



SHARON BOLTON

THE PACT

THAT SUMMER THEY MADE A PROMISE. HER LIFE FOR THEIRS.
NOW IT'S PAYBACK TIME.



PRAISE FOR SHARON BOLTON

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1

When they thought of that summer, it was to remember the bitter taste of the river in their mouths and the spatter of lager froth on hot skin; to recall days that began after noon and ended as the night sky paled in the east.

They remembered long afternoons beneath the chestnut trees in University Parks and the particular shade of rose gold that the medieval spires turned in the evening sunlight. They remembered discovering the steampunk shop on Magdalen Bridge and dressing as glamorous vampires for the rest of the month, strutting the cobbles as dusk fell, to the amusement – and occasional alarm – of the foreign exchange students.

They remembered dust clouds at Reading and Truck Festivals turning nose-bogies black and the relentless mutterings of the drug dealers: ‘Want any coke? Need any gear?’ The answer was always yes, and they never needed to ask the price.

That summer was a time of neither hope nor promise but of certainty: they were the chosen ones, to whom the world belonged, and their lives, only just beginning, would be long and golden.

How very wrong they were.

Inevitably, that summer, they ended each day at Talitha’s mock-Elizabethan monstrosity of a house a few miles out of Oxford.

Tal's dad was rarely around and her mum never bothered them – they weren't sure she was there much of the time – but the fridge was always full thanks to the housekeeper (who didn't live in), no one kept tabs on the bar in the pool house, and Domino's Pizza in nearby Thame delivered until midnight.

Mainly, they stayed outdoors, dozing away hangovers in the pool house or the circular, lead-roofed gazebo by the lake, waking as the sun came up before heading home to reassure parents of their continued existence. They slept the day away in their own beds and by four o'clock were ready to begin again. And so it had been all summer long, since the last A level exam, which had been Daniel's: Latin, on 4 June. (Went well, he thought, but you never really knew, did you?)

On the night before results came out, they gathered again at Tal's after an evening in the city. Xav sat on the edge of the pool, his feet in the water, as Amber flopped down at his side.

'I feel sick,' she muttered, letting her head fall onto his shoulder.

'Don't throw up in the pool,' Talitha warned. 'Mum had to get the filters cleaned last time. She'll make me pay if it happens again.'

Walking towards them across the terrace, weaving his way around huge terracotta pots and statues of mythical creatures, came Felix, holding a tray of drinks on the splayed fingers of his right hand. His hair, grown long since he'd finished school, glowed silver like the moon that hovered over his right shoulder. His easy, rolling walk gave him away as an athlete and on closer inspection, the over-developed right arm and shoulder, the huge thighs and slight twist in his torso might suggest an oarsman. The outdoor security lights activated as he passed them, giving the impression that Felix was creating his own light.

'I'm not pissed.' Amber sighed as Felix drew close. 'I mean I feel sick about tomorrow.'

‘Today,’ Daniel corrected from his sun-lounger. The smallest of the boys, and the least athletic, he’d never had the same success with girls as his two friends, and yet his face was perfect. Secretly, the others had asked each other if Dan might be gay. It would be totally cool, of course, as long as he didn’t have a crush on either Xav or Felix, because then, you know, awkward.

‘School doors open in six hours’ – he looked at his watch – ‘seventeen minutes and five seconds. Four. Three.’

‘Do shut up,’ Amber told him.

‘Manhattans?’ Felix offered the tray to Dan. ‘Two shots bourbon, one shot sweet vermouth and a dash of orange bitters to jazz it up a bit.’

Felix had been the first to turn eighteen; the others, mindful of his love of chemistry, had bought him a cocktail kit, and he’d taken to cocktail-making with a passion.

Talitha shook her head at the offered tray of drinks; of the group, she always drank the least. Talking about it once, when she wasn’t around, the others had wondered whether it might be out of a sense of responsibility – after all, they were nearly always at her house. ‘Nah,’ Felix had scoffed. ‘She doesn’t give a shit about any damage we might do – she just likes to feel she’s in control.’

