

WISH YOU  
WERE EYRE

*By Heather Vogel Frederick*

# WINTER

*“The eagerness of a listener quickens the tongue of a narrator.”*

- Jane Eyre

# MEGAN

*“...if she were a nice, pretty child, one might compassionate her forlornness, but one really cannot care for such a little toad as that.”*

--Jane Eyre

“Would you like fries with that?”

I frown at the menu. Since when had my grandmother started serving French fries at the teashop?

I look up to see Becca Chadwick tapping her pen against the notepad she’s holding.

“Gotcha,” she says, grinning at me.

I swat her with the menu. “Dork.”

“Hey,” she replies, “who’s the one with the job, huh? Who’s the one earning money right this instant? Speaking of which, you are planning to leave me a big tip, aren’t you?”

This is Becca’s first day as a full-fledged waitress at Pies & Prejudice, the wildly successful teashop my grandmother opened here in Concord last year. Things got so busy that Gigi decided to hire some extra help. Becca’s been her assistant since the beginning of January. She started out working on Thursday evenings at Gigi’s new cooking classes, and today is her first shift waiting tables.

“A big tip?” I pretend to think it over. “I guess it depends if you give me extra whipped cream on my hot chocolate.”

“You want a little cinnamon sprinkled on that?” Becca’s all business as she writes my order down.

“Of course.”

“Got it. Back in a flash.” She trots off to a neighboring table to take another order, her apron strings fluttering behind her. Like my grandmother, Becca is wearing the Pies & Prejudice uniform: black dress, frilly white apron, frilly white cap. Gigi had me design them, but I hadn’t imagined someone my age actually wearing one. Becca looks kind of like a French maid in a bad sitcom. She’s being a really good sport about it, though. She wanted this job so badly. Her father’s been unemployed for a while, and working here has been a way to help her family out.

My gaze drifts over to the window, and I note gloomily that it’s started to snow again. This has got to be some sort of record. Usually this time of year we get New England’s famous January thaw, but the month’s almost over and so far there’s been no sign of it. We’ve missed more school this winter than any other year I can remember. Not that I’m complaining.

A little while later, the bell over the door jangles and Emma Hawthorne and Jess Delaney come in, stomping their snow-covered boots on the mat. They spot me and wave, then cross the room to my table.

“Hey,” says Emma, taking a seat. Jess does, too.

“Hey back,” I reply as Becca reappears with my order.

“I’ll take one of those,” says Jess, pointing to the hot chocolate that she sets down in front of me.

“Ditto,” adds Emma. “But hold the cinnamon.”

Jess shrugs off her jacket, giving Becca the onceover. “You look good,” she tells her. “Just like a real waitress.”

“I am a real waitress,” Becca snaps.

“I just meant—”

Becca whooshes out a sigh and smiles. “I know. Sorry. I’ve just got a lot on my mind here. I was hoping for a quiet afternoon for my first day, but we’ve been swamped. It seems like everybody in Concord’s stopped by for a treat and something hot to drink.”

“Can you blame them?” says Emma, and we all look glumly out the window.

“I sure hope they don’t have to cancel tonight’s hockey game,” says Jess.

“Not to mention my birthday party tomorrow night,” I add. I’ve been planning it for ages—you only turn 16 once, after all—and I’ve hardly slept a wink the past few nights, I’m so excited. I think my parents have a surprise up their sleeves, too, because there’s been a lot of whispering around the house lately, and they keep giving me these goofy smiles. I’m thinking maybe they got me a car.

“I’m coming if I have to snowshoe up Strawberry Hill to get there,” Becca tells me.

As she heads for the teashop’s tiny kitchen, Emma and Jess and I discuss the odds of the hockey game getting cancelled. Emma swears that the snow is tapering off, but Jess is less optimistic. I am, too—I’ve been sitting here for nearly an hour, and it looks to me like the snow is still coming down thick and fast. I don’t care as much as the two of them do, though—Emma’s brother Darcy and boyfriend Stewart Chadwick both play for the team, and Jess is dating Darcy. I’m not dating anybody here in Concord, but I know the guys would really be disappointed if they don’t get to play.

