

HEATHER VOGEL FREDERICK

Home for the Holidays: Chapter 1

BECCA

"When there are boys you have to worry about how you look, and whether they like you, and why they like another girl better, and whether they're going to ask you to something or other. It's a strain."

– Betsy in *Spite of Herself*, Maud Hart Lovelace

Note: For those of you who haven't read the first four books in the Mother-Daughter Book Club series, this chapter might contain a few spoilers ...

"D-E-F-E-N-S-E! DEFENSE, CONCORD, DEFENSE!"

I finish off the cheer with a star jump and a high kick, then fling my maroon and white pompoms skyward, catching them neatly on the way down. As the pep band strikes up "We Will Rock You," I look up in the stands to see if Zach Norton is watching.

He's not.

He's too busy talking to Cassidy Sloane.

Third sees me, though, and waves his trombone from where he's sitting with the rest of the brass section. I wave feebly back.

My friend Ashley swats me with a pompom, her dark eyes flashing with mischief. "I didn't know you liked Third," she teases.

Third is actually Cranfield Bartlett III, but nobody ever calls him that, not even his parents.

"Shut up! I do not," I reply, through teeth clenched in a big smile. Ms. O'Donnell, our cheerleading coach, is a stickler for big smiles.



“Eyes on the field, girls,” she calls to us.

Ashley and I turn around just in time to see Darcy Hawthorne intercept a pass. There’s a roar from the stands behind us – it’s almost the end of the fourth quarter, and Concord is down by six. We desperately need another touchdown. Along with everybody else on our side of the field, I scream my head off as Darcy runs the ball back down toward our end zone. He makes it almost as far as the center line before Acton manages to tackle him. Music explodes from the pep band, and Coach O’Donnell gives us the signal to launch into another cheer.

“First and 10, do it again! GO, Concord, GO!” we holler, whipping the crowd into a frenzy.

Turkey Day game is always a big deal for Alcott High. Thanksgiving is when we play our arch-rivals, and across the field, the visitor stands are a mass of blue and gold. For a split second I find myself wishing I was wearing one of Acton High’s cheerleading uniforms. I look so much better in blue than I do in maroon.

On the other hand, we get to wear yoga pants instead of the miniskirts the Acton cheerleaders stupidly chose. Not that I have anything against miniskirts, but it’s *freezing* out here. At least they should have opted for fleece leggings under their skirts. Their legs are practically as blue as their uniforms.

I cast a worried glance up at the sky. No sign of snow yet. I really, really hope the weather forecast is wrong. My grandparents are in town from Cleveland for the holiday weekend, and Gram and Gigi, my best friend Megan Wong’s grandmother, have promised to take the two of us shopping tomorrow. I don’t want to miss out because of some dumb snowstorm.

Up in the stands, Megan reaches a purple-gloved hand from underneath the blanket she's sharing with Gigi and Gram and waves at me. I wave back at her, and at my grandfather and my brother Stewart and his girlfriend, Emma Hawthorne.

As much as it grosses me out to admit this, Stewart and Emma are kind of cute together. Well, as cute as two total dorks can be, I guess.

My dad blows me a kiss. I blow him one in return, and he stands up and pretends to catch it and tuck it into his pocket. It's silly and kind of embarrassing, but I don't really mind. For one thing, I'm used to it – we've had this little ritual since I was a kid – and for another, my dad needs all the love he can get these days. He lost his job a few weeks ago.

The insurance agency he worked for in Boston has been struggling for a while, and they finally had to lay off some employees. My dad was one of them. He's really sad about it because he worked there a long time, and he liked his job. He's worried, too, I can tell. He and my mother haven't said much to my brother and me, aside from asking us not to say anything about it to our friends for now, but we're not stupid. Stewart's a senior in high school, and I'll be getting my driver's license in a few months. We're practically adults.

As for keeping it quiet, how long is it going to take people to figure out what's going on when they spot my dad driving around town with the "Pirate Pete's Pizza" sign on the roof of our SUV? Or when they open the door and there he is with their half-pepperoni, half-veggie combo, wearing an eye patch and a Pirate Pete's skull-and-crossbones baseball cap?

I know he took the job to help out our family and everything, but couldn't he have found something less embarrassing? He says it's perfect because it lets him keep his days free for job hunting, but still. Stewart doesn't care, of course – he's oblivious anyway – but I know my mother finds it just as mortifying as I do. Even she couldn't talk him out of it, though.

“Money is money, Calliope,” my father told her. “I’m not in a position to be picky right now.”

Last night, after we met my grandparents at the airport, I overheard my mother and Gram talking in the kitchen. Mom told her that the layoff couldn’t have come at a worse time, what with her finishing up her master’s degree in landscape design, and Stewart knee deep in college applications. If my dad doesn’t find a new job soon – something a heck of a lot better than delivering pizzas – she doesn’t know how they’re going to manage.

Everybody seems to forget that it’s scary for me, too, not to mention inconvenient. I’d really been hoping for a car of my own when I get my license, but fat chance of that happening now.

There’s another roar from our fans and I snap out of my sulk and automatically slap a smile on my face. Out on the field, Darcy dodges a pair of Acton linemen and sprints toward our goal posts. The linemen grab at his jersey, but he wrenches away and surges forward, crossing into the end zone and slamming the ball onto the ground.

Touchdown!

With less than a minute to go in the game, we’re tied with Acton! The crowd hardly needs any encouragement from us, but we do our best anyway as both teams get into position for the goal kick.

*Everybody do the Concord rumble, everybody do the Concord rumble,
everyyybodyyyy rrruuumbbble...!*

As Darcy’s best friend Kyle Anderson, our kicker, takes his spot on the field, you can practically hear all of Concord hold its breath. The ref’s whistle blows and Kyle moves forward,

keeping his eye on the goal posts. Then he slams his foot against the ball, sending it flying up toward the gray clouds overhead. Up it soars, up and up and – through!

It's a win for Concord!

