

THE
Wintree Waltz
By Lauren
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Chapter 4

By 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.

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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.

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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!"

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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.

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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.

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“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.



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