Becca returns with two more hot chocolates, plus a plate of brightly-colored round cookies. “On the house,” she tells us. “Courtesy of Gigi.”

My grandmother blows us a kiss from behind the bakery counter. “*Macarons*,” she calls, pronouncing them the French way. My grandmother loves everything French. “I’m trying out some new recipes in honor of the big birthday.”

Somehow my party has turned into a weekend-long celebration. Things kick off tonight after the hockey game, with my friends taking me out to Burger Barn. Then tomorrow night, my parents are treating us all to dinner at La Belle Epoque, my grandmother’s and my favorite fancy French restaurant. Afterwards, we’ll go back to our house for cake and ice cream, and a dance. My father rented sound equipment and hired a DJ, and he’s been busy for days turning our family room into an ‘80s disco. Becca and Ashley talked me into a retro theme for the evening.

That alone should be enough for anybody, but our next mother-daughter book club meeting is on Sunday afternoon, and that always feels kind of like a party.

I reach for a bright pink cookie and take a bite. It practically melts in my mouth. “Mmm. Raspberry.”

“Lemon,” says Jess, nibbling on yellow one. “Dreamy.”

“Uh, hazelnut maybe?” says Emma. She turns around and waves the pale brown cookie in the air. “These are great, Gigi!”

“*Merci beaucoup*,” my grandmother replies.

“So what’s going on with you guys?” I ask my friends. “I’ve hardly seen you since the New Year’s Eve party, Jess.”

Jess goes to Colonial Academy, a swanky private school here in town. She’s on a full scholarship, thanks to the fact that she’s just about the smartest person I know, and thanks also to Becca’s mother, who recommended her for it.

“I know,” she replies. “Things have been really busy. Let’s see.” She starts ticking items off on her fingers. “I got my cast off, but you knew that already. I’m riding again. My solo audition is coming up next week and I’m freaking out a little over that. Correction, a lot. Oh, and calculus is really, really hard.”

“Poor you.” It’s hard to work up a lot of sympathy for someone who’s taking calculus in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Math is Jess’s favorite subject, and she’s incredibly good at it. For me, on the other hand, it’s sheer torture.

She makes a face at me. “Having Mr. Crandall for a teacher again is great, though,” she continues. “Hey—did you know that Maggie’s getting a little brother any day now?”

I’d totally forgotten that the Crandalls were expecting again. “Have they picked a name?”

“Trevor.”

“Cute. Maggie and Trevor. I like it.” The Crandalls are really nice. They were Jess’s houseparents when she started at Colonial back in eighth grade, and all of us have done some babysitting for their daughter Maggie.

Emma turns to me. “Have you heard anything from Simon?”

I nod, smiling. Simon Berkeley is my back-on-again boyfriend, as of New Year’s Eve. He broke up with me for a while last fall, telling me he thought we should be free to date other people, which was really hard. Simon is British, and living 3,000 miles away from each other is tricky. It’s not like we get to just hang out on the weekends and stuff, you know? We have to rely on emails and text messages and videoconferencing to stay close. It seems as if we’re over our rough patch, though.

“He sent a package for my birthday,” I tell her. “I’m dying to open it, but he made me promise I’d wait until tomorrow. Oh, and his father is guest lecturing up at some university in York this winter. He and his mom and Tristan drive up on the weekends whenever they can to visit him.”

“Cool,” says Emma, who lived in England our freshman year. That’s how Simon and I met—his family swapped houses with the Hawthornes. “We went to York—it’s amazing. There’s a medieval wall around the whole city, and it has this gorgeous old cathedral.”

