



*In All Things*  
**GIVE THANKS**

*Vignettes*

**DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR**



*Bellingwood - Book 24*





Book Twenty-Four  
Vignettes

DIANE GREENWOOD MUIR

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## 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 24 — In All Things, Give Thanks — 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

### Tea Time

Simon Gardner gave a small shiver when the front door of his antique shop opened. He really needed to bring that space heater out from the back.

"Good afternoon," he said with a smile to the two women who walked in. "May I help you find something or are you only browsing today?"

"Just browsing," the younger woman said. She returned his smile. "Actually, we got a little chilled out there and Mother ..."

Before she could continue, the young woman's mother put her hand up. "I'm fine," she said with only a smidgen of the heat that fired from her eyes. "Don't treat me like I'm a fragile piece of antique pottery." She shook her head while putting her hand out for Simon. "My name is Elaine Borden and this extremely helpful child of mine is Lillybeth Anderson. She and her husband plan to move to Bellingwood. I think it's a very nice town."

He took her hand and shook it. "It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Borden. I'm Simon Gardner."

"Isn't this wonderful?" Mrs. Borden said to her daughter. "I could get lost in here for hours." She removed a glove and ran the tips of her well-manicured fingers over a china teapot. How she'd managed to choose that single exquisite piece out of the large collection of items surrounding it, Simon wasn't sure, but she'd ignored everything else.

Her daughter looked around, taking in the shop, and nodded in agreement. "It's very nice. It's also warm."

Mrs. Borden gave her head a small shake and then grinned at Simon. "All I did was mention that it was chilly outside. The next thing I know, she pushed me in here and told me it was so I could warm up. Goodness gracious."

"I meant that it was warm and inviting," Lillybeth replied. She put a hand on her mother's arm. "Do you want to look around?"

"Yes. Yes, I do, but I know you have things you want to do before we return to Ames. If you leave me here with Mr. Gardner, I'm certain he'll take good care of me. Go on, now. Finish your errands and when you return, I'll be warm and safe. I might even uncover a treasure or two."

The younger woman looked at Simon. "Are you sure?"

"Oh my goodness, Lilly," Mrs. Borden said. "I am not a child. I changed your diapers and held you when you cried over a lost love. What ever made you think that you need to behave like this?"

Her daughter shook her head. "I'll be back in a while. You have my number."

"Yes I do and I've been known to call it several times a day just to catch up with you. If I have a problem, I suspect you'll be the first to know."

Before she had to take any more scolding from her mother, Lillybeth scooted out the door and was gone.

Elaine Borden laughed and laughed before giving Simon a chagrined smile. "I apologize for that. She has become unbearable since I had my heart attack. But it's been more than a year and the doctor tells me that I'm healthier now than I was before it happened. It changed my life, but she's not ready to let me live again."

"I understand," he said with a gentle smile.

"Do you have children?"

He grinned. "I do not, but Paul Bradford, who owns the hardware store next door, and his wife seem to think that I'm going to toddle off into a nursing home without their ever-present assistance."

"I keep telling her that if she doesn't straighten up, I'm going to go live with her sister in Southeast Iowa. None of us want that to happen. Lilly's younger sister has five children who live at home. As much as I love and adore those kids, the last thing I want to do is live in the same house with them."

"Does your daughter have a family?"

"Not yet. Maybe not ever. She and Rich weren't able to conceive and it's been one thing after another for them. I do understand that's

why she is so concerned about me. Who else does she have to worry about?"

"Would you join me for a cup of tea?" Simon asked, pulling a chair with a beautifully embroidered seat cushion around beside where he sat at the counter.

"That would be lovely," Mrs. Borden replied. "May I help?"

"Not at all. The water is on in the back. All I have to do is pour it. Please, have a seat. I'll be right back."

As she came around behind the counter, he stopped to help her with her coat. "You'll want to keep that close," he said. "Whenever the door opens, a brisk breeze comes in. I haven't brought up my space heater yet."

She sat and he draped the coat over her shoulders, then went to his back room where he had an old coffee pot that brewed nothing but hot water for his tea during the day. He should have brought back that beautiful tea pot, but he had another one here, though it wasn't quite as lovely. He opened the refrigerator, hoping that there might still be a few cookies left from his purchase the other day at Sweet Beans. Sure enough, there were enough there to fill a small plate.

When he returned with the tray, he set it on a short dresser beside her. "I'm sorry that all I have is tea bags. It's just me these days and I find convenience to be ... well ..."

She smiled up at him. "Convenient?"

"That's the word," he replied with a laugh.

She chose a tea bag and set it into a cup, then waited as he filled it with water.

"The cookies are made by my friend, Sylvie Donovan, over at Sweet Beans. She's a talented baker."

"I tried to talk Lilly into stopping there, but she said we didn't have time on this trip. We'll be back often enough, though."

"Have they found a house in town?"

"No, they're planning to build. She's found a location. It's near this great big home on the east side of town. Does someone really live in that place?"

