossed aside and a deep sense of belonging to something bigger than herself overwhelmed Jessie. Molly connected her to the future. They would be mother and daughter for as long as they lived. That kind of love was what made this world turn and Jessie was grabbing it with everything she had. She would not lose Molly like she'd lost her own mother.

Molly's birthday party was as much a celebration of Jessie's new life as it was Molly's.

The doorbell rang again and Marie stepped back. Jessie nodded and Marie opened the door to Polly and Henry. They hadn't brought any of their children today, something that Jessie was grateful for. Her little apartment wasn't made for that many people. Len and Andy Specek were right behind them.

Andy put her arms out and Molly dove for the woman, surprising both Bill and Andy.

"Happy Birthday, Molly," Andy said. She wrinkled her forehead and rubbed at Molly's ear. "Are you bleeding?"

Jessie laughed. "I guess I didn't clean all the lipstick off."

Marie raised her eyebrows. "Lipstick?"

"I was pretty," Molly declared. "Mommy made me take a bath."

"Mommy's a smart woman," Marie said. "You don't need makeup to be pretty."

Doug Shaffer, the other man who worked at the shop with Len Specek and Bill Sturtz arrived with his wife, Julie, before the door was closed. "Are we here in time?"

Jessie smiled. "Thank you for coming. Everyone, come on in. I don't have a lot of room, but I'm glad you're here."

"We wouldn't miss wishing little Miss Molly a happy birthday," Len said.

As her friends moved around the room, talking with each other and laughing with Molly, Jessie leaned against the doorframe. This was the happiest birthday yet.

## **Vignette #3**

### **Electric Angst**

Doug stood and put his hand out with a grin when Billy came up to the table. They were meeting at the Alehouse for dinner tonight.

"Hey, bud, how are you?" Billy asked, shaking his friend's hand.

"Okay. It's good to see you."

As soon as they sat down, a waitress stood over them. "Hi, guys," she said. "Your usual?"

Doug grinned at Emmy Mathers. "Have we ever ordered anything different?"

She glanced at Billy. "You're sure?"

He nodded and she left.

"It's like they know us or something," Doug said.

For the last six months, the two rarely worked at the same locations, so they'd taken to meeting here on Fridays. Rachel, Billy's wife, was always busy in the kitchen at Sycamore House, and Anita, Doug's girlfriend, was fine with whatever he wanted to do. She was so easygoing about things.

"I'm going to school," Billy blurted out.

"What?"

"I'm going to finish this whole thing. Get my certificate, get it all. Get out on my own. I can make more money that way. I talked to Jerry and he said I should go for it."

Doug sat back. The two of them worked for Jerry Allen, a local electrical contractor. He'd taught them and they had worked hard for him.

A year ago, the two would have discussed this type of decision for weeks before Billy followed through, and Doug would probably have ended up following his friend to get the same degree. It was just what they did. But things had changed.

He opened his mouth and then closed it as Emmy returned to the table with two ice cold glasses of beer.

"Anything before I come back with your rings?" she asked.

He shook his head, still dazed at Billy's announcement. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Billy let out a big sigh. "I'm telling you now. You don't want to do the same thing, Doug. You know that."

"What do you mean?"

"You're going to be with Anita and you two will do different things than me and Rachel. You were never going to be in this job for the rest of your life."

Doug wasn't so sure about that. He'd never given it much thought, though. He was just doing what he did. "What else do you think I'll be doing?"

"Anything, dude." Billy grinned. Rachel had tried to cure him of using that word since the day they became a couple. It drove her crazy. She told both of them that it made them sound like little kids. "You can do anything. You're smart enough. You just never believed in yourself."

"You're telling me that you aren't smart enough to do anything else?" Doug asked in challenge.

Billy leaned forward. "No, Doug. I'm telling you I like this work and I'm smart enough to go after the big bucks. I want to be my own man. I want to be the one Henry Sturtz contacts when he needs a bid on electrical for one of his buildings. And by the way, the right response to me telling you my plan should be 'congratulations, I'm proud of you.'"

"Congratulations, I'm proud of you," Doug responded automatically. Then he thought about it. "No, really. I'm proud of you. That's cool if it's what you want to do."

"It is. We okay?"

"Yeah. Why wouldn't we be okay?"

"It's just that we always do stuff together."

