



THE  
*Wintree  
Waltz*

By Lauren Doyle Owens

*Presented by the Arbor Teas Summer Reading Series*



### ARBOR TEAS SUMMER READING SERIES

Get ready to steep yourself in a story! The Arbor Teas Summer Reading Series presents an original work of fiction by a different author each year. Released one chapter per week, each serialized novel is meant to be enjoyed all summer long by tea-lovers and non tea-lovers alike. Why? Because next to iced tea, nothing goes better with summer than a good read. Enjoy!

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## Chapter 1

**A**t 9 a.m., the house was empty. The morning light crept in where it could, squeezing through the vertical blinds in the kitchen, underneath the summer draperies in the living and dining rooms, and causing the panel of stained glass on the front door to glow. In the center of the dining room table sat a teapot, newly rescued from the Treasure Mart. A treasure indeed. It was porcelain and gold-etched, and stained on the inside from many years of use. On its lid sat a gold fairy whose wings had long ago broken off; without them, she resembled an amused woman, her head cocked coquettishly, her chin resting in her palm.

To Elaine, who had spotted the teapot on a high shelf at the crowded store, the fairy looked like someone. Whom? Herself as a younger woman? One of her daughters? A friend she had had once?

And then, she remembered:

“My grandmother had one just like it,” she excitedly told her daughter when she’d brought the teapot home.

“Cool,” her daughter had said, grabbing an apple from the kitchen and walking away.

“Let’s have some,” Elaine had said, holding up the teapot as an offering.

“I have to go,” Erin, her beautiful youngest daughter said. She was always having to go.

And so the teapot just sat there, unused, all through the weekend and on Monday too, when all the residents of the Wintree home passed it on their way out the door:

Edmund, to his Monday morning golf foursome.

Elaine, to the animal shelter where she volunteered four days a week.

Jean, into the woods, to shoot photos for an art project before opening Retna, the photography shop where she worked.

And Erin, to her first day at her new job as a barista at Mighty Good Coffee.

Clara, the eldest daughter, who lived in an apartment in Kerrytown, did not pass the teapot that morning, but should not be left out. She is as much a part of the family as the Wintree dogs – Barney, an aging golden retriever, and Feisty, the three-legged terrier that Elaine insisted she was fostering, not adopting – and the cats, who came and went as they pleased through the dog door in the kitchen.

It was just about summer. Soon, the trees that had just dropped their blooms would explode with the greens of maple and oak, and glow like emeralds in the afternoon sun.

Now, today, in an old Subaru handed down from her sister, Jean changed out of her hiking boots and into her ballet flats. She took off her hat and ran a hand through her hair, teasing her bangs in the rearview mirror. There hadn't been time for tea that morning and so she'd have to move through her day, or at least the rest of the morning, unaided. This would be difficult any day, but lately it felt impossible. She had been getting up early and working late all that spring, going out into the woods to photograph the season as it unfurled each day – the snow melts of March, the muddy swells of April, the ripening of May.

She shot from sunrise until just before she had to open the shop. Most days, she'd stop at Mighty Good and grab a cup of tea to warm up before walking down the street to open Retna, where she'd sit behind the counter until her relief showed up at 3. Afterwards, Jean would spend the rest of the day in her studio, a repurposed shed behind her parents' house, paging through the hundreds of photos she'd shot each day, digitally correcting her favorites, and then choosing one photo a week to be printed on heavy, untreated paper. She would then paint over her photos, sometimes adding elements (a cardinal in a tree, a line of marching ants), other times she'd simply enrich the color of the original shot with hues of blue, brown, yellow, grey and green. Jean wasn't sure what these images would become, or how the project might evolve. But she worked on them until about 8 every night, until it was time to sleep so she could wake up in the morning and do it again.

In a few weeks, the project would end with the season. Then, a new project: a summer wedding, where she, inexplicably, was the bride. There was much to do, and she and John both had been largely distracted – Jean with her photos, and John with his last, grueling, year of medical school. So John's mother had booked the caterer, compiled the guest list and selected the place settings, while bride and groom submitted themselves to the process the way a patient might undergo a procedure, silent but willing.

~ ~ ~

They had met only the year before, when John came into Retna to find a lens for his Nikon.

She didn't notice him, not the way she had noticed her ex when they first met at an NYU bar that sold cheap and sudsy beer. John was just a customer, a guy with a good camera who didn't know how to use it.

"I don't like to carry a lot of lenses," he said. "I just want one lens that can do everything."

"What do you mean by everything?" she asked.

"I want it to be able to do what my eye does."

"Ah," she said, all well knowing the frustration. There was not a single camera lens that could do everything. There was nothing that could duplicate the magic of the human eye.

"The kit lens you have is good," she said of the 24-85 mm lens that had come with his camera. "If you want something with more of a zoom, you can get this 28-300 millimeter," she said, bringing the lens out of the case and handing it to him.

"It's heavy," he said, feeling the weight of it with his hand.

"There's a lot of glass in that lens."

"Do you have anything lighter?"

"Have you considered getting an iPhone?" she said, with a smirk she didn't try to hide.

"Seriously, though. This is it?"

"That's your do-it-all lens, yes."

"Can you show me how to use it?"

She took his camera, detached the kit lens and slid the 28-300 mm into place. As she went over the finer points of aperture and shutter speed, she realized that he was watching her, but not paying attention.

"How'd you learn all this?" he asked.

"I was a photography major at NYU."

"What do you do now?"

"Now I work here," she said, not wanting to divulge anything else about herself – her work, her striving, the fact that she lived in her parent's attic.

"You didn't say 'what about you,'" he said as she ran his credit card through to complete his purchase.

“What?”

“I’m a med student, third year.”

“Okay,” she said. She was used to these types, the unprompted braggarts.

“Do you want to have dinner with me sometime?”

“Sorry,” she said. “I have a boyfriend.”

Only she hadn’t, not anymore. And when John came in a second time, to exchange the lens for something that would do better in lower light, he asked her again to dinner and this time she said yes.

They went to dinner that night, at an eccentric French-Taiwanese place that served spiced frog legs in coconut broth and lemongrass escargot. The food was interesting but unfulfilling and they ended their date at Blank Slate Creamery, eating sundaes out of waffle cones. The Ann Arbor Art Fair was underway and they walked through it, more interested in each other than any of the artwork on display.

“I’d like to show here one day,” she told him. “When I came back from New York I thought I’d do better here, in the smaller pond of Ann Arbor, but... even here it seems you have to first be somebody in order to display your work. They don’t want unknowns.”

“How does one become known?” he asked.

Jean shook her head. “All I know is to keep working. The work is all I can control. Everything else... I leave up to fate.”

“I admire that,” he said. “In med school, you keep working and then, if you work hard enough, you become something.”

“Right,” she said. “With art, there’s no assured path.”

“But it’s more fulfilling. More exciting.”

“I guess that depends on what you find exciting. What kind of things do you want to shoot? With your camera, I mean.”

“Birds,” he said. “I want to shoot birds.”

With this, he’d piqued her interest. Most people didn’t notice birds much less want to photograph them.

“Maybe we can go for a hike sometime,” she said, “I can give you a lesson.”

“Really?” He took her hand and spun her around so she was looking at him.

“Sure,” she said with a shrug and added, “no big deal.”

But it was a big deal because it’s where they began.

And now they were here – they were getting married! This should have excited Jean but instead it terrified her. He proposed in front of her parents on Christmas

morning. There was the tree and the lights and the coffee spiked with eggnog. There was a big, sparkling diamond and before she could think, she found herself saying yes. And then there were mothers, and dresses to choose and try on, and cakes to taste. She had blinked and she was engaged. She would blink once more and would be a bride. She was almost afraid to blink a third time, to think of what would come next. But John assured her that she could have the life she wanted, that she could be and do anything. So long as she was his wife. That he would stand beside her, so long as she stood beside him.

~ ~ ~

Behind the counter at Retna, Jean flipped through one of the bridal magazines John's mother had dropped off there for her the week before along with a list of the things that still had to be decided:

Flowers – Centerpieces! Bouquets! Boutonnieres!

Drinks – Are you having a signature cocktail or not??

Food – We still need to finalize things with the caterer. Let's meet for lunch soon.

YOUR CAKE – Really, Jean. Just pick something already or I'm going with lemon coconut and I know how much you hate coconut!

She was reading about the 19 types of bridal bouquets, when her sister Erin walked through the door, a coffee in each of her hands.

"Bless you!" Jean said, accepting the coffee.

"It's my first attempt at a pour-over," Erin said. "There are way too many ways to make coffee now."

"Oooh, pretty!" Erin said, pointing to a posy bouquet of pink peonies in Jean's magazine.

"Pink peonies are the height of feminine sophistication," Jean read, a tinge of sarcasm in her voice.

"So feminine! So sophisticated!" Erin said, holding her coffee out in front her and taking a bride's slow steps.

"I have to pick something, like, yesterday," Jean said of the flowers.

"What are our colors again?"

"I'm wearing white. You're wearing Contemplative Ocean."

"Just do white roses."

"Fancy wants something that pops," Jean said, using her nickname for John's mother.

“I saw a wedding on TV once where the bride carried a bouquet of half lemons. That would pop.”

“Ew! What a bitter start. I’d rather carry a bouquet made from little sugar packets!”

“Or maybe just a jar of honey?”

“Now you’re talking!”

The girls erupted in laughter and Jean threw the magazine across the room.

“Take that, Fancy Nancy!”

“You’re so lucky,” Erin said after a while. “I’d kill for a guy like John.”

“You’re twenty. You’ll have plenty.”

“John’s special though.”

“He is,” Jean agreed. “His mother, however, is a piece of bloody work!”

As if on cue, Nancy walked through the door.

“Nancy!” Jean said, standing straighter than she had been.

“How are you dear?” Nancy said, stepping over the magazine and walking toward the sisters.

“Good,” Jean said. “You remember Erin.”

“Of course,” Nancy said, offering Erin a thin smile.

“To what do we owe the pleasure?” Jean asked.

“I made us an appointment with the caterer for today at three. It’s the only time he could do it. I hope you can make it.”

“I don’t leave here until three.”

“That’s fine,” Nancy said. “You can be a few minutes late.”

~ ~ ~

The caterers used to run a small restaurant in town, but closed it once they had kids. They now ran a busy catering business out of their small, west side home while their kids ran wild through the house and yard.

Jean had visited with John once before to discuss the menu, but nothing had been decided.

“So today’s the day!” Davis said, plunking a menu down in front of Jean.

“We’ll do a selection of four different canapés alongside a selection of three cheeses and seasonal fruit during the cocktail hour.

“Then, a soup – either vichyssoise or asparagus – and then a seated dinner.”



“Okay,” Jean said, looking not at Davis but Nancy.

“I love a vichyssoise!” Nancy said. “It’ll be perfect for July.”

“Then an option of either pork, salmon or a mixed mushroom sauté for the vegans.”

“Are there many vegans?” Nancy asked, looking as though she had just tasted something awful.

“A few,” Jean said, and added, “My sister Clara’s a vegan.”

“Oh,” Nancy said with a sharp shrug.

“It’s very common now to offer a vegan option. And of course all of the sides will be vegan.”

“Will the vichyssoise also be vegan?” Nancy asked, incredulously.

“I’ve yet to find a vegan vichyssoise that I like,” Davis said.

“Neither have I,” Nancy said, satisfied.

“So let’s taste!” Davis said, clapping his hands. With that, his wife Donna brought out a tray with two plates and two small glasses of vichyssoise.

After they tasted everything, and agreed upon the menu, Davis brought out a tray of six different cocktails.

“Now, I know you haven’t settled on an accent color yet, but I figured maybe these cocktails might provide some inspiration. Here we have a blood orange gin sparkler, a hibiscus prosecco, and a green tea gimlet with citrus syrup. That covers the bride’s love of gin and prosecco,” Davis said, nodding to Jean. “For John, we have a lemon shandy, and an Arnold Palmer spiked with vodka. Lastly, we have an iced jasmine tea sweetened with blackberry syrup, which is non-alcoholic.

“So!” Davis continued, “You have your pink, your green, your purple, your yellow and your red. I’ll leave it to you ladies to taste.”

As Davis spoke, Jean nervously turned her engagement ring around on her finger. It was a nervous tick she didn’t realize she had: she’d turn it around and around and sometimes take it off and try it on different fingers. She hadn’t eaten much that day besides the food they had tasted, and was afraid of getting bombed with her mother-in-law.

Still, she tasted: first the blood orange sparkler, because she liked the color, and then the green tea gimlet, because she was curious. Then, the hibiscus prosecco, which she didn’t love, and the shandy, which she found refreshing.

“What do you think dear?” Nancy asked.

“I like the orange,” she said, “and the shandy.”

“I don’t like the idea of having beer as a signature cocktail,” Nancy said of

the shandy. “And you’re right. The red will pop nicely against your blue bridesmaids dresses. Blood orange it is!”

~ ~ ~

“What’s a canapé anyway?” Elaine asked Jean that evening. They were sitting in the kitchen, around a pot of Kukicha, a Japanese green tea that Elaine promised Jean would give her just enough energy to get through her day and wouldn’t keep her up that evening. The alcohol had gone straight to her head and she came home ready for bed.

“It’s just a small hors d’œuvre, like a mini quiche or smoked salmon on a crustini.” Jean said.

“My daughter’s getting fancy!” Elaine said, pointing her pinky in the air for emphasis.

“I feel a bit...out of my league,” Jean confessed. “Nancy is very...sophisticated.”

“Is ‘sophisticated’ a new word for bitchy?” Elaine asked.

“Mom!”

“I’m sorry dear... and I think it’s a front. She’s a person like anyone else. You just have to get to know her. Wait for her to drop her guard.”

“How can I do that?”

“Become her friend. Try to. And don’t let her know that she intimidates you. Women like Nancy Birnbauer thrive on intimidation.”

“Can I confess something?”

“Of course!” Elaine said, taking her daughter’s hand.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. Elaine gave Jean a side-glance before rising to answer it.

“Mrs. Birnbauer!” she said. “What a surprise! Come in!”

“Jean left this at the caterer’s,” she said, proffering Jean’s engagement ring between her thumb and forefinger.

“I didn’t even realize it was missing,” Jean said, a little embarrassed. She slipped the ring back on her finger.

“You have a habit of twisting it around your finger, of taking it off and putting it back on,” Nancy said, looking down at Jean. “You really must be more careful. It’s insured but irreplaceable.”

“Sit down and have some tea with us,” Elaine offered.

“No thank you. I have to get back,” she said. “I’m sure I’ll see you both soon.”

And with that, she was gone.

“Do you think she heard us?” Jean whispered.

“Of course not!” Elaine said. “The windows were closed.”

“She’s always turning up at the worst times. I don’t know how John stands it.”

“Like all men, he’s probably blind with love for his mother. As all kids should be,” she said with a wink. “Now what were you going to tell me, dear?”

“Nothing...” Jean said with a sigh.

~ ~ ~

After tea, Elaine moved into the kitchen to prepare dinner, Jean went into her studio to sort through her photos from the day, and Erin emerged from her bedroom, exhausted from an afternoon of studying. She had changed majors twice now – from engineering to biology to movement science – and was taking a summer course to catch up. She knew the course would be condensed but hadn’t realized the workload she was taking on. She was already working at Mighty Good and volunteering twice a week in UM’s Occupational Therapy Clinic. Erin had started volunteering ostensibly because it would help her chances of getting into a good grad school. Secretly, though, she did it because she had a small – tiny! microscopic! – crush on her sister’s fiancé. And so when he suggested that she volunteer, she jumped at the chance. Now that she was working and volunteering and going to school, she was beginning to regret her decision. Plus, she never even saw John; his clinicals had him rotating around the hospital, and never toward her.

Erin sat down at the dining room table and felt the teapot to see if the tea was still warm. It was, and she poured herself a cup of the bright green elixir.

Erin smelled the tea and drank it. It was mild, grassy, slightly bitter. She poured herself another cup and drank it down.

Within seconds, she heard her sister’s voice: Can I confess something?

“What?” Erin asked, turning in her chair. She expected to find her sister behind her, but save for a sleeping cat, the room was empty.

And then: Do you think she heard us?

Erin looked around again. She heard her mother in the kitchen. Jean was likely in her studio. Erin’s eyes settled on the fairy atop the teapot. She could swear she saw her wink.

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## Chapter 2

**E**rin woke the next morning with her sister's voice in her head:

*Can I confess something?*

*Do you think she heard us?*

Erin was certain that *she* was her. But she racked her brain over what her sister had confessed, what she was keeping from her. In the shower, it dawned on her, something she had known all along:

Jean didn't love John.

Just like that, she heard her sister say:

*Can I confess something? I don't want to get married. I like him but... I don't love him. What am I going to do?*

Jean didn't love John! Of course she didn't! They were completely wrong for each other!

Poor Jean! Erin thought. Poor John!

Poor tall, handsome, affable, successful John!

What was she going to do?

Nothing, she told herself. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

There was nothing *to* do. She couldn't *tell* him, she didn't know – not really. She couldn't talk to Jean about it. Couldn't confess her crush. No. She would simply have to wait it out. Wait for fate to take its course.

In the kitchen, she grabbed an apple and a handful of almonds, which she scarfed up on the way to the hospital.

~ ~ ~

As a volunteer at the Occupational Therapy Clinic at the University of Michigan Hospital, Erin was in charge of ushering patients between the waiting room

to the patient and therapy rooms where they met with doctors or received therapy. The patients in the OT Clinic were recovering from surgeries, strokes and falls, or learning how to live with debilitating injuries; and so Erin would wheel them, guide them, or simply walk beside them, providing a calm and steady arm. She'd been doing this now for months, and so she knew most of the patients she encountered there, and they knew her.

One of her favorites was Jim, a machinist who had lost two of his fingers in a work-related accident. Though he needed no help getting there, Jim insisted Erin escort him from the waiting room to the therapy room, where he was learning to use his hand again. Jim would tell her dirty jokes and stories she doubted the validity of, but nonetheless enjoyed. Today it was a story about his first wife, Marie, who, he said, had worked as a mermaid at a roadside attraction in Florida before moving to Michigan to marry him. "She had a shock of red hair, and eyes fast as lightning. The way she'd look at you..." Jim said, trailing off. "So the first time I see her she's underwater, in this tank where they put the fake mermaids who have to hold their breath and smile while moving their legs to make their tails sway," he said, emulating swaying with his uninjured hand. "So I'm thinking, 'This is a beautiful girl. How can I get her to talk to me?' And all of these other people are around, these tourists looking in at her like she's some kind of freakshow attraction... I can't shout, there's a thick pane of glass between us. So you know what I do?"

"What?" Erin asks. They're three doors away from the therapy room, but he walks slowly, gestures with his hands.

"I get a sign and I write, 'Meet me for dinner. Lipmans 7 p.m.' I said seven, see, knowing that the attraction closed at six. I should mention that I was a good-looking guy then. The kind of guy a good looking woman might be willing to meet out of the blue."

"So did she?"

"You bet she did! A month later we were married."

"That's a good story," Erin said.

"Yeah, but it has a terrible ending," he said.

