

THE
Winter Waltz

By Lauren
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Chapter 8

By the time they got word that the wedding was canceled, Clara and Robert had traveled to Drummond Island, then back west for three days of camping and hiking around Tahquamenon Falls, and then back up to Munising, where they camped for two nights under the Aurora. It was Clara's first time seeing the lights and they bowled her over.

"So this is why people live way up north," she whispered. They had just finished a night hike and were looking out at the green and yellow lights as they glowed over Lake Superior. "It's like...Ectoplasm," she said.

"It's better if you turn off your lamp," he said, reaching over to turn off Clara's headlamp.

"Oh. Yeah," she said. In the dark his skin glowed green.

"You hungry?"

"Yeah." They were getting down to the last of their supplies. Tonight it would be par boiled rice and beans and what remained from her pouch of wine. For breakfast they'd have crackers and almond butter and the remainder of her coffee, a far cry from the substantial camp breakfasts she'd made for herself the first week out.

"Good thing we're leaving tomorrow," he said.

"You think?" she asked, watching him.

"No." He smiled. "But what can we do? You have to walk your sister down the aisle in, what, six days?"

"Actually my father does that. I'm just there for moral support. And I'm the best dancer in the family, so... they need me."

Just then, her phone chirped loudly from inside the tent.

"It's probably my mom, wanting to know what time to expect me tomorrow," she said, standing.

"I'll get dinner on," he said, "you call your people."

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Clara looked at her phone and saw that it wasn't her mother, but Jean who had texted. *Really need you*, her phone said.

"Are you good with the camp stove?" she asked Robert. "I'm going to call Jean."

"I'll manage," he said. "Tell her I said hi."

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Jean didn't know what to say, where to begin. Her face was hot, her throat raw. She couldn't forget the look on John's face. If she had a picture of it, she would have sent it to Clara, so that Clara would know. Instead, she told her everything, tracing through the events of the past week, as if trying to figure out herself how it had come to this.

Last week, Jean got a call from Lynn Winters, the director of the Michigan Photographer's Guild. There was a last minute spot in their booth at the State Street Art Fair. Did she have anything to show?

Jean had applied to participate in the fair, part of a series of art fairs that took place in Ann Arbor in late July, earlier that year, but was not accepted. This rejection by her hometown arts scene had cast a pall over her entire year. But it also pushed her to work harder, to push through the boundaries of the form and into something new. She had applied with work from New York. And, she realized now, there was something not very special about it; it could have come from anyone. The work she did that spring felt vital. It felt interesting and alive. "Yes," she said into the telephone. "How many pieces can you take?"

Four. They could take four. But they needed them by Thursday.

In her studio, Jean flipped through the pieces from her spring series. Some were rushed. Others were unfinished, abandoned mid-stroke. But she had a handful that she loved, all painted black and white photos: a portrait of the large dead oak in the center of Eberwhite with a painted heron roosting on top, called *Oak*, and a landscape of a grove of dead ash trees with the veined trails from the beetles that had killed them painted black for emphasis, called simply *Ash*; a third piece, a mosaic from a daylong study of a bloodroot, featured six rows of four, 4x4 inch images with different parts of the flower painted in each – its green leaves, white petals and yellow pistils each taking their turn as the flower slowly opened and closed

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again throughout a 12-hour period. This piece, called *Bloodroot*, was the only one that had been properly matted and framed. Jean worried that the fourth piece she selected, a painted black and white of a cherry tree in full bloom in the Arb was a bit obvious, but she also knew that out of all of her pieces, it was the one with the best chance of selling, and if one piece sold, it would more than pay for the framing of the others.

As Jean gathered her pieces, she looked longingly at the piece she was still working on, the large photo from her shoot at Eberwhite. It was anchored to her easel, her notes for adding audio still scrawled on the edges: *What native birds? What migratory birds? What made up, invented, fairytale birds?* Lately, she was having trouble even getting to the work, much less able to think about how she would capture and incorporate the audio. But that would wait for next spring. She had time. Or, she would after the wedding.

