

time of my life



A Novel

ALLISON WINN SCOTCH



of My Life

A NOVEL



Shaye Areheart Books
NEW YORK

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Published in the United States by Shaye Areheart Books, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

www.crownpublishing.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Scotch, Allison Winn.

Time of my life : a novel / by Allison Winn Scotch.—1st ed.

p. cm.

1. Self-realization in women—Fiction. 2. Life change events—Fiction.

3. Psychological fiction. I. Title.

PS3619.C64T56 2008

813'.6—dc22

2008010628

ISBN 978-0-307-40857-0

Printed in the United States of America

Design by Lynne Amft

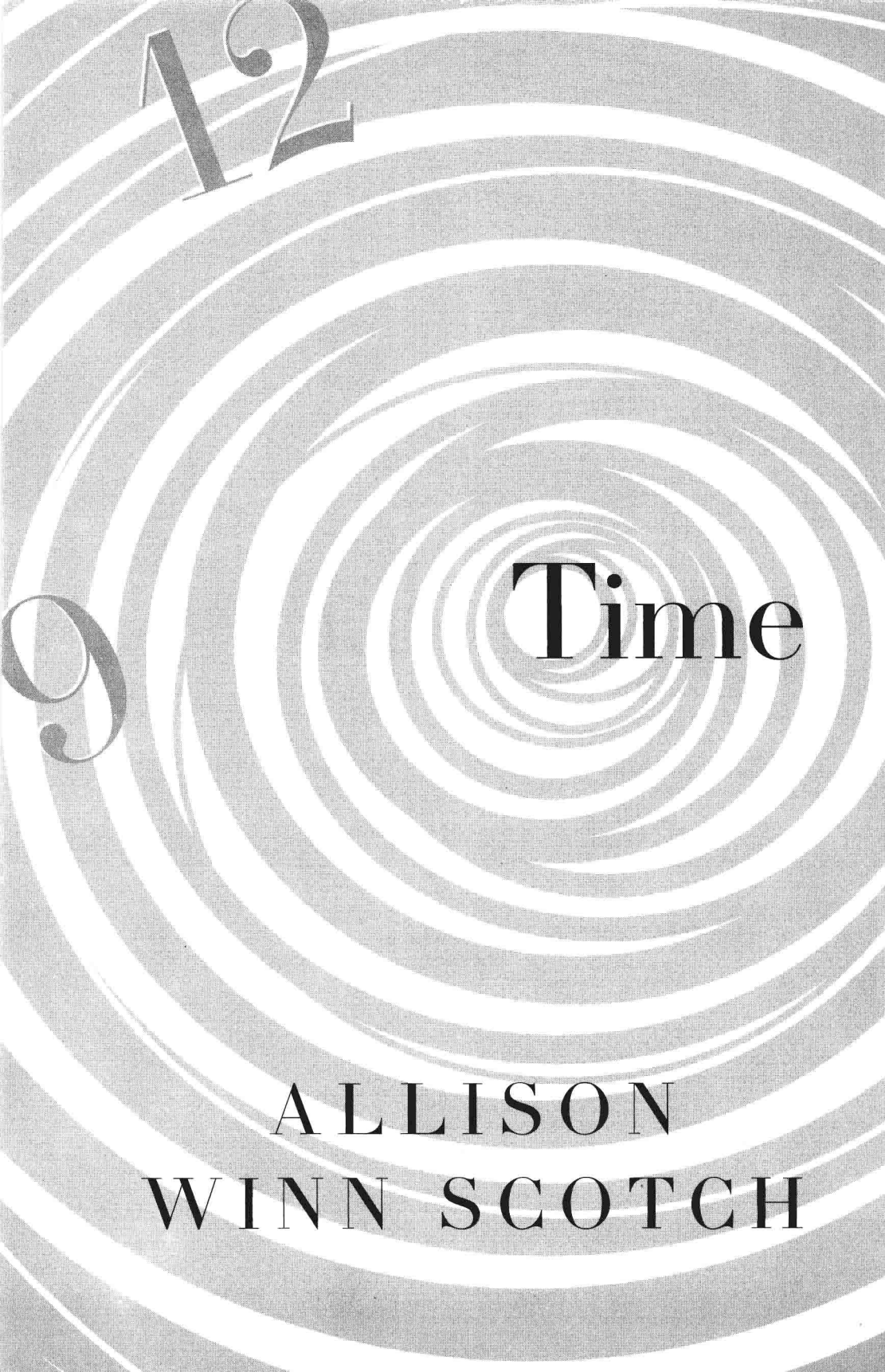
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

Time of My Life

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The Department of Lost and Found



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Time

ALLISON
WINN SCOTCH

For Adam, to whom I tell my stories.

