

THE  
*Wintree Waltz*  
By Lauren  
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## 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.

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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.

“Let’s 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 side 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.”

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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.

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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.”

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“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."

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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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