Emma’s cell phone buzzes, and she pulls it out of her pocket and glances at the screen. “Cassidy’s still at practice,” she tells us. “She’s not going to make it here in time to join us.”

Cassidy Sloane is our other friend from book club. She eats, breathes, and sleeps ice hockey.

“She says we should have cranberry almond oat scones on her,” Emma continues, smiling. Gigi’s signature scones are Cassidy’s favorite treat.

“Tempting, but I’ve already eaten way too many *macarons*,” I reply, pushing the plate away. Cassidy may eat like a horse, but I can’t. Designing clothes and sewing—my two favorite things in the world—are not cardio activities.

Before Emma can slip her cell phone back in her pocket, it buzzes again. “Oh good!” she exclaims happily, checking the message. “Zach just stopped by the rink and told Cassidy that the game is definitely on for tonight.”

Zach is Zach Norton, the most gorgeous guy at Alcott High School. At least I thought so until I met Simon Berkeley. We all used to be in love with Zach back in elementary school. OK, and middle school, too. In fact, some of us carried the torch into high school. I give Becca a sidelong look. She’s wiping down the table next to us, but I noticed her face flush at the



mention of his name. She carried the biggest torch of all of us, and she's still trying to come to terms with the fact that Cassidy and Zach are dating. Well, sort of dating. It's not like anybody ever sees them holding hands or anything. But they hang out all the time now.

I glance at the clock. The crowd in the teashop is thinning out as closing time approaches. My father should be here any minute to get Gigi and me. Pies & Prejudice serves breakfast, lunch, and afternoon tea, so he always swings by to drive my grandmother home in time for dinner. Sure enough, a few minutes later the bell above the door jingles and my father appears, right on the heels of Mrs. Chadwick.

"Yoo hoo!" Becca's mother calls, waving at Becca like she's on the far side of the Grand Canyon. Even though we're the only ones still here except for a lone table of two, Becca turns beet red. Her mother has that kind of effect on people. "That's my daughter," Mrs. Chadwick tells the other customers proudly. "This is her first day waitressing. How'd she do?"

Becca makes a beeline for the back of the shop and dives behind the curtain that serves as a door to the kitchen. I don't blame her. I would, too.

As Mrs. Chadwick badgers the trapped customers, my father beckons to me. "See you guys tonight," I tell my friends, putting on my jacket and scooping my backpack off the floor. I give my grandmother a kiss on the cheek on the way out.

"Calliope is going to drive me home," she tells me, and I nod.

My father's SUV is parked right outside. As I slide into the front seat, I glance over and notice that he's got that funny smile on his face again. "What?" I ask him suspiciously.

"Nothing," he says, popping one of the *macarons* that Gigi gave him into his mouth. "Oh man, these are good," he mumbles. "How was school?"

"Fine."

“That’s it? Fine?”

“It was school.”

“Did you have art today?”

I nod.

“And?”

Why is it that parents always want to know every detail about your boring day at school?

I heave a sigh and relent. “Art was great. We’re working on some woodcuts, and when we’re done Ms. Malone says we might get to do some soapstone carving.” I love art class, actually. It’s my favorite thing about school.

My father whistles happily to himself as we head down Lowell Road, passing first the Chadwicks’ house and then the Hawthornes’, and on over the bridge toward Strawberry Hill. Emma was right about the snow; it’s tapered off to flurries. Even though I’m pretty sick of this endlessly bleak winter, I still can’t help thinking how pretty the snowflakes look drifting across the headlights of our car.

“I guess we’re the first ones here,” my father says as we pull into the empty garage a few minutes later. He sounds kind of disappointed.

“I think mom had a Riverkeepers meeting this afternoon,” I tell him.

“On a Friday? Don’t they usually meet on Tuesdays?”

“It got postponed because of the snow.”

“Ah.”