Once Jean selected the pieces, she photographed each before rolling them back up and slipping them into tubes so that they could be easily transported. She wanted to text John the news, but hesitated. She was afraid he wouldn't like that she was distracting herself right before the wedding. Afraid he would think – that he would know – that this was where her head was. Not on *them*, but on herself, her work. It would be worse, she thought, to not tell him. She sent him the pictures she snapped along with the words *Big news*.

But John didn't respond, not right away. When he did, he texted, *My mom mentioned something about flowers...are you on that?*

By then, Jean was sitting in her car behind Format, the framer she had used for *Bloodroot*, the other three pieces in the backseat of her car.

"Shit," she said, but texted, *Yes...Remind me what time?*

Jesus, Jean... he texted. *4.*

Got it, she texted.

The last thing she wanted was to have to deal with Nancy. But what could she do? She was John's mother, and soon she would be her mother too. Just the thought gave Jean a stomachache. An hour ago, she was nervous about getting her material together. And now she was nervous about the wedding, about flowers, of all things. About having to deal with Nancy when there were so many other things to do.

Inside Format, Jean rolled out her pieces one at a time and chose the same simple white mat and black frame for each.

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"I don't suppose I get a bulk discount," she said, worrying about the price.

"Sorry," Lora, the girl who worked behind the counter said. "I'm not even sure we can do it, if we have the materials. If we can, I'll have to charge you a rush fee."

"Oh," Jean said, looking down at her pieces. She could charge thousands for each piece, but it didn't mean they would sell. She thought of each of the three credit cards in her wallet, of the toll that living in New York had taken on her finances. She ran a quick calculation in her head and estimated that she had a few thousand worth of credit free on all of the cards combined. "That's fine," she smiled. "Fingers crossed that you can do it."

"I'll check with Don when he comes back in and get back to you later this afternoon."

When Jean left, her stomach was doing loops. It was 3 p.m. and there was no time to go home before meeting Nancy. She drove to Mighty Good for some tea, and was relieved not to find her sister behind the counter. They'd hardly spoken since their argument two weeks ago, and Jean had enough to deal with without having to see Erin.

She walked with her tea down to Liberty Street, determined to be early for her meeting with Nancy. Inside the shop were buckets of snapdragons, sunflowers and peonies, and gorgeous white anemones with deep blue centers. She wished that she had paid more attention when they were selecting flowers. A white and blue pallet would have been lovely.

"Maybe for your next wedding," the florist said, noticing Jean admiring the anemones.

"What?"

"Sorry, just a little florist humor. You're June, right?"

"Jean."

"I've got your sample bouquet right over here."

She led Jean to a bouquet of pink peonies, coral ranunculi, red dahlias and purple sweet peas.

"The centerpieces will be mixed ranunculi. And the boutonnieres will all be purple sweet pea. It's a lot of color, but it comes together nicely."

Jean stuck her nose in the bouquet and breathed it in. For the first time it hit her. There was going to be a wedding and she was going to be the bride. It wasn't an intellectual exercise, or childish dare. It was really happening. Her stomach

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continued with its flips. She felt lightheaded. She stepped back from the bouquet, sure she would be sick.

"Hello, dear," Nancy said, putting her hand on Jean's shoulder. "What do you think?"

"They're gorgeous," Jean said, swooning.

"Yes, but... do we think the purple is too much?" Nancy said, pulling the sweet pea out of the bouquet and considering it.

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Jean felt better the moment she left the flower shop. She just needed a little air, she told herself, a little space. When she got home, she made a pot of peppermint tea and called Format. They could do the framing. It would cost \$2,200 without the rush fees and \$2,800 with it.

"OK," Jean said. "Let me um... I'll call you right back."

She went online and checked with each bank. She had just enough to do it.