The terrace lights went out, leaving the garden in darkness apart from the glistening turquoise glow coming from the pool, and five pairs of eyes fell to watch the slender figure, pale as moonlight, glide over the tiles at the bottom. Megan’s suit was a delicate pink, giving the impression that she was swimming naked.

‘Is it just me or has she been weird lately?’ Felix crouched at the pool edge to watch the sixth and strangest member of the group. There was something a little unearthly about the way she moved through the water with barely any visible propulsion.

'It's Megan, she's always weird,' Amber said.

'Yeah, but more than normal.'

'She's been quiet,' Daniel said.

'She's *always* quiet,' Amber insisted.

Megan floated to the surface. The mounds of her buttocks and her shoulder blades appeared a split second before she flipped and stood up. Water streamed down skin that had turned turquoise in the pool light. She looked a little like a mermaid, if mermaids had short, silver-blond hair. A siren, maybe? Yes, Megan, with her quiet inscrutability, was more siren than mermaid.

'Six hours and fifteen minutes,' Daniel called to her.

'Keep the noise down,' Talitha complained. 'If we wake Mum, she'll make us go to bed.'

'Yeah, Dan, shut up.' Amber hurried to the pool steps. 'I know I failed theology.' She handed Megan a towel, holding it high so that her friend's body was shielded from view. It's possible she meant it kindly and that she hadn't positioned her own body so that Xav couldn't see Megan climb out.

Felix said, 'No one fails theology.'

'She means she got a B,' Xav said.

'Fair play, that would be a fail. In theology.'

Amber flicked her middle finger at Felix.

'We should go to bed.' Megan walked over to where she'd left her clothes on a sun-lounger and began pulling them on. 'It'll be tomorrow before we know it.'

'That's the last thing we should do.' Flopping down again at Xav's side, Amber nuzzled her face against his neck. 'I want to put it off as long as I can.'

'You two could have sex,' Felix said. 'That'll pass two or three minutes.'

Daniel sniggered. It's possible Megan smiled too, but she hid it well.

'If any of us don't get our grades, we might not be able to go to Tal's place on Saturday,' Daniel said.

'What?' Xav looked up over Amber's shoulder.

'If we don't get our grades, we have to go through clearing. We can't do that in Sicily.'

'We do have phones in Sicily.' Talitha sounded affronted.

'I'm only saying, I think we have to be here to – you know – hatch a plan B.'

Felix, who'd already drained his glass, stood up. 'We are not plan-B people,' he announced. 'We will all get our grades. And I know how we can pass the time. Dan, how pissed are you?'

Dan held out his right hand, palm flat, swaying it this way and that.

'Can you drive?' Felix asked.

'No.' Megan looked up from the sun-lounger.

'He's the only one of us who hasn't,' Felix said. 'Come on, Dan, you don't want to go down in history as the only chicken.'

Megan didn't back down. 'We said we'd quit.'

'Last chance.' Felix fished the cherry from his empty glass and swallowed it. 'We'll all have family things tomorrow and Friday. We fly out Saturday morning.'

'I'll do it when we get back.' Dan lay back on the sun-lounger, but his eyes stayed open and wary.

Felix shook his head. 'Won't be time. I'm going to the States, Tal's staying on Mafia Island till late September.'

'If you say "Mafia Island" in front of my granddad, you'll be floating face down in the pool the next morning,' Tal said.

Felix strolled up to her. 'Which would kind of prove my point.'

Tal was tall, but everyone was dwarfed by Felix. She took a step back to hold eye contact. 'And at your funeral, we'll build into your eulogy that you were a smartarsed shitbag.'

'Come on,' Felix took her hands and mimed pulling her towards

the drive. 'Last chance for some real fun.'

'It's not a good idea,' Megan said. 'We were all sober.'

'Told you she'd gone weird,' Felix muttered, after a dark glance at Megan.