Erin was coming to find that most of Jim's stories did. She left him with his therapist and walked back to the waiting room, keeping an eye out for John, as she always did when she was at the hospital. As a third-year med student, he did clinical work throughout the hospital, his rotations changing every few weeks. So far, though,

he hadn't been assigned to OT. And even if he was, Erin knew, she'd simply offer him a blushing hello like the lovesick schoolgirl she was.

Again, she heard her sister's voice, *Can I confess something?*

It had to have been about John. What else could she possibly confess?

Erin, of course, had a world of secrets:

One, she loved her sister's fiancé.

Two, she was beginning to think that she didn't even want to work in physical therapy, which would have deemed her junior year of school a complete waste of time and money.

And, three, perhaps most embarrassing, she now believed the fairy atop her mother's teapot to be in possession of certain supernatural powers. The fairy had winked at her, after all. The fairy had told her a secret.

Erin was thinking of the teapot later that afternoon as she walked home. She thought she'd brew a pot of tea herself and see what the old fairy had to say. But when she got home, she was stopped halfway up the walk by Parker Cole, a neighbor who'd graduated from Pioneer High School a year behind her, and who, it seemed, had returned home for the summer. The hatch on his Honda was open in the Cole's driveway and Parker had put down a box of something to run over to greet her.

"Hey!" he said. "Erin Wintree!"

"That's me!" Erin said.

"Howareya?"

"Good," she said, "Just getting home from the hospital. I'm volunteering at the OT clinic."

"Cool, cool," he said. "Still doing engineering?"

"Nope! I'm studying physical therapy now."

"That's cool," he said. "Change your mind 'til you settle on the right thing."

"Tell that to my parents!" she said.

"Were they mad about it?"

"No," she said, thinking back.

"So you might be surprised by this but I've been thinking about you. The whole way home I thought, 'I wonder what Erin Wintree is up to this summer...'"

Erin didn't know what to say, so she said nothing. Maybe she blushed.

"So anyway, I thought maybe we could get together sometime and catch up."

"Sure," Erin said. "OK."

“OK! Great!” Parker clapped his hands together and stared at her.

“So...um...call me?”

“I don’t have your number,” he said, pulling his phone from his pocket. Parker unlocked his phone and handed it to her, so she could put her number in.

So, she had a date. A date was good. A date would take her mind off of John. Plus, Parker was cute, in a boyish college sophomore way. In an ‘age appropriate’ way. In a ‘date for your sister’s wedding’ way.

Erin sighed, and pushed into the house.

She found her mother in the kitchen, pouring water into the kettle, and her sister at the table.

“You’re all red!” Elaine said. “Did something happen?”

“No! God, I am?” she said, bringing a hand to her cheek.

“As a beet!” Jean said.

“What happened?” Elaine asked.

“Nothing,” Erin said. She wanted to slip into her room but it was too late. She was on their radar.

“Parker from next door asked me out.”

“That’s great!” Elaine said.

“He’s cute!” Jean agreed.

Elaine cut the heat from the kettle just before it began to whistle.

“Have some tea with us,” Elaine told Erin.

“Can’t. I have to study.”

“Then you should definitely have some tea!” Jean said. “Mom gave me some yesterday and it helped get me through the rest of the day.”

“Fine. Pushers,” Erin said, dropping her bag by the door and pulling a chair out from the table.

“So tell us what happened!” Elaine said, carrying the teapot to the table.

Erin recounted the story for them as the fairy looked on, not winking at all.

“I love it!” Jean said. “Where are you going?”

“Don’t know. He’s going to call.”

Just then, a text came through on Erin’s phone, which was still in her bag by the door.

“It begins!” Elaine said, rubbing her hands together.

“Mom gets off on this stuff,” Jean said, rolling her eyes but smiling.

“I do not!” Elaine said. But added, “Now all we have to do is find a guy for Clara!”

~ ~ ~

There is, Erin thought, nothing more awkward than going on a date with your next door neighbor. First, because you lived next door to one another, there was no reason to meet out; one had to pick the other up. Then, there were the families, who’d all known each other so long; the mothers would keep you longer than you wanted to be there, making small talk and assessing the match. There was no way around it, Erin thought. Parker was picking her up at seven.

Until then, she had to read three chapters from *Intraoperative Neurophysiological Monitoring*, and do the practice tests at the end of every chapter. She did so at the dining room table, her textbook open out in front of her, the teapot in the center of the table, quiet as a stone. As she read, Erin couldn’t help but watch the fairy – had she moved, just then? Did she have anything else to say?

After three hours and two practice tests, Erin put her head down and groaned. She was too distracted, and hadn’t absorbed any of the information. If she failed this class, she’d fall even further behind. She’d be lucky if she escaped the class with a C. She’d be happy with a C too. It was a sad state of affairs...to be happy with a C. But such was the state of her college career. She had always done well in school – was good at science and math, and so she’d started by studying engineering, only to drop out of the program before the end of her second year, when it was time to declare a major. She took a semester of biology courses before becoming bored and moving onto the School of Kinesiology and finally declaring a major. Now, after spending twice a week at the OT Clinic, she wasn’t so sure. Was it enough to help people like Jim regain the use of their hands? She had always thought she’d do more.

Just then, she felt a hand on her shoulder, her father’s.

“How’s it going, kid?”

“I’d rather not say,” she said, not to him but into her book.

“Just remember that a class is not a career. You might not ever do this stuff again. But you have to at least know about it.”

Erin looked up at him now. Had her father *always* known just what to say?

“Thanks Dad.”

“How’s the volunteer gig going?”

“It’s fine.”



“You’re a woman of few words lately!”

“Sorry dad.”

“I hear you have a date with the Cole kid later.”

“I do.”

“Where are you going?”

“Not sure.”

“Well, don’t break his heart. We have to live next to those people.”

And there was a third reason not to date your neighbor! And a fourth – you couldn’t feign illness.

~ ~ ~

Two hours later, Erin was in her bedroom, pulling clothes from her closet, holding them up in front of her, and tossing them onto her bed. Jean passed her bedroom on her way down from the attic just as Erin was trying on a pink and white plaid blouse.

“You look good in pink,” Jean said, peering in.

“You think?”

“I’ve always thought so. Do you know where are you going?”

“No. He’s younger than I am so probably the roller rink.”

“Whatever you do,” Jean said, “don’t see a movie. There’s nothing more awkward than sitting in a dark theater with a stranger.”

“But he’s not a stranger.”

“For this purpose he is.”

“What are you doing tonight?” Erin asked.

“I’m meeting up with John later for dinner. Why? You want to double?”

Yes! Erin thought. No! But said: “Nah. You don’t have to escort your kid sister on a date.”

“Remember this is supposed to be fun.”

With that, Jean left Erin alone, standing in front of the mirror in her pink blouse. Pink doesn’t look good on anyone, she thought, and turned once again to her closet.

Erin heard the back door close from the kitchen and watched out the window as Jean walked toward the shed that served as her studio. She looked back down at the mess of clothes on her bed. There was nothing here that she wanted to wear. And

so she climbed the stairs up to her sister's attic bedroom and let herself in.

The attic had been rather haphazardly turned into a bedroom when Jean returned home from New York, their father having retired and taken the bedroom that Jean had shared with Clara for his office, which he called a study. (None of the Wintree women were sure what happened in the study, but Erin was pretty sure her father went there to read the paper and illicitly smoke cigars.) In the attic, there was a bed in the corner and a chair by the window. All of Jean's clothes hung on an open rack or were stuffed in a small bureau, both of which Elaine had found at the Treasure Mart.

Erin stood in front of the rack, paging through her sister's wardrobe as though she herself was shopping in a thrift store. Her sister was at once practical and feminine, and sophisticated in a way that Erin could only hope to be. There was no pink here. Only a pallet of black, navy, and burgundy. Erin selected a silk burgundy tank dress and held it up into the light. It had pockets in the front but was otherwise plain. She walked over to the mirror and held it up in front of her. The color was so deep a spilled glass of wine would disappear into it. It, unlike the pink, looked great against her skin, which was still recovering from the long Michigan winter. Erin looked again through her sister's wardrobe and selected a denim jacket to wear over the dress. She should have asked first, but didn't have time. She took the jacket and dress and carried them downstairs. Jean had everything, Erin thought. She wouldn't miss this.

~ ~ ~

Parker studied chemistry at the University of Maryland. "Another UM," he said. They were walking through downtown Ann Arbor, with no specific destination. The streets were just beginning to crowd with tourists, townies and theatergoers, all searching for a meal.

"Look," he said, pointing to a small blue rectangle painted at the base of a building. "A fairy door."

"A what?"

"A fairy door! You've seen them."

Erin looked down at the rectangle. It had two small wooden stairs leading up to it, a red heart-shaped peephole and a tangle of gold garland stenciled around it.

"God, I miss it here," he mused.

“I’ve never seen one of those ever.”

“Sure you have!”

“Nope. This is my first.”

“They’re all over the place. My sister and I used to hunt them.”

“You used to hunt fairies?”

“No, silly. Fairy doors.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Whoever found the most had to buy the other ice cream.”

“Didn’t you know where they were after a while?”

“New ones are always popping up. The one we just saw – I’d never seen that one before.”

“Do you think they’re real?”

“What? The *doors*?”

“The fairies,” she said cautiously.

“No!” he said, incredulously. “I thought you were supposed to be smart.”

“Supposed to be,” she said with a frown.

“You look really nice tonight,” he said, taking her hand. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“So what’s Maryland like?”

“It’s OK. I mean the parties are fun. The sports teams are good, but... there’s no place like home.

Erin made a show of tapping her heels together.

“Do you wanna get something to eat?”

“Sure,” she said.

They ducked into Ashley’s, a pub neither was old enough to be in. There weren’t any tables available so they sat at the bar.

“It would suck to be a vegan in this place,” Erin said, looking down at the menu.

“Oh my god,” Parker said. “You’re not a vegan are you?”

“No, my sister Clara is. I just have a habit of scanning menus for her.”

“I don’t remember Clara.”

“She’s old. I mean, she’s the oldest.”

“Where is she?”

“Kerrytown.”

“You Wintree girls don’t go far, do you?”

“Jean went to New York for a while, but she’s back now.”

He shrugged. “Couldn’t hack it?”

“I’d never say that,” Erin said.

Just then, someone put their hands over Erin’s eyes. She turned around to see Clara, John and Jean behind her.

“Hi!” Erin said, hugging Clara. “I was just talking about you!”

“Good things, I hope.”

“Nope. Horrible things.”

“What are you guys doing sitting at the bar?” Jean asked.

“There weren’t any tables.”

“We have a table,” John said. “You should join us.”

“They’re on a date!” Jean said, elbowing him in the ribs.

By then, Erin had turned about as deep red as the dress borrowed from her sister. She attempted to cover it by closing the jacket a little tighter, but it was no use. The jacket was Jean’s too.

“Nice jacket,” Jean said with a wink.

“Thanks,” Erin said, looking down at her lap.

“Let’s leave Erin alone,” Clara said. “Have a nice date, you two,” she said over her shoulder as the threesome walked away.

“I wonder what they were doing together,” Erin said.

“Checking on you?”

“No,” she shook her head. “So anyway, where were we?”

“You were telling me about your sisters,” he said with a grin.

~ ~ ~

Across the restaurant, Clara, Jean and John settled into their booth. Clara and Jean chatted conspiratorially while John watched the door. They were meeting a friend of John’s for dinner and Clara was looking for an out.

“She looked bored, didn’t she,” Clara asked.

“Who?”

“Erin!”

“She looked fine. She looked great in my dress!”

“She might need me to rescue her.”

“Don’t be silly,” Jean said. “Erin can take care of herself. *You* on the

other hand...”

“There he is,” John said, standing to greet his friend.

Clara gave a pleading look to her sister, who had coerced her into coming on this date.

“Rob!” John said, taking his friend’s hand. “This is Jean – she’s mine – and Clara, the sister.”

“That’s me,” Clara said with a wry smile. “I am the sister.”

“Hello, Clara,” he said, taking her hand into both of his and holding them for a second too long.

“Clara’s a vegan,” John said, “so already we can’t eat here.”

“Oh,” Robert said, hesitating before sitting down.

“That’s okay,” Clara said. “I will have a beer and French fries and atone for it tomorrow.”

“That’s the spirit!” Jean said, opening her menu.

“So you’re not a health-nut vegan,” Robert said.

“Not tonight!” Clara said, smiling easily.

“Clara’s an environmental, health-nut, animal-freak vegan,” Jean said.

“That about covers it,” Clara said.

“I admire that,” Robert said.

“I believe I’ll have a steak!” John said, closing his menu.

Jean smiled at him and looked back and forth between Robert and Clara.

“I will also have a beer and fries and salad and... fish tacos?” Robert said, raising an eyebrow.

“Are you asking me?” Clara asked. “Eat what you like!”

“Okay,” he smiled, and Clara noticed that his teeth were large and slightly crooked.

They settled in over their beers and John explained that he and Robert had gone to Greenhills, a local prep school together. “But then he left town for college with the rest of the cool kids,” John explained.

“Where’d you go?” Clara asked.

“Caltech.”

“Oh!”

“It’s the most impressive thing about me,” Robert said. “It’s all downhill from there.”

“I doubt that!” Jean said, a little too loudly.

“What are you doing here?” Clara asked.

“Work. I got a fellowship to study elliptical galaxies at UM.”

“Oh,” she said, her eyes and mouth going wide.

“They’re round and dim; their shapes are less defined,” he said, drawing an ellipsis on the table with his finger. “We think that they’re the end of the line, in terms of a galaxy’s evolution. The hypothesis is that our galaxy will collide with another spiral galaxy and become an elliptical galaxy some day.”

“Oh,” Clara said, nodding.

But Robert continued: “Because the light is so old, so dim, they’re harder to see, harder to study. We can see spirals like the Milky Way very clearly. But not the older ellipticals.”

“Like a young pop star versus an aging starlet,” Jean said.

“Sure,” Robert said. “But they have great equipment at UM. So hopefully I’ll be able to see more. Learn more about them.”

“Good,” Clara said. Their beers came and she took a long sip of hers.

~ ~ ~

On the other side of the restaurant, Erin and Parker split a burger and drank a pair of Cokes. Afterwards, they walked down to Pinball Pete’s, an arcade that had been in Ann Arbor as long as they both could remember, and poured about \$5 worth of quarters into a game of Donkey Kong. They then walked home through the UM campus, which was just about empty for the summer. When they approached home, Erin saw that her house was lit up, and that both Clara’s and John’s cars were in the driveway.

“Oh god,” she said, stopping in front of her house. “Everyone’s at home. They’re probably watching out the window for us.”

“I don’t see anyone,” he said, looking up to the house.

“Do you mind if we say goodnight now? Quickly?”

“Sure,” he said, and gave her a quick hug.

“Thanks for the burger.”

“Thanks for the company,” he said. “Maybe we can do it again sometime.”

“Maybe we’ll hunt for fairies.”

“Fairy *doors*.”

“Fine,” she said. “Fairy doors.”

In the house, three pairs of eyes, three smiles. Jean saying, “That dress looks great on you.”

“Sorry,” Erin said, tentatively.

“Don’t be,” Clara said. “She’s getting her just desserts. Used to borrow my things without asking *all* the time.”

“I’ll wash it for you.”

“Dry clean,” Jean said. “You’ll dry clean it for me.”

“Me-ow!” Clara said.

“How was the date?” Elaine asked.

“It was fun. Is there any tea?”

“Always,” Elaine said. “I’ll get you a cup.”

“I’ll get it.” Erin said. “What were you guys doing out anyway?”

“Jean’s trying to *match make* me,” Clara said.

“He’s a great guy!” Jean called. “Clara’s just too picky.”

“You should all be picky!” Elaine said.

“Where’s John anyway?” Erin asked.

“With Dad in his study, not smoking,” Jean said.

“So who’s the guy?” Erin asked.

“A friend of John’s from grade school, Robert Stone. He just moved back from California,” Jean said.

“Oooh, Robert Stone,” Erin said. “Is he a newscaster? A comic book villain?”

“Better!” Jean said. “He’s an astronomer.”

“Did you like him?” Erin asked Clara.

“He’s OK. A little boring, maybe.”

“He was gaga over Clara,” Jean said, raising her eyebrows.

Erin sat with them and drank her tea, the last from the pot. It was sweet and spicy. She looked down at the teapot fairy with her broken wings, thought of the fairy doors hidden around Ann Arbor and wondered what else she’d been missing all her life.

THE  
*Wintree Waltz*  
By Lauren  
Doyle Owens



## Chapter 3

Clara walked into Eberwhite Woods, trailing a line of 20 nine year olds. Each had a facsimiled piece of paper and a partner. Together, they were to find and identify 10 types of plant species native to eastern Michigan. This was always one of the last projects of the school year, not because it wasn't warm enough to bring the kids out, but because the ground was usually very muddy all through spring. Now, though, the ground was firm enough for hiking; or, as her fourth graders were doing, running.

"Slow down!" Clara called. "Stay with your partners!"

Despite the stress of bringing 20 children into the woods, this was her favorite project of the year. It was a chance to get her kids out of the classroom and into the world around them. It was also a way for Clara to experience her true love – hiking, trees, wilderness – during the school day. Each year, as soon as summer hit, Clara strapped her kayak on top of her car and set off into Northern Michigan, for tent camping and paddling around the great lakes. This year would be different, of course, with her sister's wedding, but she'd still get a few weeks to herself. And a few weeks under the stars was worth a whole year of living in Kerrytown and teaching the fourth grade. Not that she didn't love her kids – but she loved her freedom more.

"Look!" a student held a caterpillar up to her. It had bright green fur and black antennae. It would become a moth.

"Careful," Clara said. "Don't squish it."

"What should I do with it?"

"Put it down somewhere it can't be stepped on."

"Like where?"

"Over there," she said, pointing to a spot just beyond the trail.

The boy ran to that spot and back to her, tripping over a root along the way.

"I put it under a leaf," he whispered, "so it'd be left alone."



“Good thinking,” Clara whispered back.

“OK, everyone, gather around,” she said, using her Teacher’s Voice, which was just shy of a shout. “We only have two hours here today and in two hours you have to find ten species of native plant life. Two of those plants are vines, three are trees, and five are wildflowers.”

“Do we get a prize if we get them all?” a girl asked.

“No.”

“What if we get them all first?”

“I’ll think about it,” Clara said.

“So,” she said, “work with your partners, walk slowly on the trail, and keep your eyes open. OK, hop to! All the trees and vines and flowers are that way,” she said, pointing up the trail.