"Take it home, girls," shouts Coach O'Donnell as our side of the field explodes with excitement. There's nothing forced about the smile on my face now. We treat Acton to the traditional Turkey Day gloat, the very same cheer they fired off at us last year when they won:

You might be good at baseball,

You might be good at track,

But when it comes to football,

You might as well step back!

GOBBLE-GOBBLE-GOBBLE-GOBBLE –

Gooooooooooooo, CONCORD!

Fans come pouring down out of the stands, pushing and jostling. Among them I spot Darcy's girlfriend Jess Delaney. Stuck to her like a tall, skinny barnacle is Kevin Mullins. Kevin just doesn't take a hint. He's had a crush on Jess since we were all at Walden Middle School, and she's just too nice to give him the boot. That's the difference between Jess and me. I don't put up with stuff like that the way she does.

Kevin used to be the smallest kid in the entire school, which was due to the fact that he skipped a bunch of grades. Cassidy calls him the Boy Genius. He shot up this past summer, and now he towers over Jess, who is petite. They probably weigh the same, though. My dad says if Kevin turned sideways and stuck out his tongue, he could pass as a zipper.

"Great job, Becca," Jess tells me. She's wearing a white cable-knit beanie, and only the tail of her thick blonde braid is visible. I would kill for hair like Jess's. Mine is blonde, too, but it's not thick and wavy like hers.

“Thanks.”

She cranes her neck over my shoulder, looking for Darcy. Jess is lucky. Not only is Darcy Hawthorne a great athlete, he’s also popular, smart, and a really nice guy. Plus, he still has a trace of the English accent that he and Emma both brought back with them from their year in England. There’s nothing more appealing than a cute guy with an accent.

“Gotta go,” Jess says, spotting him. “See you tonight!”

“See you!” I reply. She melts into the crowd, with Kevin trailing behind.

“What’s tonight?” asks Ashley.

I make a face. “Book club.” Not that I don’t like book club, but it is Thanksgiving, after all. I was kind of thinking jammies, leftovers, a nap, maybe snuggling up with some holiday classic on TV. My grandmother really, really wanted to attend one of our meetings, though, and tonight was the only night everybody could get together. Cassidy Sloane is in my book club too, and she plays for an elite girls’ hockey team. They have some big tournament down in Rhode Island this weekend, and for a while it didn’t look like she’d be able to make it to our meeting at all. Which was fine by me, because the less time I spend around Miss Zach-Stealer Sloane these days, the better. But in the end, it turned out she doesn’t have to be there until tomorrow morning.

“Wow, what a fabulous game!” says my father, squeezing through the crowd to reach us. The rest of my family is right behind him.

“No kidding,” says Gram, draping a blanket around my shoulders. She gives me a hug.

“That was a great halftime dance, sweetie.”

“Thanks.”

“You girls look half-frozen,” says Megan’s grandmother. “I think there’s still some hot chocolate left in my thermos if you’d like some.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Chen,” Ashley replies, “but I promised I’d get right home to help my mom.” *Call me later*, she mouths to me as she turns to go, pretending to hold a cell phone up to her ear. I nod.

“We should head home and help your mother too,” says Gram, linking her arm through mine as we inch our way toward the parking lot. Ahead of us, my brother is acting all mushy-gushy over Emma Hawthorne. He has his arm around her and keeps leaning down to kiss the top of her head. Gak! So gross! I hate PDA when it involves my brother.

I glance over at Megan and scrunch up my nose. She smothers a laugh. Megan knows exactly how I feel about this stuff. That’s the good thing about best friends. Most of the time you don’t have to say a word, and they still totally understand you.

It’s not that I don’t like Emma – she’s okay. It’s just, knowing that she’s my brother’s girlfriend makes things a little weird sometimes. Plus, we probably never would have been friends if it weren’t for the book club. Megan’s the only one in it I’m really close to. I have almost nothing in common with the others, and I’m still surprised I like them as much as I do.

Which isn’t always all that much. For instance, I’m not wild about Cassidy Sloane these days. Ever since school started this year, she’s been hanging out with Zach Norton again.

I look over to where the two of them are standing on the sidelines. Cassidy has her camera out and she’s taking his picture. Zach is clowning around and laughing his head off over something she’s saying. Watching them, it’s easy to see that he likes her. You can just tell when a guy is interested in a girl, you know? It’s written all over Zach’s face that he likes Cassidy.

Last spring, after he asked me to the Spring Formal, I really, really thought maybe he liked me. After all, I didn't have to pester him or drop hints or anything. He picked up the phone all by himself and called. Would he have done that if he didn't like me?

But now he can't take his eyes off Cassidy Sloane, the red-haired giantess from my mother-daughter book club.

I just don't get it. Back in eighth grade, when Zach surprised Cassidy with a kiss, she was so disgusted she slugged him with her baseball mitt. After that they didn't talk for a whole summer, so I figured that was that and maybe I'd finally have a chance. Even when they patched things up I was still hopeful, mostly because Cassidy made it very clear they were just friends. Plus, she spent most of last year practically glued to Tristan Berkeley, the snotty but incredibly good-looking English guy whose family did the house-swap with the Hawthornes. Tristan needed an ice-dancing partner, and Cassidy fit the bill.

I swear she has all the luck. These days the only guy who's interested in me is Third. Who is fine and everything, but he's, well, Third. Kind of a moose, dorky smile, even dorkier sense of humor. He's not exactly Prince Charming.

My mother says I spend way too much time thinking about boys, but I can't help it. Boys are the most interesting thing on the planet.

Most boys, that is. Spotting Third lumbering in our direction with his trombone case, I tug my grandmother through an opening in the crowd. "I can't wait to get home," I tell her. "I'm starving."

"I don't know which I'm looking forward to more," she says, trotting along beside me. "Thanksgiving dinner or the meeting tonight."

Gram was ecstatic when my mother told her she'd get to come to book club. She's hardly stopped talking about it since she got here. My grandmother is the whole reason we're reading what we're reading this fall.

We held our first meeting of the year back in August at Kimball's Farm. Usually, we wait until the end of each year's kick-off meeting to go out for ice cream – it's one of our little rituals – but this year we decided to meet there to celebrate the Hawthornes being home from England. We were just sitting down at a picnic table with our ice cream cones when Jess's mom asked whose turn it was to pick something for us to read.