*And for Campbell and Amelia, who hold
the answers to life's many questions.*

Now for the other life. The one without mistakes.

—LOU LIPSITZ

Chapter One

D*ing. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding.*

Somewhere in the tunnels of my left ear, I hear my car alerting me to the fact that my door is open. I take vague notice of my brain accepting the message, then I quickly ignore it. The dinging, to which I am now immune, as if someone were pinching me on my arm over and over again until that same spot becomes numb, continues.

I run my hands over the cool wood of the steering wheel, then onto the buttery leather seat below, flicking my hands underneath the sweat-basted backs of my thighs. The brochure to this car—the one that was filled with a couple who so closely resembled Barbie and Ken that my daughter actually pointed to them and said, “Barbie,” which my husband and I applauded to the point of revelry (such that people in the dealership craned their necks to see if we’d been given a free car or something), because my daughter’s vocabulary consisted of, to date, approximately seventeen words, so “Barbie” was another milestone—actually made you believe that if you bought the car, you could also buy the life. As if on the weekends, we’d be careening down sides of mountains or hurtling through white-water-filled rivers or picnicking in a dewy,

crisply green meadow at sunset with a field of sunflowers just behind us.

Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding.

Mama.

More.

Dog.

Dada.

No.

Yes.

Kiss.

Milk.

Ball.

Up.

Balloon.

Hi.

Bottle.

Cup.

Bye.

Down.

Sleep.

I run the list of Katie's words over in my mind. I have them down cold, of course, because I was the mother who knew these things. I was the mother who dutifully jotted down every milestone ("4 months, 3 weeks: Katie rolled over today! Far ahead of the 6-month target!"), who nursed her until her first birthday exactly, per the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation ("I'm so sad to give it up," I told friends as wrinkles washed across my forehead to note my air of sincerity), and who, as I have mentioned, tallied up Katie's vocabulary to ensure that she was on track to fulfill her potential. Seventeen words. A gasp ahead of other eighteen-month-olds.

And now, we also had "Barbie."

Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. Splat.

My eyes whip over to the upper corner of the windshield, where mildew-colored bird shit slowly oozes down. *Great*, I think. *Just fucking great. There's never any bird shit in the goddamn brochure.* I inhale and try to release the stress, as my Pilates teacher had taught me to do every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning from 10:00 to 11:00, after my nanny had arrived, and just before I went to the grocery store to pick up ingredients for dinner. I feel the air fill my chest, and it expands like a helium balloon.

I count to five and try not to gag. It's hard, after all, to clear my mind when the scent of fetid milk is wafting from the backseat. On the way home from a playdate yesterday, Katie had dumped her sippy cup on her head, for apparently no reason whatsoever, and since I'd already exhausted myself pretending to dote on the kids at this seemingly never-ending excruciatingly boring playdate, during which all the moms discussed diaper changes and nanny problems and potential preschool applications, I opted not to clean her car seat. *Fuck it*, I told myself, as I pulled my darling daughter and her crisp near-black curls from her saturated seat and called her a "silly willy" for dousing herself despite knowing better. *Just fuck it.*

And so I did. Which is why my Range Rover, which should have still smelled like a fine blend of lemon cleaner and shoe polish, now reeked like petrified puke.

The bird shit is snaking its way into the crack between the windshield and the side of the car when I notice that Mrs. Kwon is waving at me from inside of the dry cleaner. She is frantically, frantically flashing her hand through the air, with an alarmed, toothy smile that she wears just about every time I see her. Sometimes the alarm fades into cunning, but the toothiness remains the same.

Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding.

I heave myself from my car and make the steep step down to the pavement. I turn and look at the backs of my legs: They glisten from the perspiration and are pocked with marks from the seat,

such that they form the perfect illusion of sheeny cellulite. I slam the door shut.

Suddenly, there is quiet. I couldn't hear the dings. But now, I do hear the quiet.



"YOU NO LOOK so good," Mrs. Kwon says to me. The rack of clothes that hangs across and throughout the ceiling is snaking its way forward until she presses a button, and it stops abruptly. She grabs a pole and reaches up to unhook Henry's, my husband's, shirts. "You not sleeping? Because you really no look so good."

