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‘Claire’s books are always life-affirming and a treat to read’ **Phaedra Patrick, author of *Rise and Shine, Benedict Stone***

Claire Frost grew up in Manchester, the middle of three sisters. She always wanted to do a job that involved writing, so after studying Classics at Bristol University she started working in magazines. For the last twelve years she's been at the *Sun on Sunday*'s *Fabulous* magazine, where she is Assistant Editor and also responsible for the title's book reviews. She can mostly be found at her desk buried under a teetering TBR pile. You can follow her on Twitter: @FabFrosty, and Instagram: @therealfabfrosty.

Also by Claire Frost:

Living My Best Life
Married at First Swipe

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claire frost

the one



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For my sisters, Vicky and Katie.

Chapter One

'And then I told him that I loved him. We both sat there grinning at each other and it was just one of those moments where you feel drunk even when you're not, you know? It was like we were the only people left in the world.'

'I can't believe you've used the "L" word already!' Em cried, the corners of her eyes crinkling in delight. 'You've only known each other a few weeks!'

'Well, he said it first,' Lottie replied, taking a large gulp of red wine from her glass and letting its fruity tartness roll round her mouth. 'And we've known each other almost three months, actually!'

'And when you know, you know,' Em said dreamily. 'And Annie and I did say he was a keeper after your first date, didn't we? Oh, Lots, I'm so happy for you.'

'But we haven't met him yet,' Annie said with a frown. 'I may have agreed he *sounded* like the real deal after you gushed about him, but, Lottie, you can't go around telling random men you love them when you haven't even introduced them

to your sisters. It's not on, and I'm putting my foot down. You either invite Leo to pub club next week or I'll camp outside your place and ambush him on the doorstep.'

Lottie rolled her eyes and reached for the comfort blanket of her wine glass again. Her older sister always thought she knew best.

'You really do need to be careful, though, Lottie,' Annie continued. 'I mean it. We all remember what happened with holier-than-thou Elliot—'

'I think what Annie's saying is we both care about you and don't want to see you get hurt, that's all,' Em broke in, reaching across the table to give the top of Lottie's arm a squeeze. 'But we're only human – of course we want to meet this amazing man we've heard so much about! *Please* say you'll bring him to pub club next Wednesday,' she implored, clapping her hands in excitement.

The three sisters had been meeting in the Rope and Anchor in the centre of Oxford every Wednesday night for years. They'd picked that particular pub because it was round the corner from Annie's work at a scientific institute, as well as an easy cycle from both Lottie's job and her flat on the not-quite-as-nice side of town. It was still a forty-minute drive from Em's fresh-out-of-an-interiors-mag home in the Cotswolds, but she had always insisted she didn't mind at all.

Now, Annie visibly made an effort to soften the worry lines etched across her forehead and smiled at her sisters. She stroked her sensible brown bob, a hairstyle she had sported

for the last twenty years. 'I'll even try to be on time for once,' she said, breaking into a laugh so genuine Lottie instantly forgave her sister her bossiness. She knew Annie had been under a lot of pressure recently, both at work and at home, so it swelled Lottie's heart to see her laughing.

'OK, OK, I'll ask him! If I'd known that all it takes is the promise of meeting my new man to get you to arrive somewhere on time, I'd have introduced you to every guy who'd so much as DMed me in the last five years,' Lottie said. 'Although, to be fair, I'm not sure any of us need to meet the men I've had pictures from on Instagram.'

'On that rather sordid note,' Annie said, wrinkling her noise and joining up her freckles, 'I'll get us some more drinks. The usual?'

'Of course!' Lottie said, as Em replied, 'Yes, please.'

'Annie means well, you know,' Em said as they watched their sister head towards the bar. 'I think she's just desperate to get to know this person who's obviously had such an effect on you. We all met Charlie within weeks of their first date, didn't we?'

'I know,' Lottie said with a sigh, and then added naughtily, 'How much do you bet Annie set up a spreadsheet and plotted the exact dates when she thought she and Charlie ought to be reaching certain relationship stages, like meeting the sisters?'

'Lottie!' Em chided, but couldn't help giggling.

Lottie laughed. 'Sorry, I shouldn't take the mick. Also, in my defence, Leo was supposed to come to that Sunday

lunch round yours a few weeks ago, but that migraine really floored him.'

'I know, bless him. My two are exhausting enough when you're rattling with vitamins, but if you're feeling under the weather then they can be way too much.'

'How are my gorgeous nephews?' Lottie asked, more than happy to move the conversation on. But she didn't get to hear an answer before their older sister appeared back at the table with drinks and snacks – and opinions.

'When will you hear whether you got Alex into St Swithin's?' Annie asked. Lottie grabbed greedily at the packets of crisps under her arm, tearing one open as her sister leaned over the table to deposit their drinks.

'Not for another few weeks. But if there isn't space there, the village primary is really sweet, so it's not a problem,' Em said serenely, pushing her long, blonde hair back off her face.