The kids took off and she followed them, walking slowly behind her 20 fourth graders, and sipping Irish Breakfast from the tumbler she’d mercifully remembered to pack. Because the elementary school was adjacent to the woods, she often walked through the woods each afternoon during the fall and spring, before returning home to Kerrytown. On evenings and weekends Eberwhite was full of runners and dog walkers, but in the afternoon it was usually empty. On most days, the light would filter through the old-growth oaks and hickories, so that she was standing in a green, glowing room in the spring, and a piece of polished amber in the fall. It was a slight bit of magic in an otherwise ordinary day, and although the forest was small, and the trails too suddenly opened up into the neighborhoods surrounding it, it was still the best part of her day. And so she took the wooded detour before walking the two miles north to her apartment in Kerrytown, where she’d make a small dinner for herself, and crack open a book. She usually read a few things at once. She kept a novel by her bed, a book of short stories in the bathroom and a work of nonfiction in her living room. She was now reading *The Invention of Nature*, a collection of Kate Chopin’s short stories, and *Sense and Sensibility*, which she read a page or two of every night before falling asleep, sometimes with the book on her face. This had been her habit for years, and although she’d never meant to, she’d settled into a quiet, happy life for herself, which was fine for her but irked her mother, she knew.

The Wintree girls had all grown up with a strong sense of family, which is why – probably – none could get away from Ann Arbor for long. Each saw each other regularly, and the entire family sat down together for dinner every Sunday. Her

parents were both only children, who'd grown up in quiet, lonely households. And so the pendulum had swung the other way – if Elaine could have, she would have had ten children. She longed, Clara knew, to fill the house with grandchildren, a new generation to raise on tea and chatter. Thank god Jean was getting married. It would sate Elaine's appetite – at least for a little while.

“Look!” a student said just as she was approaching the stream that gurgled through the park, “Yellow trout lilies!”

“I want one!” another responded.

“No picking!” Clara shouted after them. She jogged up to them so that she could get ahead of the crowd. “What's principle number four of Leave No Trace?” she asked, using her Teacher's Voice and holding up four fingers.

“Leave what you find?” the caterpillar boy answered.

“Yes! And what does that mean?” She asked one of the girls.

“No picking?” the girl responded with an exaggerated shrug.

“Yes. No. Picking. Now,” Clara continued, “does someone want to tell me why we found the Trout Lily here, in the lowlands?”

“Because trout eat them?”

“No...” Clara said, looking at the stream and then back at the patch of drooping yellow lilies, which were at least five feet away.

“Because lilies need water!” someone said.

“And...” Clara begged.

“The lowlands are wet,” another called.

“Yes!” Clara said. “Very smart. OK, onward,” she said, pointing over the bridge and up toward the fallen oaks.

In the center of the forest, Jean stood behind a large dead oak, waiting for the fourth graders, her camera at the ready. Clara had mentioned she'd be bringing her students here when they had dinner over the weekend and Jean pictured students kneeling along the trail, looking closely at leaf patterns and petals, and couldn't resist the opportunity to shoot them for her photo project. But she didn't want her sister to know that she was there, spying on her fourth grade field trip, so she pulled her rig deep into the brush and hid behind the large tree. She could hear them – fourth grade must have been the loudest grade – but couldn't yet see them, until, one by one, the kids came up the trail. Jean zoomed in on the children, and snapped away,

stealing something from them as she did – their peace? Their sense of autonomy and solitude? Did children even have a sense of autonomy? Did they have a right to themselves? She shook her head, and continued zooming and snapping, capturing the children as they made slight Os with their mouths, and stood on their knees, and pointed with their small hands. She heard one call out “Poison ivy! That’s a vine!” And Clara call behind him, “Careful!”

Jean imagined vines snaking up the trees, and mice hiding in them, making themselves known on occasion by poking an eye, ear or nose out of the brush. She imagined mice watching the kids, with practiced quietude. She imagined snakes diving deep into the earth. And birds high in the trees, watching it all, patient as spiders.

Jean was snapping freely when she heard something in the brush behind her that caused her to jump. The children heard it too, as did Clara. Everyone stopped what they were doing for a minute, and listened. Jean felt her pulse in her ears. Once, many years ago, a black bear was found in these woods. It was tranquilized and carted off to the woods of Northern Michigan. They were kids then, and they thought about the bear, where it had come from, and whether it had been taken far from its family. Had the bear returned? Jean wondered. Could there be another? Through her camera, she watched Clara – her sister’s face, her eyes – and wondered if she was thinking the same thing. The children were watching her too, waiting for her cue, and in a second, she smiled and continued walking.

Within ten minutes, the parade of fourth graders had passed, on their way deeper into the forest, and Jean had shot more than 500 photos. She waited until the kids would be out of earshot before packing up. As she waited, she took her camera from its tripod and scanned the woods behind her, looking for the bear. But it wasn’t a bear that had made the noise. It was Robert, the friend of John’s they’d set Clara up with. She saw him plainly through her telephoto lens, and he saw her. He froze at first, then gave a shrug and a smile and started toward her. “Stop,” Jean lipped, holding her hand up to him, and he froze in his tracks. She waited, watching him, and he waited, watching her. When she was sure Clara’s students had moved far enough away from them, she beckoned him over, and he started walking her way, looking once behind him, toward Clara, and then in front of him, toward Jean.

“What, pray tell, are you doing here?” she asked.

“Hiking,” he said with a smile. He was handsomer than she remembered. Or

maybe he was just more confident than he'd been at dinner the other night.

"I thought your type only came out at night," she teased.

Robert shrugged. "Things don't get started for me until the fall semester, so I've got a lot of time to kill. I didn't realize your sister taught here. I had to hide behind a tree so she wouldn't see me. I wouldn't want her to think I was stalking her," he said with a laugh.

"She doesn't know I'm here either," Jean said. "She'd kill me if she knew I was photographing her kids."

"Why are you?"

"Art."

"As the eye is formed, such are its powers," he said.

"What?"

"It's Blake," he said. "It just means that you create from your vision... Somebody else might see a field trip. You...see art."

"Exactly," Jean said. "Well said."

"I had fun the other night," he said. "Your sister seems great."

"She is great."

"I'd like to see her again."

"You should call her."

"I'm not...sure she'd want to go out with me, just me. I don't think I made a very good impression."

Although Jean wouldn't say it, he was probably right. Clara *had* said he was just "OK" after their double date. Not exactly a ringing endorsement.

"I could tell you liked Clara," she said. "I knew you'd be good for each other."

"I think so too!" he said, a little overzealously.

"Hmmm," Jean said, pursing her lips and tapping her forehead. "Why don't you come to dinner Sunday night at my parent's house."

"At your *parent's* house?"

"Yes. It's very chill. Very...ordinary. No big deal."

"Are you sure?"

"Don't worry. I'll let my mom know you're coming. She'll be thrilled."

"OK!" he said, game for it. "What can I bring?"

"Just bring your lovely self," she said. "And maybe some wine."

~ ~ ~

But the moment she invited him, Jean forgot. And so she spent the rest of her week working, shooting, editing photos, painting and working some more, until, early Sunday morning, she heard her mother say, “What should we do for dinner?” At the time, her mother wasn’t even in the room. It was as though the walls had asked, as though the room itself was predicting the question. She heard her mother’s voice, but her mother was still asleep upstairs.

Jean looked down at the dogs, at Barney, who slept at her feet, and Feisty, who slept at his, and said, “Where’s mom?”

Barney looked at the stairs with his eyes only, as if to say “still asleep.”

“Go wake her up,” Jean whispered, and Barney stood up, shook, and rushed up the stairs, and Feisty quickly followed.

Within minutes, the dogs barreled back down the stairs and Elaine and Edmund followed.

“Good morning, dear,” Elaine said, “you’re up early.”

“Not early enough,” Jean said, making a hyperbolic grimace. “I forgot to tell you something.”

“What’s that?”

“I invited Robert Stone to dinner.”

“Who’s Robert Stone?” Edmund asked.

“The friend of John’s that we like for Clara.”

“Oh, good,” Edmund said, already distracted by the newspaper.

“When?” Elaine asked.

“Tonight.”

“Tonight!” Elaine said.

“Should I call him and cancel?”

“Of course not,” Elaine said. “Just help me plan the menu.”

“Can’t,” Jean said, standing. “I’m meeting John. We’re looking at a house.”

“A house!”

“I meant to tell you,” she said. And with that, she grabbed her bag and left the house.

“Why would they be looking at a house?” Elaine asked, sitting down.

“You don’t expect them to live in the attic, do you?” Edmund asked.

“No but...they’re just kids, what do they need a house for?”

Edmund shrugged and looked down at the paper. Elaine went into the kitchen to figure out breakfast.

“Is there any tea in that pot?” she asked.

“No,” he said, lifting it. “It’s empty.”

Elaine put the kettle on, pulled cream cheese and salmon from the refrigerator, and sliced a couple of bagels.

“Maybe I can get Erin to help me,” Elaine said.

“I’ll help you!” Edmund said, putting the paper down. “If we’re going to marry off our daughters we’ll do it together.”

“Don’t be cynical,” Elaine said.

“Don’t be cynical about what?” Erin said, groggily coming into the kitchen.

“We’re having a party!” Edmund said. “An old fashioned English ball.”

“Your father’s joking,” Elaine said. “Jean invited the fellow she likes for Clara to dinner tonight.”

“Oh,” Erin said, opening the refrigerator and staring into it.

“Why don’t you bring your beau,” Edmund said. “Eight for dinner and dancing!”

“Does Clara know?” Erin asked, pouring milk into a bowl of cereal.

“Well I should think...” Elaine said, carrying their breakfast to the table. “I’m sure Jean would have told her. I’ll text her to make sure.” But because there was a cup of tea in front of her, and not a phone, Elaine forgot. She planned her dinner, and made two lists – one to take to the store, the other, a to-do list for Edmund to follow. It was a proper summer day, after all, and it would be a proper summer night. Edmund was to clean off the back porch, get the grill ready, and string up the lights. And if he wanted to teach the kids to dance, then so be it.

THE  
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By Lauren  
Doyle Owens



## Chapter 4

**B**y six o'clock, the house was ready. The back porch had been cleared of pollen and cobwebs, and a couple strands of party lights had been strung up over the table, which wore a green tablecloth and a dozen votive candles. Her whole life Elaine had wanted this – a house full of people to cook for and talk to. For years they hosted faculty parties and poetry readings, sometimes in the same night – everyone they knew coming together to share food and ideas. But a good friend of theirs died several years ago, and two more moved away, and they'd gotten out of the habit. Now, though, Jean was back home and getting married, and their lives were expanding once again; becoming what Elaine wanted, and had missed, all these years. Still, she was nervous. It had been a while since they'd entertained, and she wanted everything to be perfect.

In the kitchen, she arranged vegetables around a bowl of hummus, and sliced a baguette. She had made gazpacho, and was going to pour it in small juice glasses to serve as an appetizer, something she had seen on television. Her roast was on the grill, and a vegan roast, purchased at the food Co-Op, would be reheated just before dinner. When everything was ready, Elaine went upstairs to change her clothes and run a brush through her hair.

None of her clothes were fitting lately, something she blamed on bread or menopause or both, but she hadn't yet given in to buying new ones. Luckily, it was summer, and she could get away with wearing the loose linen culottes she'd bought in Japan years before. Somewhere, she had a t-shirt that said "Oh my stars!" but thought it might be too heavy-handed, so she pulled on a soft black top.

"Not half bad," she said to her reflection.

Downstairs, she heard the front door open and close, and Clara's voice, calling her.

"Be right down!"

Elaine smoothed on lipstick and kissed her lips together with a smack.

Clara was standing at the base of the stairs as Elaine descended.

“Where is everyone?” she asked.

“I think the girls are in Jean’s room. Your dad should be outside, manning the grill. I have a vegan roast for you.”

“You didn’t have to do that. I brought some leftover tempeh from last night.”

“Oh!” Elaine said, noting her daughter’s casual dress – loose jeans, a Nancy Drew t-shirt, and a pair of Chuck Taylors. “You look...nice.”

“What’s going on here?” Clara asked, walking into the kitchen. “Oh god,” she whispered to her mother, “Fancy Nancy’s not coming is she?”

“No dear,” Elaine said, pouring gazpacho from the blender. “Here, try this.”

Clara smelled it. “Is there vodka in this?”

“Just a little.”

Clara tasted it. “It’s good. Now what’s going on?”

“Didn’t Jean tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

But it was too late. There was a knock on the door. The astronomer was prompt.

~ ~ ~

Clara’s eyes grew wide as her mother opened the door and Robert, the guy Jean had set her up with, stood on the other side, a bottle of wine in his hand.

“You must be Robert!” Elaine said. “Come in! I was just having Clara try the soup.”

“Hi Clara,” he said, stepping into the house and smiling broadly.

“Hello,” Clara said, stiffening.

“Oh,” he said, handing over a bag to Elaine. “Just some arugula and asparagus from my garden.”

“From your garden!” Elaine exclaimed, peering into the bag. “My, my.”

“It’s not really *my* garden. I’m renting a house in Water Hill. The garden was put in by the owners. But I’m putting it to good use!”

“You sure are!” Elaine said. “My goodness!”

Without missing a beat, Elaine whisked Robert in and sat him down at the bar, next to Clara.



“We were just talking about the interesting work that you do!” said Elaine.  
“Weren’t we Clara?”

“No,” Clara said, unconcerned with hiding her annoyance.

“It’s probably not interesting to everyone,” he said, nodding toward Clara.

“I bet it is!” Elaine said. “So tell me, what brings you to Ann Arbor?”

“I was awarded a post-doc fellowship to continue my studies of elliptical galaxies at UM.”

“Oh,” Elaine said. “That is interesting... What can I get you to drink?”

“I’ll have whatever Clara’s having.”

“What am I having mom?” Clara asked.

“Wine?” Elaine asked, determined to stay bright.

“I’ll have water now and wine with dinner,” Clara said, and turning to Robert,  
“You should know that the soup has vodka in it.”

“Only a little!” Elaine said.

“In that case cheers!” Robert said, holding his glass of soup up to Clara.

“I better go see what those girls are up to,” Elaine said, leaving them.

“You seem surprised that I’m here,” he said, turning to Clara. “Jean invited me. I hope it’s not too...”

“It’s fine,” Clara said, shaking her head. “It’s just that no one told me.”

“That’s awful,” he said. “Do you want me to leave?”

“Of course not,” she said. “It’s just dinner.”

“That’s too bad,” he said. “I was hoping we’d skip over that second date awkwardness and go straight to matrimony.”

“You’re joking,” Clara said, stiffly serious.

“Of course, Clara, of course.”

Twice now, he’d said her name. There was a certain intimacy to it. Lately, everyone called her Miss Wintree, or nothing at all.

“Cheers,” she said, lifting her glass of gazpacho to him.

And then it seemed that everyone was in the room with them, even the neighbor kid that Erin was seeing.

“Hi Dad,” Clara said, turning around to kiss her father.

“I have a surprise for you later,” he said, patting his breast pocket.

“I don’t smoke and I don’t like surprises,” she told him, loud enough for everyone to hear.

~ ~ ~

Upstairs, Jean had told Erin about her disastrous day spent house hunting with John and Nancy. “They keep looking at these terrible *McMansions*. Not me at all.”

“Why are you even buying a house now anyway?” Erin asked. “It seems like a lot of stress.”

“I know...” Jean said, shaking her head. “It’s Fancy’s wedding present to us. She wants us to be able to move in right after the honeymoon.”

“She’s buying you a *house*?” Erin asked, incredulous.

“Yes,” Jean said, furrowing her brow. “I don’t mean to be ungrateful but...it feels like too much.”

“*Way* too much! Where do they even get their money?”

“John says they invested well.”

“Well,” Erin shrugged. “You get a handsome doctor and a house and I get a C on my exam.”

“It’s not a contest,” Jean said.

“We’re sisters,” Erin said, “everything’s a contest. Now what have you got for me to wear tonight?”

“Just wear jeans,” Jean said. “It’s Sunday dinner, it’s not... Oh my god I forgot about Clara,” Jean said, covering her mouth.

“Don’t worry, mom told her.”

Downstairs, Jean could see from Clara’s expression that Elaine *hadn’t* told her, so she took her sister by the elbow and whispered, “I’m sorry.”

“I’m going to kill you,” Clara whispered back. “I’m going to kill you and bake your organs into a pie and feed it to John.”

“That’s very...precise,” Jean said. “It’s just that I bumped into him, and...he really is gaga for you.”

“He’s gaga for galaxies,” Clara whispered, widening her eyes for effect.

Just then, Edmund popped a bottle of champagne and sent glasses of it all around.

“A toast!” he said, lifting his glass. “To our first Sunday dinner of the summer. And to new friends,” he said, lifting his glass to Robert and then Parker.

“It’s like they’re trying to get rid of us,” Clara whispered to Erin. “I feel as

though I'm suddenly the extra daughter in a Jane Austen novel. And I don't even live here!"

~ ~ ~

Erin lifted her glass, happy to be partaking. "Cheers!" she said to the group, and separately (awkwardly?) to Parker, "Cheers."

"You guys really do Sundays well here," he said.

"Of course," Edmund continued, "this is also the summer our middle daughter marries our first son!" he said, lifting his glass to Jean and John. "So, let's toast again to Jean and John. May you get through these next few weeks with aplomb!"

"We will," John said, taking Jean's hand.

How lucky Jean was, Erin thought, to have him next to her.

After filling up on hummus and gazpacho, the party moved outside. It was just after seven and the sun had just fallen below the neighbors house, so the backyard, with its oak and hickory trees, glowed with evening light and several, early, fireflies.

"It's beautiful back here," Robert said. "Why aren't you guys having your wedding here?" Robert asked John.

"My mom had better ideas," John said.

"We're doing the rehearsal dinner here," Elaine offered. "You're welcome to come of course."

"Your mom has better ideas about everything," Jean said, taking a swallow of wine.

"What does that mean?" Clara asked.

Erin shot her a look of warning, but it was too late.

"She wants us to live in suburbia," Jean said.

"Well, just because she wants you to doesn't mean you have to," Elaine said.

"That's right," John said. "We can live wherever we want."

"Can we though?" Jean asked, looking at him.

"Of course!" John said.

"The roast is delicious mom," Erin said, changing the subject.

"Tell your dad," Elaine said. "He did all the heavy lifting."

"So! Parker," Edmund started, "how's Maryland?"

"It's good."

“What are you studying?”

“Chemistry.”

“You like it?”

“Sure.”

“Well good,” Edmund said, “that’s great! I have no idea how Elaine and I got surrounded by so many STEM people.”

“Dad teaches literature,” Clara explained, looking at Robert. “Mom’s a poet.”

“Really?” Robert asked, looking at Elaine.

“*Was* a poet. I haven’t written anything in years.”

“Once a poet, always a poet,” Edmund said. “It’s not a practice. It’s a manner of being.”

Erin watched as her parents exchanged a look that she didn’t know the meaning behind. Sweetness? Admiration? Her whole life, they’d had a separate, private language. She’d always assumed that this was what it was like to be married, which was, of course, why she wanted to get married. But she was pretty sure that John and Jean didn’t have that language, and she wondered if they ever would.

“I’m retired now,” Edmund continued. “Taught at UM for 30 years.”

“I’m there now,” Robert said. “Incredible astronomy department.”

“So I hear!” Edmund responded. “Maybe you can sneak us into the observatory sometime.”

“Maybe,” Robert said, looking at Clara. “What did you study, Clara, I never asked,”

“I studied English in undergrad and education in grad school.”

“Do you like teaching?”

“I like teaching here,” she said. “The kids are great.”