I press my lips together and morph my face into something like a smile. I can feel my cheeks digging into themselves, my dimples cratering.

"No," I say, and shake my head. "Not sleeping too much, I guess."

"What wrong?" Mrs. Kwon asks, as she wrestles the shirts down to our level.

"Nothing." I shrug. My face muscles are starting to tremble from the weight of the forced smile. "Nothing at all."

"You not being honest," Mrs. Kwon chastises. "When you no sleep, something is always wrong." She lands the shirts, much like how I imagine a fisherman lands his catch, and splays them across the counter.

I don't answer. Instead, I sift through my purse for my wallet.

"Have you talk to husband about it?" Mrs. Kwon is relentless. "You always picking up his things, but I never meet him. Why? Where is he? Why he never pick up his own shirts?"

"He's working," I say.

"Eh," she responds. "Men always working. They not realizing that the women are working, too." She gestures behind her. "My

husband think that because I am wife, I have to clean, cook, and still do dry-clean business. What does he do? Nothing!" She shimmies her hands even more exuberantly than normal.

I smile with what I hope to be sympathy and wait for my change, as she punches the cash register with fervor.

"You know what you need?" she asks, as the drawer to the register bounces open. "More sex." I feel myself turning a hue of purple, which she quickly detects. "Don't you be embarrassed! Every woman need more sex. You sleep better. Your marriage better. Sex make all things better."

"Well, unfortunately," I say, trying to swallow the mortification that comes with your dry cleaner giving you advice on your carnal activities, "Henry is in London. And will be for at least another week." I don't mention that Henry is nearly always in London or San Francisco or Hong Kong or somewhere that isn't our quaint, homey suburb tucked away thirty miles from Manhattan, where people flee from the city life like fugitives who aren't sure what they're outrunning. Henry's constant travel was the price we paid for his success as the youngest partner at his boutique investment bank.

"Oooh, that too bad." Mrs. Kwon's eyes grow small. "You do look like you need some good sex." She shrugs and flashes her teeth again. "Maybe next week you look better!"

Maybe, I think, as I plod out to my sure-to-make-my-life-rosy new car. But, then again, probably not.



RIGHT THERE, I nearly moan out loud. Yes, harder right there.

Garland must have intuited my angst because at that very moment, I feel his fingertips knead into my upper shoulders like a baker might bread.

"You're spasming here," he whispers just loudly enough so I can hear him over the Enya. I feel my muscle involuntarily clench up and resist the very relief that I'm trying to offer it. "This entire section of your back is in deep spasm," he repeats. "We're going to have to do a lot of work on this today."

I grunt and rearrange my face in the donut cushion so that I, ideally, won't look half-alien when Garland is done. Not that he hasn't seen me at my worst before: Once, on my worst day, I devolved into sputtering sobs as his hands worked their way down my torso, releasing what he later told me was "disturbed energy" that came unjiggered through the power of massage. But still. It wasn't a look to which I aspired. Not least because, as my friends from Pilates informed me, Garland, with his sinewy forearms and espresso-colored hair, would occasionally put his hands in places where, perhaps, management wouldn't approve. But where my friends very much did.

But I'd been seeing him every other week for nearly four months, and as of yet, nothing inappropriate at all. Which, in some ways, was a relief. Henry and I had met at twenty-seven, and for the past seven years, there had been no one else. Nor had I truly wanted there to be. I was a wife. I was a *good* wife, and fantasizing about your masseuse, no, fantasizing about *anyone* was outside the bounds of what I characterized a "good" wife to be. I attended the requisite cocktail parties for Henry's firm. I washed our ivory damask sheets every Saturday. I ironed Katie's gingham dresses so that there wasn't a literal thread out of place.

Of course, despite my best and most public efforts, my subconscious occasionally led me down paths that my current consciousness couldn't control. So while Garland worked his delicious finger magic on me, I couldn't help but wonder how it would feel if those fingers wound their way beyond the acceptable parameters of what they teach you in massage school.

I heard him slap some eucalyptus oil between his hands, and my nerves along my spine exploded as he ran his palms over them.

The truth of the matter was that Mrs. Kwon wasn't entirely wrong. Henry and I were going stale, not because we wanted to, but because like a bag of cookies that had inadvertently been left open, the air in our marriage was slowly hardening our crusts.

When was the last time we had sex? I think, forgetting Garland's hands entirely. I filter through my brain until I land on a wedding we'd attended in the Berkshires two months earlier.