Simon knitted his brows as he considered where she might be

talking about. He pointed. "Near the cemetery?"

"Yes, that's it. It looks lived in, but my goodness, it is immense."

"That's the Bell House. It was originally an old hotel. It became a tuberculosis sanatorium, and then a wealthy family purchased it. There are tales of hauntings, but none are true. Polly Giller and her husband, Henry Sturtz, purchased the house and I believe they are still in the process of renovating it. They own the Sycamore Inn and the old school building - Sycamore House. They are preparing for the Grand Opening of a bed and breakfast just north of town."

"My goodness. They must be quite the business people."

"They are good people," Simon said. "When Polly moved to town, she re-energized a lot of us. She'll never admit it, but she's done good things for Bellingwood. Where is your daughter planning to build?"

"There's an empty lot just around the corner from ... the Bell House, did you say?"

He nodded.

"She wants to buy the empty lot and one next to it. They'll demolish the old house and build a brand new home there. She and her husband have dreamed of having a big yard, even if they don't have children. The neighborhood is rather dumpy, but it looks as if it is trying to recover."

Simon thought about it from an outsider's viewpoint. He'd lived in town so long that he'd watched many homes deteriorate, much as he had, he supposed. It was all part of the aging process unless someone came in and gave those old buildings a facelift. The neighborhood around the Bell House had been hard hit over the years. Polly and Henry's presence had encouraged some families to clean up, but not nearly enough.

"You're right," he said. "There are homes in that neighborhood that need help, but people are trying."

"Oh, I wouldn't dare make any judgment. My Arnie and I lived in an old home for many years. We did our best, but sometimes it just got out there ahead of us. We were much too busy to spend time worrying about it. Then, when he retired and we had time to do some of the work, he suddenly passed away." She shook her

head slowly, remembering. "Lilly scooped me up, insisting that I come live with them. I was so broken-hearted that I just let her do that to me. Before I realized that I was ready to have my independence back, I was already enmeshed in their lives. But that's not a story you want to hear. How long have you been here?"

The front door opened again and Elaine's daughter blew in. "The wind is getting colder out there." She looked around and her eyes landed on them. "Oh. I was going to ask if you wanted to go to the coffee shop with me. I'm meeting with someone to interview them about building our house."

"Henry Sturtz?" Simon asked.

"Yes. That's him. Do you know him?"

Simon smiled. "I do. He's a good friend and I highly recommend him as a contractor. In fact, your mother says that you might be building down by the old Bell House. He and his wife own that place. They live there with their family."

"It must be a big family," Lillybeth said. "Do you want to come with me, Mother?"

"You go ahead," Mrs. Borden replied, eliciting a surprised look from her daughter. "I'm having a splendid time with Mr. Gardner. Come back for me when you're ready to go."

"You're sure?"

"When have you known me to be indecisive? Scratch that. I apologize. Yes, I'm quite certain. I'd like the opportunity to get to know Mr. Gardner better, especially if I'm moving to Bellingwood in the future. I might as well start out by having friends in town."

Her daughter nodded uncertainly and left again.

"I'm a terrible person," Mrs. Borden said. "I do so enjoy making her squirm. I hope you don't mind my company."

"I am enjoying it very much," Simon said. He lifted the teapot. "Would you like some more?"

## Vignette #2

### Giving Thanks

"I can smell it out here," Sky said, standing in the doorway between the lobby and the manager's apartment at Sycamore Inn. "You're going to kill me. How much longer?"

Stephanie Armstrong turned off the mixer and brushed her hands down her apron. "The turkey still has another hour and a half. I'm just getting started."

"I was afraid of that. Do you have anything I can snack on?"

Kayla held out the bowl of green beans and mushroom soup. "Do you want some of this before I put it in the casserole dish?"

"Uncooked?" he asked.

She nodded and smiled.

"I can wait."

Stephanie opened a cupboard and took down a can of mixed nuts. "Here, take these out with you. Will that help?"

"I was kinda hoping for cookies or pie or something like that."

"We have cookies," Kayla said, her eyes lighting up. "Polly gave us a big batch of chocolate chip. They're in the freezer. Is that okay, Stephanie?"

"He's an adult," Stephanie said with a chuckle. "He's a skinny adult. He can eat as many cookies as he wants. Would you like another cup of coffee, Sky?"

"Yeah? Coffee and cookies? I'm set." As he started toward the coffee pot, they heard the ding of the bell at the front counter.

"Be right back."

He walked out and smiled at three young people standing before him. "Happy Thanksgiving. How can I help you?"

"Do you have a room available?"

"Sure. Are you in town for long?"

The young woman who had asked the question stepped up to the counter. "Just tonight."

"One room or more?" he asked.

She turned back to her friends. They shrugged.

"Do you have one with two beds in it? We can make that work."

Skylar nodded. "No problem. What brings you to Bellingwood?"

