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The Time of My Life

Written by Cecelia Ahern

Published by HarperCollins

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CECELIA AHERN

The Time of my Life



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For my precious girl, Robin

‘You used to be much more . . . “muchier”.
You’ve lost your muchness.’

The Mad Hatter to Alice in the film of
Alice in Wonderland (2010)



CHAPTER ONE

Dear Lucy Silchester,

You have an appointment for Monday 30 May.

I didn't read the rest. I didn't need to, I knew who it was from. I could tell as soon as I arrived home from work to my studio apartment and saw it lying on the floor, halfway from the front door to the kitchen, on the burned part of the carpet where the Christmas tree had fallen – and landed – two years ago and the lights had singed the carpet hairs. The carpet was a cheap old thing chosen by my penny-pinching landlord, a grey worn industrial yarn that looked as though more feet had trodden over it than the apparently 'lucky' testicles of the bull mosaic in Galleria Vittorio Emmanuele II in Milan. You'd find a similar kind of fabric in my office building – a more appropriate location as it was never intended to be walked on barefoot, made only for the steady stream of on-foot shiny leather-shoe traffic moving from cubicle to photocopier, photocopier to coffee machine, coffee machine to emergency exit stairwell for a sneaky smoke, ironically the only location which failed to alert the fire alarm. I had been a part of the effort to find the smoking spot and each time the enemy had located us,

we began efforts to find a new safe house. The current place was easy to find – hundreds of butts in piles on the ground to mark the spot, their lives sucked out of them by their users in panicked distressed frenzy, their souls floating around the insides of lungs while their outsides were dropped, stamped on and deserted. It was a place more worshipped than any other in the building, more than the coffee machine, more than the exit doors at six p.m., most certainly more than the chair before the desk of Edna Larson – the boss lady – who ate good intentions like a broken dispenser that swallowed your coins but failed to spit out the bar of chocolate.

The letter lay there on that dirty singed floor. A cream woven envelope with grand George Street font declaring my name in certain no-doubt-about-it black ink, and beside it, a gold embossed stamp, three swirls joined together.



The triple spirals of life. I knew what it was because I'd received two similar letters already and I'd Googled the symbol. I'd failed to make an appointment for either of the requests to meet. I'd also failed to phone the number supplied to rearrange or cancel. I'd ignored it, swept it under the rug – or would have if the Christmas tree lights hadn't set fire to the shagpile that used to be there – and forgotten about it. But I hadn't really forgotten about it. You never forget about things you've done that you know you shouldn't have done. They hang around your mind, linger like a thief casing a joint for a future job. You see them there, dramatically lurking nearby in striped monochrome, leaping behind postboxes as

soon as your head whips around to confront them. Or it's a familiar face in a crowd that you glimpse but then lose sight of. An annoying *Where's Wally?* forever locked away and hidden in every thought in your conscience. The bad thing that you did, always there to let you know.

A month on from ignoring the second letter and this one had arrived with another rescheduled appointment, and no mention of my previous failures to respond. It was like my mother – its polite failure to acknowledge my shortcomings was making me feel even worse.

I held the fancy paper at the corner between my thumb and forefinger and tilted my head to read it as it flopped to the side. The cat had pissed on it again. Ironic really. I didn't blame him. My illegally owning a pet in a high-rise apartment block in the middle of the city and holding down a full-time job meant the cat had no opportunity to go outside to relieve himself. In an attempt to rid myself of my guilt I had put framed photographs of the outside world around the apartment: the grass, the sea, a postbox, pebbles, traffic, a park, a collection of other cats, and Gene Kelly. The latter obviously to service my needs but I hoped the others would dispel any longing he had to go outside. Or to breathe fresh air, to make friends, to fall in love. Or to sing and dance.

As I was out five days a week from eight a.m. often to eight p.m. and sometimes didn't come home at all, I had trained him to 'eliminate', as the cat trainer had phrased it, on paper so he would get used to using his litter box. And this letter, the only piece of paper left lying on the floor, was surely just a confusion to him. I watched him move self-consciously around the edge of the room. He knew it was wrong. It was lurking in his mind, the thing he'd done that he knew he shouldn't have done.