"I think it's yours," Mrs. Hawthorne told her. Emma's mother is a librarian and super-organized, and she's been in charge of the club since the beginning.

"No, Phoebe, I think it's Becca and Calliope's turn," Mrs. Wong said, taking the teeniest lick ever of her strawberry ice cream cone. Megan's mother treats sugar like it's the enemy.

My mother pounced on this the way I pounce on Motor Mouth lip gloss whenever it goes on sale. "That's right! It is. And we've got just the thing."

I looked at her blankly. This was news to me. "We do?"

"Uh-huh," she said, nodding.

"Well?" asked Mrs. Hawthorne.

"The Betsy-Tacy books!"

I let out a groan. This was my mother's idea of "just the thing"? Those books Gram was always going on about? My grandmother gave me the entire set practically the day I was born, and they've been sitting on the bookshelf in my room forever. They were her absolute favorite when she was growing up, which tells you how old they are.

What happened next, though, was probably the high point of my entire three years with the book club.

“What are the Betsy-Tacy books?” asked Emma.

Stunned silence fell over the picnic table. Megan and Jess and Cassidy and I stared at her, our mouths literally dropping open. Emma Hawthorne has read every book in the universe.

“You don’t know them?” asked my mother, flicking a glance at Mrs. Hawthorne. “That surprises me, Emma. They’re classics, after all.”

“Really?” Emma frowned.

“Absolutely. They’re about a group of girls growing up in a little town in Minnesota called Deep Valley.”

“How many books are there in the series?”

“Ten.”

I’ll never forget the look on Emma’s face as long as I live.

“TEN?” she screeched, whirling around to her mother. “How come you never told me about them?”

“Well,” said Mrs. Hawthorne, “it’s not that I didn’t know about them—” she flicked a glance back at my mother, and I sensed a little tug-of-war going on, “—or about the author, Maud Hart Lovelace. I just never got around to reading them.”

Beside me, my mother was trying very hard not to gloat. It’s almost impossible to one-up Mrs. Hawthorne.

I decided to rub it in. "I've read them," I said, which wasn't exactly true. My mother read the first few aloud to me when I was little, but I never finished the series. Emma didn't need to know that, though. "Ages ago."

From the expression on Emma's face, you'd have thought I just announced that I was growing a tail. "You *did*? How come you never mentioned them?"

"You never asked," I replied, trying not to look too smug.

Cassidy's mother frowned at me. "Are you sure you want to read them again?"

Across the picnic table, my mother gave me Winona eyes. Gram made up that expression. Winona Root is a character in the books, and this one time Betsy and Tacy and their friend Tib try and hypnotize her into taking them to the theater. It doesn't work, of course, but it's pretty funny the way they all stare at her, trying.

Winona eyes or no Winona eyes, I knew that if I said no, my mother would never let me hear the end of it. There's just no dealing with my mother. "Sure," I replied. "Why not?"

My mother swiftly closed the deal. "Becca's grandmother has offered to buy a complete set for each one of you, if you all agree to read them."

"That's very generous of her," said Mrs. Hawthorne. "She must really love these books."

"She loves Maud Hart Lovelace the way you love Jane Austen, Phoebe," my mother told her. "Mother was born in Minnesota, and she grew up reading the Betsy-Tacy series. She made sure I did, too. It's kind of a family tradition."

I shot her a look. Talk about stretching the truth! A family tradition? For her and Gram, maybe, but not for me.

“Can you tell us a bit about the books?” asked Mrs. Delaney. “I’m afraid I’m not familiar with them either.”

“Absolutely,” my mother replied. “Deep Valley is a small town, very much like Concord only in the Midwest. The stories follow Betsy Ray and her family and friends as they grow up in the late 19th and early 20th century —”

Cassidy let out a groan when she heard this, but my mother was ready for her.

“I know, I know, more musty, dusty old books, right? These are different from all the other ones we’ve read so far, though. They have a very modern sensibility.” My mother fished around in her tote bag and pulled out *Betsy-Tacy*. “This is the first book, and it starts when Betsy Ray and Tacy Kelly are five years old.”

“Whoa, dude – I mean, Mrs. Chadwick – are you seriously expecting us to read about a couple of *five year-olds*?” Cassidy protested. “We’re sophomores!”

“Wait, wait, let me finish,” my mother hurried to explain. “The books follow the girls all the way through high school and into college and beyond. See?” She dumped the rest of the books in her tote bag on the table and held one of them up, waving it triumphantly. “The last one is called *Betsy’s Wedding*.”

The picnic table grew quiet as my friends chewed on that.

“You girls are going to feel right at home in Deep Valley, I promise,” my mother continued. “Betsy and her friends are fun-loving, and they like pranks and mischief, and above all” – she paused dramatically and lowered her voice – “they like boys.”

Cassidy snorted.

“That clinches it for me,” said her mother, elbowing her sharply. “Count me in.”

Emma sighed happily. “Ten whole books I haven’t read!”

"I don't have time to read ten books," grumbled Cassidy, who looked like she wanted to pop somebody with her ice cream cone. Or better yet, her hockey stick.

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Sloane-Kinkaid crisply. "What about all that time you're spending in the car these days?" She reached over and plucked a handful of books from the table. "One hockey tournament in Connecticut and you'd knock these right off."

"On top of all my homework? Mom, get real! I'm already a week behind on *The Grapes of Wrath*." Cassidy crossed her arms and scowled.

"I thought we were going to get to pick the books this year for a change," said Jess softly, looking disappointed. She'd been pushing for some story about a racehorse. Jess still had that stupid horse crush of hers. I got over mine back in fourth grade.

"I thought so too," said Emma. "I want us all to read *Jane Eyre*."

"How about a compromise?" suggested Mrs. Wong. "What if we split the year up this time, and spend the first half – between now and the end of December, say – reading the Betsy-Tacy books, then move on to something else after that?"

"That sounds good," said Mrs. Delaney, and we all nodded.