'I wasn't,' Amber said.

'You're never sober,' Felix told her. 'Come on, guys, it'll take an hour at most – Dan will officially be a grown-up.'

'I haven't passed my test,' Daniel objected.

'Oh, like that'll make a difference. "It's OK, Officer, I know I've broken every rule in the Highway Code, not to mention several laws, but look, here's my licence. Are we good now?"'

Amber got to her feet. 'I need to take my mind off things. You stay here, Megan. I'll come with you, Dan.'

'We all go or we all stay,' Felix said.

Xav stood up. 'I'm in.'

A sharp glance seemed to bounce between Talitha, Megan and Dan; Talitha shrugged, feigning disinterest. Then, looking troubled, Daniel stood up and Megan followed. Back then, when Felix and Xav agreed on something, it happened. That was just the way it was.

They had a secret, you see, that summer. On the rare occasions, in years to come, when they talked about it, they could never agree quite how it started or whose idea it had been. Maybe at the beginning, none of them really intended to go through with it; maybe it had simply been something fun to talk about. The coolest dare imaginable; simple and yet so freakishly, thrillingly dangerous. None of them could have said when the talk became reality, when they realised it was actually going to happen. All they knew was that one moment they were sitting around the pool at Talitha's house and the next they were speeding, at eighty miles an hour, the wrong way down the M40.

2

It was three o'clock in the morning the first time. Felix had been at the wheel – of course he had – and they'd seen no other cars. It had taken a little over two minutes, because Felix drove like a maniac down the centre lane. After the first minute had passed, when none of them spoke, when they'd all stared, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, into the darkness, the A40 had morphed into the M40. They'd sped another mile before Felix had braked hard, swinging the car round in a three-hundred-and-thirty degree turn to reach the exit slip road of junction seven. Two minutes of stupid, senseless risk and they were back on the right side of the law.

The car – Felix's mother's VW Golf cabriolet – had erupted with loud, jubilant noise. They'd laughed, screamed and hugged each other. None of them had ever felt more alive. They didn't sleep that night; they drank and talked till dawn and beyond. There wasn't a drug that could compare to it; they knew they'd never feel that way again as long as they lived. It had been a rite of passage; they'd bet against the odds and won. They were marked, special.

But even the purest high wears off, and it had only been a matter of time before Xav had wanted to do it too. Xav hadn't been quite so lucky as Felix. As he'd reached the M40, at a little over eighty miles an hour, Felix, who'd been in the passenger seat,

had seen the taillights of a car on the opposite carriageway. It was a little way ahead of them, but they were gaining on it.

‘Stop the car, turn round!’ Amber had shrieked.

‘No, slow down. They might think we’re behind them, on a bend in the road,’ Daniel said.

‘Kill your lights. They won’t see us.’ Felix leaned across the driver’s seat and switched off the headlights.

The night was dark, cloud cover and no moon; they were speeding into a black void. Amber screamed and Xav switched the lights back on.

‘Fuck it,’ he said, and floored the accelerator. The speedometer crept up to eighty-five miles an hour, ninety, ninety-two. Xav leaned forward over the wheel, as though willing the car to go faster. The rest of them froze, silent, turning as one to their left as they caught up with the car, a large red saloon, on the opposite carriageway.

For a second, the driver, the only occupant of the car, didn’t see them, then instinct alerted him and he glanced their way. He looked away, checked his rear-view mirror, then looked back again. His face twisted with incredulity.

Felix raised his right hand and waved.

‘Don’t overtake,’ Megan called from her uncomfortable position, squashed in the back. ‘Stay level with him.’

‘Why?’ Xav was still hunched over the steering wheel.

‘If you pull in front, he’ll see our number.’

‘There are lights ahead,’ Talitha said. ‘Something’s coming at us.’

‘Shit,’ Xav steered to the right, onto what should have been the inside lane. The lights coming towards them on their own carriageway were high off the ground, widely spaced, powerful; the lights of a heavy-goods vehicle.