Robert nodded in admiration. “Well, your students seem to love you.”

Across the table, Jean’s eyes grew wide. She coughed, loudly, and took a sip of wine.

“What?” Clara asked, confused.

“I mean they must,” Robert said. “They must love you.”

“I hope so. Plus, it’s a great way to get summers off. I like to travel.”

“Where to?”

That summer, she was traveling twice, first to New Jersey to visit a friend who’d just had a baby, and then on her annual camping trip. She explained, “I drive

up to Mackinaw City and leave my car for a few weeks while paddling around the islands between Lakes Michigan, Huron and Superior.”

“That’s...amazing,” he said. “I’ll actually be up there for a week in July.”

“How’s that?”

“I’m meeting up with some friends in Munising. Conditions are going to be favorable to see the Northern Lights.”

“Wow,” Clara said, a bit dumbfounded.

Under the table, Jean kicked her, and, when Clara didn’t respond said, “You guys should meet up!”

“It’s a big region,” Robert said, shaking his head but smiling.

“And I probably won’t make it past the Les Cheneaux islands this year. I’ll be in New Jersey until July 1, so the trip is a bit squeezed.”

“Too bad,” Robert said.

“Yeah,” Clara agreed. She looked down at her plate and up at Jean, who hiccupped into her hand.

~ ~ ~

After dinner, Edmund stood and cleared his throat. He took a 3x5 note card from his breast pocket, looked down at it, and then up at his guests.

“It’s not every day we have an even number for dinner. It’s even more rare that we have a perfect gender split. You’ll recall that in Jane Austen, each ball culminated in a dance. The Regency Waltz, or English Country Waltz, as it’s sometimes called, requires an even number of participants, and, ideally, even numbers of men and women. Tonight, because we have both, I thought we’d have a little fun.”

“Oh my god he’s not serious,” Erin said, to no one in particular.

“So!” Edmund said, “if we can just move this table out of the way, and line up. I’ll tell you all how it goes.”

At first, nobody moved. Erin and Clara both shot panicked looks at their mother, who only smiled, shrugged, and stood.

“We’ll help with the table,” John said, motioning to Robert to take the other end.

“If you’ll remember your Jane,” Edmund said, “she didn’t give a ton of details about the kinds of dances that were done at her country balls. Only that

there *was* dancing and that who danced with whom, and for how long, was quite significant. But there won't be any scandals tonight," he said, looking pleased with himself, "We'll do a movie version of Jane, and a version of the Regency Waltz, with the women lining up on one side of the deck and the men lining up across from them. So! You stand across from your partner," he said, positioning himself in front of Elaine, "and bow – well, the men bow, the women curtsy," Elaine curtsied, for emphasis or demonstration, "and then, turn this way, toward the sunset," Edmund said, turning to face west, and taking Elaine's left hand into his right "and walk hand in hand," he called behind him, "taking two steps, rising up onto your toes, down, and walking back two steps, rising on your toes again, coming down, and turning to face your partner." He stopped for a second, facing his smiling wife. "Then, and this is where it gets fun, you turn and switch partners. So, if I'm standing here, and Robert is standing next to me, Elaine would dance with Robert, and whomever was dancing with the gentleman to my right, will dance with me. When you get to the front, simply walk to the back of the line and start over. Ready to get started?" He asked, looking up at his dinner guests.

Jean snorted. "Is this what you and mom do on weekends?"

"The idea is," Edmund continued, "you go around and around, and eventually come back to your original partner."

Erin smiled at Parker, whispered, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said, "We never do stuff like this at my house."

"Is everyone ready?" Edmund asked. He took his phone out of his pocket and pressed play, and a heavy, piano waltz started playing through the small telephone speaker.

Everyone lined up, four men across from four women.

"Now bow," Edmund said. "Now, face the sunset, take each other's hands, step, step, toe, go back, step step toe. Now, ladies, step into the gap and switch partners, face west, step, step, toe, go back, step step toe."

It went on like this, with Clara across from Robert, and then John, and then Parker, trading partners with her sisters. Then, finally, dancing with her father. "This is fun," she said, as she step-stepped beside him. "And you're nuts."

"Thank you dear," he said.

"Is this Fiona Apple?"

"Yes," he said, "you like?"

He bowed to her, stood and then crossed the line to take her mother's hand. Then, she was back across from Robert. He bowed and took her hand.

"Did you know," he asked, "that there was a famous astronomer," he rose up on his toes, "named Maria Clara Eimmart." They circled around one another and switched partners.

"How's it going?" Jean asked Robert.

"Great. How are you?"

Toes. Step-step.

"Drunk!" Jean said, bowing. She stepped into the circle and took Parker's hand.

Erin was sweating as she curtsied and John bowed. He looked great that night, tall and tan. She offered him her hand and they walked, step-step.

"Toes!" Edmund called.

"I'll be dreaming about this," John said, taking two steps backward and coming up on his toes.

"What?" Erin asked. "I mean, really?"

They came together and he bowed.

"She was German," Robert was saying now, somehow capable of picking up where he left off with Clara. "She drew these..."

"Who drew what?" Elaine asked Robert, taking his hand.

"An astronomer. I was telling Clara."

"She likes you, I can tell."

"Really?"

Robert took Erin's hand and took two steps west, stood on his toes, and took two steps east, stood on his toes, and bowed. Her hands were clammy, and he discreetly wiped his hands on his pants.

Back to Clara, he said, "Maria Clara Eimmart drew these lovely illustrations of moon and planetary phases."

Switch to Jean.

"I'd love to see them," Jean said.

"Oh?"

"Yes. Love to."

"OK. I was thinking, your sister..."

Switch to Erin, who looked green. "Are you OK?" he asked.

“Why?” She asked.

“No reason,” he said, taking two steps backward.

The song ended, and Edmund called out, “keep going! Get back to your partner!” So they shuffled along through two more cycles, until Robert was across from Clara, who looked lovely, her face slightly flushed.

“I was trying to say –” he started.

“Who’s ready for tea? Elaine called, and Clara disappeared into the kitchen to help her mother.

~ ~ ~

“You like him, I can tell,” Elaine said, a knowing smile on her lips.

“I don’t like having him pushed on me,” Clara said, reaching up into the cabinet for teacups.

“Don’t use those, dear, they don’t match,” Elaine said of the cups.

“Nothing matches,” Clara said. The cabinet was crammed with tea cups – a few handleless enamel cups, painted blue, each with its own markings of chips and tea stains; a few handled coffee mugs, one of which read “Coffee is not my cup of tea,” and an assorted mess of gifts and touristic souvenirs, collected over the years.

“Get the nice ones from the cabinet.”

“They’re all dusty,” Clara said, still pulling mismatched cups from the cabinet, and counting until she had eight.

“Then give the best ones to the guests,” Elaine said, giving up.

“Which tea do you want mom?”

“Let’s do lemongrass. We all had too much to eat and drink.”

Clara filled the tea basket with lemongrass and waited for the kettle to boil. Then, Robert came in and stood across from her.

“Can I help?”

“You can take the cups outside,” Clara said, “just make sure that you give yourself the nicest cup.”

“You like him, you like him,” her mother sang.

“Please stop it,” Clara said. She poured boiling water over the tea, and let herself linger over the pot as the steam rose up, smelling the lemongrass.

By then, the sun had fully set; the crickets were singing. The party sat around the table, under the lights. Her father was going on about Jane Austen, and Regency



dances. “The movies likely have it wrong,” he was saying. “If Jane only knew!” he shook his head, “she might have gone into greater detail.”

“I’ve never seen any of the movies,” Robert said.

Jean couldn’t believe this. “You’ve never seen *Pride & Prejudice*, *Sense & Sensibility*, *Northanger Abbey*? *Emma*?”

“No,” he said, with a bit of a blush.

“But you’ve read the books?” Clara asked.

“Um. No,” he said.

“So you have zero context for what we just did!” Edmund said. “You must think we’re all nuts!”

“I would never say ‘nuts’” Robert said. “Spirited, maybe.”

Edmund slapped his knee, loving this.

Clara poured tea for everyone and took her seat next to Robert.

She watched him hold the cup up to his mouth and blow on it. He smelled the tea before taking a sip.

Maybe it was the warmth of the tea, or of the night itself – the fireflies, twinkle lights and champagne, her father cracking with laughter – but she felt a sudden pull to him. She looked up at him over her teacup and he smiled. He was just about to reach for her, but he stopped, put his hand down, and frowned.

THE  
*Wintree Waltz*  
By Lauren  
Doyle Owens



## Chapter 5

**M**onday, it rained a kind of silvery veil over Ann Arbor. Jean, who was officially finished shooting photos for the spring series, was captivated by the light, but too sleepy, and too hung-over, to do anything about it. And so she stayed in bed much longer than usual, looking out at the slick-wet street from her little attic window, and waited for the house to empty before coming downstairs. When she couldn't put it off any longer, Jean pulled on a pair of cut offs and made her way into the kitchen, where she toasted a bagel and made a pot of Earl Grey.

Perhaps there was something wrong about living in your childhood home this far into adulthood, about eating your parents' bagels and drinking your parents' tea. But it was comfortable. She'd certainly never been this comfortable in New York, where she'd shared a two bedroom with five women, and often skipped meals to make rent. But at least she had been there, the center of everything. At least she had learned to live on her own. If she had to do it again, she could. Which was not, perhaps, the most appropriate thought to have a month before your wedding. But it's what she thought nonetheless, as she spread a honeyed cream cheese over a sesame bagel and poured Earl Grey from her mother's funny little fairy teapot.

"I don't want a house," she said aloud, trying the thought on for size.

She looked at the teapot fairy, who smiled back at her, her head resting flirtatiously on her chin, daring Jean to say more.

"I don't want to get married," Jean told the teapot. "There, I said it."

*There, I said it.* Jean heard back. *I don't want to get married. I don't want a house. There, I said it.*

It was different, somehow, from hearing your voice in your head. It sounded instead like hearing your voice recorded. Jean looked around her. The kitchen was empty. On the table, a part of the newspaper was messily folded, having been read and discarded hours before. Her mother would be at the animal shelter, Erin at one

of her jobs, and her father off with his golf foursome, either playing in the rain or settling in for an early bourbon in front of the club's large windows, talking about whatever men of their age talked about, politics or travel plans.

Jean lingered over her breakfast and paged through the discarded newspaper, allowing herself a peek at the classifieds in the back. All of the listed apartments were dull, suburban complexes situated around little man-made lakes and fountains. Not her style. And way out of her price range. She thought back to the cramped Brooklyn apartment she shared with five women after graduating from NYU, a dim fourth-floor walkup on the edge of Bushwick. She thought about the L train, and damp grey concrete. The jobs she had – a receptionist at a gallery during the day, a waitress at a café at night. The clothes she was expected to wear. The person she was expected to be. And now she was here, expected to be someone else.

She thought of the night before, of dancing with her family, and of how well John fit in. It felt good to have everyone together; it felt like things were starting to be the way they were supposed to be all along. Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right. That, in marrying John, she was giving up, or maybe giving in. She thought of his mother, declaring that the house they had looked at the day before was "perfect" for them. She wondered if Nancy even knew who she was, what she liked, what she wanted.

"I don't know what I want," she heard herself saying. "How could Fancy know if I don't?"

Jean finished her tea and wiped the crumbs from her mouth. She thought of the photos she had taken the week before, of Clara's student looking up at the trees in astonishment. If nothing else, Jean thought, she had her work. She knew that much.

On Friday, Jean had taken her favorite photo from Wednesday's shoot and laid it out in Photoshop on a large canvas, so that she had nine inches of empty space above and below the 22-inch image. That weekend at Retna, she sent the file to their Epson Stylus Pro and peeled off a heavy print on inkjet canvas. Onto it, Jean decided, she'd layer the fantastical vision she'd had when she was shooting, of vines snaking up the trees, hiding all manner of life, of snakes diving deep into the earth and birds high above it all, watching the children as they looked up into the trees and down at the ground. The photo she worked with was an intensely contrasted black and white. She wasn't sure if she would paint all of the children, or just one, a boy she'd captured looking up into the trees with amazement. And so she'd save the children

for last, and start with hues of brown for the ground and trees. She'd then layer on hues of green, for the vines above ground and the snakes below. She'd paint creatures hiding in the vines, mice and chipmunks, their eyes, noses and tails all-but camouflaged.

Jean opened her studio windows to the rain and mixed shades of basic blue, red, yellow and white acrylic so that she had a palette of mud, sienna and umber. The deeper the ground, the darker and denser the earth would get. Further up, waves of beetles would ride swells of mud, and armies of ants would tunnel deep into the ground. Black and green garter snakes would vein the earth. Above ground, the paint would meet the photo, the tame, wood-chipped trail, the children in the forest's understory. Vines of Americana and Fox Grape would cover the bare trees like dresses of yarn and lace. This was her vision, anyway. And as she worked, she could not keep up. Each time she had an idea, she'd stop to write it on the edge of the canvas, so that she could continue layering hues of brown onto the canvas, creating the painting's visual and literal foundation.

She painted until the day grew tired, until her stomach rumbled with hunger, until the rain stopped and the birds began singing. She thought "Singing! Sound! There should be music! An audio component!" She'd have to capture, and mix, the sounds of the birds with the sounds of the children. Why hadn't she thought of it before! It was all coming together – in her head at least, and only in her head. In front of her, the canvas was still only a black and white photo with a layer of earth below.

Jean ignored her hunger and took notes, planning the painting layer by layer. In the margins, she wrote:

What native birds?

What migratory birds?

What made up, invented, fairytale birds?

She took her pencil and drew heavy lines under the words *What made up*, the perfect title.

When Jean was finished, she took off her smock and headed back into the house, ravenous with hunger. She had a sort of giddy, blissful exhaustion, and as she pulled food from the fridge, she thought about the painting, what it could be. She was just finished making a sandwich when there was a knock at the door, the severity of which startled her.

She peeked out the window in the dining room and saw John's mother, standing on the porch.

"Nancy!" Jean exclaimed, opening the door.

"Jean," Nancy said, looking down a perturbed nose at her.

"Come in," Jean said, stepping out of her way.

"Do you never answer your phone?"

"I was in my studio. I tend to leave the phone upstairs when I'm working. It's too distracting," she said brightly. Too brightly, it seemed, for the situation.

"We had lunch plans. At the caterers?"

"Again?" Jean asked.

"Yes, again Jean. I told you about it yesterday."

"I'm sorry... I guess I didn't..."

"I swear, Jean, sometimes I think I'm the only one who cares about this wedding."

"I'm sorry," Jean said again.

"The menu's decided. I'm sorry for your sister but the vegan food was terrible so I nixed it. No reason everyone should eat quinoa just because *she's* a vegan."

"I'm sure we can work something out," Jean said.

"I'm sure," Nancy said, offering a thin, red lipsticked half smile. "What are you doing tomorrow?"

"I'm painting in the morning and working at Retna in the afternoon."

"There's a house that just went on the market. It's amazing. And very close to here. Can I get you to come take a look at it with me? John will be at work, of course."

"I'll be at work too," Jean said, firmly.

"Fine. I'll go and see it by myself. If I like it, you and John can come and see it next weekend, John Senior and I are traveling this weekend. I just hope it doesn't get snatched up by then. It's a tight market, Jean."

"Okay," Jean said. And, after a lull, "I was just about to have a snack. We had a big dinner here last night and there are a lot of leftovers, so if you want..."

"Thank you but I'm still full from lunch. I'll let you get to it though." And with that, she was off. Jean imagined Nancy flinging a cape behind her as she went.

The following Saturday, Jean and John met his mother at a house on Aberdeen Drive, a heavily wooded street in Ann Arbor Hills, an exclusive

neighborhood east of downtown. When they pulled into the driveway, Jean's jaw dropped at the size and spectacle of the house. "She's got to be kidding."

"Just...try and keep an open mind," he said.

"When you say 'open mind,'" Jean started, carefully choosing her words, "I feel like what you're really saying, is 'just go along with it.'"

"That's not what I'm saying."

"It doesn't make sense for us to live in a house this...*grand*."

"It is pretty great, isn't it?" he said, staring up at the stately 4,000 square foot house with fifteen windows and a Juliette terrace.

"We're only two people," she said.

"Not for long," he said, squeezing her thigh.

"John," she started, "I don't want..."

But his mother pulled up behind them with the realtor, and John got out of the car to greet her.

"It's beautiful!" he said.

"And just a few blocks from the river!" Nancy said.

Jean stared up at the brick behemoth. She suddenly had a feeling of being trapped.

"Shall we take a look?" John said, taking her hand.

Inside, everything was immaculate. The walls were freshly painted a radiant yellow. The wooden floors shone. The kitchen was enormous, with large windows that looked out onto a manicured lot with evergreens that had gone in less than ten years before. Jean thought of the lot that had been cleared to build the house, of the old growth hardwood trees that had been removed and replaced with fast-growing hemlocks. It made her ill. She couldn't believe that anyone would think she would want to live there, much less John, the man she was marrying.

She turned to him, cast him a pleading look. When he only smiled back, Jean said, "It's too nice. Too...formal. How will we even fill it?"

"With babies," Nancy said, walking in from the atrium.

"I mean with what stuff?" Jean said.

"Well," John said, thoughtfully. "We have a few family heirlooms, right mom? And whatever we need, we'll buy."

Jean tried to imagine it – a life inside a 4,000 square foot palace on Aberdeen Drive, bouncing babies on her knee while sitting on someone else's family heirloom.

It was somebody's life, but it wasn't hers.

"It's...ghastly," Elaine said later as Jean showed her the photos online.  
"Garrish. That *yellow*."

"I know," Jean said. "I didn't know what to say. Nobody's ever tried to give me a house before."

"Nor me."

Erin sat across from them, silently watching her sister. How could Jean not want to live in a place like that...with a man like John? All Erin had to do was see the large room off the kitchen, with the series of windows overlooking a landscaped lawn to picture it furnished, to picture children running through. She could practically hear herself calling "Dinnertime!"

"How do you say no to something like this?" Jean asked.

"Well," Elaine said, pouring a second cup of tea and looking down into it, perhaps searching for the words. "Maybe you can't. Not exactly. Not without saying no to a lot of other things."

"What do you mean?" Erin asked, putting her cup down and leaning forward.

"I mean," Elaine said carefully, "your sister has a lot to think about."

"I wouldn't have to think a second about it," Erin said.

"I suppose you'd love to live in a palace on Aberdeen Drive," Jean said.

"What's wrong with wanting to be normal?" Erin said.

"What's normal about living in a palace before you're thirty?" Jean said.

"Oh so you'd rather live in mom and dad's attic?"

Jean shrugged. She wasn't interested in giving Erin a fight.

"I'm too far into this," Jean told her mother after Erin got up and left the table.

"You can call it off at any time."

"I don't feel like I can though. I feel like... it's already been decided."

"Did I ever tell you about the boy I almost married?" Elaine said, looking up from her tea.

"No!" Jean said, incredulous.

"It's a very long very *old* story. We weren't quite as far into the game as you are, with the caterer booked and invitations out, but... the point is, I almost married him and I didn't."

“Who was he?”