Cassidy still didn't look convinced. "You mean we're going to read all ten books between now and January?"

Mrs. Hawthorne, who'd been scanning the information on the jacket flaps, pursed her lips. "We could just read the four high school books, I suppose."

"But you have to start at the beginning!" my mother protested. "You'll miss too much!"

"You have a point," said Mrs. Hawthorne. "And Clementine is right, the first four are pretty slim. What if we breeze through them for September's meeting, then dive into *Heaven to*

Betsy and *Betsy in Spite of Herself* for October and November? That will take us up through their sophomore year, the same age as you girls.”

“But Mom, we can’t just ignore half of an author’s body of work!” said Emma.

I crossed my eyes at Megan, who squelched a smile. Only Emma Hawthorne would use a term like “body of work.”

“Nothing’s stopping you or anyone else from reading the rest of them,” said her mother. “But this might be a more realistic goal as a group.”

And that was that, and now here we are three months later. I look over at Gram, who’s smiling at me expectantly.

I smile back at her. “Yeah, Gram, I’m looking forward to tonight, too,” I tell her, and surprisingly, this isn’t a complete lie.

I’d been so sure I wouldn’t like the books, but my mother was right – they really are pretty modern. Especially once the girls get into high school. Sure, the slang they use is ridiculous – nobody says stuff like “Hully gee!” these days – but there are crushes and dances and parties, and they’re always on the phone to each other, and on top of that, Betsy totally feels the same way I do about school, plus she and her friends love to shop, and they love clothes.

Megan has been flipping out at all the descriptions of the outfits. We both adore vintage styles, and she’s started calling her shirts “shirtwaists,” like they do in the books, which is a little over the top if you ask me but that’s the way Megan is when it comes to fashion.

My stomach growls as we get into the car. Gram laughs. “Time to unbend and really eat, right?”

“Yup,” I reply, scaring myself a little. Mom and Gram do this all the time – quote from the *Betsy-Tacy* books to each other – but it’s not really my thing, and this is the first time a reference hasn’t gone completely over my head. I hope it doesn’t mean I’m getting old.

Thanksgiving is just about my favorite meal of the year, and I only had a tiny breakfast this morning so I’d be really hungry for it. My mother and Gram spent all day yesterday cooking, and as we come trooping into the house we’re greeted by such wonderful smells that I want to tear into the turkey right then and there. But cheerleading is a real workout, and I don’t smell so wonderful myself, so I run upstairs to take a quick shower and change.

Mom likes us to dress up for Thanksgiving dinner, so I put on a skirt and a black cashmere turtleneck I found at Sweet Repeats, my favorite consignment store on Newbury Street in Boston. It’s from some swanky shop in London, and Gigi nearly fainted when she saw the label. “The bargain of the century,” she told me, when she heard what I paid for it. “Good work, Becca.”

With any luck, Megan and I will get a chance to hunt for more bargains there when we’re in Boston tomorrow.

As my mother and Gram and I enter the dining room with a parade of platters, and my father starts to carve the turkey, Grampie rubs his hands together. “All of my favorites!”

“Especially the sweet potato casserole with mini marshmallows,” says my brother happily, dishing himself up a huge serving.

“Pig,” I whisper to him.

He plops an equally huge serving onto my plate. “Pig yourself,” he whispers back. “It’s your favorite, too.”

He's right; it is. And Gram is right, too. If there's ever a time to unbend and really eat, it's Thanksgiving. The second we finish saying grace I plow into the food on my plate like it's my last meal on earth.

Afterwards, we all pitch in to clear the table and do the dishes, then Dad and Grampie and Stewart wander into the family room to watch a little football.

"I'm going to take a nap so I'll be fresh for the meeting tonight," says Gram, yawning.

"Me, too," says my mother. "How about you, honey?"

"Maybe," I tell her. "I think I'll watch a movie up in my room first, though."

I fall asleep halfway through *Miss Congeniality* – one of my all-time favorites – and the next thing I know I hear my mother bellowing at me from downstairs.

"Rebecca Elaine Chadwick! What are you doing up there? We're going to be late!"

"Coming, mom!" I call back. I try to keep the irritation out of my voice, but it's hard. My mother can be really aggravating.

I leave the turtleneck on but change out of my skirt into my jeans, then pull on a pair of black suede ankle boots. Dashing into the bathroom to brush my teeth, I glance in the mirror and decide to give my hair one last run-through. As long as I'm doing that, I figure I might as well fiddle with my mascara and eyeshadow, too. Megan and I agree that it's always best to put a little effort into how you look, because you never know who you might run into. Finishing up with a fresh coat of gloss on my lips, I grab my purse and head downstairs.

"Really, Becca," scolds my mother, who is waiting with Gram in the front hall. "You need to learn to be more punctual."

I give her a rueful smile and nod earnestly. I've learned that the best way to deal with my mother is not to argue, but just to agree with everything she says. She's not really mad at

me, anyway. She's mad because November was our month to host book club, but everybody voted to have it at Cassidy's.

We won't be meeting again until January – we decided to skip the holidays since our schedules are all really hectic – so we're choosing Secret Santas tonight, and everybody thought it would be more festive to do that at the Sloane-Kinkaid's. The minute the Thanksgiving turkey's cleared off the table, and sometimes even before, Cassidy's mother whips out the Christmas decorations. She has her own TV show – *Cooking with Clementine* – and since their house is the set, they're on a different schedule than the rest of the world.

My mother's been simmering about this for weeks.

"It's like she has a bunch of elves hidden in the garage or something," I heard her grumble to my father a couple of nights ago. "It's not humanly possible to decorate that fast."

My father, who like me finds it easier just to go along with my mother, didn't even look up from the paper. "Yes, dear," he murmured. "Elves, dear."

"Oh for heaven's sake, Henry," my mother snapped back. "There are no such thing as elves!"

You just can't win when it comes to my mother.

"Hey Becca, would you give this to Emma for me?" asks my brother, galumphing down the stairs.

I make a face when I see the title. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Gak! Who reads this stuff? Besides my brother and Emma, I mean?