‘You’ve got time,’ Felix said, his voice hoarse with tension. ‘The junction’s coming up.’

Xav braked, the car on the opposite carriageway moved ahead, and the lights coming towards them grew bigger. A horn, low-pitched and angry, broke through the hum of their wheels on tarmac. The air in the car seemed to reverberate with it.

‘Junction,’ Felix snapped, as the sign, unreadable on its reverse side, became visible against the background of trees and hedge. Xav swung the car. They were going too fast, heading for the metal crash barrier. Amber screamed. Talitha wrapped her arms around her head. At the last second, Xav pulled the car back onto its course, and they were off the motorway.

A month went by, and nothing more was said about their two adventures, but then Felix and Talitha had an argument one night about why women should never be permitted in the armed forces. They simply didn’t have the physical courage, Felix argued. To prove him wrong, as he’d almost certainly known she would, Talitha had insisted on repeating the motorway stunt. Once again, they’d piled into Felix’s mum’s car – the only one big enough to take all six of them. Felix had sat in the passenger seat; Megan, the smallest, had curled onto Daniel’s lap. They had their designated places, by this time, with only the driver changing.

That time had been uneventful until Talitha had pulled off the motorway at junction seven and they’d seen a highway-patrol car in the layby of the A329. She’d panicked and stalled the car.

‘Move,’ Felix said. ‘If you don’t, he’ll come over. Move.’

‘What if he saw us?’ Talitha’s face was white with fear. ‘What if he pulls us over?’

‘If you don’t move, he definitely will.’

Talitha had pulled out, away from the layby. Every head in the car turned to watch the police vehicle, but it had remained where it was. And that made three times they’d got away with it.

Amber had been drunk; it had been as simple as that. But even before she insisted on having her turn, it had become an

unspoken agreement that the three-minute drive was something that, sooner or later, they were all going to do. They'd seen no other vehicles that night, which was probably just as well, because Amber almost certainly wouldn't have been able to react in time.

Megan, to their surprise, had proven to be the coolest of all at the wheel. In the early hours of a Sunday morning, she'd swung onto the A40 to see headlights almost upon her. Before any of the others had time to react, she'd swerved right onto the hard shoulder, screeched to a stop and killed her headlights.

'Duck, all of you,' she'd hissed as she'd dropped her own head onto the wheel.

No sooner had the other car flashed past than she'd restarted the engine and driven at eighty miles an hour along the inside lane to get them off the motorway.

'That's it,' she said, when they got back to Tal's house. 'We were bloody lucky just now. We're not risking it again.'

Shaken, they'd all agreed, and it hadn't been mentioned again. Until tonight.

And so now, after all, it was Daniel's turn.

Not long after three o'clock in the morning, the B-road heading north out of Talitha's village was empty. They drove with the top down, because Amber was still feeling queasy and the night air smelled of honeysuckle, which seemed to bode well, and muck-spreading, which didn't.

Daniel drove slowly and badly, his acceleration uneven, over-compensating on the steering. At the tiny hump bridge over the stream, he nearly hit the wall.

'Watch it.' Felix, as usual, was in the passenger seat.

'I'm not used to this car,' Daniel complained.

'OK,' Felix said, as they approached the junction with London Road. 'We all know the drill if we're stopped. We were heading

back to Tal's house. Daniel wasn't sure of the way and got lost. We're all a bit pissed, and we weren't concentrating. "We're all terribly sorry and upset and we'll never do it again, Officer.""

'You don't have to do it, Dan,' Megan said. No one replied.

'Everyone got their seat belts on?' Xav asked.

'Hold tight, Meg,' said Talitha.

'No hesitation, straight into the middle lane,' Felix said, as Daniel turned right at the junction and drove onto the slip road that would take them down to the A40. 'You need some speed.'

Daniel edged the car up to thirty miles an hour; the bend in the road was sharp, veering south, then south-east. The correct route – the only legally permitted route – made an almost complete circle onto the A40 heading into Oxford. At its south-eastern tip, the carriageway split; one way entered the A40, the other allowed traffic to leave it.