The young woman took in a deep breath of relief. "Thank you. We got on the road at three o'clock this morning. I'm so tired I could cry."

The other young woman put her hand on the first girl's back. "Nina's great-grandmother died. We just piled in the car and started driving."

"I'm so sorry. Your family is from Bellingwood?" Skylar asked.

"No. Just Great-Grandma. Everyone else is spread out across the country and since I didn't have Thanksgiving plans, I offered to come get her remains. We'll bury her in Kentucky. Don't know why I had to get here so soon, it just seemed like the right thing to do."

"You drove in from Kentucky? Straight through?"

Julia smiled at her friends. "We switched off, but yeah. It's been a long drive. I don't suppose there's any place open in town where we can get some food. We're starving."

"No, only the convenience stores." Skylar put his finger up. "Just a second. Don't go anywhere." He ducked back into the apartment and closed the door.

"Guests for the weekend?" Stephanie asked as she peered at a recipe on her tablet.

"Yeah. Three kids in town to pick up a great-grandmother's remains. They have nowhere to eat and it's Thanksgiving."

That got her attention. Kayla put her dish down on the counter and stopped to look at him as well.

"Don't worry. I haven't done anything stupid like invite them without asking," he said, his hands up. "But what do you think? Do we have enough food to share?"

"How many?" Kayla asked.

"Three. I can send them to Boone. Surely something is open down there today."

"Their great-grandmother died and they traveled in to town on Thanksgiving? Is there a funeral in the morning or something?"

He shook his head. "Kids trying to do the right thing by their

family. I don't even think they're related to each other. Just friends with the girl who had to make the trip. I remember doing crazy things like that when I was their age."

Stephanie looked at Kayla. "We didn't do crazy things, we just ran away to Bellingwood."

"What should I do?" he asked.

She opened the oven and looked at him with a grin. "I thought it would be fun to have tons of leftovers this year, so I bought a huge turkey. We can make more green bean casserole and I can find more food to serve. Invite them. We'll make room." Her eyes teared up. "I can't believe that this year we get to be the ones offering our home to strangers. I never thought I'd get that chance. You okay with it, Kayla?"

"Yeah," Kayla said. "It sounds great. Go ahead, Sky."

He walked over and gave Stephanie a quick kiss, then patted Kayla's shoulder. "Thanks, guys. I'll tell them about an hour?"

"That's great."

Skylar went back out into the lobby. The three young people were looking at the books in one of the bookcases along the outside wall. "Nina?"

She spun and walked back to the counter. "Is there a problem?"

"No problem. I was just making sure we had enough food to invite you to dinner. We do. It will be ready in an hour. Would you join us?"

"No way," the young man said, coming up behind her. "You'd do that?"

"Why not? You shouldn't be searching for dinner on Thanksgiving day."

"I'm Pete, by the way, and that's Angie. Can't believe you have all these cool books here. I know where we'll be this evening."

Angie walked over, carrying a book. "Sitting in front of the fireplace. This is cool. Are you guys busy this weekend?"

"Busy enough," Skylar said. He gave them a key to one of the rooms along the front. "See you in an hour."

As the three young people left, an older couple walked in. They all held doors for each other, the three young people smiling and



shaking hands as they made their way past, much happier than when they'd come in.

"Welcome to Bellingwood," Skylar said. "Do you have a reservation?"

"No," the gentleman replied. "Do you have any rooms available?"

The woman with him looked up from the purse she'd been looking through. "Please? We've had a long morning."

"Of course we do," Skylar replied. "One bed or two?"

"One would be fine." She smiled at the older man. "Do you have a king-size bed? We've never slept on one of those."

Skylar chuckled. "We certainly do. They are big beds."

"I've told Jimmy over the years that we should treat ourselves, but he likes sleeping close to me, so all we've ever had is a full-size bed. This will be fun, but I'll bet he still sleeps on my side."

Sky couldn't contain his laughter. "That's wonderful. What brings you to Bellingwood?"

"Our daughter," she replied, the smile on her face fading away. "Thanksgiving just fell apart. She and her husband are in a real mess right now. I suppose I should have seen it coming. She's been sad for a long time. We needed to get out of there and give them some space." She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I told you that. It's nothing for you to worry about."

"You haven't had dinner?"

The woman shrugged. "We'll make do. I have what I brought in a cooler. We hadn't even carried it into the house. I told her to call us if things settle down, but I don't know how long that will take."

His hands were poised over the computer keyboard.

"Jim and Myrna Albaugh," her husband said, handing a credit card to Skylar.

He took a chance. In for a penny, in for a pound. "Would you like to join us for Thanksgiving dinner?" he asked, gesturing to the apartment behind him. "The young people you met on your way in are coming up in an hour. We have plenty of turkey."

"We don't want to bother you," Myrna said.

"It's really no bother." Skylar bit his lower lip at the thought that

he hadn't gotten this one approved by Kayla and Stephanie. They'd been so gracious about the other three, surely two more wouldn't matter.