Stewart grins and lopes off across the hall to the living room. He knows I think he's a dork. The annoying thing is, he doesn't care.

My mother hands me my jacket impatiently, then pokes her head in the living room after him. "I hope you two boys manage to have fun without us."

"Don't worry, we're well-fortified," my grandfather replies, scooting a plate of turkey sandwiches to the center of the coffee table, well out of Yo-Yo's reach. Yo-Yo is our Labradoodle. He's pretending to snooze by the fireplace, but one eyelid is cracked open and one large furry ear is cocked toward the table, and I can tell that those sandwiches are on his radar screen. "Plus, we have some fun of our own planned," Grampie continues, nodding at the Scrabble board that he and Stewart are busy setting up.

I smirk at my brother, and this time his face flushes. Rearranging letters to make words – are you kidding me? This is supposed to be fun? Besides, who wants to play a BORED game when there are perfectly good TV shows to watch?

My father sneaks up behind us. "Arrggh!" he growls, tickling my mother in the ribs.

She shrieks and jumps. "Henry!"

He grins. Slipping on his eyepatch and cap, he asks, "Can an old seadog offer three lovely wenches a ride?"

"No way," I tell him. That's all I need – to be seen driving around Concord in the Pirate Pete-mobile.

"Such a shame you have to work tonight," says my grandmother.

My father shrugs. "I guess some people prefer pizza to turkey, and besides, it pays double time and a half plus tips." He gives my mother a kiss on the cheek. "Have fun, dear."

He heads down the hall to the garage, and Gram and I follow my mother out the front door.

“Concord is so pretty at night,” sighs my grandmother, tucking her arm through mine.
“Especially this time of year.”

She’s right. The tree won’t be up in Monument Square for another week or two – there’s always a holiday parade in early December, along with a big tree lighting ceremony – but a lot of the shop windows on Main Street are already decorated for Christmas. A few even have wreaths on the doors. Not Pies & Prejudice, though, the tea shop that Megan’s grandmother opened last month. Megan’s mom made sure of that. She hates the commercialism of the holidays, and Megan said she made Gigi promise she wouldn’t get sucked into it too early.

The plan is to meet at Pies & Prejudice for breakfast tomorrow before we head out on our shopping trip. Afterwards, my mom and Mrs. Wong are going to hold down the fort while Gigi hits the sales with Gram and Megan and me.

Just thinking about tomorrow makes me want to dance down the street. I love to shop, and the day after Thanksgiving is like the Kentucky Derby or something for people like me. I’m still smiling as we turn down Hubbard Street to Cassidy’s.

“What a beautiful old house!” says Gram, pausing at the entrance to the brick walkway that leads to the Sloane-Kinkaid’s Victorian. It really is a cool house – it even has a turret. And last year Cassidy’s mother had it restored to its original color for an episode on her TV show.

“If you like houses that are painted dog-tongue pink,” says my mother with a disdainful sniff.

I saw the paint cans in the garage, and the official color is actually Sonoma Sunrise, not dog-tongue pink. There are two shades for the trim, too – Lemon Meringue and Wedding White. I think it looks great.

Mrs. Sloane-Kinkaid calls their house a “painted lady.” That’s the term for Victorian homes that are painted more than one color, she told us.

“All that gaudy gingerbread!” scoffs my mother, casting a baleful glance at the fancy woodwork under the eaves and along the porch railing. Mrs. Sloane-Kinkaid explained all about gingerbread, too – she says it’s kind of like jewelry, the perfect accessory for a painted lady. I totally agree. I’d love it if our house had gingerbread on it, but fat chance of that.

Everything about our house screams “traditional!” Boring is more like it.

“I prefer the simplicity of Colonial architecture to Victorian froufrou,” my mother says loftily. “It’s much more in keeping with our historic town.”

“I don’t find it gaudy, Calliope,” says Gram. “I think it’s perfect.”

Me too, but I know better than to say so. My grandmother is about the only person on earth who can contradict my mother and get away with it.

My mother surveys the front porch, noting the pumpkins and wheat sheaves piled by the front door and the turkey flag hanging from the rafters. There’s not a Christmas ornament in sight. “There’s no reason we couldn’t have had book club at our house,” she sputters.

“Clementine didn’t find time to decorate after all.”

The door flies open before we can knock. “Ho ho ho,” says Mrs. Sloane-Kinkaid as we step inside.

“Wow,” I reply. The front hall looks like Santaland at Macy’s.

My mother blinks, then scowls. “Elves,” she mutters.

“Lovely,” says Gram, looking around. “Just lovely.”

A garland of fresh cedar greens embedded with twinkle lights is twined around the entire length of the banister leading upstairs, and a matching one outlines the arched entry to

the living room. Red velvet ribbon is wrapped around the coat tree, around the legs of the hall table, and around the staircase balusters. More ribbon is tied in bows on the chandelier overhead. Cassidy's least favorite of her mother's decorations, what she calls the weird mannequins, stand on either side of the door leading to the dining room. The boy mannequin is dressed as Santa, of course, and the girl as Mrs. Santa. They're holding signs that read: "Welcome mother-daughter book club!" As a final touch, there's a clear glass bowl filled with red and green ornaments – and more twinkle lights – on top of the hall table, and two large red-leaved poinsettia plants flanking the base of the stairs.

"It's so nice to see you again, Grace," says Mrs. Sloane-Kinkaid, taking my grandmother's coat. "We're just tickled that you could join us."

My grandmother smiles. "Wild horses couldn't keep me away from Sunday Night Lunch."

In the Betsy-Tacy books, the Ray family eats their main meal at noon on Sundays, so they always have sandwiches for supper. Mrs. Sloane-Kinkaid thought my grandmother would get a kick out of it if we used their term for the meal for our book club meeting tonight. She was right, because Gram is beaming.

"Except it's Thursday night, and nobody's hungry," mumbles my mother, obviously not willing to let the whole Christmas decoration thing go.

"Who's not hungry?" asks Cassidy, jogging down the hall from the kitchen. Murphy, her family's scruff-muffin of a dog, is right at her heels, and her little sister Chloe is perched on her shoulders. "I'm starving. What took you guys so long?"

