

THE  
*Wintree Waltz*  
By Lauren  
Doyle Owens



## Chapter 9

The day after she heard from Jean, Clara and Robert packed up camp and drove home. They had been living in a soap bubble those few days, and after it popped, they were stunned silent, embarrassed, maybe, for having to go back and face their lives – her family and the breakup – in the midst of their blossoming romance. They drove to Mackinaw in silence, and a lump formed in Clara’s throat as they crossed the Mackinac Bridge. It was time to say goodbye, something she didn’t yet want to do.

Robert drove her to her car, and they took her kayak off of his car and strapped it onto hers.

“Do you want me to follow you home?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “I’ll be fine.”

“Do you want to have dinner later?”

“I should probably start some laundry and go see my sister,” she said.

“Of course. And I guess I should go see John.”

“Probably,” she said, looking up at him.

They joined hands and stood together in silence between their cars.

“I feel like I’m never going to see you again,” he said.

“We live, like, five minutes away from each other.”

“Yeah but... that’s real life. These last few days with you have been a dream.”

They had been. She thought of waking up in her tent those first two mornings, knowing that he was right next to her, in his own tent. And then, on the third morning, of waking up right next to him, and to a whole new reality.

He looked up at her kayak. “Sure this is strapped on okay?”

“It’s fine.”

“OK, dear Clara. I guess I’ll see you when I see you.”

“You should think of something else to call me,” she said. “It feels so...official

when you call me Clara.”

“Any suggestions?”

“Nope,” she said, smiling.

They kissed goodbye and she sat in her car for a minute, waiting for him to pull away, but he didn't. He was waiting for her. So she pulled out of the parking lot, navigated to I-75 and disappeared.

In four hours, Clara stepped through the threshold of her parent's house. It was dark, quiet; the curtains were pulled closed, shutting out the afternoon light. There were stacks of boxes by the front door. Wedding gifts that would need to be opened, acknowledged and returned.

“Mom?” she called.

There was no response.

“Jean?”

Nothing.

She walked quietly through the house, so as not to disturb anyone or anything, and found her father sitting in his study, staring out the open window, smoking.

“Dad?”

“Clara!” he said, quickly standing. “You're alive! How was your trip?”

“It was good.”

“Anything, um, happen?”

“Anything like what, dad?” she asked, staring him down. She had a feeling he was responsible for Robert's appearance three weeks before in Mackinaw City. Now she knew.

“Like nothing,” he said, shaking his head and shrugging.

“So where is everyone?”

“Work. Your mom's at the shelter. Erin's at Mighty Good. Jean's at Retna. At least I think she is.”

“How is she?”

“I don't know,” he said, shaking his head. “I'm just the guy who pays for all this. Nobody tells me anything.”

“Go easy on her.”

“I am, I am. Family's still coming in from Chicago. I don't want to tell them

not to, but... What's the point?"

Clara shrugged. "One foot in front of the other. Besides, this isn't about us."

"Nope, nope. It's about your sister. Still," he said, "she broke my heart."

"Isn't it better for your daughter to be happy?"

"Don't lecture me, Clara. Your mother's already done that."

"I'm sorry dad," Clara said.

"So! Tell me! How was your trip? Are you sure nothing happened?"

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Later, Erin came home, looked into the refrigerator for something to eat, and, finding nothing, went into her bedroom and closed the door. She felt, at once, responsible for, and vindicated by, the dissolution of Jean and John's relationship. She was torn between wanting to comfort each of them. But she knew that neither needed, or wanted, her and so she had stayed in her bedroom last night when Jean had come home and tearfully told her mother what happened. She listened to her mother's comforting reaction, and to her father's explosive one, surprised by it. "The *entire* family's coming in *one week*, Jean!" her father had said. "You can't flake out of this!"

"I'm not!" Jean had said. "I'm not *flaking*! I'm just...making up my mind a little too late."

"John's a *good guy*. Good guys don't grow on trees, Jean!"

"They don't?" Jean had said, sarcastically.

"Let's everybody calm down," Elaine had said, and Erin pictured her taking each of their hands, trying to bridge the gap between them.

"The Birnbauers are probably going to sue us for the cost of the wedding!" Edmund said. "We never would have gone for such a costly affair!"

There was quiet chatter that Erin couldn't hear. Then, Jean said, "I'm sorry dad."

"It's OK," he said, and Erin pictured him putting an arm around her. "All that matters is that you're happy."

It was quiet again, and Erin sat against her door, listening. She thought about John, and the conversation he must have been having with his parents. Finally, Erin heard her sister on the stairs. She listened for her in the attic but Jean was silent,

either sleeping or crying.

A day later, nobody had clued her into what was happening. Had they forgotten about her, or just assumed she knew what she needed to know? *The wedding is off; please continue with your regularly scheduled life.* Only, there was nothing scheduled. The wedding was going to be the highlight of her summer. She was going to get to see John in a tux – she might have even gotten to dance with him. And now, well, nothing. She might not ever see him again, which felt wrong; it felt unfair. What if she had met him first? What if he had proposed to her?