She called Format back. "This feels a little absurd," she said, "but I have to split the charge between three cards."

"You can pay for it when you pick them up."

"When can I get them?"

"Thursday morning."

"Perfect," Jean said. "What time do you open?"

Jean watched a brown UPS truck pull up the street and stop in front of the house. He got out carrying a large Crate & Barrel box, the third one this week.

What's absurd, she thought, is that all of this money is being spent on you and you don't even want it.

Erin came out of her room to get the door.

"Oh," she said. "I didn't know you were home."

"I am."

"Well, I guess you can get the door yourself then," Erin said. "It's obviously for you."

"Please don't be like that," Jean said.

"Like what?" Erin shrugged.

"Don't be jealous."

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“I’m not jealous!” Erin said, more forcefully than was necessary.
The UPS man knocked on the door. The two sisters stared at each other.
“Aren’t you gonna get it?” Erin asked.
“Yeah,” Jean said. She answered the door and put the black and white box with the others.

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On Wednesday, State Street was closed to traffic and the booths were erected for the art fair. One large booth held a wall for Jean’s work. Early Thursday morning, Jean picked up her pieces from Format and took them to the booth. It felt like Christmas, graduation day and her birthday all rolled into one. She worked with a volunteer to hang her pieces, hanging *Oak* and *Ash* in the center, *Bloodroot* to the left of them and *Cherry* to the right, trying to strike the perfect balance between visual variety and unity. When the pieces were hung she stepped back to look at them, and was thrilled with the result. It was her own little piece of the art fair.

From behind her, someone said, “I think you’ve had a breakthrough.” Jean spun around to see Lynn Winters, the director of the Photographer’s Guild and one of the fair’s jurors. “I’m Lynn,” she said, offering her hand.

“Jean Wintree,” Jean said, taking Lynn’s hand.

“It’s better than the work you submitted with,” Lynn said. “I’m excited to see how it does this weekend.”

Up until then, nobody but John had seen her new work – not even her parents, who rarely bothered to come back into her studio. And so it was good to get an affirmation of what she thought she knew. It *was* good work. Maybe the best she’d ever done.

“I’m working on a piece now that I love,” Jean said. “I wish it was finished. Maybe next year.”

“We’re always in love with the piece we’re working on. Everything else we take for granted. Don’t do that to yourself, OK? You’ve worked hard. You’re here. It’s time to celebrate.”

“OK,” Jean said, smiling.

The weekend was exhausting, exhilarating and a little overwhelming. Jean was out the door by eight every morning and in after ten every night. She gleefully attended the artist-only after parties – happy to be among other artists even after the

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long days of babysitting her work, talking to strangers, and sneaking food and bathroom breaks whenever she could. She was interviewed by ARTnews and MLive, and asked who represented her a half dozen times. She didn't want to say "Nobody," so she simply demurred. "I'm not showing anything in a gallery now, if that's what you mean." Twice, local gallerists gave her their cards, saying that they might have some space. A gallerist from Chicago also expressed interest. Finally, it felt like things were starting to click into place. That the work she had done and the sleep she had lost were not for naught. That she had chased her dreams and finally caught up to them.

But by Sunday, none of her pieces had sold, and the attention had started to drift away. On Monday, she would wake up and begin another long day, and everything would be just as it had been. What, she wondered, had she expected? That someone would see her work, and all of the sudden her art career would take off? That she would be rescued from obscurity? From her parents back yard? From... her wedding? Jean shook her head. She didn't want that. Didn't want to be rescued, from her wedding or anything else. But the moment the thought crept into her mind, it stayed, a spider building a web. Would she want to marry John if she knew there was an opportunity to do something else? If she could do anything, anything at all, what would it be? *Cancel the wedding*, she thought. *Send back the gifts. Move on.* And so, when Linus Birch walked into her booth and introduced himself, it had already been decided.