I hate cats but I liked this cat. I named him Mr Pan after

Peter, the well-known flying young boy. Mr Pan is neither a boy who will never age nor, oddly enough, does he possess the ability to fly, but there is a strange resemblance and it seemed appropriate at the time. I found him in a skip down an alleyway one night, purring as though in deep distress. Or perhaps that was me. What I was doing down there shall remain private but it was raining hard, I was wearing a beige trenchcoat and after mourning the loss of a perfect boyfriend over too many tequilas, I was doing my best to channel Audrey Hepburn by chasing the animal and calling out ‘Cat!’ in a clear and unique, yet distressed tone. Turned out it was a day-old kitten and it’d been born a hermaphrodite. Its mother or owner, or both, had shunned it. Though the vet informed me that the kitten had more male than female anatomy, naming him felt as though I alone took the responsibility of choosing his sex. I thought of my broken heart and my being passed up for a promotion because my boss had an inkling I was pregnant – though it was after the holidays and my annual gorge-fest had been a wild boar short of a Tudor banquet – I’d been through a particularly horrific month of stomach cramps; a street bum had groped me late one night on the train; and when I had enforced my opinion at work I’d been called a bitch by my male counterparts and so I decided life would be easier for the cat as a male. But I think I made the wrong decision. Occasionally I call him Samantha or Mary or something feminine and he looks up with what I can only describe as thanks before sloping off to sit in one of my shoes and gaze wistfully at the stiletto and the world he’s been deprived of. But I digress. Back to the letter.

I would have to attend the appointment this time. There was no way around it. I couldn’t ignore it; I didn’t want to irritate its sender any further.

So who was the sender?

I held the drying page by the corner and again tilted my head to read the flopped paper.

Dear Lucy Silchester,

You have an appointment for Monday 30 May.

Yours sincerely,

Life

Life. Why of course.

My life needed me. It was going through a tough time and I hadn't been paying enough attention to it. I'd taken my eye off the ball, I'd busied myself with other things: friends' lives, work issues, my deteriorating and ever needy car, that kind of thing. I'd completely and utterly ignored my life. And now it had written to me, summoned me, and there was only one thing for it. I had to go and meet with it face to face.



CHAPTER TWO

I'd heard about this kind of thing happening which is why I wasn't making a great dramatic deal about it. I generally don't become overexcited about things anyway, I'm just not one of those people. I'm not easily surprised by things either. I think it's because I expect that anything can happen. That makes me sound like a believer and I'm not necessarily that either. I'll phrase it better: I just accept things that happen. All things. So my life writing to me, though unusual, wasn't surprising; it was more of an inconvenience. I knew that it would demand much of my attention for the foreseeable future and if that was an easy thing for me then I wouldn't have received the letters in the first place.

I beat the ice from the fridge-freezer with a knife and retrieved a cottage pie with my blue hand. While I waited for the microwave to ping I ate a slice of toast. Then a yoghurt. It still wasn't ready so I licked the lid. I decided that the arrival of the letter gave me permission to open a bottle of €3.99 Pinot Grigio. I stabbed the remainder of the ice from the fridge-freezer while Mr Pan ran to hide in a pink heart-decorated wellington boot still covered in dried muck from a summer music festival three years ago. I removed a wine bottle I'd forgotten to take from the freezer which was

now a frozen solid block of alcohol and I replaced it with the new bottle. I wouldn't forget this one. I mustn't. It was the last bottle left in the wine-cellar-stroke-corner-cupboard-under-the-cookie-jar. Which reminded me of cookies. I also ate a double chocolate chip cookie while I waited. Then the microwaved pinged. I emptied the pie onto the plate, a big unappetising messy pile of mush, still cold in the middle but I hadn't the patience to put it back in and wait thirty seconds more. I stood at the counter to eat and poked at the warm parts around the edges.

I used to cook. I used to cook almost every night. The nights I didn't, my then boyfriend cooked. We enjoyed it. We owned a large apartment in a converted bread factory with floor-to-ceiling steel grid windows and original exposed brickwork on most walls. We had an open-plan kitchen-cum-dining-room and almost every weekend we had friends around for dinner. Blake loved cooking, he loved entertaining, he loved the idea of all of our friends, even family, joining us. He loved the sound of ten to fifteen people laughing, talking, eating, debating. He loved the smells, the steam, the oohs and aahs of delight. He'd stand at the kitchen island and tell a word-perfect story while dicing an onion, splashing the red wine into a beef bourguignon, or flambéing a baked alaska. He never measured anything, he always got the balance just right. He got the balance of everything just right. He was a food and travel writer, he loved going everywhere and tasting everything. He was adventurous. At weekends we never sat still, we climbed this mountain and that mountain, during summers we'd go to countries I'd never heard of. We jumped out of an airplane twice, we'd both bungee jumped three times. He was perfect.

And, he died.

Just joking, he's perfectly fine. Alive and well. Cruel joke I

know, but I laughed. No, he's not dead. He's still alive. Still perfect.

But I left him.