"We *have* to do it," I said to Henry, as we lay on the crisp sheets of the inn and both wished that we were asleep instead. "Seriously, Hen, I just read an article in *Redbook* that said that couples who have sex have a much deeper connection and are more likely to stay married."

"What about couples who would rather sleep?" He looked over at me and grinned. "Are they doomed?"

"It didn't say," I said tersely, and rolled to my side.

"I'm kidding, Jill, I'm kidding." I heard the sheets rustle below him as he moved to spoon me, and then, from behind, he slowly unbuttoned my shirt.

Okay, so that was two months, it's not that bad, I tell myself, readjusting my face in the cushion. Especially because Henry is always away. That has to be taken into account when doing the math. He's always away.

It didn't used to be like this, of course. When we first met, we ravaged each other like wild beasts, albeit without the wildness and maybe not quite like beasts, as Henry had an aversion to performing oral sex and usually begged off when I had my period, but certainly with the passion that a new relationship brings. And even if the sex wasn't as torrid as it had been in my previous relationship with Jackson, Henry and I clicked together in ways that were unexplainable but instinctual, as if by being with each other, Henry, the

up-and-coming finance guru with a swimmer's build and a mind like a steel trap, and me, advertising executive, who had coined the year's biggest jingle, "It's the zizz in the fizz that makes Coke what it is," with my yoga-hardened abs, somehow illuminated all the deficiencies in my prior boyfriends. I was drawn to him, liberated with him, and in many ways, saved by him. When we met one night at a dingy bar in the East Village, I was embroiled in a sinking relationship with Jackson—whom I'd met at graduate school; he was getting his MFA, I was getting my MBA—that had boulders tied to it that neither one of us seemed capable of cutting loose.

So it's not like it always used to be this way, I remind myself, as Enya stopped crooning in the background and another New Agey singer whom I don't recognize filters out through the speakers overhead. But still. How could we get back on track? *Redbook* had dozens of articles on it, but none of them seemed to help. What was the one moment where we lost our way? Or was it a series of moments that snowballed into something larger, something intangible, something careening forward with too much acceleration for us to stop it now?

What I didn't think about—what I *refused* to allow myself to think about—was that Ainsley, another friend from business school who now lives in a house on my same cul-de-sac and who runs a ridiculously lucrative eBay business from her garage that sells personalized baby gifts, had just gotten an invitation to Jackson's wedding. And that, despite the fact that we'd broken up seven years prior and I'd been the one to finally—firmly and permanently—walk away from him and on toward Henry, his engagement and upcoming wedding still ate away at my emotional landscape, as if him avowing himself to another woman was somehow a blight, a pox on me.

"Are you going to be okay if I tell you the news about Jack?" Ainsley said two mornings ago when we were power walking with our aerodynamic strollers in tow.

“Of course!” I said, waving my free hand but not turning to look her in the eye. “Is he still at *Esquire*?”

“Uh-huh,” she said, between breaths. *Figures*, I thought. *Figures he’d stay at a job that he didn’t love simply because of inertia. Figures that he’d never get that novel off the ground despite his best promises.*

“He’s getting married,” Ainsley said, shooting the bitterness straight out of me.

I should have responded. I suppose that the ten-second pause before I did respond was what gave me away. It must have been clear that within that ten-second pause—as my brain spun back to *how much I fucking loved him* and then to our first date at a falafel joint stuffed with undergrads where we had to shout above the raucous din but that we had so much to say to each other that it didn’t matter, and then to our last and final date at China Fun when we were all talked out, and then to how, even though I’d found complete contentedness with Henry, sometimes I was haunted from the inside out by how much I still craved Jackson, his spontaneity, his zeal, his ability to wander through life without a defined to-do list, and Henry was always, *always* armed with a to-do list—I was in no way okay. Frames from my old life flashed through my brain the way that they do in the movies just before the hero is set to die: the camaraderie that I thrived on at the ad agency, the lazy Saturday mornings when Jack had toted his laptop to the neighborhood diner to work on his stagnant novel and I had forty-five minutes of quiet time just to nurse my coffee and stare out the window dreaming of nothing at all, the Christmas vacation before I ever even met Jack, when Ainsley and I booked a last-minute trip to Paris and kissed random French men on the night before New Year’s Eve. There were so many things to miss about my pre-Henry, pre-Katie, pre-this era life; Jack was just one of them.

“Of course I’m okay!” I chirped to Ainsley breathlessly,