She thought of the night they danced her father’s crazy waltz and John said he would dream of it. Erin stood in her bedroom now and tried to remember the steps to the waltz – a bow and a curtsy, two steps down the line, tiptoes, and two steps back, tiptoes again, a twirl and a partner switch. It was so easy and so absurd. In her bedroom, she danced, imagining John and Parker, her father, Robert Stone, and other, faceless dance partners, men she had yet to meet but might one day.

That morning, she’d made a pot of tea and waited for the fairy to say something, to use her sister’s or mother’s voice to tell her what was happening. But the fairy was silent, inanimate, nothing but porcelain shaped in a mold. Erin wondered if she had come alive this summer simply to taunt her, to tell her what she wanted to hear. And if so, what did she want to hear now?

*You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.*

*You don’t have to get married, but you can if you want to.*

*You don’t have to finish school, but you can if you want to.*

*You don’t have to go to grad school.*

*You don’t have to walk the path you thought you wanted.*

“What should I do instead?” she asked the fairy, and the fairy parroted her back:

*What should I do instead?*

And so she said, “Maybe travel like mom. Be brave like Clara. Brave like Jean.”

*Thank you,* she heard Jean’s voice say.

“No,” Erin said to the fairy. “Thank *you*.”

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That evening, Elaine came home carrying bags of takeout. She called everyone in, but no one came, so she fixed herself a plate, grabbed a magazine, and sat alone at the dining room table, flipping through, of all things, *Modern Bride*. There was an article titled “Cold Feet? Here’s What to do Before You Call it Off.” She wondered if Jean had read the article, or if she had, #10: *Have a Heart to Heart with Your Husband to Be*.

Elaine was just about to go for seconds when there was a knock at the door. It was quick, sharp and unannounced, and she knew just who it was.

“Nancy!” She said. “Please come in.”

Nancy stepped in and looked around. She always looked as though she had landed on another planet whenever she came over, as though she was surprised by the appearance of their house, by the way they lived.

“How are you?” Elaine said. “How is John?”

“He’s heartbroken, obviously,” Nancy said. “We all are.”

“I’m sorry,” Elaine said. “We’re...we’re mortified.”

“I’m here for the ring,” Nancy said.

“The ring?”

“The engagement ring my son gave your daughter?”

“Of course. I’m just surprised she didn’t give it back to him.”

“Is she here?”

“I think she’s upstairs. She’s been sleeping a lot.”

“God, she better not be pregnant,” Nancy said, her voice full of vitriol.

“She’s not,” Elaine said, as Nancy walked into the house and stood at the foot of the stairs.

“Well, are you going to get her or am I?”

“You want me to wake her up?” Elaine asked.

“Never mind!” Nancy said, throwing up her arms and charging up the stairs.

“Jean!” She called. “Jean!”

~ ~ ~

Jean woke up to see John’s mother standing over her, her arms folded in exasperation.

“Nancy!” she said, shooting up out of bed.

“I’m here for the ring.”

Jean stood up and walked across the room in her underwear. She was disoriented, but unembarrassed. If anyone should be embarrassed, she thought, it was Nancy.

“Here it is,” she said, placing the ring in Nancy’s hand. “Do you want me to turn on the light so you can make sure all the diamonds are accounted for?”

“Don’t be silly,” Nancy said, pocketing the ring. Then, “John’s heartbroken. You broke his heart.”

“Mine’s broken too,” Jean said, earnestly.

“Then why did you do it?” Nancy asked.

“John didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?” Nancy spat.

“We just didn’t want the same things.”

“A fine time to decide that!” Nancy said, and turned to go.

“Do you want to know the truth?” Jean called after her, and Nancy stopped. “The truth is, I didn’t want a house. And I didn’t want your heirloom furniture. And I didn’t want to bounce your grandchildren on my lap while he went off and worked.”

“You ungrateful spoiled brat!” Nancy spat.

“Why can’t you be nice to me? I’m not the right person for your son. And I loved him enough to be honest with him, to be honest with myself.”

“Can I give you some advice?” Nancy said.

“Can I give *you* some?” Jean fired back.

And with that, Nancy turned and walked away.

Jean climbed back into bed, too numb to cry. She had moved through the day in a haze of disbelief, texting friends and calling relatives. Most wanted to come anyway, to be there for her. *We’ll get our nails done and go to the movies and eat too much popcorn*, one of her roommates from Brooklyn had texted. *We’ll go on your honeymoon together*, another said. *San Francisco!* Another friend texted. *How exciting!* It was exciting, or it might have been, had not the best thing and the worst thing happened simultaneously.

Her childhood best friend texted her an image of a tarot card: Judgment.

*I just pulled a card for you*, she said.

*I’m definitely feeling that one*, Jean texted back.