"We could bring in our part of the meal," her husband said. "My wife makes the best homemade rolls and she brought a pecan pie and cranberry salad. Would that be okay, Myrna?"

She smiled at him. "That would be lovely. We also have candy corn and nuts."

"In forty-five minutes or so, then," Skylar said. He handed the credit card and a key back to Jimmy. "You're just down in Room Three. Right out front, there."

"Thank you so much," Myrna said. Her husband nodded his gratitude as they walked to the front door.

Before Skylar could turn back to the apartment, the front door opened again and a young woman walked in with a little boy.

"Welcome to Sycamore Inn," Skylar said. "Do you have a reservation?"

She smiled weakly. "No. Please tell me you have a room."

"Of course I do."

"Just one bed. Carter can sleep with me. Is there any place in town where we can get something to eat today?"

He shook his head. "No, I'm sorry. Everything is closed."

She handed him her credit card. Danielle Mixan. He swiped it and smiled at her. "Would you consider joining us for Thanksgiving dinner? We're kinda doing potluck."

Danielle blinked in surprise. "What? No. We can drive down to Boone. Don't you think there'd be something open there?"

"Maybe. Or you could join us. The couple you just saw leaving will be here and three other young people who don't have a place to eat will also be coming."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am. About forty minutes or so."

"Thank you so much. We've been on the road for the last couple of days trying to get here. I thought we'd arrive tomorrow, but here we are and nothing is ready for us."

"What brings you to Bellingwood?"

"We're moving to town. My husband has everything to get us into the apartment and he won't be here until tomorrow."

"Wow."

"Yeah," she said with a laugh. "Bad planning on my part. I just didn't think the trip would go as well as it has. We spent time with my parents in Fort Worth and started driving north. I thought Carter and I would spend more time seeing the sights, but we kept pushing through and here we are." Her eyes brightened. "Mom sent me with a bunch of food. It's all in a cooler. She cooked and sliced a ham for us. I have egg-nog, too. We were going to have it tomorrow. Can I bring something?"

"Bring whatever you like," Skylar said. He handed back her credit card and a key. "You're just down the way in Room Four. We'll see you in a while."

"Thank you. This just makes my day. Come on, honey. Let's unpack for the night."

Skylar took a breath, praying no one else would walk in the front door. Then he turned around, put his hand on the door handle to the apartment and opened it.

"We're getting there," Kayla said. "I just need to set the table."

"Uh ..." Skylar stood in the doorway. "Uh ..."

"What?" Stephanie asked with a laugh. "Spit it out."

"Four more people?"

She dropped the spatula into the pan of gravy on the stove. "What?"

"Four more people. Please, don't kill me. They have nowhere to go."

"Where are we going to put four more? I have plenty of food, but four? You've invited seven strangers to a dinner for three?"

"Yeah? Am I dead?"

She laughed out loud and when she saw Kayla's stricken look, she kept laughing.

"You're not mad?" Kayla asked.

"Because Skylar asked people to join us on Thanksgiving Day? How can I be? He wouldn't have asked them if they didn't need a place to be today. It's Thanksgiving. This is what it's all about. I

don't know if we have enough food, but we'll stretch it as far as we can. If nothing else, we'll eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches." She took a deep breath. "It's going to have to be paper plates. You have all of that in the lobby, right?"

Skylar nodded, grateful that she wasn't yelling at him. "Plastic cutlery, too."

"We'll eat out there. Drag the tables over near the fireplace. Kayla, you help him. Put more coffee on, Sky."

"I think some of them might be bringing food, too. I don't know what they have, though," he said.

"That's great. Potluck Thanksgiving. We can do this." Stephanie limped over to him. Her leg was so much better than it had been earlier this year after a terrible car accident, but she would always have a limp. He kinda loved that about her. "I won't be upset by this because it's the nicest thing that's ever happened to me on Thanksgiving. Don't ever worry about inviting people to eat with us, okay?"

"I can't believe you aren't mad."

She took his hand. "People have taken care of me since the day I moved to Bellingwood. Now it's my turn. I'm so happy."

He blinked back tears. Was this really his life now?

"Don't you dare cry on me," Stephanie said. "We have too much work to do. Go. Set those tables up and then come back so we can figure out what happens next. And you're carving the turkey." She pointed at the oven. "You ready for that?"

"Whatever you want, Steph. Whatever you want."

"I want us to welcome our guests with all the grace that's been given to me and Kayla. I'm thankful for that." She kissed his lips. "I'm thankful that you're so generous. Happy Thanksgiving."

## Vignette #3

### Kindness Acts

"Come on, Cameron," Doug Shaffer said. "Let's go pick up a Christmas tree."

Cameron glanced at his mother. It was something she usually did with his dad. She smiled. "Go on. It's time you learned how to pick out a good one. The rest of us have plenty of Christmas decorating to do today."

"Okay," he said with a shrug.