Leaving our boots on the rack in the garage—my mother hates wet shoes in the house—we go inside and hang our coats in the front hall closet. Then I head down to the hall to my room to change. Mirror Megan—that’s what I call my reflection—frowns at me as I pull on my

oldest sweats and put my hair up into a sloppy ponytail, but I promise her I'll change before the game tonight. Right now, I just want to be comfortable.

Sliding my feet into my favorite pair of slippers, pink bunnies so ratty they've lost most of their fuzz, I notice that one of the ears on the left one is flopping forward like it's about to fall off. And that's exactly what it does as I reach down to adjust it. I shrug and toss it in the wastebasket next to my desk. With any luck, I'll get a new pair for my birthday. I've been hinting big-time to Becca, because I know that they're cheap and won't break the bank. With her father out of work, she doesn't need to be buying me expensive presents.

Grabbing my laptop off my desk, I settle cross-legged on my bed and flip it open. Time to check my email, or more specifically, time to check for email from Simon.

He sent me an e-card! I click on the link, and it opens to a wintry scene, with snowflakes falling on evergreens and little kids skating on a pond. I smile. Simon has been looking at the Weather Channel again. He likes to do that, so he can see what's happening here in Concord. The snowflakes and skaters onscreen swirl around for a bit while a little tune tinkles in the background, then the snowflakes arrange themselves into the words "Keep warm! Happy almost birthday! XOXO Simon."

I can't help laughing. It's really cute, and so is he for sending it.

I hop online to check out the weather in Bath, where he and his family live, so I can send him a card back. Not surprisingly, the forecast is for rain. That's what happens in England this time of year. I find a funny card for him with frogs carrying lily pad umbrellas, and add a message: "Keep dry! Miss you! XOXO Megan."

The garage door rumbles as I press send. My mother must be home. Sure enough, a few moments later the intercom on my wall crackles. Our house is on the large side—Emma calls it

“sprawling”—and my father had this system installed so we didn’t have to holler at each other. “Megan!” he says. “Your mother’s home. Can you come here for a minute?” He sounds excited.

My pulse quickens as I scuff back down the hall to the living room. Maybe this is it. A car of my own would be so cool!

My mother is hanging up her coat in the hall closet. “Where’s Gigi?” she asks my dad. “I thought you were going to wait and bring her home.”

“Calliope Chadwick offered to give her a ride,” he replies.

My mother spots me and breaks into the same goofy grin my father was wearing on the drive home. “Hi sweetie!” she says.

“Hi,” I reply cautiously.

She crosses into the living room, where my father is sitting on the sofa reading the newspaper. Or at least he’s holding it. Mostly he’s smiling at me. What is up with the two of them?

My mother leans down and gives him a kiss, then straightens, frowning. “Has anyone seen my cell phone?” she asks, patting the pockets of her pants. She starts looking behind the sofa cushions. “I know I had it earlier today.”

“You probably left it in your coat,” my father tells her. “Megan, why don’t you go check for her.”

“Sure.” I scuff over to the hall closet. My mother’s winter coat is on a hanger next to my jacket, and I go right to the inside zip pocket where she usually stashes her phone. “Not here!”

“Are you sure?” she calls back. “Did you check all the pockets?”

*The keys!* I think. *She probably hid the keys to my birthday present in one of the pockets!* I rifle through the rest of them. Nothing. As I slip my hand into the last one, my fingertips touch something soft. Something soft that's *moving*. I snatch my hand back, startled.

The pocket squeaks. Holding it open gingerly, I peer in.

My heart stops.

I gasp in disbelief.

The pocket is full of white fur. White fur that's attached to a *kitten!* Reaching in again gently, I draw out a mewling ball of fluff.

"Omigosh—you little angel!" I whisper, holding it—him? her?—up to my cheek. It's the softest thing I've ever felt. As I kiss its little nose, I spot something out of the corner of my eye, and look over to see the lens of a videocamera peeking around the edge of the closet door. My father is behind it, of course. He's not even trying to hide his broad smile now.