"Very nice," Linus said, moving his spectacled eyes over her work. His eyes fell on *Bloodroot, Oak and Ash*. "What are you working on now?" he asked.

"I'm working on a very large landscape that takes a slice of reality, in this case a black and white, and layers on what can't be seen. I want to create an audio component for it, but I'm a bit out of my depth."

"Do you have an MFA?"

"No."

"Good," he said, and shook his head: "Doesn't matter."

He spent a long time looking at *Bloodroot*, at each of its 24 photos.

"Interesting choices," he said. "Do you have roots?"

"What?" Jean asked.

"I mean, are you mobile?"

"Yes," she said, "fairly."

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Just then, Nancy walked in, and Jean was distracted by the need to acknowledge her. She looked over Linus's shoulder at Nancy, and smiled. "I'm sorry," she said to Linus, "my mother-in-law just walked in."

"You're married?"

"No. Not yet."

"Take my card," he said. "I run the Exploratorium, in San Francisco, have you heard of it?"

"No."

"Well go online and take a look. I have a residency spot that I need to fill."

"Oh."

Jean was dying to know what he would say next, and dying for Nancy not to hear.

"I'm inviting a few artists to come out next month," he said. "To see the space, meet the other artists. Are you available?"

"Yes," she said, without hesitation.

"Great," he said. He shook her hand, and just like that, everything changed.

"Yes?" Nancy said, after Linus walked away. "What exactly are we saying yes to?"

"*I'm*," Jean said, "saying yes to meeting with him in San Francisco."

"Shouldn't you talk to John first?" Nancy said, more than miffed.

"Yes," Jean said. "I will."

Just then, Lynn walked behind her and put a small red sticker on Cherry. The piece had sold.

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Jean and John had already planned to meet up later that night, to celebrate the end of her first real deal art show, and John swung by her booth to pick her up as the fair was being torn down. As they walked to the restaurant, Jean felt her legs going numb, her anxiety pouring into them. This wasn't the time to tell him, it was time to celebrate. And yet, when they tucked into a dark booth at Ashley's, and she looked across at him, she knew what she had to do.

Jean took a sip of water.

"You're shaking," he said.

"I'm hungry," she said, and shook her head: "I'm nervous."

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“Don’t be!” he said. “This is the fun part! You sold your first painting! I’m so proud of you.”

“Thank you,” she said. She squeezed his hand, and did not immediately let go.

The waitress came and Jean asked her to give them a minute. She couldn’t think of eating. Couldn’t think of anything but the thing she had to say:

“I wish I had known in December the things I know now,” she said, keeping her eyes steady on him.

“Like what things?” he asked, his face turning serious.

“Like the things you want – a house, a baby.”

“Everybody wants that.”

“Not everybody,” she said. “At least... not now.”

“OK...” he trailed.

She continued: “I might have an opportunity to go to San Francisco.”

He took his hand away. “You might?” he said, a bit of force to his voice.

“Yes,” she said. “And I want to be free to do that. Free to explore.”

“We’re getting married *next week*. You couldn’t have figured this out before?”

The waitress returned and John put up his hand to shoo her away.

“I wish I had known before,” she said.

“There are always going to be opportunities, Jean. There’s always going to be something else out there. That’s the point of getting married. It means that *I choose you* over those things.”

“But you don’t have to choose me over what you want to do. You get both. It’s only me that has to choose.”

“Where is all this coming from?”

She looked down at the table. Where *was* it coming from? Why hadn’t she known before? Why had she said yes to his proposal?

“It just all happened so fast,” she said finally. “I didn’t have any time to think, to get to know you. In a marriage, two lives come together, but...I don’t have a life yet, so...I would just be joining yours.”

He looked at her with panicked, sweaty confusion. His face darkened, as though a cloud had passed over him. “This can’t be happening.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. She took his hand but he swiped it away.

“I have to go,” he said. He got up and walked away.



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