He was a football player. Very dumb but very pretty. I was twenty. It was summer. I got carried away.”

“What happened?”

“I left for my semester abroad, he turned pro. I stayed out of the country for a few years and when I came back I met your father in line at the market.”

“He said, ‘What are you going to do with those mushrooms,’” Jean said, recounting a story she’d heard hundreds of times.

“And I said, ‘I’m going to cook them.’ And then I had him over for dinner and the rest is history.”

“I’ve never felt about anyone the way you feel about dad.”

“Not yet, and maybe not about John...but you will.”

“What should I do?” Just thinking about canceling the wedding gave Jean a stomachache, but also a rush of relief.

Elaine shrugged. “Entirely up to you my dear.”

~ ~ ~

Later, Erin was on her way out to meet Parker for the final concert of the Ann Arbor Summer Fest. She didn’t know the band, but she didn’t care. She was irritated with her sister for reasons that didn’t seem entirely fair – even to her. She wanted a night out where she didn’t think about anything, not about Jean or John, or anyone.

On her way out, she saw the teapot on the table, and couldn’t resist. She lifted it and gave it a shake, to see if there was anything left. When there was, Erin poured the last of the tea into her cup, which was still on the table from earlier. She stood and waited, watching the teapot fairy, and waiting for her to reveal her secrets. But the fairy was silent.

“OK, so I’m crazy,” Erin said.

*OK, so I’m crazy,* she heard back.

Erin pulled out a chair and sat down at the table, and stared at the fairy.

“Tell me,” she said.

*Tell me, tell me, tell me,* she heard herself say.

Erin looked at her phone. She was late. She rolled her eyes, frustrated with herself. What am I going to do anyway? She thought. Break them up? Go after John?



Be serious.

*I feel like...it's already decided*, she heard her sister say.

And? Erin thought, staring intently at the fairy.

*Entirely up to you, my dear.*

~ ~ ~

There was a crush of people at the festival. Erin couldn't find Parker. Her phone was about to die. But the band, a Swedish quartet with a female lead singer, was good. And soon, Erin found that she was dancing, and that, for once, she didn't care what other people thought of her. As the sun set, and the crowd grew, Erin jumped and danced, and pumped her fist in the air. She hooted and wailed at the end of every song. She started dancing with the others around her, a community of ecstatic strangers, looking over her shoulder for Parker all the while. By the time the set was over, it was fully dark, and her phone was dead. Erin looked around as the crowd dispersed, thinking that Parker would suddenly appear.

Instead, when the crowd cleared away, and Erin found herself standing alone in the street, it wasn't Parker she saw, but John.

"Hey, Erin," he said, with a quick wave.

"Hey," she said, self-conscious again. She wiped sweat from her brow and face.

"You here alone?"

"Yeah. I was supposed to meet Parker but I couldn't find him."

"A lot of that going around. I was supposed to meet your sister."

"Oh," Erin said, her heart beating hard in her chest.

"You wanna grab something to eat?"

"OK," she said, with a smile she hoped wasn't too eager.

They walked several blocks west, to get away from the crowds, which had filled the restaurants along State Street, and ended up on 5<sup>th</sup>.

"Do you like Thai?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said, "of course."

They ducked into a small dark restaurant Erin had never been in before. It was crowded, but had a table open near the back.

"I feel bad that I wasn't able to find Parker," she said. "I hope he's not worried."

“Do you want to use my phone?”

“I don’t know his number,” she said, shaking her head.

“You kids and your Google brains,” he said, shaking his fist. “Just kidding, I don’t know anyone’s number anymore either.”

“So, um, how’s it going?” she asked, though she figured she already knew.

“It’s fine,” he said. “It’s good.”

“I heard you looked at a house today.”

“What did she say?” he asked, conspiratorially.

“I don’t know,” Erin shrugged, demurring.

“Come on, E,” he said. So he had a nickname for her.

“Um, nothing really,” she said, searching her memory for something she could tell him. “She was just showing the house to my mom.”

They ordered Pad Thai and chicken in basil sauce to split.

“How’s it going at the hospital?” he asked.

“It’s fine,” she said, nodding. She looked across the table at him. His handsome, waspy, face; his broad shoulders; his serious mouth.

She took a sip of water.

“You’re shaking,” he said. “Are you OK?”

She heard her mother’s voice say, *Entirely up to you, my dear.*

“Would it be so terrible if you didn’t get married? I mean, if you didn’t marry Jean?”

“What?” he asked, surprised and maybe hurt. “What did she say?”

“Nothing.”

“Erin,” he said, leveling with her.

“John.”

“What is going on?”

Erin shook her head. She had dug a hole she didn’t know how to climb out of.

“It’s nothing,” she said finally. “None of my business.”

“But?”

“For starters,” Erin said, looking down. “She hates the house. That kind of thing isn’t Jean at all.”

“Oh,” he said, dumbfounded, sitting back in his chair.

She decided to take a risk. “I would love to live in a house like that. To be

married, to have lots of kids... But, Jean... she's more... she does her own thing.”

“Which is what I love about her.”

“Right,” Erin said, “Sure.”

“Tell me what I can do,” he said.

THE  
*Wintree Waltz*  
By Lauren  
Doyle Owens



## Chapter 6

The night after her dinner with John, Erin lay in bed searching her memory for what she had said. She imagined revisions – the things that she should have said, the things she might have said – but eventually, her memory wound back to what she really said:

“I love my sister, and I love you. As a brother. I mean... as a man.” She didn’t pause to watch his face. She focused on the glass of water in front her. “Sometimes I wonder if... well, I wonder,” she stammered. She looked directly at him, took a drink of water. “I wonder if you’re really well suited for each other. Like, maybe...maybe... she’s not the one you should marry.”

“What?” he asked, incredulous and blinking.

Their food arrived, two steaming plates plunked down in front of them. Erin searched John’s face through the steam.

“It’s just that... you and I are... and Jean is...”

“What?” he asked again.

“What I’m trying to say is... Jean isn’t like us.”

“And what are we like?”

“And what are we like?” she repeated him, in a daze. “We’re...practical. We’re...normal. My sister, I love her, but...she has her head in the clouds.”

“She’s an artist, Erin. Maybe she needs some grounding but...that’s what I’m for. We balance each other out.”

Erin looked at the plates of food in front of them, trying to figure out where she could go from there. Then, she looked up at him. “I’m saying this out of love – for both of you – just make sure that you both want the same things, before you get married.”

“Is it the house?” he asked with intensity.

“I think that’s part of it.”

“But there’s more?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“It sounds like you do know.”

“Just talk to her,” Erin said. “Just...make sure that it’s right.”

“Thanks Erin,” he said, grabbing her hand and squeezing it. “Seriously, thank you.”

He stood up, put some cash on the table to pay the dinner bill, and left.

~ ~ ~

How many times, Erin wondered now, had she said she loved him? Three? Four? Was she *insane*? Erin pulled the covers over her head. She wondered if Clara had left for her trip yet, and if she could join her. Or if she could transfer to a different college, in a different state.

And then, it started, the banging on her door:

“Erin!” It was Jean’s furious voice, and Erin was reminded of all the fights Jean and Clara had, over clothes and friends and boys, when Erin was much younger.

Erin got out of bed, mussed her hair. She opened the door and yawned, doing her best to look sleepy.

But Jean wasn’t having it.

“What did you say to John?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you tell him I didn’t want to get married?”

“No!” Erin responded. “Of course not!” And then, because her sister did not look at all pacified, she tried another tactic: “Do you?”

“None of your business!” Jean responded. Her eyes were red. Had she been up all night? Had she been crying? Was it all Erin’s fault?

“What’s going on?” Elaine asked. She was standing at the bottom of the stairs, having just come home from the market, her arms were full of groceries.

“Erin told John that I don’t want to get married. That I’m not serious. That I have my head in the clouds!”

Elaine dropped her bags and climbed the stairs to comfort Jean. They were all standing in the hallway now, at the threshold of Erin’s bedroom.

“Did you?” Elaine asked her.

“I don’t *think* so...” Erin said, hedging.

“What do you mean you don’t *think* so!?” Jean asked.

“Lets all calm down,” Elaine said. She took Jean’s hand and pulled her downstairs, and instructed Erin to put the kettle on.

In the kitchen, Erin boiled water and scooped tea into her mother’s fairy teapot, looking at it as though the fairy had betrayed her. But maybe it was her brain that had betrayed her. Maybe she was going crazy. They had a distant relative who spent some time in a sanitarium. Maybe that’s where they would send her.

Erin carried the tea into the living room, where Jean was telling her side of the story.

“I was supposed to meet John for the Little Dragon show on Washington Street, but I was painting and lost track of time. Then when I went to meet up with him, I couldn’t find him, so I walked home and went to bed. I woke up to like, fifty calls and texts from him. He had dinner with Erin and Erin told him I didn’t want to get married!” She handed her phone to her mother, so she could see the string her texts.

“Erin?” Elaine asked, incredulous.

“All I said was that you should talk. About what you want. You know...in your lives.”

Jean shot her a threatening look.

To Elaine, Jean said, “It’s none of her business!”

“I’m sure it was a misunderstanding. And that your sister had good intentions,” Elaine said, shooting a slide glance to Erin.

“I don’t know what to do,” Jean said, scrolling through the texts on her phone.

“All you have to do is talk to him,” Elaine said. “Clear up the misunderstanding.”

“Besides,” Erin said, “Maybe it’ll work out for the better.”

“For the better *how*?” Jean asked.

“Well...” Erin started. She looked down at the fairy. “It’s important to be honest. To tell him how you feel. If you don’t want to get married...”

“Who said I don’t want to get *married*?” Jean asked.

“No one,” Erin said. “I just thought that maybe you didn’t. Because of the whole house thing.”

“You should really mind your own business,” Jean said.

“It is my business! You’re my sister! John’s my...” Erin searched the room, looking for the right noun.

Her mother frowned at her. Jean raised her eyebrows expectantly.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I screwed everything up.”

Jean left her tea where it was and went upstairs.

Elaine leveled a stern look at Erin. “What’s gotten into you?”

“It just...got out of hand.”

“Stay out of your sister’s business. Now,” she said, standing up, “help me put this food away.”

~ ~ ~

Upstairs, Jean took a shower. She texted Clara, who would be leaving soon for her trip to the Upper Peninsula, and packed a bag. She needed to escape for a few days, to figure things out.

*Sorry, Clara texted back. I’ve already left.*

*Maybe I can catch up?*

*Don’t you have a wedding to prepare for?* Clara texted.

*Yes...* Jean texted back. *Just wanted to escape for a little while.*

*You don’t need me for that. Go to the Arb. Or take a canoe down the river. Take John.*

*You know, don’t you?* Jean texted.

*Know what?*

*NM,* Jean wrote. *Never mind.*

She sat on the bed next to her packed bag, looking out through the little attic window. It was fully summer and the light was strong. Below were joggers and cyclists, cars going by. A man was holding a child’s hand and walking a dog.

John texted that he wanted to talk.

*Meet me at the Arb,* she texted.

She laced up her sneakers and walked to the Arboretum, a preserve that stretched between campus and the Huron River. By then, the peonies that carpeted the valley just beyond the entrance every spring and summer had shrugged off their blooms, and the streets and grasses and curbs and gutters outside the Arb were covered in every imaginable shade of pink, like cake icing or party favors. Maybe this wasn’t the right place to meet John, Jean thought, it was too beautiful, too

celebratory. But it was too late. He stood by the entrance, a weary smile under a ball cap.

“Hi,” he breathed, slipping his hand into hers.

She hugged him tightly, and did not immediately let go.

They walked past the peonies and down toward the river. Neither said anything until they were alone on the path.

“I’m sorry about yesterday,” she said. “I couldn’t find you.”

But John got right to it:

“Why does Erin think that you don’t want to get married?”

“I have no idea,” she said, not ready for the confrontation.

He took her hand and looked sternly down at her. “I don’t believe you.”

“I love you,” she said.

“But...”

“I love you,” she said. “Simply that.”

“However...” he said, not letting her off so easily.

Jean continued walking down the path, but John didn’t follow. She turned around and looked at him, felt her body tense, her jaw tighten, her fist clench and release.

“I love you,” she said. She wanted to stomp her feet. She wanted this to be enough.

John simply stood there, several paces away, waiting.

Jean sighed. Finally, she said:

“I don’t want to live in a big house, with heirloom furniture. I don’t want to bounce babies on my lap.” Having said it, Jean felt both elated and doomed.

“Oh,” he said. He looked down the path at her, slack-jawed.

John walked over to a nearby bench. Jean followed him and sat down next to him.

“I’m sorry,” she said, staring across the trail to the tree line. It felt like there was gauze over her eyes, like she couldn’t see anything as it was.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I just did tell you.”

“Before.”

“Before... I didn’t know what I was agreeing to. You asked me to marry you and I said yes.”



“Should I have been more specific?” he asked, his eyes narrowing, his face going angry.

“John,” she started, taking his hand. “I don’t have a plan. If we weren’t getting married, I wouldn’t know what I was doing in...August, much less the rest of my life. But it seems as though you do have a plan. A plan for yourself, and a plan for me. And I don’t like that.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked again.

“I don’t think I knew,” she said, “until your mother started this stuff with the house. And every place we looked at was a little more grand, and a little less me...” She started to cry, and let the tears come. “And I started to realize that, it doesn’t matter who I am. Like...in marrying you I’m just there to fill a role. To stand beside you. To have babies, and live in a big house and... be *alone*, John.”

“Why do you think you would be alone?”

“I’m already alone! You and your mom... you have these plans! And you have your work. And... she treats my work like it’s a *hobby*.”

“Well,” he said, “in her defense...”

“How can you defend that?” she asked, backing away from him.

“You don’t exactly make a living from it.”

“I see!” she said, incredulous. “So I am to marry you and paint my little pictures in my spare time and have babies and work around your crazy doctor’s schedule...”

“We can get a nanny!” he said.

Jean looked down at her shoes. Everything was getting clearer. “I don’t think we understand each other.”

He took her hand. “I love you, you love me, we’re getting married *next month*! What is there to understand?”

“Well,” she said, standing. “I don’t want a nanny. And I don’t want a house. And I don’t *want* a *signature cocktail*.” A gust of wind came and blew petals at her feet.

“What is it that you want then?” he asked, standing.

“I want to be able to figure it out for myself.”

They walked down to the river and south, along the riverbank. She watched a group of teens paddle swiftly downriver, and thought of Clara, her beautiful sister who did just what she wanted.

“Erin has a crush on you,” she said suddenly.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I’m just saying...you could marry her.”

“I want to marry *you*,” he said, spinning her around to face him.

He kissed her hard and she kissed him back. There was something about him that she loved fiercely, something that she did not want to let go of.

He took her by the shoulders. “I know we can work this out.”

“How?”

He shook his head. “We just will.”

“OK,” she said, but she wasn’t sure if she believed it.

~ ~ ~

Later, the family shared a small, tense, Sunday dinner. Clara was absent, and John had come, out of habit or invitation, Erin wasn’t sure. She avoided his eyes, looked down at her plate, and spoke only when she was spoken to.

“So,” John said to Edmund, “What dance are you teaching us tonight?”

“I’m sorry, what?” Edmund said, looking up from his plate.

“He’s worried about Clara,” Jean told him.

“I majored in worrying about Clara,” Edmund said. “And minored in worrying about Jean. I’m currently working on a post-doc in worrying about Erin,” he said, winking at his daughter.

“Clara’s fine,” Jean said. “Clara could go to the moon and back by herself.”

“So could you, if you wanted to,” John said.

Elaine, Edmund and Erin all looked up at John, and then at each other.

Jean said nothing.

“Where is she now?” John asked. “Still in Jersey?”

“I think she’s on her paddling trip,” Elaine said.

“She is,” Jean said. “I talked to her earlier.”

“What did she say?” Edmund asked. “Everything OK?”

“Far as I know,” Jean said.

“I still wish she hadn’t gone this year,” Elaine said. “It’s too close to the wedding.”

“Don’t worry about the wedding,” Jean snapped.

“I’m not worried about it, dear,” Elaine said, tenderly. “You don’t worry about it either, OK?”

“Ha. Yeah, OK,” Jean said.

For a second, all eyes were on Jean, except Erin’s, who watched John as he looked at Jean and then down at his plate. She could feel his sadness and she wanted to reach out and take his hand, to comfort him.

“So!” Edmund said finally. “What’s everyone doing for the fourth?”

“My parents will be at the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club, so we’ll be up there. You all are welcome to come if you like.”

“We have to stay home for the dogs,” Elaine said. “Fireworks make them crazy.”

“How about you, Erin?” John asked, and Erin could tell he was doing his best to make peace. “Would you like to join us?”

“I shouldn’t,” Erin said. “I mean, I already have plans.”

“With the Cole kid?” Edmund asked.

“Yes,” Erin lied. Truthfully, they hadn’t connected since the day before and she didn’t know where they stood. She would have thought that being neighbors would make them immune to the normal flakiness of college relationships, but she guessed not.

After dinner, Erin helped her father with the dishes as Elaine and Jean spoke quietly in the other room. “Do you have any idea what’s going on over there?” Edmund asked her, and Erin feigned ignorance.

“Hey Dad,” Jean called, “I got a text from Clara.”

“Everything OK?” he asked, turning to face the dining room.

“Better than OK.”

“What’s she say?”

“OMG Robert’s here,” Jean said, reading her text from Clara, and smiling for the first time that night.

“Robert’s where?” Elaine asked.

Jean shrugged. “With Clara I guess.”

“Oh,” Edmund said, and winked at Erin. “Good.”

~ ~ ~

"I'm not stalking you," Robert said, his arms raised in surrender.

Clara was sitting at an outdoor café in Mackinaw City, always the first stop on her weeks-long paddling trip around the eastern islands of the Upper Peninsula.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, standing to greet him.

"I'm not meeting my colleagues until next week, so I thought I'd come up and do some sightseeing."

"So you are stalking me."

Robert shook his head. He seemed nervous.

"I was about to order some soup. Would you like to join me?"

"I'd love to," he said, pulling out the chair opposite her.

He sat and she told him about her planned trip. She had spent the day in Mackinaw, buying the supplies she'd forgotten in Ann Arbor: extra batteries for her headlamp, and bug spray, replacement bandages, ibuprofen and water purifications tablets for her first aid kit. She would stay a night at the inn there and then take off in her kayak early the next morning.

"And then?" he asked with a shrug.

"Camping, paddling, camping, paddling, camping, paddling, until I get sick of it, or lonely, or the calendar tells me it's time to go back."

"So you're always um...alone?"

"I used to go with a group of teachers, but... their lives all caught up with them. They got married and had kids so... now I go alone."

"You're brave to camp alone."

"Would you say that to a man?"

"Probably," he said with a smile.

"I know that my father thinks I'm arrogant for coming out here alone. But... I don't see it that way. I just see it as... well, if you want to do something, you don't ask for permission or wait until you have consensus, you just... do it."

"I doubt he thinks you're arrogant."

Clara shrugged.

The waitress came and brought Robert a place setting and a glass of water. They ordered.