In the last two years, Cameron had gone from homeless after his house burned down, to living in a tiny apartment with his parents and siblings, to a bigger apartment. Now his parents were talking about building a house. He never thought life would get better after he was forced to move away from his friends, but he still remembered that night in the woods behind the hotel when Henry Sturtz promised him it would. He'd gotten a new dog, he made new friends, and this year there were going to be a lot more presents under the tree. Who knew that moving to Bellingwood would change his life this much?

His dad stood at the front door holding Cameron's coat. "We'll be back later, Julie," he called out.

"Don't hurry. Have fun."

As they went outside to the truck, Doug put his hand on Cameron's back. "We're going to do something a little different today, buddy. Just you and me. I want to make this an annual tradition."

"What's that?"

"Do you ever think about how much you've been given?"

Cameron frowned. "What do you mean?"

"How fortunate you are. Do you ever think about that?"

"I guess. Not a lot, but yeah. We lived through the fire. That was a good thing."

"Not just in the big things, but the small things, too," his dad

said. He pointed. "Belt on."

"I'm confused." Cameron obeyed and pulled the seat belt on.

"It was your mom's idea, but I told her that I wanted to do this with you. While we're out today, we're going to do three random acts of kindness because we've been given so much."

"That sounds kind of cool. How will we figure out what to do?"

Doug smiled as he pulled onto the highway. "We'll know when we see it. Your mom knows we'll be gone for at least two hours, so we have plenty of time. Are you ready for the adventure?"

"This sounds like fun. So, Dad ..."

"Yeah?"

"Did we leave early so we can get lunch?"

Doug laughed. "You are always hungry, Cam. What do you want for lunch?"

"McDonald's?"

"Don't break the bank, bud. Really?"

"Yeah. We never get to go there. Please?"

"Sure."

As they drove through to the south side of Boone, Cameron kept his eyes peeled for something they could do. There wasn't much going on. Maybe everyone was out shopping. It was the day after Thanksgiving. Then he saw it. A young woman was dragging a big box across her front lawn.

"Dad, stop. Can we help her?"

His father pulled over. "Go ask."

"Me?"

Doug smiled. "Yes, you. Go ask if we can help her."

Cameron took a deep breath, opened his door and said, "Ma'am?"

The woman looked up.

"Can we help you? My dad and I are out looking for random acts of kindness to do." Cameron gave a nervous giggle. "That sounded weird, but can we help?"

The young woman looked at him and then peered to see Doug in the driver's seat. "I can do this," she said.

"We'd like to help if you'd let us. No money or anything. Just let

us help."

She let out a strange little sound and nodded.

"Come on, Dad," Cameron said.

Doug turned off the truck, got out, walked around, and with his hand on Cameron's back, they strode over to the box. "What are you working on here?"

The young woman couldn't speak. She just pointed at the box.

Doug unflapped it and smiled at a box filled with inflatable Christmas decorations. "These are great. We'll put them wherever you want us to. We're yours to command."

She shook her head and tears spurted out of her eyes. "I'm sorry," she choked. "This was so unexpected."

"Are you okay, ma'am?" Cameron asked.

"Not really. But thank you. This is so nice. I didn't want to even put these out this year, but I had to. My husband loved Christmas and he loved these silly things."

Cameron heard her use the past tense when she spoke and looked at his dad.

Doug smiled at him. "I'm sorry," he said to the young woman. "How long has he been gone?"

"He died last February. It's been the worst year, but I told myself I was going to be better by Christmas. My parents are coming into town next week. I wanted to have this much done at least."

"Well, we're here. We'll get these set up for you."

The three of them worked and before long, the Santa, the snowman, and an inflatable Rudolph were coming to life, slowly rising as fans blew warm air in to them. The young woman shook Cameron's hand. "Thank you. Cam's probably smiling right now."

"Cam?" Doug asked.

She nodded. "My husband. Cameron."

"That's my name," Cameron said.

She stepped back and clutched at her heart. "Really? He sent you?"

"I don't know about that, but yeah, that's my name."

She stepped forward and hugged him, then unexpectedly hugged his father as well. "Thank you so much. Maybe I will be

better by Christmas. I know he's keeping an eye on me. Can you come in for something to drink?"

Doug shook his head. "No, not today. We're off on another mission."

She stood beside the inflatable Santa as they walked silently back to their truck. Cameron waved at her as his father drove off.

"That was weird, right?"

"Pretty wonderful, though."

"I'm never going to forget that. I can't believe we got there just at the right time."

"Little miracles," Doug said.

He pulled into the drive-thru at McDonald's and they placed their order. It was busy today and they had a short wait. "What do you think?" Doug asked.

"What?"

"Pay for the family behind us?"

Cameron's eyes lit up. "Yeah? That would be great."

When they got to the payment window, Doug handed his credit card to the cashier. "We want to pay for the family behind us," he said.

She grinned. "All they're getting is two drinks. That's easy."