'But it's nowhere near as prestigious as St Swithin's. Plus, once Alex is in there, Dante will be a dead cert, and it will make such a difference when it comes to secondary school and university,' Annie said forcefully.

Lottie blinked a few times and laughed through a mouthful of cheese and onion crumbs. 'You do know Dante is only two, don't you, Annie?'

Em smiled easily but Annie remained adamant. 'It's never too early to get them on the right path. Why wouldn't you and Luca want to give them every opportunity you can? They're smart boys, and the right school will only make them smarter.'

Lottie could see that her older sister was about to launch into another of her diatribes, and so she forced herself not to reach for another handful of crisps and instead replied, 'You're probably right, Annie. Anyway, did you manage to move things around so you can go to that wedding in the Dordogne?'

Em shot Lottie a small smile of thanks and turned to Annie. 'Oh, it's such a lovely part of the world down there, what a beautiful place to have a wedding.'

'Yes, I booked our flights at the weekend.' She sighed. 'Though I still can't believe Alistair and Janey have given everyone such little notice about the wedding. We were going to start our final cycle of IVF at the beginning of July, but I think we'll put it back to September now we're going to France. Charlie can't understand why we don't just get on with it now, but I want to make sure we're following the rules to the letter and giving ourselves every chance of making it work.'

'Oh, Annie, sweetheart, that's hard, but it does sound like the best idea,' Em said immediately. 'And I'm sure Charlie does understand – he's just disappointed, as are you. But you know we'll all be here for you every step of the way.'

'Of course we will,' Lottie agreed, impotently wishing she had her little sister's knack of knowing exactly what to say and when to say it.

'I know,' Annie replied, taking a shaky sip of her drink then giving them a small smile. 'Thank you.'

There was a beat of silence while they all inwardly

acknowledged that this IVF attempt was probably Annie's last chance to carry a baby herself, and that it was just as likely to fail as the previous four cycles. But Em broke the suddenly sombre mood by smiling at Lottie and saying, 'So, Lots, now we know we're going to meet him soon, what else do we need to know about Leo? Ooh, Lots and Leo has definitely got a ring to it – how have I never noticed that before?'

Lottie giggled. 'We sound like a posh clothing brand, don't we?' She glanced up at Annie who managed a smile. 'I really hope you both like him. He's so make-your-heart-beat-faster gorgeous, and he has this ability to make you feel like you're the only person he wants to talk to.'

'You sound so smitten!' Annie laughed.

'I'm not sure I've ever heard anyone actually use the word "smitten" before,' Lottie said with a laugh, then straightened her shoulders a little. 'But yes, I really am. I think I've properly fallen for him.' She paused before adding, 'I even told him about Elliot.'

Both of her sisters turned their bodies fully towards her, their eyes wide.

'What did he say?' Em asked, a little cautiously.

'He was just kind and thoughtful. He said it wasn't a reflection on me – it was all on Elliot. And he promised *he* would never do that to me.'

'Well, you would be pretty unlucky for that to happen twice. Anyway, when we meet him next week, I'll make sure I grill him on his philosophical beliefs.'

'Annie! Swear to me right here and now you won't do

that!' Lottie cried. Her voice was laced with laughter, but she couldn't help feeling a little anxious. Over the years, she had taught herself to laugh along with Annie and the rest of the family about the Elliot affair to some extent, and part of her knew her sister was only teasing, but the other part knew that Elliot had left scars etched into her heart that could never be removed. Leo was the first man she'd ever told why her one long-term, maybe-this-is-for-keeps relationship had ended, and although his reaction had been everything she could have ever wished from him, that didn't mean she wanted her sisters bringing it up the first time they met him.

'She's only joking, aren't you, Annie?' Em stepped in quickly. 'Anyway, I want to see more pictures. It's rude to keep his "make-your-heart-beat-faster" face from us!'

'Seeing as you asked so nicely.' Lottie smiled, picking up her phone from the table where it had been lying face down on a beer mat. She frowned when she saw she had three missed calls from an unknown number, and just as she opened her photo app, her phone began to vibrate in her hand.

'Let me just see who this is,' she said, waving her mobile at her sisters and pushing her chair back. 'It's probably someone trying to sell me something. Give me a sec.'

Annie and Em nodded and shooed her away to take the call, and as she swiped her finger across the screen and raised the phone to her ear, she saw Em turn back to their older sister, rub her arm and quietly say something to her.

Five minutes later, even though the person on the other

end of the phone had long since hung up, Lottie was still standing in exactly the same spot near the door, her mobile clutched in her hand.

'Lots? Are you OK? We thought we'd make a move,' Em said as she and Annie appeared with quizzical looks and arms laden with coats and bags. 'Lottie?'

'He's gone,' were the only words Lottie could form.

Annie frowned. 'Who's gone? Gone where?'

'He's gone.'

'Lottie, sweetheart, what's happened?' Em asked, gently pushing her sister's arms into her jacket and leading her outside.

As a blast of cold evening air hit them, Lottie stared at her sisters. 'Leo. He's dead. He's gone.'



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