"Surprise!" he and my mother shout.

"Is it really mine?" I exclaim, still stunned. "To keep?"

"It's a she, actually, and yes she is," my mother replies.

"Happy early birthday, sweetheart," adds my father.

"How ... when—" I stammer. I've been asking for a pet – or for a sister or brother – for, well, forever. The answer has always been no. My mother's all into zero population growth, plus both of my parents are neat freaks, especially my dad, and they've always said they don't do pets.

"It's all your grandmother's doing," my mother replies with a rueful sigh. "She and Shannon Delaney have been twisting our arms ever since the party at Half Moon Farm."

The Hawthornes lost their cat Melville last fall, and Jess's family gave them a kitten on New Year's Eve.

My kitten is definitely cuter, though. It yawns and pats at my face with a tiny paw, and I bury my nose in her soft fur again. "This is the best present ever!" I mean it, too. A kitten is way better than a car.

"There's more!" says my father. "Come and see."

"More kittens?" I reply, gaping at him.

He grins. "No, silly. More kitten *stuff*." He herds me down the hall toward my room, then opens the door to the guest room across from it. "Ta da!"

It looks like Pet Zone made a house call. There's not one but two baskets with pillows in them for snoozing, a pole covered in carpet and what look like branches sticking out of it—some sort of a combination climbing tree/scratching post, I'm guessing—a feeding station, and another basket full of toys.

"And her box will go in your bathroom," my mother says, grabbing something that looks like a big plastic suitcase by the handle and carrying it back across the hall to my bedroom. "I found ecologically friendly cat litter for it."

Of course she did. That's my mother in a nutshell—saving the world, one litter box at a time.

We stand there, my parents both talking at once as they try to film me, pat the kitten, gauge my reaction, and tell me how they managed to keep it a secret from me all at the same time. They're both so excited that you'd think they were the ones getting a kitten, not me.

“What made you change your mind?” I ask, perching on the edge of my bed and cradling the kitten against my shoulder. I hear the rumbling of a tiny purr as she burrows into my neck, then starts kneading the collar of my sweatshirt.

“I think it was when Shannon sent us the email with her picture, wasn’t it, Jerry?” my mother replies, glancing at my father. “She was the last one left in the litter.”

He nods. “Shannon said she figured a white kitten she couldn’t do all that much damage to an all-white house.”

I had to smile at this. Trust my parents to pick a cat to match our décor. Our house is really modern, and from the carpets to the furniture, almost everything in it is white.

The three of us sit there playing with my new pet until she tires out and curls in a little ball in my lap and goes to sleep. She’s so totally adorable I can hardly stand it. I feel like I’m going to burst with happiness. This is shaping up to be the best birthday weekend ever.

My dad is still clutching the camera, of course. I think my entire life is preserved somewhere on DVDs.

“What are you going to call her?” asks my mother.

“How about Snowball?” suggests my father.

I shake my head. “Too boring. I’m thinking Coco, after Coco Chanel.”

“Cute,” says my father.

“Perfect!” says my mother. “Your grandmother will love it.”

Coco Chanel is Gigi’s favorite fashion designer. I figure it’s a fitting tribute, since my grandmother is the one who talked my parents into getting me a pet.

My mother reaches out a forefinger and strokes the kitten's ears. "Do you remember when Cassidy's little sister Chloe was born, and your grandmother tried to get Clementine and Stanley to name her Coco?"

I nod, grinning. "That's what gave me the idea."

A few minutes later, my mother stands up reluctantly. "Well, I guess I'd better get dinner started. Why don't you put Coco in her basket, and come keep me company?"

"Do you think she'll be OK by herself?" my father asks anxiously. "Maybe I should install a video monitor so we can keep an eye on her."

My mother winks at me. "She'll be fine," she says. "Leave your door open, Megan. Cats are smart—if she needs us, she'll come find us."