"More, Dad," Cameron said. "Is that okay?"

"My son says we need to spend more than that. Pick up the next family, too."

"That's really nice of you." She handed back the receipt and his card. "Thank you."

"Merry Christmas," Doug said.

Cameron echoed him. "Merry Christmas!"

As they drove away, Doug patted Cameron's knee. "That was fun."

"They couldn't even say thank you. So, it was like the perfect gift. They don't know us. We were just a couple of guys who did something nice."

"That's two. Keep your eye out for number three."

"Dad?"

"Yeah."



"Do you really think her husband sent us to help with those decorations?"

"I don't know, Cameron. I do think that God keeps an eye on his children, though."

"What if we hadn't come out to do this today?"

"But we did."

"But what if we didn't?"

Doug pulled into a parking spot in front where they'd pick up their Christmas tree. "But we did and that's all that matters, isn't it?"

"If we hadn't been looking to do an act of kindness, we wouldn't have stopped to help her."

"What does that say to you?"

Cameron took a long drink of his soda. "That we should always be looking for ways to be kind?"

"It isn't easy. It's hard for me, too. I get so busy with everything I've got going on, I forget to look out for people I don't know. I wouldn't have seen that she needed help if you hadn't been paying attention. You did that today."

"So I did one and you did one."

After they finished eating, Doug gathered up the trash. "Shall we find a tree?"

"They have a bunch up there."

"Your Mom said it was on you to find the perfect tree. Let's see what we come up with."

Cameron took the bag of trash from his dad and ran it over to a can in the parking lot, then ran back to his father. "How are we going to get those trees into the truck?"

"They'll bag them for us," Doug said.

The two wandered through the trees and Cameron finally decided on a six-foot blue spruce. "Is there enough room for the star on top?"

Doug nodded. "It will be perfect. Let's ask someone to help us."

"You stay here. Don't let anyone else take this one. I'll ask," Cameron said. He headed to one of the people who was wearing a logoed sweatshirt, then had to stand and wait a few minutes while the man spoke with a woman.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. If you wait a few weeks, some of these will come down in price. Right now, I can't make that kind of a deal. Come back just before Christmas."

"But ..." Her words trailed off. "Okay. I understand. I was just hoping."

"I'm really sorry. I don't have the authority to make a deal like that."

She nodded and stepped back.

Cameron looked up and saw tears in her eyes.

"Sir," he said. "My dad is back there by the tree we want to buy. He sent me to get you."

"Got it, son. I'll find him."

Cameron started to follow him, then turned back to the woman. She was walking away. "Ma'am?"

She looked at him.

"You need a tree today?"

She nodded. "I wanted a live tree. My husband is coming home tomorrow. He's been overseas for eight months. I wanted to surprise him, but we don't have the money for one of these trees."

Cameron took a deep breath. He knew that his parents didn't have a lot of money, but he'd give up a Christmas present if it meant she could have the tree she wanted. He reached out and grabbed her hand. "Yes, you do. Come on. Let me get my dad."

"No." She pulled her hand back. "I don't mean for you to do that. It's okay. We'll figure this out on our own."

"I know. But see, Dad and I left the house this morning knowing that we were going to do three random acts of kindness. He told me to keep an eye out for the third. I think that's you. Please?"

She blinked and shook her head. "I don't understand."

"Sometimes things don't make any sense to me, either. Come on. Let's find my dad." Cameron grabbed her hand again and led her to where he'd last seen his father. "Did you have a tree picked out?" he asked.

She nodded and pointed at a small, but thick and wide tree. "We don't have much room in the apartment."

"We don't either, but Mom says we're going to have a big tree

anyway. It's the first time in a few years." He heard his father's voice and took the woman's arm, leading her to the sound. "Dad. I found it."

Doug turned and when he saw his son with another woman, he smiled. "You did?"

"Can we buy another Christmas tree?"

"Of course we can."

The man who worked there looked up and frowned at the woman standing beside Cameron.

"She needs a tree today," Cameron said. "Her husband is coming home tomorrow. He's been overseas."

"Military?" Doug asked.

The woman nodded.

"We'll buy her tree, too," Doug said.

"There is a military discount, ma'am," the man said. He propped the bagged tree up against the wall. "Which tree would you like?"

The two walked off and Doug put his arm around Cameron's shoulders. "I knew you could do it."

"Is this okay? I know it's more money. I'd be willing to give up a Christmas present. She should have a tree."

"This is just fine. I'm proud of you."

Cameron shrugged. "It feels really good," he said in a near-whisper. "I wish I could do this every day."

"Me too, son. Me too."

*This story was inspired by Kristina Kuzmic, popular online personality.*

## Vignette #4

### Major Award

Lucy Parker stopped in front of Simon Gardner's antique shop. She didn't get in here very often; she was generally working when he was open, but Joe had given her a few days off just before Christmas. Kids were home for the holidays and he had plenty of help at the diner. She was finally able to take some much-needed vacation time.