"Cassidy," her mother chides. "Don't be rude."

"I'm not being rude, just honest." She grins at us.

Cassidy Sloane is always hungry. She eats like a horse and never gains an ounce. It's totally not fair. I know it's because of all the time she spends at the rink, but still, I'd kill for her figure. She's built like her mother, tall and lean. Mrs. Sloane-Kinkaid used to be a model, a famous one, and Cassidy and her older sister Courtney obviously got her genes. As my eyes slide over to my mother, I can't help hoping that in my case maybe the family genes will skip a generation.

"BECCA!" Chloe squeals. She's eighteen months old, and does a lot of squealing.

"Chloe!" I squeal back, reaching up for her. I'm one of Chloe's regular babysitters now that Cassidy is so busy with her hockey team, the Lady Shawmuts, and with Chicks with Sticks, the girls' hockey club she coaches.

I give her a kiss and Chloe pats my turtleneck. "Ooo," she says, and gives it a kiss. Everybody laughs.

"See if you can teach her to say 'cashmere,'" calls Gigi from the living room, where she's sitting with the rest of the book club. "The girl's got good taste,"

"Mother!" protests Mrs. Wong.

Gigi winks at me.

"I like your outfit, too," I tell Chloe, running my finger over the brown velvet headband that's nestled in her blonde curls.

"*Oui, mademoiselle*, you look *très chic*," adds Megan. She switched to French this year at school, leaving me without a study partner in Spanish class. Gigi put her up to it. She loves everything French.

Chloe grins at us. She's still dressed in her Thanksgiving outfit: brown velvet leggings and a matching dress with a pattern of autumn leaves on it. She looks adorable. But then, Chloe always looks adorable. She's the cutest little kid I know.

I carry her into the living room and pause by the sofa. "Hey, Emma." I pass her the book of poems my brother gave me. "Stewart asked me to give this to you."

"Thanks," she replies, taking it from me.

Chloe spots Jess sitting next to Emma and starts to squirm. Jess babysits for her too, when she has time. She's a lot busier this year at Colonial Academy, the fancy private boarding school here in Concord that she goes to. She's there on a full scholarship, thanks to my mother, who's on the Board of Trustees and who recommended her for it. My mother always wanted me to go there, too, but fat chance of that. Not with my grades. Homework is not on my Top Ten List of Fun Things to Do. Which is fine, because Colonial Academy is a girls' school, and I would rather shave my head than go to a school that didn't have boys in it.

I hand Chloe to Jess and move closer to the fire that's blazing on the hearth.

"Everything looks just beautiful, Clementine," says my grandmother, glancing around at all the greenery and glowing candles.

"It smells good, too," I add, taking a deep sniff. I love holiday smells – pine, cinnamon, yummy things baking in the oven. I think if I had to pick one time of year as my favorite, this whole stretch from Thanksgiving to Christmas would be it.

"I'm just sorry we didn't get the tree up in time for you," says Mrs. Sloane-Kinkaid.

"The crew wasn't able to squeeze it in before they left yesterday."

My mother shoots my grandmother a knowing look. "Elves," she whispers.

"I'm glad there's no tree yet," says Mrs. Wong. "Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday, and I like to savor it. There's too much rush-rush these days."

"I know, Lily, and I agree with you," Cassidy's mother replies. "If I didn't have the holiday special to film this weekend, I'd have waited another couple of weeks to decorate."

"I don't mind if Christmas hurries up this year," says Jess.

Of course she doesn't. That's because she gets to spend it with Savannah Sinclair and her family, skiing in Switzerland. She's been talking about nothing else ever since she found out she was going. Savannah is a Senator's daughter, and she and Jess roomed together at Colonial their freshman year. Things didn't go so well back then, but they got over it and now they're good friends. This year, the two of them are in a quad with Adele and Frankie, Jess's other best friends at Colonial, and all three of them are going with the Sinclairs to Switzerland for the holidays.

We're probably going to be stuck here in boring old Concord. My family was supposed to go on a Christmas cruise with the Wongs, but we had to cancel after my dad lost his job.

"Soup's on, ladies," says Cassidy's stepfather, appearing in the doorway with a tray of mugs.

Cassidy's older sister Courtney is right behind him. She's carrying a platter of sandwiches, and so is the guy who's with her. I don't recognize him, but I figure he must be Courtney's boyfriend, because Cassidy's been talking about how her sister was planning to bring him home for Thanksgiving. I size him up. Tall, athletic-looking, sandy hair, brown eyes. Megan looks over at me and lifts an eyebrow in approval. I raise one back in silent agreement: seriously cute.

“Where are my manners?” cries Mrs. Sloane-Kinkaid, springing to her feet. “Book club – meet Grant Bell.”

Courtney’s boyfriend grins. “Hi.”

“Hi,” we chorus back.

Courtney tucks her arm in Grant’s and smiles up at him as her mother goes around the room making introductions. I can’t help feeling a pang of envy. Does everybody in the world have a boyfriend but me?

Stanley clears his throat. “On the menu tonight, we have Clemmie’s famous carrot yogurt soup, plus Mr. Ray’s famous turkey-and-stuffing sandwiches – cut bite-size, for delicate appetites.” He suppresses a shudder as he points to the second platter. “And these, uh, other sandwiches, too.”

“The secret to good onion sandwiches,” says Mrs. Sloane-Kinkaid, swinging into TV chef mode, “is to use only the best bread, lots of sweet butter, and Bermuda onions that have been sliced paper thin and sprinkled with vinegar – I used an herbed rice vinegar – plus salt and pepper, and allowed to marinate for at least an hour.”

In the Betsy-Tacy books, onion sandwiches are a staple at the Ray family’s Sunday Night Lunch. They sound totally gross to me, and by the look on his face, it’s obvious that Stanley thinks so too.

“Hope somebody brought breath mints,” mutters Cassidy.

“And a killer dessert,” adds Emma.

“Emma Jane Hawthorne!” says her mother.

Emma smiles sheepishly. “Sorry. I’m sure your sandwiches are really good, Mrs. Sloane-Kinkaid.”