Black and white chevrons, indicating that all vehicles should turn left, came into view, then came the no-entry signs that flanked the right-hand side of the carriageway. It couldn't have been clearer which way they were supposed to drive. Daniel gave a low-pitched moan.

'Hold your nerve.' Felix sat forward, as though craning to see around Daniel onto the carriageway they were about to enter.

'Oh God, I hate this bit.' Amber tucked her face into Xav's shoulder; Talitha sat forward, holding tight onto the back of Felix's headrest.

'And go,' Felix called at the crucial moment. The car swung right, past the no-entry signs, and onto the wrong carriageway of the A40. The dual carriageway ahead, two lanes, unlit, was clear.

'Oh, thank God, thank God,' Talitha muttered.

'You need some speed,' Felix warned. The car was moving at a little over thirty miles an hour. 'Two and a half miles, that's all. Less than three minutes if you get your foot down.'

Jaw clenched, eyes unblinking, Daniel pressed down on the accelerator and the speedometer moved up to forty miles an hour, fifty, fifty-five. The intermittent white line that divided the lanes flashed past.

‘Nothing behind,’ Megan called.

‘We need to get a move on.’ Felix was drumming his fingers on the dashboard.

‘Not fast enough, Dan.’ Xav’s voice was strained with tension.

The gear box screamed as Daniel made a clumsy change into top gear.

‘There’s a fox. Watch out for the fox!’ Amber grabbed hold of Daniel’s shoulder.

‘Fuck’s sake, Amber,’ Talitha snapped.

‘I’m good, I’m good.’ Daniel steered into the lane closest to the central reservation.

‘Motorway coming up,’ Xav said.

‘I’m never doing this again,’ Talitha moaned.

‘Nearly there,’ Felix said. ‘Move into the middle lane when you can. The turn will be easier.’

Maybe the bend in the road took them all by surprise. One moment, all ahead was darkness, the next blinding lights were speeding towards them. Out of nowhere, another car had appeared.

Amber screamed.

‘Hard shoulder!’ Felix yelled.

All of them were thrown forward by the sudden loss of momentum as the acrid smell of brake fluid filled the car. Felix pushed the steering wheel out of Daniel’s grip and the car swung hard to the right. It should have been enough.

But the other car matched their movements, as though a huge mirror had been dropped in front of them. They were feet away from it. Daniel had frozen, his eyes wide and staring.

Felix pulled the wheel back. The car rocked and seemed to scream at them. They could hear the squeal of brakes, the blasting of a horn. Light filled the car, illuminating their horrified faces. There was a split second of silence, then the other car was gone and they were stationary on the carriageway. The world had stopped spinning.

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3

Tiny whimpering sounds filled the night and it took them a moment to realise they were coming from the car engine as its component parts protested at their treatment of it. A moth attracted by the headlights bounced against the windscreen and, in the heavy silence, they could hear its gentle, reproachful thudding. *What did you do?* It seemed to be saying to them. *What did you do?*

‘Shit.’ Felix dropped his head into his hands and spoke through his fingers. ‘Get out of here, Dan. Now.’

‘We didn’t hit it,’ Daniel said. ‘That car. We missed it, didn’t we? Someone tell me we missed it.’

‘It’s crashed,’ Megan whispered, as though if she said it softly enough, it might not be true. ‘It’s hit a tree or something.’

None of the others moved.

‘Dan, we have to get out of here.’ Felix grabbed hold of Daniel’s shoulder. ‘Get out of the car. I’ll drive.’

Daniel didn’t resist Felix’s shaking. He’d become limp, unresponsive.

Xav leaned towards the driver’s seat. ‘Dan, we can’t stay here. Something else will be along.’

Gently, Talitha took Felix’s hand away from Daniel. ‘Dan, please,’ she said. ‘We’ll all die if we stay here.’

Daniel turned on the ignition. Nothing happened.