It was just around five and the sun was still high in the sky. She loved the summer for that reason – the days seemed endless and full of possibility. Clara

looked over at the water, at the ferries that were coming and going between Mackinaw City and Mackinac Island. She couldn't wait to get out on the water, to disappear.

She caught Robert watching her. He said, "I had a really good time at your parent's house. I'm sorry if that was a little...weird."

"It wasn't weird. Well, it was," she admitted, "but we more than made up for it with the dancing."

"True," he said, "you did."

Their meal arrived and they ate in silence, Robert stealing looks at Clara and Clara stealing looks at Robert. As much as she was looking forward to getting out on the water, she was happy to be with him, there, now.

"What are you doing this evening?" she asked once they were finished eating.

"I thought I'd take the ferry over to the island. You?"

She had been planning on getting to bed early, which was why the early dinner. But she said, "Taking the ferry out to the island."

~ ~ ~

Because the island was usually crowded in summer, and offered no camping, Clara usually skipped it in favor of paddling out to the wilderness areas of St. Ignace and beginning her trip there. In fact, she'd never been to Mackinac Island, the old fur trader's outpost and Victorian summer retreat, and knew nothing about it but that it was there, and could be traveled to via ferry from the eastern shores of Mackinaw City. After dinner, she and Robert did just that, boarding a small tourist ferry and standing on the deck while the ferry churned slowly into Lake Huron.

The ferry was crowded and they huddled together along the rail, hiding from one another behind their sunglasses.

"I keep thinking how funny it is that I saw you," he said.

"Really? I figured you'd planned it."

"I didn't," he said. "How could I?"

She thought about it for a minute, of the improbability of them being in the same restaurant at the same time.

"I saw you that day in the woods," she said, referring to the day she took her students into Eberwhite before the end of the school year.

“I saw you too,” he said. “I wasn’t sure if I should have said hello or not so I just kept walking.”

“You hid behind a tree.”

“You saw that?”

“Yep.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I was surprised to see you and I didn’t want you to think I was...stalking you.”

“And now what should I think?”

“Fair question,” he said.

When the boat docked, they slipped ahead of the tourists, who seemed confused as to what to do next, and disembarked. Off the boat, they were swept into the bustle of foot traffic, and quickly made their way into town, where tourist shops sold t-shirts and ice cream and fudge made on marble slabs. They rented a pair of beach cruisers and made their way around the island, stopping to notice a house now and then, a particularly beautiful garden, or to look out at the deep blue expanse of water that stretched out beneath the island’s bluffs. There were no cars on the island, so the ride was easy. The streets were wide and empty, but for the occasional jogger, a group of trotting tourist-backed horses, or the mounds of manure the horses left behind.

East of the bluffs, the island was wilder, with long stretches of tree-covered trails and a lot less people. They rode beside each other without speaking. Clara savored the cool of the shade, the quiet of the moment. She didn’t, as was her tendency, make a plan for later or worry about what was next. She simply relished in the cool air, the wind against her skin. It felt good to move after being so long in the car, to be free after spending the past week with her friends in New Jersey, who were holed up inside their house with their new baby. She thought that she should always come to Mackinac Island before pushing off in her kayak. She should remember that there were other options beside the things she was used to.

Eventually, the road around the island got crowded again and, just over an hour into their ride, they found their way back into town.

“Ice cream?” he asked.

“Not for me,” she said.

“Coffee?”

“Sure.”

They turned in their bikes and made their way on foot to Lucky Bean, a coffee shop they'd seen during their ride.

"What'll you have?" he asked.

"I think I'll just do tea," she said. "Early night tonight."

Clara ordered chamomile while he stared at the menu for five minutes before ordering a Honey Bear Latte, which was a chai latte with a shot of espresso.

"That sounds...kind of good," she said.

"You want to change your order?" he asked.

"No," she said, "I better not get too adventurous this late in the day."

"I'll order mine with soy so you can try it," he said.

Clara found a table in the back, and Robert carried their drinks over when they were ready.

"Here," he said, handing her his coffee. "Try mine before I get my cooties on it."

"I hope it doesn't keep me up," Clara said. She usually didn't have caffeine past five.

Clara tried the latte. It was sweet, strong and spicy. The espresso combined perfectly with the tea.

"It's good," she said. "Now I'll have to figure out how to make this on my camp stove."

"So tell me about how you do this." He said. "You paddle all day, and then camp."

"That's right."

"It's the kind of thing that sounds simple but... isn't."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm afraid I would get lost. Or starve. Or be eaten by a bear."

"Well, these days you're not likely to get lost. So there's one. You're also not likely to starve, so long as you pack enough food, and the food that you do pack doesn't get wet. And, as far as bears go...you just have to be smart about it. Tie your food up. Keep your camp clean. Make enough noise so that they know you're there."

"OK. What about drowning?"

"I'm not going to drown."

"How do you know?" he asked. "What if your kayak flips?"

"You're starting to sound like my dad," she said.

“Seriously though.”

“If my kayak flips, I’ll turn it back over.”

“An answer for everything,” he said, shaking his head.

“Besides, aren’t you going to Munising? Lake Superior is way colder.”

“Yeah, but... I’m just staying at a campground. That’s hardly self-sufficient.”

“I stay at campgrounds, sometimes.”

“Yes, but you get there via kayak.”

“I feel like you’re angling for an invitation,” she said, and she couldn’t help but smile.

“Not at all!” he said. “I’m just curious. I’m curious about you, Clara.”

“That’s nice to hear,” she said.

“Is it?” He looked across the table at her with intensity.

“Yes.”

It was like a spell coming over her, the way she felt then, the energy that coursed between them. And if she wasn’t afraid of what might happen after, she might have asked him to join her for the first week of her trip. Instead, she said:

“We should probably get going.”



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## Chapter 7

After leaving Robert, Clara took a shower and finished packing. She stuffed her food supplies in a blue nylon sack, a pair of socks and sneakers in a red nylon sack, the rest of her clothes in a turquoise nylon sack, and toiletries in a yellow nylon sack. She packed her journal, two pens and two novels – *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The Illumination* – in a small grey nylon sack, her camp stove and cooking supplies in a green nylon sack, and her tent and sleeping bag in a large purple nylon sack. Then, she loaded everything up in her large Duluth canoe pack, just to make sure it fit. This packing system was devised over years of trial and error – carrying too many things, carrying the wrong things, carrying everything in her arms and nothing on her back, and struggling every step of the way. Now, when she reached shore she could carry everything on her back in the canoe pack, and carry her kayak to camp.

The next morning, she grabbed a handful of matchbooks at checkout and stuffed them deep into her green sack, just in case her butane lighter failed, and ate a large breakfast in town. She then drove to the Headlands at Trails End Bay, parked her car in the 24-hour lot, and unloaded her kayak, a red Whistler she'd bought used five summers before, and carried it to the beach. On the beach, she emptied the contents of her Duluth pack into the front and rear bulkheads, making sure her gear was evenly distributed. She stuffed the Duluth bag in her final empty nylon sack, and placed it in the rear bulkhead.

Once her kayak was packed, Clara looked out across the water. The winds were low and the water calm, but she was nervous nonetheless. She imagined overturning her kayak and spilling into the water, and the rollover techniques she would use to right herself. She took a photo of her car, and dropped a pin for her mother, just in case. Finally, she pulled her kayak to the water's edge, climbed inside and pushed off into the bay.

It was 10 a.m., and the sun was high. The water sparkled, and shot off glints of light in every direction, the finest cut sapphire. She paddled north through the straits, and exhaled deeply. She was finally there. Finally free.

The first hours were ecstasy. Clara thought about nothing but the rhythm of the kayak, the spray of the water against her arms and face. She had planned her trip roughly, so that she knew how many miles she would paddle in a day and where she would put in at night. Today would be one of her longest. She'd stop for lunch in St. Ignace and then paddle around the southern edge of the Upper Peninsula into Horseshoe Bay. She'd been doing this trip now for ten years, first meeting up with her college friends for a week a year to paddle the Les Cheneaux Water Trail, a 75-mile stretch of paradise that ran east of the Mackinac Straits through the Les Cheneaux archipelago. Some summers, the trips were longer, more arduous. She'd loop up through the Great Lakes Passage and between the Upper Peninsula and Drummond Island, and paddle up the Saint Mary's River and into Lake Superior. One year, she made it as far as Munising. It was thrilling to approach the Pictured Rocks after a month on the water, and she lay back in her kayak and floated below them, staring up in amazement.

This trip would be shorter, a week and a half out through the Les Cheneaux archipelago and a week and a half back. She would take her time, giving her arms a rest when needed, hiking her favorite trails, and visiting her favorite towns along the water. She couldn't go too far – as it was, her mother wasn't happy that she was leaving a month before her sister's wedding. "What if something *happens*?" Elaine had said. "If something happens," Clara countered, "we'll have bigger problems than whether or not I was able to make it to my sister's wedding."

As she passed under the Mackinac Bridge, Clara thought about Robert, and wondered if he'd already crossed on his way to Munising. She was surprised how much she'd enjoyed spending time with him, and as she lay in bed the night before, she couldn't help but wonder about him, and how he appeared before her earlier that day. Was it kismet or careful planning? Contrivance or cosmic force? Now, out on the water, she imagined him there with her – asking her questions, telling her stories, or simply paddling alongside in silence, soaking in the sunlight.

Clara pulled through the straits and stopped at the state park near St. Ignace to use the public restroom and eat lunch. After lunch, she lay in the shade and sipped tea from a thermos, looking out at the Mackinac Bridge and the sparkling water

below. It always surprised her, the first day or two of her trip, how slow the going was, when compared with car travel. If she wanted to, she could have crossed the bridge from Mackinaw City yesterday and stayed the night in St. Ignace. It would have been a 20 minute drive by car. Twenty minutes, or an entire morning, depending on how she went. But she liked it slow. The slower you went, the more you saw. Besides, if she had crossed over into St. Ignace, she never would have seen Robert. Kismet. Or...contrivance? Whatever it was, it had worked its magic on her. She was looking up at the bridge, wondering about the color of his car, and if he was crossing, and where he was going.

There was much to explore between there and Munising. They'd looked at a map together yesterday, before parting ways. She suggested he'd take a picnic lunch through the Sault Sainte Marie Forest, and then drive west through the forests and farmland of Route 28. She'd also given him her itinerary, and they exchanged numbers – for safety's sake. "I'll be the closest person to you up here," he said, "so if you need anything..."

They were standing in the parking lot of her hotel, having walked there after taking the ferry back from Mackinac Island.

"Did my father put you up to this?" she asked, thinking that it finally made sense – Robert just happening to be in Mackinaw the same day she was.

"No!" he said.

"Really?"

"Really," he said, and took her hand.

He stood across from her in the Super 8 parking lot. It was 9 p.m. and the sun was setting.

"I'd be embarrassed if he had."

"He didn't."

"OK," she said.

Instead of letting go of her hand, he pulled her toward him, and she allowed herself to be kissed.

~ ~ ~

That afternoon, Clara pushed back into the water and paddled north, into Horseshoe Bay. The water was calm, north of the straits, and it was quieter, away from the highway. As the sun stretched to the west, the water grew more intensely

blue, and the wading birds, the blue heron and double breasted cormorant, dove for fish. Clara sat and watched in awe as a heron caught and swallowed a large fish. She wondered what it was like to be the heron. What it was like to be the fish.

She stopped again when the sun was just above the tree line, and scanned the shoreline for a safe place to put in. There was a narrow stretch of beach, behind which a line of spruce and hemlock seemed to go on forever.

Clara paddled to shore, letting the waves push her in. She lifted herself out of the kayak and pulled it onto the beach. It was an empty stretch of land. The only sounds were the waves lapping to shore and the cacophony of songbirds and owls, calling to one another in the distance. She found a nice, dry spot just shy of the tree line and settled in to make camp.

The first night out always made her anxious, and as she unpacked she was happy to find that all of her bags had stayed safe and dry. She went for her tent first, and once she re-confirmed that she had packed all of its components, she quickly unpacked her stove to make a fire and boil water.

In an hour, she was settled. Her tent was up, and her dinner – a half serving from a pouch of parboiled rice and beans – was made. She'd tapped the pouch of red wine she'd brought with her, and sat in her folding camp chair, her feet up on her kayak, the moon rising over Lake Huron, the sky darkening.

She texted her father, and when she didn't hear from him, her mother.

*Safe and sound. Warm and happy,* she said, sharing a photo of herself.

*Wow!* Her mother wrote back. *Relax a little for me, will ya?*

*Sure,* Clara texted. *Everything OK?*

*... Her phone made a series of ellipses as her mother typed.*

*...Yes,* her mother texted finally.

Although Elaine's hesitation piqued Clara's interest, she didn't respond back. The past several months had been full of pseudo-emergencies related to the wedding, and Clara was happy for a reprieve. Besides, they all knew how it was going to end. Her sister would be a beautiful bride in an overpriced dress, they would all eat overpriced food in a beautiful reception hall, and get, probably, a little too drunk. Erin would let go of the crush on John that everyone knew she had. Jean would have a baby or two. And the family would find its new normal.

Above her, the sky darkened and the stars emerged, strong and bright. More stars than she'd seen in a year. When she first saw them, the stars of the true

wilderness, Clara was both stunned and saddened. How was it, she wondered, that she lived in a place where she couldn't see the true night sky? She was cheating herself, she thought. She needed to move somewhere, and soon. But that was a decade ago, and still, she remained in Ann Arbor. What was she waiting for, she sometimes wondered.

In her lap, her phone chirped. It was Robert.

*High and dry?*

*Dry, not high,* she texted.

*Good,* he texted. *Good day?*

*Uncommonly good.*

She waited for him to respond, but he didn't. And as she sat looking up at the stars, she imagined him there with her, the conversation they would have. He'd show her the constellations above them, and tell her about the Milky Way, pointing up to the galaxy as it stretched out above them, a nebulous reminder of space or size or time. She looked at her phone, a little frustrated now that he hadn't responded. She wanted to know where *he* was and what *he* was doing and whether *he* was high and dry. But she didn't ask him. Instead, she boiled water for her hot water bottle, extinguished her fire, tidied up her camp, and zipped herself into her tent. Within moments, she was asleep.

The next morning, Clara woke just after sunrise. Her arms and shoulders were sore. She made herself oatmeal fortified with flax, hemp, cacao and nuts, and drank a strong cup of coffee as she watched the mist rise over the lake. After breakfast, she steeped tea for her thermos, and stood behind her tent to bathe with water warmed by the fire. When she was dressed, sunscreensed, and energized, she packed up camp, packed her kayak and pushed back into the water.

So went the days. She paddled close to the shoreline, and camped along the shores of Saint Martin Bay, Search Bay and Marquette Island. She rented a cabin on Loons Point so she could take a proper shower and do some laundry. She then paddled out to Government Island, a deserted public island in the archipelago where she camped for three nights, happy to have the time to read and rest. On her tenth day she paddled long and hard out to De Tour State Park, where she pulled ashore and carried her kayak into a proper campground.

It had been a nice, but lonely trip, and Clara was ready to go back. The next day, she would change directions, reverse course, and head back, slowly toward Ann

Arbor. She'd arrive just in time for the final dress fitting, the bachelorette party, the rehearsal dinner, the wedding itself. And then, a few weeks later, the school year. The fall. The Earth slowly tilting away from the sun. Her 33rd birthday. Everything else.

And so she made camp. Built a fire and made dinner. She texted her parents. Texted Robert. He'd be in Munising for days now, awaiting the Aurora's rare summer showing. As the days went on, she felt a stronger pull to him, a kind of magnetic attraction she had nothing to do with, and was powerless over. As she waited for him to text back, she imagined what he was doing. Maybe coming back from a hike, making his own camp, settling in for the night under the same stars.

Clara finished dinner, cleaned up, boiled water and extinguished her fire. She thought about staying a few days in the park and doing some hiking, her arms were sore from one of her longer days of paddling. But she had to get back. She only ever had three weeks for this, and her first two weeks were nearly gone.

Late that evening, she was lying in her tent listening to the owls and reading *The Illumination* when Robert texted her a picture of the Aurora over Lake Superior. *Wish you were here.* He texted. *Really.*

She texted him back without hesitation. *Me too.*

*Headed home tomorrow. You?*

Yes, she texted.

*Want a ride?*

Clara stared at her phone, wondering how to respond. Did she want a ride? It was not too far out of his way to get her, she knew. But she wanted to take her time.

*I have another week, she wrote. I want to use it.*

*I understand.*

*Do you have to be back by a certain day?* She texted.

No.

And so Clara dropped a pin to share her location.

*Really?* He texted.

Instead of texting him back, Clara called him.

"Do you have a tent?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Do you have a roof rack?"

"I can get one," he said.

"I want to go hiking," she said.

“What’s it like over there?”

“Watery,” she said. “But you’d like it. They have stars here.”

“When I saw the Aurora, I thought, I wish Clara was here. Is that weird?”

“No.”

“Does it make you...”

“No.”

“No, what?”

“I thought you were going to say ‘does it make you uncomfortable.’”

“That is what I was going to say.”

Clara switched off her headlamp and lay there in the dark.

“What’s the craziest thing you’ve ever done?” she asked.

“I think I’m about to do it,” he said.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said.

“Goodnight, Clara.”

“Goodnight.”

THE  
*Wintree Waltz*  
By Lauren  
Doyle Owens



## Chapter 8

**B**y the time they got word that the wedding was canceled, Clara and Robert had traveled to Drummond Island, then back west for three days of camping and hiking around Tahquamenon Falls, and then back up to Munising, where they camped for two nights under the Aurora. It was Clara's first time seeing the lights and they bowled her over.

"So this is why people live way up north," she whispered. They had just finished a night hike and were looking out at the green and yellow lights as they glowed over Lake Superior. "It's like...Ectoplasm," she said.

"It's better if you turn off your lamp," he said, reaching over to turn off Clara's headlamp.

"Oh. Yeah," she said. In the dark his skin glowed green.

"You hungry?"

"Yeah." They were getting down to the last of their supplies. Tonight it would be par boiled rice and beans and what remained from her pouch of wine. For breakfast they'd have crackers and almond butter and the remainder of her coffee, a far cry from the substantial camp breakfasts she'd made for herself the first week out.

"Good thing we're leaving tomorrow," he said.

"You think?" she asked, watching him.

"No." He smiled. "But what can we do? You have to walk your sister down the aisle in, what, six days?"

"Actually my father does that. I'm just there for moral support. And I'm the best dancer in the family, so... they need me."

Just then, her phone chirped loudly from inside the tent.

"It's probably my mom, wanting to know what time to expect me tomorrow," she said, standing.

"I'll get dinner on," he said, "you call your people."



Clara looked at her phone and saw that it wasn't her mother, but Jean who had texted. *Really need you*, her phone said.

"Are you good with the camp stove?" she asked Robert. "I'm going to call Jean."

"I'll manage," he said. "Tell her I said hi."

~ ~ ~

Jean didn't know what to say, where to begin. Her face was hot, her throat raw. She couldn't forget the look on John's face. If she had a picture of it, she would have sent it to Clara, so that Clara would know. Instead, she told her everything, tracing through the events of the past week, as if trying to figure out herself how it had come to this.