“Actually, there is a killer dessert,” says Cassidy’s mother. “I made fudge.”

“Oh, good!” says Gram. “It wouldn’t be a true Deep Valley party without fudge.”

Mrs. Sloane-Kinkaid passes her the platter of onion sandwiches, and she selects one and takes a bite. “Mmm – nice and crisp and light. Just the thing after a big Thanksgiving dinner.”

The sandwiches make their way around the room to mixed reviews.

“Sheesh, Mom, these are *awful*,” says Cassidy, gagging.

“No kidding,” I gasp as my eyes start to water.

“Surprisingly good,” says Mrs. Hawthorne, and Megan nods in agreement. “I like them too,” she says.

Megan has a cast iron stomach. You’d have to, to survive her mother’s cooking. Anything probably tastes better than the tofu-infested casseroles Mrs. Wong is always dreaming up. I used to dread going to Megan’s house after school, because there were never any decent snacks. I mean, kale chips? Who serves kale chips to elementary schoolers? All that changed, of course, when Gigi came over from Hong Kong to live with them. Megan’s grandmother is a fabulous cook.

“I guess nobody ever kissed anybody back in Deep Valley, did they?” Cassidy says, leaning over and breathing in Jess’s face.

Cassidy!” Jess fans the air indignantly with her napkin.

I set my onion sandwich aside and concentrate on the mug of soup, which is delicious. I didn’t think I’d have room for dessert, but when Mr. Kinkaid reappears with a plate of fudge, there’s no way I can resist. Cassidy’s mom’s fudge is almost as good as Gram’s.

“Shall we get down to business here before we pick our Secret Santas?” asks Mrs. Hawthorne. She always likes to get down to business.

Megan nudges me with her foot under the table. I nudge her back. The two of us have hatched a plot to make sure we're each other's Secret Santas.

"First of all," continues Mrs. Hawthorne, "I'd like to introduce our honored guest. I hope you've all had a chance to meet Becca's grandmother, Grace Gilman, who is the reason why we're reading the Betsy-Tacy books this fall. Mrs. Gilman, perhaps you'd like to tell us a bit about your relationship with the series."

Gram looks around the room, smiling. "I am so thrilled that the 'Winding Hall of Fate,' as Betsy calls it, led me here to your meeting tonight! I can't remember a time when I didn't know about the Betsy-Tacy books. I guess when you're a girl, and you're from Minnesota, it's pretty hard not to. Maud Hart Lovelace was born and raised in Mankato, which is just a hop and a skip from my hometown of St. Peter."

"Do you have a favorite?" asks Gigi.

Gram doesn't even hesitate. "*Betsy and Tacy Go Downtown*," she replies. "I adore that book. Aspiring writer Betsy getting her Uncle Keith's trunk to use for a desk; meeting the fun-loving Mrs. Poppy; and of course the wonderful Christmas shopping trip." Her eyes crinkle around the edges as she looks over at Megan and me. "My guess is that unlike Betsy and Tacy, though, you girls will be buying more than just ornaments tomorrow, right?"

"Oh yeah," I reply, slapping Megan a high five.

"I loved *Downtown*, too," says Mrs. Delaney. "I especially love the way Betsy's parents support her dreams of being a writer, and let her go to the library all by herself, and out to lunch at a restaurant, too."

“Me, too,” says Emma. “That was my favorite part. Well, that and Mrs. Poppy – I love her! She’s so cheerful and ...” Her voice trails off as her gaze wanders over in my mother’s direction.

Mrs. Poppy is built kind of like my mother, on the large side. Actually, Mrs. Poppy is a whale. A really nice one, but a whale. She and her husband own a hotel in Deep Valley, and she loves to eat.

Fortunately, my mother is too happy thinking about the book to realize the direction Emma was going in. “And of course we can’t forget Winona eyes,” she adds.

“What are Winona eyes?” asks Cassidy.

Mrs. Sloane-Kinkaid frowns. “Didn’t you read *Betsy and Tacy Go Downtown?*”

“Um,” says Cassidy.

“Cassidy! You promised!”

“Mom – I told you, I hardly have time to tie my shoes these days!”

Gram explains to her about how the girls tried to hypnotize Winona into taking them to the theater by staring at her. “Let me demonstrate for you,” she says, goggling intensely at Cassidy, who laughs.

“Let’s talk about the boys,” says Mrs. Delaney. “Who’s Team Tony and who’s Team Joe?”

In the high school books, there are these two guys that Betsy Ray likes – well, there are more than two, actually, but the main ones are Joe Willard, who’s handsome and super smart and a good writer but kind of stand-offish, and Tony Markham, who’s handsome and funny and a good dancer but a little on the wild side.

I'm Team Tony, of course, and so is Megan. Jess is Team Joe, like Emma – no big surprise there. Cassidy thinks the whole idea is stupid and refuses to choose.

"I guess I'd have to say I'm Team Tony," says Gram. "How could anyone resist a T. D. S.?"

"What's a T. D. S.?" asks Cassidy, and her mother's mouth drops open.

"Cassidy Ann Sloane!" she exclaims. "You haven't read *Heaven to Betsy* either?"

Cassidy squirms a little. "I started it."

Mrs. Sloane-Kinkaid closes her eyes and shakes her head. "I apologize for my daughter, Grace. After you bought her the books and everything."

"Cassidy, you've got to read them all!" says Emma. "They're really good."

"Will you all please get off my case?" grumbles Cassidy. "It's not that I don't want to, it's just that seriously, between hockey and school, I've got my hands full."

My grandmother leans forward and pats her knee. "No need to explain yourself to me, dear. School has to come first. And hockey, too. T. D. S. stands for 'tall dark stranger' – Tony Markham, the mysterious boy who shows up at Deep Valley High School."

"Kind of like Tristan Berkeley did last year at Alcott High," says Megan, and Cassidy turns bright red. She does not like to be teased about Tristan.

"What I want to know is how the Deep Valley girls all stay so slim," says her mother, taking pity on her and changing the subject. "They're always eating! Muffins, cake, banana splits at Heinz's!"

