

THE
Wintree Waltz
By Lauren
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Chapter 2

Erin 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.

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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!”

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.



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