"You married Rachel without me," Doug said, smiling at his friend. "Then you moved out into your own apartment. Talk about leaving a guy behind."

"Never thought I had it in me, did you?"

Doug frowned at that as he thought. The thing was, he always

considered himself the leader of this team and Billy was the follower. Or was he? Nowadays, Billy did things because he wanted to. He didn't wait for Doug to do them first.

In fact, what had he done lately? Anita wanted him to ask her to marry him. She even hinted that she'd buy the rings and propose if he didn't figure it out. There had been some big fight with her mother after Christmas last year and Doug had steered way clear of that. If he'd asked questions, he would have had to get involved and that was a lot of work. It was easier not knowing.

"Your face is kinda mad-looking," Billy said. "What?"

"I don't know," Doug replied with a quick shake of his head. "Just thinking about things."

"What kind of things?"

Doug shrugged. "Just things. This is good for you. Are you and Rachel talking about having rugrats soon or something? Is that what's going on?"

"Not soon. We kinda want to be in a house before we do that."

"You're going to buy a house? Dude, that'll make you part of the establishment."

It was Billy's turn to frown. "The establishment?"

"Yeah, sorry. I've been watching old movies with Anita. But seriously, that's some grown-up stuff. Out on your own, babies, house. I don't even know."

"It had to happen someday. I don't want to wait forever. We could probably afford a little house right now with what Rachel and I are making, but if we wait one more year, we'll be in really good shape."

Doug didn't even know how much money he had in his bank account and Billy was doing financial planning for a house? Who was this guy?

"You're going to be old before your time," he said.

Billy smiled at him. "And you're going to be a kid forever. Somebody has to be prepared to take care of you. If you never get married and end up turning into an old bachelor, Rachel says we'll buy a big house and put an apartment in the basement for you. That way she can make sure you eat well and take care of yourself."

Doug frowned at his friend. "You're kidding. You have not talked about me that way."

"Yeah. We have," Billy replied. "She's more worried about you than I am. Especially since Anita is practically throwing herself at you and you keep diving out of the way. That girl isn't going to wait for you forever. Someday she'll realize that you'll never change and move on."

"So what if she does?" Doug asked. Now he was annoyed. He hated being backed into a wall. Anita had never said anything, even though he knew she was disappointed that he wasn't ready to commit to marriage.

"You're kind of an idiot," Billy said low enough so Emmy wouldn't hear him as she approached their table with a basket of onion rings.

"Burgers are on the grill, guys," she said. "I'll bring them over in a few. Do you need anything else?"

Doug didn't even look up. His mind reeled with feelings of inadequacy. He heard Billy say something to her as he closed his eyes while taking a drink.

"Hey," Billy said. "I was supposed to come in and give you my good news and we'd maybe celebrate. What's going on?"

"I'm a loser." Doug pulled a hunk of hot onions onto his plate and reached for the ketchup. Anita liked ranch dressing with hers. He was all about the ketchup. Dang, he thought about her all the time. She was everywhere in his life.

"I've always said that about you."

"What?"

"That you're a loser. You know I don't believe it, right? You just need to figure out what you want to do."

"I don't know what I want to do. I thought we'd be working together forever. Heck, I figured we'd live together forever. You already screwed that up." Doug shot his friend a forced smile.

"Do you really want to be running wire for the rest of your life?" Billy asked. "Do you want to be working for someone like me forever? And live by yourself? Scratching and sniffing in your old recliner because you can't bring yourself to buy new stuff?"



"I bought everything in that apartment," Doug protested.

"Four years ago. You haven't updated your computer or your television. Nothing. You just keep holding on to the same things. You haven't done anything with my old bedroom. The room is empty, like it was the day I moved out." Billy pushed the basket across the table to Doug. "What happened tonight, anyway? I didn't want to come in here and get down on you. Stop making me."

"I'm not making you do anything."

"You called yourself a loser."

"You weren't supposed to agree."

"I don't agree. You just need to think about moving on."

Doug stabbed at the onions in the basket again. Probably with more force than necessary, but he was frustrated. "I never thought about it. But thirty is only a few years away, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Rachel and I want to have a baby before we turn thirty." Billy grinned. "Maybe twins or something."

"Twins don't show up because you want them. How are you planning to do that?"

"Hope," Billy said. "Wouldn't it be great if you and Anita had babies, too? Then our kids could be buddies."

