

THE
Wintree Waltz
By Lauren
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Chapter 10

Yes. 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.

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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.”

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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.

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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."

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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.

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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.



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