Last week, Jean got a call from Lynn Winters, the director of the Michigan Photographer's Guild. There was a last minute spot in their booth at the State Street Art Fair. Did she have anything to show?

Jean had applied to participate in the fair, part of a series of art fairs that took place in Ann Arbor in late July, earlier that year, but was not accepted. This rejection by her hometown arts scene had cast a pall over her entire year. But it also pushed her to work harder, to push through the boundaries of the form and into something new. She had applied with work from New York. And, she realized now, there was something not very special about it; it could have come from anyone. The work she did that spring felt vital. It felt interesting and alive. "Yes," she said into the telephone. "How many pieces can you take?"

Four. They could take four. But they needed them by Thursday.

In her studio, Jean flipped through the pieces from her spring series. Some were rushed. Others were unfinished, abandoned mid-stroke. But she had a handful that she loved, all painted black and white photos: a portrait of the large dead oak in the center of Eberwhite with a painted heron roosting on top, called *Oak*, and a landscape of a grove of dead ash trees with the veined trails from the beetles that had killed them painted black for emphasis, called simply *Ash*; a third piece, a mosaic from a daylong study of a bloodroot, featured six rows of four, 4x4 inch images with different parts of the flower painted in each – its green leaves, white petals and yellow pistils each taking their turn as the flower slowly opened and closed

again throughout a 12-hour period. This piece, called *Bloodroot*, was the only one that had been properly matted and framed. Jean worried that the fourth piece she selected, a painted black and white of a cherry tree in full bloom in the Arb was a bit obvious, but she also knew that out of all of her pieces, it was the one with the best chance of selling, and if one piece sold, it would more than pay for the framing of the others.

As Jean gathered her pieces, she looked longingly at the piece she was still working on, the large photo from her shoot at Eberwhite. It was anchored to her easel, her notes for adding audio still scrawled on the edges: *What native birds? What migratory birds? What made up, invented, fairytale birds?* Lately, she was having trouble even getting to the work, much less able to think about how she would capture and incorporate the audio. But that would wait for next spring. She had time. Or, she would after the wedding.

Once Jean selected the pieces, she photographed each before rolling them back up and slipping them into tubes so that they could be easily transported. She wanted to text John the news, but hesitated. She was afraid he wouldn't like that she was distracting herself right before the wedding. Afraid he would think – that he would know – that this was where her head was. Not on *them*, but on herself, her work. It would be worse, she thought, to not tell him. She sent him the pictures she snapped along with the words *Big news*.

But John didn't respond, not right away. When he did, he texted, *My mom mentioned something about flowers...are you on that?*

By then, Jean was sitting in her car behind Format, the framer she had used for *Bloodroot*, the other three pieces in the backseat of her car.

"Shit," she said, but texted, *Yes...Remind me what time?*

*Jesus, Jean...* he texted. *4.*

*Got it,* she texted.

The last thing she wanted was to have to deal with Nancy. But what could she do? She was John's mother, and soon she would be her mother too. Just the thought gave Jean a stomachache. An hour ago, she was nervous about getting her material together. And now she was nervous about the wedding, about flowers, of all things. About having to deal with Nancy when there were so many other things to do.

Inside Format, Jean rolled out her pieces one at a time and chose the same simple white mat and black frame for each.

“I don’t suppose I get a bulk discount,” she said, worrying about the price.

“Sorry,” Lora, the girl who worked behind the counter said. “I’m not even sure we can do it, if we have the materials. If we can, I’ll have to charge you a rush fee.”

“Oh,” Jean said, looking down at her pieces. She could charge thousands for each piece, but it didn’t mean they would sell. She thought of each of the three credit cards in her wallet, of the toll that living in New York had taken on her finances. She ran a quick calculation in her head and estimated that she had a few thousand worth of credit free on all of the cards combined. “That’s fine,” she smiled. “Fingers crossed that you can do it.”

“I’ll check with Don when he comes back in and get back to you later this afternoon.”

When Jean left, her stomach was doing loops. It was 3 p.m. and there was no time to go home before meeting Nancy. She drove to Mighty Good for some tea, and was relieved not to find her sister behind the counter. They’d hardly spoken since their argument two weeks ago, and Jean had enough to deal with without having to see Erin.

She walked with her tea down to Liberty Street, determined to be early for her meeting with Nancy. Inside the shop were buckets of snapdragons, sunflowers and peonies, and gorgeous white anemones with deep blue centers. She wished that she had paid more attention when they were selecting flowers. A white and blue pallet would have been lovely.

“Maybe for your next wedding,” the florist said, noticing Jean admiring the anemones.

“What?”

“Sorry, just a little florist humor. You’re June, right?”

“Jean.”

“I’ve got your sample bouquet right over here.”

She led Jean to a bouquet of pink peonies, coral ranunculi, red dahlias and purple sweet peas.

“The centerpieces will be mixed ranunculi. And the boutonnières will all be purple sweet pea. It’s a lot of color, but it comes together nicely.”

Jean stuck her nose in the bouquet and breathed it in. For the first time it hit her. There was going to be a wedding and she was going to be the bride. It wasn’t an intellectual exercise, or childish dare. It was really happening. Her stomach

continued with its flips. She felt lightheaded. She stepped back from the bouquet, sure she would be sick.

“Hello, dear,” Nancy said, putting her hand on Jean’s shoulder. “What do you think?”

“They’re gorgeous,” Jean said, swooning.

“Yes, but... do we think the purple is too much?” Nancy said, pulling the sweet pea out of the bouquet and considering it.

~ ~ ~

Jean felt better the moment she left the flower shop. She just needed a little air, she told herself, a little space. When she got home, she made a pot of peppermint tea and called Format. They could do the framing. It would cost \$2,200 without the rush fees and \$2,800 with it.

“OK,” Jean said. “Let me um... I’ll call you right back.”

She went online and checked with each bank. She had just enough to do it.

She called Format back. “This feels a little absurd,” she said, “but I have to split the charge between three cards.”

“You can pay for it when you pick them up.”

“When can I get them?”

“Thursday morning.”

“Perfect,” Jean said. “What time do you open?”

Jean watched a brown UPS truck pull up the street and stop in front of the house. He got out carrying a large Crate & Barrel box, the third one this week.

What’s absurd, she thought, is that all of this money is being spent on you and you don’t even want it.

Erin came out of her room to get the door.

“Oh,” she said. “I didn’t know you were home.”

“I am.”

“Well, I guess you can get the door yourself then,” Erin said. “It’s obviously for you.”

“Please don’t be like that,” Jean said.

“Like what?” Erin shrugged.

“Don’t be jealous.”

“I’m not jealous!” Erin said, more forcefully than was necessary.

The UPS man knocked on the door. The two sisters stared at each other.

“Aren’t you gonna get it?” Erin asked.

“Yeah,” Jean said. She answered the door and put the black and white box with the others.

~ ~ ~

On Wednesday, State Street was closed to traffic and the booths were erected for the art fair. One large booth held a wall for Jean’s work. Early Thursday morning, Jean picked up her pieces from Format and took them to the booth. It felt like Christmas, graduation day and her birthday all rolled into one. She worked with a volunteer to hang her pieces, hanging *Oak* and *Ash* in the center, *Bloodroot* to the left of them and *Cherry* to the right, trying to strike the perfect balance between visual variety and unity. When the pieces were hung she stepped back to look at them, and was thrilled with the result. It was her own little piece of the art fair.

From behind her, someone said, “I think you’ve had a breakthrough.” Jean spun around to see Lynn Winters, the director of the Photographer’s Guild and one of the fair’s jurors. “I’m Lynn,” she said, offering her hand.

“Jean Wintree,” Jean said, taking Lynn’s hand.

“It’s better than the work you submitted with,” Lynn said. “I’m excited to see how it does this weekend.”

Up until then, nobody but John had seen her new work – not even her parents, who rarely bothered to come back into her studio. And so it was good to get an affirmation of what she thought she knew. It *was* good work. Maybe the best she’d ever done.

“I’m working on a piece now that I love,” Jean said. “I wish it was finished. Maybe next year.”

“We’re always in love with the piece we’re working on. Everything else we take for granted. Don’t do that to yourself, OK? You’ve worked hard. You’re here. It’s time to celebrate.”

“OK,” Jean said, smiling.

The weekend was exhausting, exhilarating and a little overwhelming. Jean was out the door by eight every morning and in after ten every night. She gleefully attended the artist-only after parties – happy to be among other artists even after the

long days of babysitting her work, talking to strangers, and sneaking food and bathroom breaks whenever she could. She was interviewed by ARTnews and MLive, and asked who represented her a half dozen times. She didn't want to say "Nobody," so she simply demurred. "I'm not showing anything in a gallery now, if that's what you mean." Twice, local gallerists gave her their cards, saying that they might have some space. A gallerist from Chicago also expressed interest. Finally, it felt like things were starting to click into place. That the work she had done and the sleep she had lost were not for naught. That she had chased her dreams and finally caught up to them.

But by Sunday, none of her pieces had sold, and the attention had started to drift away. On Monday, she would wake up and begin another long day, and everything would be just as it had been. What, she wondered, had she expected? That someone would see her work, and all of the sudden her art career would take off? That she would be rescued from obscurity? From her parents back yard? From... her wedding? Jean shook her head. She didn't want that. Didn't want to be rescued, from her wedding or anything else. But the moment the thought crept into her mind, it stayed, a spider building a web. Would she want to marry John if she knew there was an opportunity to do something else? If she could do anything, anything at all, what would it be? *Cancel the wedding*, she thought. *Send back the gifts. Move on.* And so, when Linus Birch walked into her booth and introduced himself, it had already been decided.

"Very nice," Linus said, moving his spectacled eyes over her work. His eyes fell on *Bloodroot, Oak* and *Ash*. "What are you working on now?" he asked.

"I'm working on a very large landscape that takes a slice of reality, in this case a black and white, and layers on what can't be seen. I want to create an audio component for it, but I'm a bit out of my depth."

"Do you have an MFA?"

"No."

"Good," he said, and shook his head: "Doesn't matter."

He spent a long time looking at *Bloodroot*, at each of its 24 photos.

"Interesting choices," he said. "Do you have roots?"

"What?" Jean asked.

"I mean, are you mobile?"

"Yes," she said, "fairly."

Just then, Nancy walked in, and Jean was distracted by the need to acknowledge her. She looked over Linus's shoulder at Nancy, and smiled. "I'm sorry," she said to Linus, "my mother-in-law just walked in."

"You're married?"

"No. Not yet."

"Take my card," he said. "I run the Exploratorium, in San Francisco, have you heard of it?"

"No."

"Well go online and take a look. I have a residency spot that I need to fill."

"Oh."

Jean was dying to know what he would say next, and dying for Nancy not to hear.

"I'm inviting a few artists to come out next month," he said. "To see the space, meet the other artists. Are you available?"

"Yes," she said, without hesitation.

"Great," he said. He shook her hand, and just like that, everything changed.

"Yes?" Nancy said, after Linus walked away. "What exactly are we saying yes to?"

"I'm," Jean said, "saying yes to meeting with him in San Francisco."

"Shouldn't you talk to John first?" Nancy said, more than miffed.

"Yes," Jean said. "I will."

Just then, Lynn walked behind her and put a small red sticker on Cherry. The piece had sold.

~ ~ ~

Jean and John had already planned to meet up later that night, to celebrate the end of her first real deal art show, and John swung by her booth to pick her up as the fair was being torn down. As they walked to the restaurant, Jean felt her legs going numb, her anxiety pouring into them. This wasn't the time to tell him, it was time to celebrate. And yet, when they tucked into a dark booth at Ashley's, and she looked across at him, she knew what she had to do.

Jean took a sip of water.

"You're shaking," he said.

"I'm hungry," she said, and shook her head: "I'm nervous."

“Don’t be!” he said. “This is the fun part! You sold your first painting! I’m so proud of you.”

“Thank you,” she said. She squeezed his hand, and did not immediately let go.

The waitress came and Jean asked her to give them a minute. She couldn’t think of eating. Couldn’t think of anything but the thing she had to say:

“I wish I had known in December the things I know now,” she said, keeping her eyes steady on him.

“Like what things?” he asked, his face turning serious.

“Like the things you want – a house, a baby.”

“Everybody wants that.”

“Not everybody,” she said. “At least... not now.”

“OK...” he trailed.

She continued: “I might have an opportunity to go to San Francisco.”

He took his hand away. “You might?” he said, a bit of force to his voice.

“Yes,” she said. “And I want to be free to do that. Free to explore.”

“We’re getting married *next week*. You couldn’t have figured this out before?”

The waitress returned and John put up his hand to shoo her away.

“I wish I had known before,” she said.

“There are always going to be opportunities, Jean. There’s always going to be something else out there. That’s the point of getting married. It means that *I choose you* over those things.”

“But you don’t have to choose me over what you want to do. You get both. It’s only me that has to choose.”

“Where is all this coming from?”

She looked down at the table. Where *was* it coming from? Why hadn’t she known before? Why had she said yes to his proposal?

“It just all happened so fast,” she said finally. “I didn’t have any time to think, to get to know you. In a marriage, two lives come together, but...I don’t have a life yet, so...I would just be joining yours.”

He looked at her with panicked, sweaty confusion. His face darkened, as though a cloud had passed over him. “This can’t be happening.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. She took his hand but he swiped it away.

“I have to go,” he said. He got up and walked away.



THE  
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Doyle Owens



## Chapter 9

The day after she heard from Jean, Clara and Robert packed up camp and drove home. They had been living in a soap bubble those few days, and after it popped, they were stunned silent, embarrassed, maybe, for having to go back and face their lives – her family and the breakup – in the midst of their blossoming romance. They drove to Mackinaw in silence, and a lump formed in Clara’s throat as they crossed the Mackinac Bridge. It was time to say goodbye, something she didn’t yet want to do.

Robert drove her to her car, and they took her kayak off of his car and strapped it onto hers.

“Do you want me to follow you home?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “I’ll be fine.”

“Do you want to have dinner later?”

“I should probably start some laundry and go see my sister,” she said.

“Of course. And I guess I should go see John.”

“Probably,” she said, looking up at him.

They joined hands and stood together in silence between their cars.

“I feel like I’m never going to see you again,” he said.

“We live, like, five minutes away from each other.”

“Yeah but... that’s real life. These last few days with you have been a dream.”

They had been. She thought of waking up in her tent those first two mornings, knowing that he was right next to her, in his own tent. And then, on the third morning, of waking up right next to him, and to a whole new reality.

He looked up at her kayak. “Sure this is strapped on okay?”

“It’s fine.”

“OK, dear Clara. I guess I’ll see you when I see you.”

“You should think of something else to call me,” she said. “It feels so...official

when you call me Clara.”

“Any suggestions?”

“Nope,” she said, smiling.

They kissed goodbye and she sat in her car for a minute, waiting for him to pull away, but he didn’t. He was waiting for her. So she pulled out of the parking lot, navigated to I-75 and disappeared.

In four hours, Clara stepped through the threshold of her parent’s house. It was dark, quiet; the curtains were pulled closed, shutting out the afternoon light. There were stacks of boxes by the front door. Wedding gifts that would need to be opened, acknowledged and returned.

“Mom?” she called.

There was no response.

“Jean?”

Nothing.

She walked quietly through the house, so as not to disturb anyone or anything, and found her father sitting in his study, staring out the open window, smoking.

“Dad?”

“Clara!” he said, quickly standing. “You’re alive! How was your trip?”

“It was good.”

“Anything, um, happen?”

“Anything like what, dad?” she asked, staring him down. She had a feeling he was responsible for Robert’s appearance three weeks before in Mackinaw City. Now she knew.

“Like nothing,” he said, shaking his head and shrugging.

“So where is everyone?”

“Work. Your mom’s at the shelter. Erin’s at Mighty Good. Jean’s at Retna. At least I think she is.”

“How is she?”

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m just the guy who pays for all this. Nobody tells me anything.”

“Go easy on her.”

“I am, I am. Family’s still coming in from Chicago. I don’t want to tell them

not to, but... What's the point?"

Clara shrugged. "One foot in front of the other. Besides, this isn't about us."

"Nope, nope. It's about your sister. Still," he said, "she broke my heart."

"Isn't it better for your daughter to be happy?"

"Don't lecture me, Clara. Your mother's already done that."

"I'm sorry dad," Clara said.

"So! Tell me! How was your trip? Are you sure nothing happened?"

~ ~ ~

Later, Erin came home, looked into the refrigerator for something to eat, and, finding nothing, went into her bedroom and closed the door. She felt, at once, responsible for, and vindicated by, the dissolution of Jean and John's relationship. She was torn between wanting to comfort each of them. But she knew that neither needed, or wanted, her and so she had stayed in her bedroom last night when Jean had come home and tearfully told her mother what happened. She listened to her mother's comforting reaction, and to her father's explosive one, surprised by it. "The *entire* family's coming in *one week*, Jean!" her father had said. "You can't flake out of this!"

"I'm not!" Jean had said. "I'm not *flaking*! I'm just...making up my mind a little too late."

"John's a *good guy*. Good guys don't grow on trees, Jean!"

"They don't?" Jean had said, sarcastically.

"Let's everybody calm down," Elaine had said, and Erin pictured her taking each of their hands, trying to bridge the gap between them.

"The Birnbauers are probably going to sue us for the cost of the wedding!" Edmund said. "We never would have gone for such a costly affair!"

There was quiet chatter that Erin couldn't hear. Then, Jean said, "I'm sorry dad."

"It's OK," he said, and Erin pictured him putting an arm around her. "All that matters is that you're happy."

It was quiet again, and Erin sat against her door, listening. She thought about John, and the conversation he must have been having with his parents. Finally, Erin heard her sister on the stairs. She listened for her in the attic but Jean was silent,

either sleeping or crying.

A day later, nobody had clued her into what was happening. Had they forgotten about her, or just assumed she knew what she needed to know? *The wedding is off; please continue with your regularly scheduled life.* Only, there was nothing scheduled. The wedding was going to be the highlight of her summer. She was going to get to see John in a tux – she might have even gotten to dance with him. And now, well, nothing. She might not ever see him again, which felt wrong; it felt unfair. What if she had met him first? What if he had proposed to her?

She thought of the night they danced her father’s crazy waltz and John said he would dream of it. Erin stood in her bedroom now and tried to remember the steps to the waltz – a bow and a curtsy, two steps down the line, tiptoes, and two steps back, tiptoes again, a twirl and a partner switch. It was so easy and so absurd. In her bedroom, she danced, imagining John and Parker, her father, Robert Stone, and other, faceless dance partners, men she had yet to meet but might one day.

That morning, she’d made a pot of tea and waited for the fairy to say something, to use her sister’s or mother’s voice to tell her what was happening. But the fairy was silent, inanimate, nothing but porcelain shaped in a mold. Erin wondered if she had come alive this summer simply to taunt her, to tell her what she wanted to hear. And if so, what did she want to hear now?

*You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.*

*You don’t have to get married, but you can if you want to.*

*You don’t have to finish school, but you can if you want to.*

*You don’t have to go to grad school.*

*You don’t have to walk the path you thought you wanted.*

“What should I do instead?” she asked the fairy, and the fairy parroted her back:

*What should I do instead?*

And so she said, “Maybe travel like mom. Be brave like Clara. Brave like Jean.”

