

LEBRIS

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**I WILL
MARRY
GEORGE
CLOONEY
(...BY CHRISTMAS)**

TRACY BLOOM



arrow books

Chapter One

Midlander Hotel, Saturday 7 September 2013

Michelle didn't like weddings.

She didn't like weddings because she hated the blatant and continuous lying that they required.

The weather was perfect despite the gale force winds and horizontal rain. The bride looked beautiful and had picked a gorgeous dress, despite the fact that no-one else would be seen dead in it. The service was extremely moving, although the vicar droned on for way too long and the groom sounded like a mouse on helium when he said his vows. The venue was so special, despite the fact

that everyone had been to at least a dozen weddings there before, and eating the slimy, bland chicken main course yet again had made them want to throw up.

Yes, Michelle hated lying. Well, about most things.

Still, at least she knew there wouldn't be any chicken to squander false praise on at this wedding. Her best friend Gina was prone to many a brain malfunction, but that would be a step too far even for her. The fact that Michelle and Gina both worked in a chicken factory, and spent every day up to their elbows in giblets waiting to escape to the chicken-free utopia that is Netflix, was surely a guarantee that chicken would play no role in this wedding.

And yet, come 5.30 p.m. on Saturday 7 September, there Michelle sat at Gina's wedding eating slimy, damp chicken on a table full of co-chicken murderers, trying to ignore the massive menu faux pas. Not that the rest of the table looked concerned. A good majority appeared to be having a whale of a time. She couldn't really tell, though, as they were jabbering away in Polish and could quite possibly be in hysterics over the weird English wedding rituals designed to minimise enjoyment for all in attendance.

'Why don't you finish mine?' she said, sliding the

contents of her plate onto Big Slaw's – so called because no-one at the chicken factory could pronounce his name, though they knew it ended in *-slaw*, and he was bigger than the other Polish guy whose name also ended in *-slaw* (and he wasn't the Asian lad who everyone thought it funny to call Cole Slaw, despite the fact he wasn't from Poland and he wasn't black).

'Not hungry?' asked Big Slaw.

'No. I tell you, Big Slaw, if I'd served up this tasteless rubbish when I was training to be a chef I'd have been kicked off the course faster than you can say deep fat fryer.'

'You used to be a chef?' he asked.

'Well, I trained a long time ago,' she admitted. 'I was even offered a job in a top restaurant in London.'

'What happened? Why you end up in chicken factory?'

'Life, Big Slaw,' sighed Michelle. 'That's what happened.'

For the rest of the meal and throughout the speeches Michelle let herself sink into the background. She had no partner with her to take on the conversation ping-pong around their table so she'd fallen silent, not having the

energy to be chatty enough for two in order to contribute properly. The happy babble swirled around her as she spotted, worryingly, that the print on her dress was almost identical to the pattern on the flock wallpaper lining the overused function room. She was actually becoming wallpaper, she realised, as she pulled down the hem of the quality outfit she'd purchased to show a willingness to have a good time. She'd thought buying a dress from Topshop would be enough to mask the tired-of-life slouch of a 36-year-old single mum who'd had her hand up too many chickens' backsides. Apparently not. Topshop was determined moreover to put her in her place, sending her into depression by making her wear a dress that was clearly two sizes smaller than the label stated. She hoped the scratchy gold and cream fabric would later prove as effective as Harry Potter's invisibility cloak, should she pause too long near a badly decorated wall. Just the look she was after.

She was grateful when the tinkle of fork on glass heralded the start of the speeches. The wedding was progressing. She could look forward to at least half an hour where she wasn't required to make small talk or eat any more of the hotel's bland offerings. But the words of love and good wishes for the future left her wishing she

was still stuck in the overcooked-vegetable-phase of the wedding. She couldn't be happier for Gina, really she couldn't. Dumped in a playpen with Michelle at a very young age, Gina had apparently offered her the hand of friendship by stuffing rusks down her nappy. They'd been inseparable ever since. When Gina had met Mike, Michelle had been the first to tell her that they would be married within the year and she'd been right. But as sure as she'd been that Mike was the perfect man for Gina, she was just as sure that such a man didn't exist for her. As she watched Gina fighting back tears whilst listening to the one she loved declare his feelings to the whole world, Michelle felt depressed to the bone, knowing she would never hear a groom's speech crafted for her.

She was on the verge of wedding defeat, her happiness for Gina's future conflicting with sadness for her own prospects, when Big Slaw came to her rescue. 'Let's go Polish,' he announced, waving a bottle of vodka over his head. Perfect, thought Michelle. Anaesthetic. She offered her glass along with the rest of her table and tried to concentrate on the all-important art of toasting the happy couple in Polish.

'Who will you marry you?' Little Slaw asked Michelle some time later. The wedding had improved at her table. The apple pie, covered in congealing custard, had been abandoned in favour of learning 'cheers' in Polish, until Big Slaw had to pop out to the off-licence to purchase more vodka. Clothing was fast being discarded. Ties snaked over the backs of chairs, hats crumpled under furniture legs and shoes congregated in a heap under the table. Seating arrangements had also slackened as the weak sloped off for crafty fags, allowing comrades to shuffle up together and reorganise the plan more to their liking. Little Slaw had dived into Big Slaw's seat the minute he'd left in search of more vodka. He was one of Michelle's older Eastern European friends, many having joined the factory over the past few years. A wise man in his sixties, he'd come to be with his daughter and grandchildren who had settled in the area. In Michelle's head he was actually Yoda, given his broken English, tiny frame, wrinkled face and his liking for asking deep, searching questions. Sometimes she imagined that she was Princess Leia whilst they chatted over lunch at the factory. Anything to escape the knowledge that she was spending yet another day of her life chewing on dry Ryvita in a chicken factory.

