

THE
Wintree Waltz
By Lauren
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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."

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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.



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