*I think it means that you have employed excellent judgment.*

Jean knew in her heart that she had. And that if this was the worst life would

ever be, it would not be so bad.

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And so most of Jean's wedding guests came to town anyway. On Thursday night, Clara threw what was supposed to have been Jean's bachelorette party, an adult version of a sleep over with manicures, martinis, and fancy party food. It was not a pity party. Jean's friends made sure of that. Instead, they simply celebrated the happy occasion of being together, of being alive and in love with one another. That weekend, the party would continue. The Wintrees and Birnbauers decided to split the spoils, and so half of the flowers and half of the food would be delivered to the Wintree home promptly at 11 on Saturday. The Birnbauers were keeping the venue, the music, and photographer for themselves. Jean would have her party, and John would have his.

This meant two days of parties at the Wintree household – one on Friday with the food already ordered for the rehearsal dinner, and one on Saturday, with the signature cocktail and canapés for the wedding that would have been. By then, the house had already been cleaned, the yard already decorated with twinkle lights wrapped around the trunks of the oaks and hickories in their backyard. The tables and chairs Elaine didn't remember ordering had been delivered, and she put them on the deck, covered them with tablecloths, and topped them with the arrangements she'd planned for the rehearsal – pillar candles in hurricanes and vases full of hydrangeas clipped from her garden. She was glad she'd spent the money on the hurricanes, as they'd be used for two nights instead of one. There were so many flowers coming on Saturday, she thought about taking them to the cemetery and decorating every headstone. And maybe she would, on Sunday, once everyone had gone. For now, there was the wedding to get through, the non-wedding she'd taken to calling it, a weekend full of guests to entertain. She was relieved she hadn't planned a wedding brunch. Two days of people in her house would be quite enough.

On Friday, once the house was ready, Elaine threw on a sundress and uncorked a few bottles of wine. She felt like she'd been holding her breath, and it was finally time to exhale. Her mother was there. Her aunts and cousins were arriving soon. She'd allow herself to be swept up by their love, soothed by their presence, and she hoped that Jean would too. She hoped that, rather than tearing the family apart,



the non-wedding would serve to stitch them even closer together.

So far, it seemed to be. The girls were getting along, thank god. And it seemed that Jean had forgiven Erin for her prescient indiscretion. Sometimes, being the mother of girls, the mother of sisters, it felt like she was pressing her face against the glass, trying to see them, to know them better, to be in on their secrets. And this summer had been no exception. She could feel only the heat that came from their arguments, the grace from their friendship. Were they, most of the time, content? She didn't know. She only knew their extremes.

Today, though, as the family gathered, and all three girls graciously greeted their guests, the girls seemed to present a united front. No one would know, Elaine thought, that Erin had an obvious and inappropriate crush on John, or that Clara was likely irritated for having scheduled her travel around an event that never came to be. In fact, Clara didn't seem irritated at all. She seemed happy – *very* happy, Elaine thought, watching Clara with her new beau. Since he'd arrived that evening, every time Elaine caught sight of her daughter, Robert was next to her. They seemed to be in constant conversation. And Elaine wasn't the only one who noticed. "Look at that," her aunt said, pointing to Clara and Robert canoodling in the corner, "we might have a wedding yet!"

"I'm just happy she's happy," Elaine said.

Later, outside, as their guests ate and drank and laughed together, Edmund stood:

"I want to make a toast," he said. "This week has not gone the way we thought it would, and we are grateful to you all for coming to share your time with us nonetheless. To my beautiful daughters, Clara, Jean and Erin: You've always done exactly what you've wanted, what you thought was right. That, more than anything else, makes me very proud to be your father. And to Jean," he said, looking at her, "I hope you feel our love and support, today and always. Cheers to you," he said, lifting his glass, "Cheers to all of you."

And it was just what Elaine would have said, if only she had been able to find the words.

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After the toast, the party continued and got louder, as the music came on and space was cleared for dancing. "Two nights of this!" Clara said, raising her eyebrows.



“Let’s get out of here before your dad tries to teach us something from Dickens,” Robert said.

They walked down into the yard, and under the lighted trees.

“I really like your family,” Robert said.

“Thank you,” Clara said, “I like them too.”

“I’d like you to meet mine, if you don’t think that’s moving too fast.”

“No, I don’t think it is.”

“Good,” he said, “In that case...” He swung around to look at her. Clara wondered if his eyes had always been so blue, or if it was maybe just the shirt he was wearing. “I decided what I’d like to call you,” he said.

“Go on,” Clara said.

He held his breath, closed his eyes and opened them, but he didn’t say anything, not right away.

Finally, he said, “Wife.”

“That’s bananas!” Clara blurted. It was the only thing she could think to say.

“Is it though?”

“Yes!” she said, but couldn’t resist the smile that spread across her face. “We only just met – what would everyone say?”

“I don’t care what everyone says. I just want to know what you say. So tell me,” he said, pulling her into him, “what would Clara say?”



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