‘Again, do it again,’ Felix yelled.

The second time, the engine started. Daniel swung the car onto the hard shoulder and stopped.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Felix said. ‘We have to get out of here.’

A smell of burned rubber flooded the car. The night was silent.

‘We have to see if they’re OK,’ Amber said.

‘Are you mental?’ Felix snapped back. ‘We’ll go down for this. Dan, give me the keys.’

‘Amber’s right,’ Xav said. ‘We have to check.’

Dan glanced once into the rear-view mirror and clamped his eyes shut tight. On the other carriageway, a vehicle entered the motorway and sped away.

‘I’m getting out.’ Megan pushed herself up so that she could sit on the car’s side panel. She swung her legs over.

Moving slowly, his eyes not quite focusing and his limbs unsteady, Xav opened his door. On the other side, Talitha did the same.

‘I swear, if you lot get out, I’ll leave you here,’ Felix warned. ‘Meg, get back in.’

‘I’ll go,’ Xav volunteered. ‘Don’t let him leave me behind.’ Still, he didn’t move.

With a sudden rush of movement that took them all by surprise, Daniel climbed out through the driver’s door and stood looking back down the carriageway. Seeing his chance, Felix jumped out and ran around the front of the car. Before he could reach the driver’s seat, though, Xav reached forward and grabbed the keys from the ignition. Then, at last, he got out of the car. Amber slid across and followed him. On the other side, Talitha climbed out.

The six of them, diminished, stared back at the devastation they’d wreaked.

The other car, a white Vauxhall Astra, was thirty yards away. Its

rear wheels were still on the hard shoulder, but its front end had vanished into undergrowth. Its headlights illuminated a mass of vegetation and the trunk of a tree.

The tree seemed to accuse them, as though if they closed their eyes, they would hear it moan with pain. Then the silence was broken as screaming sounded from inside the wrecked car. Thin, high-pitched, terrified.

'I think that's a—' Amber stopped, unable to finish her sentence. Xav moved towards the Astra.

'Give me the keys,' Felix demanded. 'Xav, give me the fucking keys.'

Ignoring him, Xav took another step forward. Megan did too, as movement became apparent in the headlights of the crashed car; something hardly visible, nebulous, an upward drift. The screaming stopped, only to be replaced by the sound of hammering on glass.

Xav took out his mobile phone.

'What the hell are you doing?' Talitha demanded.

'We need help.'

She wrapped her hand around his, enclosing the phone. 'We can't call the emergency services.'

'Dan can turn the car round,' Xav told her. 'We'll say we were travelling the right way and there was an accident. We don't know how it happened.'

'Dan's over the limit,' Amber said. 'He'll go to prison.'

'Not necessarily.' Xav pulled away for Talitha. 'And only for a short time. It can't be helped. We can't get away with this.'

'Smoke,' Megan whispered. 'Smoke coming up from the bonnet. It's on fire.'

'OK, OK.' Felix strode ahead and turned to face them, his hands held up as though in surrender. 'This is the plan. We make sure they're OK, then we get back in the car. We drive to the nearest

phone box and we call an ambulance from there. We won't give our names.'

'We can't leave them,' Megan said.

Felix reached out, his eyes darkening when Megan flinched away. 'They're probably fine.' He looked from one friend to the next. 'It's just a bump. They didn't hit us. Xav, you and me, we'll go and check now. OK?'

Without taking his eyes off the Astra, Xav nodded.

'Turn the ignition off,' Talitha said. 'You have to do that. It's the ignition that causes the sparks.'

'It'll be OK, guys. It'll be cool.' Felix put his hand on Xav's shoulder. 'Get back in the car and wait for us. Dan, get in the back. I'm driving us home.'

Daniel and the girls stayed where they were as Felix and Xav walked towards the car. They'd covered roughly half the distance when a bright bubble of flame appeared on the Astra's bonnet.

Talitha wailed. A second later, the Astra's petrol tank exploded.