"Don't forget fudge," says Mrs. Delaney, helping herself to another piece.

"You must remember that it's the early 1900s," says Mrs. Wong, who always takes everything seriously. "There aren't very many cars and the girls walk everywhere. Plus, a *valley*

implies that there are hills, so that would give them even more exercise, too." Mrs. Wong loves geography.

"Thank you, Lily," says Mrs. Hawthorne, pulling a sheaf of papers out of her tote bag. Among them are maps of Deep Valley, which she distributes to each of us, along with a second handout. "You've just provided me with the perfect introduction to this month's fun facts."

FUN FACTS ABOUT MAUD

1. Maud Hart Lovelace was born on April 26, 1892, in Mankato, Minnesota. "I lived the happiest childhood a child could possibly know," she once said. She drew on those happy childhood memories for the Betsy-Tacy series.
2. She knew very young that she wanted to be an author someday. "I cannot remember back to a year in which I did not consider myself to be a writer," she once recalled. "I remember following my mother around as a tyke, asking her, 'How do you spell "going down the street"?' See? I was writing a story already."
3. When Maud was ten, her father printed a booklet of her poems, and at eighteen, she sold her first story to a magazine. She grew up to write a number of short stories and historical novels for adults, but today is best known for her books for young readers.
4. *Betsy-Tacy*, the first of the Deep Valley books, was published in 1940. It was an instant success, and was followed by nine others. *Betsy's Wedding*, the final book in the series, was published in 1955. Maud also wrote three additional stories set in Deep Valley: *Winona's Pony Cart*, *Carney's House Party*, and *Emily of Deep Valley*.
5. Deep Valley is based on a real place – Maud's hometown of Mankato – and the characters are based on people she knew growing up, including her best friend Bick Kenney, who became Tacy Kelly in the book. If you travel to Mankato today, you can

tour Maud's and Bick's homes, which are right across the street from each other, just as Betsy's and Tacy's are in the books, and you can sit on a replica of the hillside bench where the real-life Maud and Bick, as well as their fictional counterparts, would often meet.

"It's just like Louisa May Alcott and the Orchard House here in Concord," says Emma.

"Louisa based her characters on real people too."

"Maybe you'll end up writing about Concord and all of us someday," Megan tells her.

My mother gets a funny look on her face at this. She's probably thinking about Emma's father and *Spring Reckoning* again. Mr. Hawthorne is a writer, and my mother is convinced that one of the characters in his novel – not a very flattering one – was based on her.

Cassidy reaches over and prods Emma with her toe. "I guess I'd better be nice to you so you don't talk trash about me in all those books you're going to write."

"Maybe we should give you Winona eyes to make sure you don't," I suggest, and we all stare at Emma solemnly until she starts to laugh.

Mrs. Sloane-Kinkaid glances at her watch. "I hate to break up the party, but it's been a long day, and we have to get up at the crack of dawn to drive to Rhode Island."

"Yes, of course!" says Mrs. Hawthorne. "I totally forgot about the hockey tournament. Are you girls ready to choose your Secret Santas?"

We nod, and she pulls a Santa hat out of her tote bag, along with a pile of pens and three-by-five cards. Megan's mom starts passing them around.

"Let me remind you how this works," says Mrs. Hawthorne. "You'll each choose a name, and you will become that person's Secret Santa for a week. Seven days – seven presents. Keep them small, okay? No spending a lot of money."

"I would encourage you all to think about homemade gifts," says Mrs. Wong.

"Fat chance," mutters Cassidy, who hates crafts. I smile at her. My feelings exactly.

"When will we find out who our Secret Santas are?" asks Jess.

"At our next meeting."

"We have to wait until *January*?"

Mrs. Hawthorne nods. "Probably. We moms haven't had a chance to check our calendars and set a date yet."

"I have a snoggestion," says Gram. "Snoggestion" is another of my grandmother's favorite terms, along with "Winona eyes." It's what Betsy Ray's father calls a really great suggestion. "If you're interested, that is. Some of my friends back in Cleveland are big Betsy-Tacy fans, too, and every year we have an ornament exchange. We pick names, just like you're about to do, and then look for ornaments that have something to do with one of the books to give to each other."

"Sounds like fun," says Mrs. Delaney.

"Especially if you made the ornaments," adds Mrs. Wong.

Megan's eyes slide over to mine. Her mother can be like a dog with a bone when she gets going on something.

"You could have them be the final Secret Santa gift, and give them to each other at our next meeting when we do the Big Reveal," says Mrs. Sloane-Kinkaid.

Mrs. Hawthorne nods. "Good thinking, Clementine." She peers over her glasses at me and my friends. "Girls? Are you in?"

"Wait a minute," says Gigi. "How come they get to have all the fun? I think the grown-ups should give each other ornaments, too."

After a quick vote, Megan's mother passes out 3X5 cards to all of them, too.

Megan and I exchange a surreptitious glance as we write down our names on our cards. We made a pact as soon as we heard about the whole Secret Santa idea, mostly because we know each other so well, and this way we'll be able to pick out great stuff. The plan is to turn down one of the corners on our card, so that when we reach into the hat we can feel around for it.

But something goes wrong.

Megan picks first, and when she pulls out the card and looks at the name on it, she flicks me a sharp glance and shakes her head, one really quick, almost invisible shake.

Uh-oh, I think. That can't be good. Who did she pick, if she didn't pick me? And even more importantly, who am I going to get stuck with?

Not Cassidy, I plead silently as the Santa hat makes its way slowly around our circle. *Please please please don't let me pick Cassidy.*

Besides the fact that I have no idea how to shop for someone who never uses makeup or wears jewelry, and who forgets to use deodorant half the time, and thinks about nothing but hockey, I really, really don't want to be forced to buy presents for my crush's crush. I've liked Zach Norton since kindergarten and if it weren't for Cassidy, I know he'd like me, too.

I reach into the hat and grope around for a card with one of its corners turned down. But since I'm the last one to pick, there's only one card left.

I pull it out.

I turn it over.

My heart sinks.

CASSIDY.