Doug shot him a panicked look. "Let's not be hasty. What do you think I should do?"

"That's up to you, moron," Billy said. "What do you want to do?"

Doug looked around the bar. "It would be fun to own a place like this."

"You want to run a bar? What do you know about running a business?"

"What did I know about being an electrician until I started? Just think. You could come in after work and get a free beer whenever you wanted. What if I put a bunch of video games in and had tournaments and stuff. Like we used to do at Sycamore House."

"Some of us work during the day and have families at night. When are we going to make extra time for gaming? If I'm lucky I can talk Rachel into playing with me sometimes. When we have kids, it wouldn't be fair for me to leave the house to come play at your bar every night. Those kids will be mine, too, you know."

"So you come out one evening and Rachel comes to play another evening," Doug said, his eyes lighting up. "You know how Sweet Beans has that old-style wood floor and brick wall thing going on? What if I put it into one of the old empty buildings downtown. We could put up a ton of neon signs. It would be so way cool."

"Like that old song," Billy said. "Electric Avenue or something. Mom loved that song. She played it all the time when she was dancing around the house cleaning."

"Your mom?" Doug asked, surprised.

"Yeah. She used to be cool," Billy said and gestured around the room. "Do you really want to run a bar?"

"I don't know." Doug sat back after having moved forward in his excitement. "I probably can't. It's a stupid idea."

"There has to be something in there that you can make work. Would your parents help you?"

"I don't know. It's my life. They shouldn't have to be responsible for me anymore. They're kinda enjoying their retirement. And if it fails, I don't want them to have spent their money on me."

"What about Anita? She's loaded."

"Yeah, that's what I want to do." Doug huffed a laugh. "Hey Anita, wanna get married? I need big bucks to open some stupid gaming bar downtown. If I fail, sorry about that."

"You need to talk to someone like Polly and Henry," Billy said. "They're doing a lot of investing in Bellingwood."

"I'm not borrowing money from them," Doug protested.

"No, just talk to them. Get their input. See if they think your idea would work. They know what the buildings downtown are going for. Those two have a ton of information on what's going on in Bellingwood. If you don't talk to them, you'd be an idiot."

"Second time you've called me that tonight," Doug said, holding up his first two fingers. "Stop it."

Emmy arrived with their plates. "Did you need something?" she asked.

"Yeah, like fifty thousand dollars," Doug said. He brought his fingers back down, realizing she thought he was waving at her.

"I have that in my locker in back," she said. "What are you going

to do with it?"

"I don't know yet," he said. "I could come up with something cool, though."

"I'll bet you could. You were always really adventurous," she said. "I'll check on you after a while."

After she left, Doug peered at Billy. "She thinks I'm adventurous?"

"You always were."

"Man, I really lost that."

"Maybe it's time to find it again."

## **Vignette #4**

### **Handyman**

"Move the left side down a smidge."

Andrew did as asked and waited while Eliseo laid the level across the top of the board.

"Perfect." With the power screwdriver, Eliseo sent two screws through to the stud and moved to the other side of Andrew to send two more through. He handed the screwdriver to Andrew and a handful of screws. "You get the rest and I'll mark the next."

Andrew stifled a sigh. Eliseo wanted him to be part of this even though he knew how un-handy Andrew was. Every time they did some sort of project around the house together, Andrew managed to hurt himself. At least they hadn't needed to go to the hospital yet. There had been bandages and ice packs, but no gaping wounds to speak of. The worst thing was that whenever his mom heard about an injury she looked like she was proud of him.

He put the screw on the end of the driver, pressed it into place, and pulled the trigger. Sure enough, it spun up and out, landing on the floor. Andrew looked at Eliseo sheepishly, waiting for him to say something, but there was nothing. And there wouldn't be. The man was a saint. He put up with Andrew's ineptitude and never got frustrated. At least not out loud.

"Sorry," Andrew muttered.

"You're doing fine. Be sure to hold it in place."

They were installing shelves in Sylvie's bedroom closet today. On a Saturday. When Andrew could have been doing nearly anything else. But no, he was being a handyman. He couldn't say no to Eliseo, though. Good thing the man didn't use that against him or else he'd be spending his free time at the barn scooping horse poop every day. How Jason considered that to be a good use of his time, Andrew would never understand. He'd done it a couple of times and unless there was some apocalyptic emergency he was never doing it again. Someone needed to invent a better way to

manage that stuff. There were toilets for humans, why couldn't there be flushable stalls for horses. And dogs. If he'd known how much poop Padme could leave in the back yard, he would have worked harder to train her to use the toilet.