'Who will I marry me?' she replied, vodka chasers vastly improving the quality of her Yoda impression.

'Is that no good question, my young friend?' Little Slaw asked, looking confused.

'No, it's a stupid question.' She looked away, all good humour draining from her.

'Your daughter's father, where is he?' he asked.

'I've no idea.' She stared back, daring him to pursue this particular line of questioning. He understood. He was Yoda.

'So who will you marry then?' he repeated.

Reluctantly, under Little Slaw's intense gaze, Michelle considered the question. She mentally reviewed the years she'd dedicated to stopping anyone from wanting to marry her. Pregnant at twenty-one to a man who was best forgotten, she had successfully blighted her prime marrying years with the phrase, 'Would you like to come home and meet my daughter?' Matters had not been improved by her need for help with childcare, which had forced her into buying a house in the same street as her parents, in the small Derbyshire market town where she had been born and bred. Malton held few opportunities for meeting single men aside from its tiny nightclub, known locally as 'Vegas' due to its dazzling array of a

dozen flashing light bulbs. Even there it was virtually impossible to meet anyone who you weren't either related to or who you hadn't had a scrap with when you were at primary school.

But she also had a further ace up her sleeve, quite literally a killer fact that was guaranteed to make any man run a mile: An older sister. A dead one, victim of a hit-and-run when Michelle was in her early twenties. Apparently this branded her damaged, incapable of forming attachments and psychologically disturbed. Who could possibly live through a trauma like that without significant baggage? The introduction of a dead sister seemed to overcrowd any relationship and force the man to back off rapidly as if she'd grown two heads overnight. Jane's death had not only left her bereft of any siblings; it had also dramatically cut down her options in the marriage department.

'I,' she finally declared wearily to Little Slaw, 'will marry George Clooney.'

Little Slaw laughed too loudly.

'Always the joker, you,' he said, slapping her on the back.

Well, that had actually been the plan, once, a long time ago. She could vividly remember her seven-year-

I Will Marry George Clooney (By Christmas)

old daughter's face as she pleaded with her whilst they were snuggled up together on the sofa after watching George Clooney play the perfect single dad in the movie, *One Fine Day*.

'I wish he was my daddy,' Josie had said, sniffing into her teddy. Michelle could almost feel her heart breaking.

'I wish he was too,' she'd said wistfully.

'Really?' said Josie, her eyes lighting up.

'Really,' Michelle replied, nodding vigorously.

Josie leapt off the sofa and started jumping up and down.

'Oh please, Mummy, please, please marry him!' she chanted over and over again.

'Okay, okay,' she'd said, laughing. 'I'll see what I can do.'

Suddenly aware that Little Slaw was still laughing at her, Michelle gave him a punch on the arm. She knew of course that it was ridiculous to say that you were going to marry Mr Clooney; however, that didn't mean that others were allowed to think it that hilarious.

'What's so funny?' she asked.

'Hey, listen,' said Little Slaw, shouting over the table to his daughter. 'Michelle say she will marry George Clooney!'

You'd have thought it was the funniest thing that Baby Slaw had ever heard.

'You all seem to be having a good time,' announced Gina, swooping by in her Pippa Middleton knock-off. Sadly she lacked the required arse, having been on an intense pre-wedding diet, so with her tall, skinny frame and flame-red hair she resembled a matchstick rather than a sexy bride.

'You look like a swan, Gina,' Brian shouted from across the table.

'Aw, thanks Bri,' replied Gina, blushing.

'A Swan Vesta,' he added, creasing up with laughter as the rest of the table sniggered.

'Ignore him,' cut in Michelle, leaping to defend her friend. 'You look amazing, really. They're actually all laughing at me because I said I was going to marry George Clooney.'

Gina stared at her, appearing to consider her statement carefully.

'Perhaps George Clooney is someone different in Poland. You know, like the Prime Minister or something?' she said eventually.

'Are you serious?' asked Michelle.

'Yeah, like, you know, maybe the Polish Prime

Minister happens to be called George Clooney. It would be pretty funny to someone from Poland if you said you were going to marry the Polish Prime Minister.' Gina turned to Little Slaw to clarify the matter. 'Is George Clooney your Prime Minister?'

Little Slaw gave his best confused Yoda look for the second time that day.

'No. He Danny Ocean.'

'Danny Ocean is your Prime Minister?'

'No, George Clooney is Danny Ocean.'

Gina turned to Michelle. 'He has no idea who George Clooney is. I don't know why they're laughing at you.'

'They're laughing because they know exactly who George Clooney is and they think it's hilarious that I could think he would ever marry me.'

'Well, they'd be right there, wouldn't they, Michelle?'

'Gina, you're supposed to be my mate.'

'I am, but do you seriously think short, dark-haired, curvy women whose boobs are just a bit too big for their bodies are his type?'

'What point are you trying to make, Gina?'

'Michelle, you know I love you, and I know you sometimes think I'm stupid, but even I know that