

# The Time of Her Life

KATE FENTON

## Extract

Annie finished the last fragment of toast as Dominic limped off into the garden. ‘Since when did you turn into Heston Blumenthal?’

‘I’m having to learn fast, aren’t I?’ Rob shrugged. ‘Now that I’m shifting for myself.’

‘What? Oh.’ She bit her lip. ‘Sorry.’  
‘Don’t beat yourself up. Statement of fact. Fran’s gone, old house’s gone, I’m still unpacking boxes in the ~~at~~, with sole care and control of a shiny new kitchen. And I’m here to tell you the cookers these developers put in nowadays are so bloody complicated you need a degree course just to turn the grill on.’ He took a swig of tea. ‘Matter of fact, I’ve always quite liked cooking. It was Fran used to hustle me out of the kitchen. She said I made more mess with one supper than she did in a week.’

Annie’s eyes flickered towards the pans, tools, pots and crumpled packaging strewn across her own worktops. ‘No, really?’ She did not pursue this line of attack, though, because she sensed an opportunity. They – which is to say Annie, her sister Jennifer, Bernie and even daughter Martha on the phone from New Zealand – had been speculating amongst them-selves at length but largely fruitlessly as to what lay behind the collapse of the Daley marriage. The older women had talked to Rob, of course, variously offering sympathy, surprise,

solidarity or shepherd's pie. He had responded with polite impenetrability all round. The most revealing admission any of them had prised out of him was that no, he couldn't honestly say he'd seen this coming. Gobsnacked would about sum him up. But there you go, eh? Naturally, Annie was not prepared to accept such blokey stoicism at face value.

'So how's Fran getting along?' she enquired now. Very casually. 'In her new house?'

Rob had just taken a bite of toast. 'Fine,' he said thickly. 'So far as I know.' He swallowed and met her gaze squarely. 'And before you ask, yes of course we're in touch. All the time. We've three kids and the thick end of thirty years joint finances to sort out for the divorce agreement. And no, we're not at war. It's fi ne, she's fi ne, I'm fi ne, any other questions?'

Now or never. 'Why'd she leave you, Robbo?'

At least this silenced him, if only for a moment. He glanced at her rather oddly. 'You got any suggestions?'

'Apart from you being impossible for any sane woman to live with? Oh, don't give me the kicked-spaniel look, you know I'm joking. No, I haven't the foggiest, how should I? We all thought you two were rock solid.'

He looked down at his hands, at the left hand where, for the first time, she noticed a pale indentation where his wedding ring had lived. 'Yup,' he said quietly. 'Reckon I did and all.'

This was so different from his usual brusque tone that Annie was moved to put her hand over his and was as much surprised as touched when his fingers twisted to return her clasp. 'Poor old Bobsy,' she said. 'We'll have to find a nice little friend to cheer you up, won't we?'

Considering she had spoken from the heart, in a one hundred per cent genuine surge of affectionate sympathy, she was not expecting him to snort and snatch away his hand. 'I was being nice to you,' she protested.

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‘Yeah, well. It’s unnatural. Frightened the life out of me.’

‘Idiot. I’m concerned for you, that’s all.’

‘Finished with that plate?’

‘For Pete’s sake, can’t we have an adult conversation for once? I’ve been feeling guilty for weeks, actually, but what with winding up Jake’s estate, selling the business, the wedding – and now Dom crashing home – it’s been one blessed thing after another. I’ve had no chance to talk properly, see how you’re getting on, be a friend in need, all that.’

‘In need of what?’

She grinned. ‘How about a woman?’

He rose to his feet and eyed her satirically. ‘You offering?’

‘Be serious, you pillock. Female company, if you’d sooner call it that. I refuse to talk about girlfriends and boyfriends—’

‘Thank God for that.’

‘—because with the best will in the world, we’re not youngsters any more, are we?’ She rose too. Scooping up mugs and side plates she followed him across to the sink. ‘But I’m sure it must be tough, finding yourself rattling round in a strange flat . . .’

‘The flat’s great.’

‘If you like operating theatres. No, no, don’t jump down my throat, your, um, apartment’s fine, lovely. What I’m talking about is being on your own. For the first time in decades.’

He glanced up from the dishwasher into which he had begun to thread cutlery. In the wrong rack, but she let it pass. Some things in life are even more important than the correct stacking of dishwashers. ‘So are you, with Bernie gone,’ he said. ‘Living on your tod. For the first time.’

‘Actually I’m not, not now Dom’s back. And with all the ironmongery in his leg and zilch in the bank it looks like he’ll be around for a bit. Plus he’s bust up with his girlfriend, did I

tell you? Not that she's any great loss . . . Anyway, that's beside the point. I'm a woman.'

'You don't say.'

'Whereas it's well recognised that men aren't good on their own. Scientific fact. They die younger.'

'Been reading the *Daily Mail*?'

'I'm offering to help, OK? Come on, I did a pretty amazing job pairing up Bernie and Dave.'

Rob straightened and turned to stare at her. 'You're never claiming credit for that marriage? Anyone with half a brain could see those two were made for one another.'

'Ha!' Annie leaned back against the sink, folding her arms. 'It's all very well saying that now, but who spotted the potential in the first place? Who was sending Bernie up to the Hoppy night after night to help with the little girls? And you know it isn't easy forging relationships after a certain age. The game's different. No one knows the rules. People are terrified of making a fool of themselves.'

Rob returned to the dishwasher. 'Tell me about it.'

'See? You do know what I'm talking about. And getting Bernie and Dave together I felt like—' She broke off. 'What's that barmy Scottish sport where they chuck boulders along the ice?'

'Curling?'

'Exactly. With those two, I've been like one of the broom-swishing minions, whizzing out in front, sweeping all the crap out of the way. Don't pull faces, Rob Daley, it's true. I was forever throwing them together, including babysitting his kids so they could go out on their first proper dates. In fact, if you'd been at the wedding yesterday, you'd have heard Dave saying all this and more in his speech. I was very touched.'

Rob was studying a dismayingly egg-encrusted pan. 'I heard Dave spent most of his speech quoting the email his dad'd sent, instead of turning up.'

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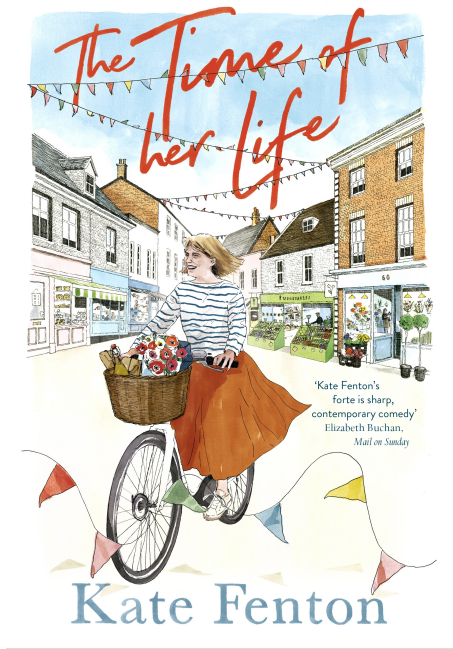
‘His bloody wife was taken ill. Allergic shock or something.’

‘Yeah? Well, much as I hate to say I told you so . . .’

‘Only your favourite phrase,’ said Annie, seizing the pan from him and filling it with water.

‘How much did I bet you the guy wouldn’t show?’

‘I can’t remember,’ she said, untruthfully. ‘But very likely about what it’ll cost me to replace this saucepan. So shall we call it quits?’



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