What a load of ... Andrew giggled to himself. Poop. That's what he was thinking. Yep, sure. When the snow finally melted in their back yard, it was his job to clean up. Worst day ever. He was going to have a house out in the country where his dogs could run wherever they wanted and he wouldn't have to clean up after them. That was gross. At least Eliseo's dogs didn't spend much time in the yard. They were mostly out at Elva's house or down at the barn.

"What's so funny?" Eliseo asked, standing up to stretch.

"Nothing. Just thinking about dog poop," Andrew replied.

"It has nothing on horse poop."

"I know that." Andrew laughed again. "I don't see why you guys like cleaning up after them."

Eliseo put his hand out for the driver and anchored the next board to the wall. "Would you hand me the level?"

Andrew picked it up from the floor and handed it over.

"It's not that I like cleaning up, it's that they deserve a clean space and since I love them, I'll do whatever it takes to make them happy. Maybe think about it like changing a baby's diaper. The baby can't take care of itself, so we help because we love them."

Andrew dropped his head to his chest with a dramatic sigh. "I'm going to have to change diapers someday, aren't I."

"If you plan to have children, you will," Eliseo said, his eyes twinkling.

"You managed to get out of diaper-duty and you have lots of kids."

Eliseo laughed out loud. "Good clean living on my part. Maybe God knew that I would scoop enough horse crap to make up for all of you as babies."

"Well, I have a good start with Padme."

Eliseo just chuckled as he set the level on top of the board. He nudged the end up and drove a screw into the wall. "Your mother is going to like this."

"You're always doing nice things for her." Andrew held out his handful of screws. Eliseo had done most of the work in here. Andrew had helped empty his mom's closet this morning, but he was pretty much useless in this small space with any kind of tool.

"I like being able to help," Eliseo said. "She deserves nice things. Okay, that's the last one. Do you want to start bringing the shelves in to me? Long ones first."

Eliseo had painted all the shelves before he brought them to the house. He wanted this to be a surprise for Sylvie. There wasn't any special occasion, he just wanted to do it. He'd texted Andrew last night to tell him that they were working on the project today and to be up and ready by eight-thirty when he'd be home from the barn.

Andrew thought it was funny that he'd gotten a text when they lived in the same house, but he guessed it was the easiest way to keep the secret. He wasn't quite so sure that Sylvie would appreciate having the two of them go through her closet. Not that there was anything weird in there, but she was really private about her stuff. The boys never went into her room when they were growing up. If they did, bad things happened. She kept her bedroom door shut all the time.

He and Jason had snuck in one night when she was working, both of them curious as to what it was that she might be hiding from her sons. There was nothing interesting at all. The older he got, the more he realized that it was important for her to have a safe place where no one could intrude. He couldn't believe it when Eliseo moved in and suddenly her bedroom became their bedroom. Everything from new paint and new bedding to different dressers and a couple of nice chairs. His mom had really changed this last year. She was so much happier.

He still wasn't sure what she'd say when she realized he'd been hauling her clothes and shoes and boxes of other stuff in and out of the closet. The last time he'd been near this stuff was carrying boxes into the house when they moved from the apartment. Even then, he'd carefully brought boxes labeled 'Sylvie' up to her room and left them. At least she kept her underwear in a dresser. He did not need

to be pawing through those things today. There were just some things you never wanted to know about your mom.

One by one, Andrew handed in the long shelves and then stood waiting as Eliseo laid them across the back wall of the closet. He held onto a stack of short shelves that would line the side walls. This really was going to be nice.

Eliseo turned and nodded. "All ready for me? You take that side and I'll do these. Then I have baskets in the truck that we need to bring up."

"Baskets?" Andrew asked. "For what?"

"For these short shelves. Sylvie can arrange them however she likes, but they'll clean up the smaller items."

"You thought of everything."

"It's a start. If she wants me to do something different, she'll tell me."

"No she won't," Andrew said. "She put up with the old closet; she'll be thrilled with this." When he finished setting the last shelf into place, he stepped out. "You're good at this."