*Thank you,* she heard Jean’s voice say.

“No,” Erin said to the fairy. “Thank *you*.”

~ ~ ~

That evening, Elaine came home carrying bags of takeout. She called everyone in, but no one came, so she fixed herself a plate, grabbed a magazine, and sat alone at the dining room table, flipping through, of all things, *Modern Bride*. There was an article titled “Cold Feet? Here’s What to do Before You Call it Off.” She wondered if Jean had read the article, or if she had, #10: *Have a Heart to Heart with Your Husband to Be*.

Elaine was just about to go for seconds when there was a knock at the door. It was quick, sharp and unannounced, and she knew just who it was.

“Nancy!” She said. “Please come in.”

Nancy stepped in and looked around. She always looked as though she had landed on another planet whenever she came over, as though she was surprised by the appearance of their house, by the way they lived.

“How are you?” Elaine said. “How is John?”

“He’s heartbroken, obviously,” Nancy said. “We all are.”

“I’m sorry,” Elaine said. “We’re...we’re mortified.”

“I’m here for the ring,” Nancy said.

“The ring?”

“The engagement ring my son gave your daughter?”

“Of course. I’m just surprised she didn’t give it back to him.”

“Is she here?”

“I think she’s upstairs. She’s been sleeping a lot.”

“God, she better not be pregnant,” Nancy said, her voice full of vitriol.

“She’s not,” Elaine said, as Nancy walked into the house and stood at the foot of the stairs.

“Well, are you going to get her or am I?”

“You want me to wake her up?” Elaine asked.

“Never mind!” Nancy said, throwing up her arms and charging up the stairs.

“Jean!” She called. “Jean!”

~ ~ ~

Jean woke up to see John’s mother standing over her, her arms folded in exasperation.

“Nancy!” she said, shooting up out of bed.

“I’m here for the ring.”

Jean stood up and walked across the room in her underwear. She was disoriented, but unembarrassed. If anyone should be embarrassed, she thought, it was Nancy.

“Here it is,” she said, placing the ring in Nancy’s hand. “Do you want me to turn on the light so you can make sure all the diamonds are accounted for?”

“Don’t be silly,” Nancy said, pocketing the ring. Then, “John’s heartbroken. You broke his heart.”

“Mine’s broken too,” Jean said, earnestly.

“Then why did you do it?” Nancy asked.

“John didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?” Nancy spat.

“We just didn’t want the same things.”

“A fine time to decide that!” Nancy said, and turned to go.

“Do you want to know the truth?” Jean called after her, and Nancy stopped. “The truth is, I didn’t want a house. And I didn’t want your heirloom furniture. And I didn’t want to bounce your grandchildren on my lap while he went off and worked.”

“You ungrateful spoiled brat!” Nancy spat.

“Why can’t you be nice to me? I’m not the right person for your son. And I loved him enough to be honest with him, to be honest with myself.”

“Can I give you some advice?” Nancy said.

“Can I give *you* some?” Jean fired back.

And with that, Nancy turned and walked away.

Jean climbed back into bed, too numb to cry. She had moved through the day in a haze of disbelief, texting friends and calling relatives. Most wanted to come anyway, to be there for her. *We’ll get our nails done and go to the movies and eat too much popcorn*, one of her roommates from Brooklyn had texted. *We’ll go on your honeymoon together*, another said. *San Francisco!* Another friend texted. *How exciting!* It was exciting, or it might have been, had not the best thing and the worst thing happened simultaneously.

Her childhood best friend texted her an image of a tarot card: Judgment.

*I just pulled a card for you*, she said.

*I’m definitely feeling that one*, Jean texted back.

*I think it means that you have employed excellent judgment.*

Jean knew in her heart that she had. And that if this was the worst life would

ever be, it would not be so bad.

~ ~ ~

And so most of Jean's wedding guests came to town anyway. On Thursday night, Clara threw what was supposed to have been Jean's bachelorette party, an adult version of a sleep over with manicures, martinis, and fancy party food. It was not a pity party. Jean's friends made sure of that. Instead, they simply celebrated the happy occasion of being together, of being alive and in love with one another. That weekend, the party would continue. The Wintrees and Birnbauers decided to split the spoils, and so half of the flowers and half of the food would be delivered to the Wintree home promptly at 11 on Saturday. The Birnbauers were keeping the venue, the music, and photographer for themselves. Jean would have her party, and John would have his.

This meant two days of parties at the Wintree household – one on Friday with the food already ordered for the rehearsal dinner, and one on Saturday, with the signature cocktail and canapés for the wedding that would have been. By then, the house had already been cleaned, the yard already decorated with twinkle lights wrapped around the trunks of the oaks and hickories in their backyard. The tables and chairs Elaine didn't remember ordering had been delivered, and she put them on the deck, covered them with tablecloths, and topped them with the arrangements she'd planned for the rehearsal – pillar candles in hurricanes and vases full of hydrangeas clipped from her garden. She was glad she'd spent the money on the hurricanes, as they'd be used for two nights instead of one. There were so many flowers coming on Saturday, she thought about taking them to the cemetery and decorating every headstone. And maybe she would, on Sunday, once everyone had gone. For now, there was the wedding to get through, the non-wedding she'd taken to calling it, a weekend full of guests to entertain. She was relieved she hadn't planned a wedding brunch. Two days of people in her house would be quite enough.

On Friday, once the house was ready, Elaine threw on a sundress and uncorked a few bottles of wine. She felt like she'd been holding her breath, and it was finally time to exhale. Her mother was there. Her aunts and cousins were arriving soon. She'd allow herself to be swept up by their love, soothed by their presence, and she hoped that Jean would too. She hoped that, rather than tearing the family apart,

the non-wedding would serve to stitch them even closer together.

So far, it seemed to be. The girls were getting along, thank god. And it seemed that Jean had forgiven Erin for her prescient indiscretion. Sometimes, being the mother of girls, the mother of sisters, it felt like she was pressing her face against the glass, trying to see them, to know them better, to be in on their secrets. And this summer had been no exception. She could feel only the heat that came from their arguments, the grace from their friendship. Were they, most of the time, content? She didn't know. She only knew their extremes.

Today, though, as the family gathered, and all three girls graciously greeted their guests, the girls seemed to present a united front. No one would know, Elaine thought, that Erin had an obvious and inappropriate crush on John, or that Clara was likely irritated for having scheduled her travel around an event that never came to be. In fact, Clara didn't seem irritated at all. She seemed happy – *very* happy, Elaine thought, watching Clara with her new beau. Since he'd arrived that evening, every time Elaine caught sight of her daughter, Robert was next to her. They seemed to be in constant conversation. And Elaine wasn't the only one who noticed. "Look at that," her aunt said, pointing to Clara and Robert canoodling in the corner, "we might have a wedding yet!"

"I'm just happy she's happy," Elaine said.

Later, outside, as their guests ate and drank and laughed together, Edmund stood:

"I want to make a toast," he said. "This week has not gone the way we thought it would, and we are grateful to you all for coming to share your time with us nonetheless. To my beautiful daughters, Clara, Jean and Erin: You've always done exactly what you've wanted, what you thought was right. That, more than anything else, makes me very proud to be your father. And to Jean," he said, looking at her, "I hope you feel our love and support, today and always. Cheers to you," he said, lifting his glass, "Cheers to all of you."

And it was just what Elaine would have said, if only she had been able to find the words.

~ ~ ~

After the toast, the party continued and got louder, as the music came on and space was cleared for dancing. "Two nights of this!" Clara said, raising her eyebrows.



“Let’s get out of here before your dad tries to teach us something from Dickens,” Robert said.

They walked down into the yard, and under the lighted trees.

“I really like your family,” Robert said.

“Thank you,” Clara said, “I like them too.”

“I’d like you to meet mine, if you don’t think that’s moving too fast.”

“No, I don’t think it is.”

“Good,” he said, “In that case...” He swung around to look at her. Clara wondered if his eyes had always been so blue, or if it was maybe just the shirt he was wearing. “I decided what I’d like to call you,” he said.

“Go on,” Clara said.

He held his breath, closed his eyes and opened them, but he didn’t say anything, not right away.

Finally, he said, “Wife.”

“That’s bananas!” Clara blurted. It was the only thing she could think to say.

“Is it though?”

“Yes!” she said, but couldn’t resist the smile that spread across her face. “We only just met – what would everyone say?”

“I don’t care what everyone says. I just want to know what you say. So tell me,” he said, pulling her into him, “what would Clara say?”

THE  
*Wintree Waltz*  
By Lauren  
Doyle Owens



## Chapter 10

**Y**es. Clara would say yes. She didn't know it until the moment he asked her, in the twinkle-lighted glow of the trees.

"I'm not usually so..." she started.

He asked her again, his smile growing: "What would Clara say?"

His hands were holding hers and it felt as though they were about to jump off a cliff together and into an ocean. "Yes," she said, laughing. "Clara would say yes."

They kissed. He picked her up and spun her around. And soon, the party fell into silence, as everyone on the deck looked down at them.

"We're getting married!" Robert called up.

The party was stunned. Somebody turned off the music. They stared down at them, blankly.

"That is, sir, if it's okay with you," Robert said, addressing Edmund.

"Really?" Elaine said, looking down at Clara.

"Yes!" Clara called up, her voice full of laughter.

"Only if you do it tomorrow!" Edmund called down, with great delight.

"Wouldn't that be something!" Clara heard her aunt Mildred say.

Robert looked at Clara. "Up to you," he said.

And Clara, who felt for sure she'd swallowed a whole strand of twinkle lights, she was so happy, said to him, "Yes. So long as it's okay with Jean."

"We're coming up!" Robert called.

Clara felt dazed, but surer than ever before. And so when Jean stood in front of her with tears in her eyes, she simply embraced her sister and let her cry.

"I'm happy for you," Jean said. "I don't want you to think that I'm not."

"I know," Clara said, petting her sister's head. "And it doesn't have to be tomorrow. I'm not in any hurry."

"Do it!" Jean said, pulling away and looking at her sister through tears. "But

you can't have my dress."

And so it was settled. The family had come for a wedding and a wedding they were going to get.

~ ~ ~

Clara had a closet full of bridesmaid gowns she'd always planned to, but never did, get rid of. This included the gown she was going to wear to her sister's wedding, a one-shouldered A-line in Contemplative Ocean.

"What if I wore this," she said, turning to her sisters who were sitting on her bed the next morning, "and you each chose one of these to wear?"

"Totally up to you," Erin said, "but, it might look nicer if Jean and I wore the bridesmaid dresses planned for today and you chose another color, something light."

"I have always loved this one," Clara said of a pale pink lace and organza dress she wore as a bridesmaid ten years ago. I'd be shocked if it still fits."

"It'll look amazing with the flowers," Jean said. They were using everything they could from Jean's scuttled wedding, including the flowers, rental linens and food. It made for a surprisingly easy, if not unusual, home wedding.

The dress fit perfectly. If Clara had gained an inch in ten years, she had worked it off during her kayaking trip. "You don't think it's too much for mom and dad's backyard?" Clara asked, coming into her bedroom from the bathroom. "I kind of feel like I should be wearing overalls."

"It's beautiful!" Erin said.

Jean put her arm around Erin, and Erin leaned into her sister, grateful for the affection.

"Okay then!" Clara said. "This is my wedding dress! Now what?"

It had been a morning of furious activity, of phone calls and last minute invites, of errands she'd never imagined making, like going to city hall for a marriage license.

"Now we eat," Jean said. "Hair and makeup will be at mom and dad's at two."

They walked down the street to The Lunch Room, a vegan eatery in Kerrytown but Clara was barely able to eat.

"Eat!" Erin said, you'll never get through today otherwise.

"Or you'll get drunk on my signature cocktail. I mean...your signature cocktail."

The sisters fell into silence. Erin stared into her soup.

“I just want to say that I’m sorry,” Erin said finally, turning to Jean. “I never should have said the things that I said.”

“It’s okay,” Jean said, squeezing her sister’s hand. “I didn’t realize it at the time but...you saved me. Just don’t go marrying John,” Jean said, as an afterthought. “I’m not sure I could take seeing him every Christmas and Thanksgiving.”

“Aw, but dad would be so happy!” Clara said, jokingly.

“I think he’s too old for me anyway.”

“Besides,” Clara said, “you have the neighbor boy.”

“We broke up,” Erin said. “He’s going back to Maryland and...I just wasn’t that into him, anyway.”

“Good,” Jean said. “You’re too young to be tied down.”

“I agree,” Erin said. “Besides, I think I might like to... explore my options.”

“Meaning?” Jean asked.

“Do you think they would let me travel?”

Clara and Jean looked at each other and then back at Erin.

“I don’t see why not,” Clara said. “So long as you graduate first.”

“But...that’s the problem. I don’t want to graduate. I mean...I don’t know what I want to do.”

Jean shrugged. “Mom did a semester abroad. Just remind her of that.”

“Where would you want to go?” Clara asked.

“I don’t know,” Erin said. “The idea of going anywhere feels kind of... revolutionary.”

“I fully support it,” Clara said. “Nobody ever said, ‘I wish I had traveled less.’”

“Me too,” Jean said, squeezing Erin’s shoulder. “Good for you.”

~ ~ ~

After the girls had their hair and makeup done, but before they put their dresses on, Elaine carried a pot of tea upstairs on a tray with four cups. “One last pot of tea with my daughters,” she said.

“We’ll all still be here tomorrow, mom,” Jean said.

“Yes, but everything will be different. *Better*,” she said, squeezing Clara’s hand, “but different.”

She poured out the golden liquid into the four cups and raised hers to her daughters.

“Cheers,” she said. “It has been my pleasure raising you, my beautiful daughters.”

“Are we all getting married?” Erin said, looking conspiratorially at Jean, but it wasn’t the right day for that joke, and when Jean smiled politely back at her, Erin looked down at the teapot fairy, who grinned up at her, silent as a statue.

“Thanks Mom,” Clara said, and they tapped teacups.

“Can I ask you guys a question?” Erin said, still looking down at the teapot.

“Yes?” Elaine said.

“Has anyone ever heard anything when they’re drinking from this teapot?”

“Heard anything like what?” Jean asked, smiling.

“Like...voices.”

“Are you telling us you’re hearing voices?” Clara asked.

“No...” Erin said. “I’m asking you if you are.”

“Sometimes.” Elaine said.

“Really?” Erin asked, incredulous.

“Sure,” Elaine said, shrugging. “I hear your voice and Jean’s voice and sometimes Clara’s voice. I just thought it was me, thinking of you.”

“What do you hear?” Jean asked Erin.

“I hear your voice, and sometimes Mom’s.”

Clara looked at Jean, wide-eyed, and screwed her finger beside her temple to indicate that their mother and sister had gone coo-coo, but Jean, who had heard her own voice while drinking from the teapot, knew better.

“Well, maybe there’s some magic in this old thing,” Elaine said.

“Or maybe you all just need to get out more,” Clara said, winking at Erin.

“Is everybody decent?” Edmund asked, knocking on the door.

“Well if they weren’t, you would have seen them anyway!” Elaine said, teasing her husband.

“Robert’s parents are here,” he said.

~ ~ ~

Downstairs, the house was a flurry of activity. In the kitchen, the caterers were

setting up. Outside, Jean's friends were helping, putting linens, flowers and candles on the tables, and hanging pomanders from each row of chairs under the trees in the back yard.

"We're so happy," Robert's mother, Muriel, said, taking Clara's hands. "Aren't we, Dick?" she said, nudging her husband.

"Yes," he said. "Surprised, but happy."

"Me too," Clara said, hugging them each.

"We don't want to keep you," Muriel said. "We'll have lots of time to get to know each other. But I do want to tell you that I dreamt about you," she said, leaning in. "This was before Robert even moved back. When he said he was coming back to Ann Arbor I went to bed that night and dreamt that he met a dark-haired vegetarian, and then he met you!" she said, on the verge of tears.

"Wow," Clara said.

"So I want you to know," Muriel said, squeezing Clara's hand, "that even though this seems sudden, it's not. If anything, it's taken longer than it should have."

~ ~ ~

Upstairs, Clara put on her pink wedding dress and looked in the mirror. She wasn't nervous or afraid. She was certain. She thought of Robert's mother, and the dream she had had. What Clara hadn't told Muriel was that she had a dream too. The night she met Robert, she dreamt that she was trying to call him, but couldn't connect. She kept trying, on different phones and in different places, but she couldn't reach him. It was a frustrating and terrifying dream, and she'd never experienced anything like it. The next day, she thought about calling him but held back. She was going away that summer, and didn't want to start anything. Then, he walked into her parent's living room. Then, he found her in Mackinaw City. Then, they fell in love.

"You look amazing," Jean said, standing in the doorway.

"Thank you," Clara said, "you do too."

"I want you to know that I'm really happy," Jean said. "For you and for myself."

"You don't think it's crazy?" Clara asked.

"For you? No. You know what you're doing."

"Thanks."

They hugged and Edmund stood in the doorway, watching.

“My beautiful girls,” he said, wiping tears from his eyes.

“Ready?” Clara asked.

“Never,” he said.

~ ~ ~

Downstairs, the haphazardly assembled guests took their seats under the canopy of trees in the Wintree backyard, and Clara walked down the aisle as Robert’s niece played *Ode to Joy* on her flute. As she walked toward him, Clara couldn’t shake the feeling that all of this had been done before. And when she took Robert’s hand, she felt a familiarity that she had never before known. And when they kissed, she thought, “Oh yes! There you are!”

And the guests applauded.

That night, they danced.

*The End.*



## MEET THE AUTHOR: LAUREN DOYLE OWENS

Lauren Doyle Owens is a Florida-based fiction writer. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous publications, including *Tigertail*, *Concho River Review* and *The Seventh Wave*.

Lauren chose to set her novella *The Wintree Waltz* in Ann Arbor, Michigan (home to Arbor Teas). “For me, it was just natural that the novel be set in Ann Arbor, a place that takes on a completely different identity during the summer, as the students leave and the townies take over,” Owens explains. “I love this idea of playing with identities, how a place or a person can become something different depending on the decisions they make, or even who they’re standing next to. When I started to write about the Wintree sisters, I realized how they’re all in a state of flux, that anything could change for them at any moment.”

“Literature is full of marriage plots, so I was tapping into a tradition of light-hearted, even magical, stories that take place during this universal turning point. I had so much fun spending time with the Wintrees as I worked on *The Wintree Waltz* and I hope readers do too,” Owens says.

Lauren is the oldest of four girls, and definitely a “Clara Wintree”. When not writing, Lauren is a hobbyist photographer, and loves to travel, hike, and eat. Her favorite teas are Matcha, Gyokuro and Silver Needle – especially when she’s on deadline! Lauren lives in Fort Lauderdale with her husband Chris.

You can follow Lauren on Twitter and find more of her work on [laurendoyleowens.com](http://laurendoyleowens.com). She is currently seeking representation for *The Other Side of Everything*, a novel set during a steamy South Florida summer.





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