He has a television show now. He'd signed the deal when we were still together. It's on a travel channel we both used to watch all the time, and now and then I switch over and watch him walking the Great Wall of China or sitting in a boat in Thailand eating pad thai; and always, after his word-perfect review, in his perfect clothes – even after a week of climbing mountains, shitting in woods and not showering – he looks into the camera with his perfect face and he'll say, 'Wish you were here.' That's the name of the show. He told me in the weeks and months that followed our traumatic break-up, while he was crying down the phone, that he'd named it for me, that every time he said it he was talking to me and only me and never ever to anybody else. He wanted me back. He called me every day. Then every two days. Eventually it was once a week and I knew he'd been grappling with the phone for days trying to wait for that one moment to speak to me. Eventually he stopped calling and he'd send me emails. Long detailed emails about where he'd been, about how he felt without me, so depressing and so lonely I couldn't read them any more. I stopped replying to him. Then his emails got shorter. Less emotional, less detailed, always asking me to meet him though, always asking for us to get back together. I was tempted, don't get me wrong, he was a perfect man, and having a perfect, handsome man want you is sometimes enough to make you want him back, but that was in the weak moments of my own loneliness. I didn't want him. It wasn't that I'd met anybody else either, I told him that time and time again though perhaps it would have been easier if I'd pretended I had because then he could have moved on. I didn't want

anybody else. I didn't really want anyone. I wanted to just stop for a while. I wanted to stop doing things and stop moving. I just wanted to be on my own.

I left my job, got a new one at an appliance company for half the salary. We sold the apartment. I rented this studio apartment, a quarter of the size of any other home I'd owned. I found a cat. Some would say I stole it but nevertheless, he/she is mine now. I visit my family when held at gunpoint, I go out with the same friends on nights that he's not there – my ex-boyfriend, not the cat – which is more often now that he's travelling so much. I don't miss him and when I do miss him, I switch on the TV and I get enough dosage of him to feel content again. I don't miss my job. I miss the money a little bit when I see something in the shops or in a magazine that I want, but then I leave the shop or I turn the page and I get over it. I don't miss the travelling. I don't miss the dinner parties.

And I'm not unhappy.

I'm not.

Okay, I lied.

He left me.



CHAPTER THREE

I was halfway through the bottle of wine by the time I built up the – not courage, I didn't need courage, I wasn't afraid – I needed to care. It took half a bottle of wine to care about returning a call to my life, and so I dialled the number listed on the letter. I took a bite of a chocolate bar while I waited for the phone to connect. It was answered on the first ring. It didn't give me time to chew, never mind swallow my chocolate.

'Oh, sorry,' I said with a stuffed mouth. 'I've chocolate in my mouth.'

'That's okay dear, take your time,' an upbeat older woman with a smooth American-pie Southern accent said perkily. I chewed quickly, swallowed and washed it down with some wine. Then I retched.

I cleared my throat. 'Finished.'

'What was it?'

'Galaxy.'

'Bubble or caramel?'

'Bubble.'

'Mmm, my favourite. How can I help you?'

'I received a letter about an appointment on Monday. My name is Lucy Silchester.'

‘Yes, Ms Silchester, I have you in the system. How does nine a.m. suit?’

‘Oh well, actually that’s not why I’m calling. You see, I can’t make the appointment, I’m working that day.’

I waited for her to say, *Oh silly us, asking you to come on a work day, let’s cancel the entire thing*, but she didn’t.

‘Well, I guess we can work around you. What time do you finish?’

‘Six.’

‘How about seven p.m.?’

‘I can’t because it’s my friend’s birthday and we’re going for dinner.’

‘What about your lunch break? Would a lunch meeting suit you?’

‘I’ve to bring my car to the garage.’

‘So, just to summarise, you can’t make the appointment because you’ve work in the day, you’re bringing your car to the garage on your lunch break and you’ve dinner with friends in the evening.’

‘Yes.’ I frowned. ‘Are you writing that down?’ I heard tapping in the background. This bothered me; they had summoned me, not the other way around. They were going to have to find a time.

‘You know, sweetheart,’ she said in her long Southern drawl – I could almost see the apple pie slithering from her lips and landing on her keyboard, then her keyboard hissing and going alight, and my summons being forever wiped from the memory. ‘You’re obviously not familiar with this system.’ She took a breath and I jumped in before the boiling apples had a chance to drip again.

‘Are people usually?’

I’d knocked her off her train of thought.

‘Pardon me?’

‘When you contact people, when *life summons people to meet with it*,’ I emphasised, ‘are people usually familiar with the procedure?’

‘Well,’ the longest sing-song that sounded like *way-eell*, ‘some are and some aren’t, I suppose, but that’s what I’m here for. How’s about I make it easier for you by arranging for him to come to you? He’d do that if I asked.’

I thought about that, then suddenly, ‘Him?’

She chuckled. ‘That catches people out too.’

‘Are they always *hims*?’

‘No, not always, sometimes they’re *hers*.’

‘Under what circumstances are they men?’

‘Oh, it’s just hit or miss, sweetheart, there ain’t no reason for it. Just like you and me being born what we are. Will that be a problem for you?’