"The baskets are in the bed of my truck. Why don't you go get them while I put the rods in."

Eliseo had installed holders at two different heights for Sylvie's clothes. She wasn't going to believe this.

As Andrew left the room, Padme caught up with him, having watched them work from one of the chairs. "I didn't even hurt myself today," he said to her. "Not that I did much that I could hurt myself, but still, it's kind of a big deal."

She wagged her tail and raced him down the steps.

The baskets Eliseo had purchased for the closet were really cool. They were made out of fabric and he'd gotten a set of brown and a set of blue, the same colors as their bedroom. His mom was going to love these.

When he got back upstairs with them, Eliseo was already hanging clothes on the rods. His mom's shoes were neatly organized on two of the lower shelves and some of her boxes were in place on the top shelf.

"These are great," Andrew said. "You're going to make her

happy. She'll never believe this."

"Did you see how easy it was?"

Andrew laughed out loud. "For you, maybe. Did *you* see how much trouble I had putting screws in?"

"You just need to practice. The more you do something, the easier it gets." Eliseo took the load of baskets and lifted one out of the other, spreading them out on the bed.

"Do you think if you'd been my dad from the beginning I would have learned how to do these things?" Andrew asked, sitting beside one of the baskets. He picked up a stack of his mother's summer shorts and set it down inside.

"That's neither here nor there," Eliseo replied. "Your mom taught you boys so much. Things like this you pick up along the way."

"Dad doesn't ever do this stuff either. It's not like we were going to learn it from him." Andrew huffed a laugh. "Probably a good thing we lived in that apartment for so long. At least Mr. Emerson fixed the plumbing. Can't you see me trying to change out a faucet? Water everywhere."

"Do you want to know how to do that? Next week we should replace the sink in your bathroom."

Andrew looked at him in shock. "Are you kidding?"

"Not really."

"Do you really think that I will ever do any of these things by myself?"

Eliseo put his hand on Andrew's back. "All you have to do is try."

"Polly says there is no try," Andrew retorted.

With an unexpected guffaw, Eliseo grabbed up two of the baskets. "Then we'll have to make sure you do it. Girls like it when you know how to fix things."

Andrew stopped in his tracks. He'd never thought about that. Rebecca lived with Henry and Heath and Hayden. Those three could fix or make anything. She'd never said anything to him about whether or not he was handy. It hadn't ever come up. Whenever she talked about the work they did, though, it sounded like she was proud of them. Just the other night she went on and on about Henry



building the new bed and breakfast.

"Rebecca knows I can't fix things," Andrew said quietly. He wasn't sure if Eliseo heard him or not. Probably better that he didn't.

But Eliseo turned and took another two baskets from Andrew's arms. "Think about the surprise your mom will have when she comes home to this tonight. Isn't it better to surprise them with what you can do than what you can't?"

"We have two years, Eliseo," Andrew said. "Can you teach me everything before I graduate from high school?"

"Do or do not," Eliseo replied. "There is no try."

Andrew laughed. "So that's a yes?"

"We'll start on the bathroom sink next weekend."

This was going to be an interesting couple of years.

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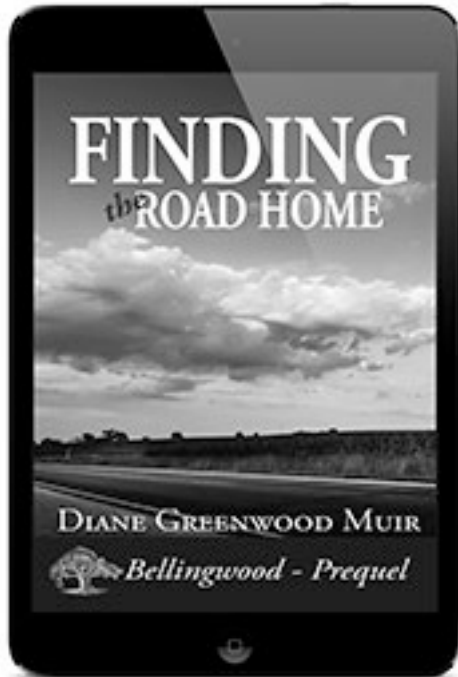
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for news about upcoming books, conversations while I'm writing and you're reading, and a continued look at life in a small town.

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