She loved her job. Joe was good to work for; the customers were friendly for the most part, and even though she was on her feet all day, it kept her in pretty good shape. But vacations were a wonderful gift especially around the holidays. It was nice to be able to wake up in the morning with no plans for the day. She could wander around in her robe and slippers as long as she wanted.

Donna was spending a few hours with Greg today so Lucy could do some shopping. She and Greg didn't exchange much in the way of Christmas gifts. They had everything they needed. Christmas had never been about presents, but that didn't stop either of them from finding little things for each other over the years.

The other day she had spotted a couple of Ertl diecast muscle cars in Simon's window and the 1969 Camaro was one Greg didn't have.

The bell on the door jangled as she walked in and Simon stood up from behind his counter.

"Mrs. Parker," he said with a smile. "How are you today?"

"Come on, it's Lucy. You know better," she responded. "I'm fine. How about you?"

"The warm weather and sunshine is good for the soul. Are you ready for Christmas?"

"One last thing to get for Greg." Lucy pointed at the window. "I'd like that green Ertl Camaro in the window."

"That's a good buy. He doesn't have that one yet?"

She shook her head. "Do you have any others?"

Simon grinned. "You know me too well. I actually saved one back that I was sure he didn't have. I thought I'd bring it out when you stopped by. It's in the back."

He headed for the front window, and returned with the Camaro still in its original packaging, smiled, and headed for his back room.

Lucy wandered over to a lovely painted glass lamp and ran her fingers along the glass beads that hung from it. She'd last seen one of these in her Aunt Hannah's house. She remembered sitting quietly while the adults talked above her head, wondering how long she'd have to endure their conversation. Aunt Hannah wasn't interesting, she'd never married, had no children, and seemed mean as a snake. Several times a year, the old lady would expect a command performance from her nephew and his young family. They would all dress in their very best clothes and drive to Southeast Iowa to spend a couple of uncomfortable hours in the stifling heat of that house while Aunt Hannah interrogated her parents about their lives and what they might know of other family members.

"Are you interested in the lamp?" Simon asked as he walked past.

"Not at all. It brought back a childhood memory that I'd not thought of in many years."

"My treasures have a tendency to do that to people." He showed her a 1970 lime green Plymouth Superbird. "What do you think?"

Lucy laughed out loud. "He will love that one. Thank you."

"It's a good thing he hasn't branched out into some of the other Ertl cars," Simon said. "Collecting these could wreck a budget."

She nodded. "A long time ago, he talked about some of the branded trucks and cars, but decided that would be a rabbit hole he'd never return from. It's hard not to buy them, though."

"How is Greg? I haven't seen him in a while. Is he still working on that book about Bellingwood's history?"

"He's fine. Since we got the computer that helps him speak, communication is much more fun. And yes, he's been working through more of the history. I don't know if he'll ever finish writing his book, but the research has been a joy for him."

"Let him know that if there is anything I can ever do to help, I'm glad to pitch in. I'd love to see what he's working on."

"I'll tell him. Do you have plans for Christmas?"

Simon grinned. "Jean has invited me to join them for the day. I love my brother, but spending all day with him is more than I can do. She serves dinner at eleven. I'll arrive a few minutes before then, they'll make a fuss over me, we'll eat and open a present or two, then I can escape to the peace of my own home. Crystal will miss me. I can't leave her very long."

Jean and Sam Gardner were good people. Lucy didn't know Jean well. She didn't come into the diner often. Sam came in with Eliseo Aquila and Ralph Bedford often enough that she understood Simon's issue. Sam had strong opinions about things and wasn't afraid to make everyone aware of them.

Lucy lifted her eyebrow. "Crystal?"

Simon smiled, reached down and brought up a sleepy orange tabby cat. He set her on the counter top and she stretched her legs out, placing one affectionately across his wrist. "I didn't realize you hadn't met her yet."

"She looks happy and content." Lucy smiled. "And not worried about a thing."

"She's my girl," Simon said. He stroked the cat's head, rubbing its ears, then handed Lucy a receipt for the cars.

She glanced at it and took cash from her purse.

"Do you need a bag?"

"No, this is fine." Lucy reached tentatively toward the cat, then drew her hand back.

"It's fine. She's used to strangers and loves to be petted."

"Not like a lot of cats I've met in my time. She must feel safe here." She ran her hand down the cat's back and up its tail. "When I retire, I'm getting a cat or a dog."

"I didn't expect her to come into my life, but I'm glad she did," Simon said.

Lucy nodded, then picked up the cars. "Thank you for this. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Mrs. Parker."

"Lucy," she responded as she headed for the door.

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"Merry Christmas, Greg," Lucy said as she put a plate with eggs, bacon and toast on the table in front of her husband.

"Merry Christmas, Lucy."

She'd grown more used to the computer voice over the last year or so. It wasn't her husband's voice, but they were his words and she was grateful for that.

"Are you ready?"