I thought about it. Couldn’t see why it would. ‘No.’

‘So what time would you like him to visit you?’ She tapped some more.

‘Visit me? No!’ I shouted down the phone. Mr Pan jumped, opened his eyes, looked around and closed them again. ‘Sorry for shouting,’ I composed myself. ‘He can’t come here.’

‘But I thought you said that wouldn’t be a problem for you.’

‘I meant it’s not a problem that he’s a man. I thought you were asking if *that* would be a problem.’

She laughed. ‘But why would I ask you that?’

‘I don’t know. Sometimes health spas ask that too, you know, in case you don’t want a male masseuse . . .’

She chuckled. ‘Well, I can guarantee he won’t be massaging any part of your anatomy.’

She made *anatomy* sound dirty. I shuddered.

‘Well, tell him I’m very sorry but he can’t come here.’ I looked around at my dismal studio flat that I always felt quite

cosy in. It was a place for me, my own personal hovel; it was not for entertaining guests, lovers, neighbours, family members or even emergency services when the rug caught fire, it was just for me. And Mr Pan.

I was huddled up by the arm of the couch and a few steps behind me was the end of my double bed. To my right was a kitchen countertop, to my left the windows and beside the bed was a bathroom. That was about the size of it. Not that the size bothered me, or embarrassed me. It was more the state of it. My floor had become the wardrobe. I liked to think of my scattered belongings as stepping stones, my yellow brick road . . . that kind of thing. The contents of my previous top-dollar penthouse wardrobe were bigger than the new studio apartment itself and so my too many pairs of shoes had found their home along the windowsill, my long coats and full-length dresses hung on hangers at the right- and left-hand ends of the curtain pole and I slid them open and closed as the sun and moon requested just like regular curtains. The carpet was as I have already described, the couch monopolised the small living area reaching from windowsill to kitchen counter, which meant you couldn't walk around it but had to climb over the back to sit on it. My life could not visit me in this mess. I was aware of the irony.

'My carpets are being cleaned,' I said, then I sighed as if it was just such a nuisance that I couldn't bear to think about it. It wasn't a lie. My carpets very much *needed* to be cleaned.

'Well, can I recommend Magic Carpet Cleaners,' she said brightly, as though suddenly jumping to commercial hour. 'My husband,' *ma husbaand*, 'is a devil for shining his boots in the living room and Magic Carpet Cleaners get that black polish right out, you wouldn't believe. He snores too. Unless I fall asleep before him I get none the rest of the night so I watch those infomercials and one night I saw a man shining

his shoes on a white carpet, just like my husband and that's what caught my attention. Was like the company was made just for me. They took the stain right out, so I had to go out and get me some. Magic Carpet Cleaners, write it down.'

She was so intense I found myself wanting to invest in black shoe polish in order to test these magical cleaning info-commercial people and I scrambled for a pen, which in accordance with the Pen Legislation Act of Since the Beginning of Time was not anywhere in sight when I needed it. With marker in hand I looked around for something to write on. I couldn't find any paper so I wrote on the carpet, which seemed appropriate.

'Why don't you just tell me when you can come see him, save us the back and forth.'

My mother had called a special meeting of the family to gather on Saturday.

'You know what, I know that this is so important, being summoned by my life and all, and despite having an important family gathering on Saturday, I'd really love to meet with him then.'

'Oh,' *ewwww*, 'sweetheart, I will make a special note that you were willing to miss that special day with your loved ones to meet with him but I think that you should take that time to be with your family. God only knows how long you've got 'em for and we'll see you the following day. Sunday. How does that grab you?'

I groaned. But not out loud, it was inside, deep within, a long agonised painful sound from a painful agonised place deep inside. And so the date was set. Sunday, we would meet, our paths would collide and everything I'd considered to be secure and anchored would suddenly slip and slide and change beyond belief. That's what I'd read would happen in a magazine interview with a woman who had met with her life. They provided

before and after photos of her for the benefit of the uneducated reader who couldn't access picture images in their mind. Interestingly, before she'd met her life, her hair hadn't been blowdried, but it was after; she had no make-up or spray tan on before, but had after; she wore leggings and a Mickey Mouse T-shirt before and was photographed in harsh lighting, but wore a softly draped asymmetric dress afterwards in a perfectly lit studio kitchen where a tall vase of artistically placed lemons and limes showed how life had apparently made her more attracted to citric flavours. She wore glasses before meeting with life, she wore contacts afterwards. I wondered who had changed her more; the magazine or her life.

In just under a week's time I was going to meet my life. And my life was a man. But why me? I felt my life was going just fine. I felt fine. Everything in my life was absolutely fine.

Then I lay back on the couch and studied the curtain pole to decide what to wear.