As the three of us head back down the hall, my father pulls out his cell phone and taps away at the screen, making notes for himself. "We'll need another basket in the kitchen," he mutters. "And I think we could probably use one in the living room, too. And another one of those climbing things."

My mother and I smile at each other. Whenever my father decides to do something, he always does it in a big way.

Just as we reach the living room, I hear the scrape of a key in the lock and the front door flies open.

"*Bon soir!*" trills my grandmother. She trots in, towing a petite dark-haired girl I'm sure I've never seen before, but who still looks vaguely familiar. On the doorstep behind them is a huge pile of luggage.

"Uh, hello," says my mother cautiously.



“This is Sophie,” announces my grandmother. “She just arrived from France and she’s going to live with us!”

My father blinks. My mother looks from Gigi to the French girl and back again. Then she reaches for my grandmother’s arm. “Mother, may I speak to you in the kitchen for a moment?”

The two of them disappear, leaving my father and me standing in the middle of the living room with – Sophie? Was that her name?

She regards us unsmilingly. I can’t tell if she’s unhappy to be here specifically, or just unhappy generally. She doesn’t say a word, just looks around the room with her eyebrows raised. Her gaze lingers on our white baby grand piano, and I can tell she’s impressed. Then she looks at me, and suddenly I can see that she’s not impressed any more. My hand creeps up to my hair, which I’m deeply regretting scraping back in a pony tail, and I’m very conscious of the fact that my ancient sweats are not just ancient, but also now covered in white cat hair.

Sophie, on the other hand, looks like she’s breezed in from a photo shoot. Her curly hair is perfectly tousled, and her outfit is stunning. Simple, understated, but stunning. She’s wearing jeans, knee-high black leather boots, a white turtleneck sweater and a black pea coat, topped with a white cashmere scarf knotted artfully around her neck. Everything about her screams *I am French! I am tres chic!*

Which I am most definitely not.

The discussion in the kitchen is getting heated. My mother doesn’t like surprises, and she doesn’t do houseguests. Add the two things together, and it’s a sure-fire recipe for disaster.

“I couldn’t just leave her standing there like an orphan!” I hear Gigi protest.

“You could have at least called first!” my mother sounds furious. She’s got a point, actually. My grandmother is kind of impulsive sometimes. “This is not your decision to make!”

Sparks are practically flying out from under the kitchen door, and my father gives it a nervous glance. “So Sophie,” he asks. “Do you speak English?”

The French girl shrugs. “*Mais bien sur*, but of course.”

“Right,” he says, and vanishes into the kitchen just as I hear Gigi protest, “She was supposed to stay with Peter and Polly Perkins, but after what happened today, they had to drop out of the exchange program!”

A moment later, the voices subside. Sophie’s lips curl up in a hint of a smile. Not a particularly friendly smile, though. A minute ticks awkwardly by. She examines her fingernails. Then the kitchen door opens and my mother and father and Gigi appear. “It’s settled then,” says my grandmother. “You’ll stay with us.”

“*Merci*,” says Sophie politely.

“I’m sure you’re tired after your long trip,” my mother says, a little stiffly. “Megan will show you to the guest room. It’s Sophie, right?”

The French girl nods. “*Oui*. Sophie Fairfax.”

We all stare at her. My heart sinks as I suddenly realize where the resemblance comes from.

“No relation to Annabelle Fairfax, are you?” my mother asks.

Sophie nods. “*Elle est ma cousine*.”

Stinkerbelle has a *cousin*? I stare at Sophie, stunned. No way. Absolutely no way.

There's a small meowing noise behind me, and I look around to see my new kitten hesitating in the living room doorway. I kneel down and stretch out my hand toward her, wagging my fingers. Beside me, Sophie Fairfax does the same.

Coco hesitates for a moment, her tiny tail twitching. Then she scampers straight to the French girl.

I take it all back. This is shaping up to be the worst birthday weekend ever.