He gave her a smile and nodded toward the television.

This was only the third time they'd watched *A Christmas Story* this year. It was one of their favorites. She remembered the first time they'd seen it together. They'd only been married a couple of years when it came out and the two of them had watched it in stunned silence, surprised at the absolute hilarity of the story. When it was over, they wanted to watch it over and over, just to laugh at some of the scenes, both funny and uncomfortable. Little did they know that years later, watching it over and over would become one of their favorite things to do together during the holiday season.

They could both recite the dialog, but Lucy still cringed when Flick's tongue stuck to the metal pole. When Ralphie's mother broke the lamp, the two of them laughed and laughed.

"Do you want to begin with presents?" Greg asked.

She turned to him. "Now?"

He smiled.

"What have you done?" she asked.

He brought a hand up and pointed to the closet.

"You hid a present in the closet?" There were a few gifts from him under their small tree. Donna was always glad to shop for Greg, knowing that he loved nothing more than giving Lucy gifts to tell her how he loved her.

Traditionally, they exchanged gifts after watching *A Christmas Story* and then *White Christmas*. There were plenty of other holiday

movies they watched together on Christmas day, but those two were movies that she sat through without getting up to move around and clean or putter.

"Please," he said, pointing at the closet again.

"Oh, Greg, you spoil me."

She heard a low chuckle come from him as she walked over to the closet. Opening the door, Lucy frowned at the large box. It was wrapped in bright Christmas paper and had her name emblazoned across the front.

"What have you done?" Lucy turned to look at him and could have sworn that his smile had turned into a wicked grin. "Greg?"

"Open it."

She dragged the box into the room and put it in front of her chair. "Is this the beginning of gift giving? I can get the rest of the presents from under the tree."

"No. Just open that one. Just one."

"Okay. I'm not sure what to do with you, though." Lucy couldn't bring herself to tear wrapping paper. She carefully pulled the tape away and heard a growl from her husband.

"Open it."

"You're killing me," she said.

"Open it."

"Fine." She ripped the paper and looked at her husband, whose smile had grown. "Greg, what is it?"

He nodded toward the box and she continued to rip the paper down until she could see the packaging. "You did not," she said.

Greg laughed. "Major award."

She pulled the box up and laughed and laughed at the replica leg lamp from *A Christmas Story*. "I can't believe you did this. This has to be one of my most favorite gifts."

He nodded. "Couldn't wait for you to see it. Donna kept it for weeks at her house. I told her not to put it in the window."

"Where should we put it?"

"The front window?"

"Do you think?"

"Fun for the neighbors."



Lucy laughed. "They'll think we've lost our minds."

"It's fun. I have nicer presents for you under the tree."

She glanced back at the small tree. "Do you want to open those now?"

"No. Let's watch the movie."

Lucy stood up and walked over to Greg's chair. He looked up at her. "Merry Christmas, Greg. You are a nut." She reached for his hand.

He gave her a small tug and she frowned. "Are you sure?"

Greg nodded.

Lucy pushed his table away, then waited as he shifted around before gingerly sitting in his lap. She put her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. He turned his face and she leaned in to kiss his lips.

"Merry Christmas," she whispered.

Without access to his computer, he had more trouble speaking, but he leaned close to kiss her again. "I love you," he managed to get out.

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*(Turn the page for links and more information. You know you want to.)*

# THANK YOU!



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:

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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.

Diane Greenwood Muir's [Amazon Author Page](#) is a great place to watch for new releases.

Follow Diane on Twitter at [twitter.com/nammynools](https://twitter.com/nammynools) for regular updates and notifications.

Recipes and decorating ideas found in the books can often be found on Pinterest at: <http://pinterest.com/nammynools/>

And if you are looking for Sycamore House swag, check out Polly's CafePress store: <http://www.cafepress.com/sycamorehouse>

*(Keep going, there's more.)*

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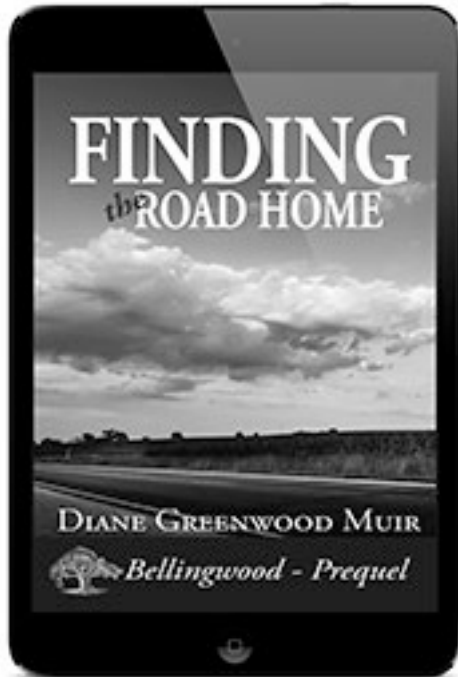
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