

## PRAISE FOR *WHENEVER YOU'RE READY*

'Tender, warm-hearted and wise. Bolton is a born storyteller.'  
**Toni Jordan, author of *Prettier If She Smiled More***

'It's so damned refreshing to read a novel in which three dimensional older female characters are at the centre of the action . . . Friendships, betrayals, secrets and lies, romances, revelations— Trish Bolton tackles the gritty stuff that we inevitably confront in the second half of our lives. A page-turner of a novel.'  
**Sian Prior, author of *Childless***

'What a joy this book is. Deft and effortless storytelling, vivid, poignant characters, and a deep undertow of social commentary shot through with wicked, laugh-out-loud humour. I loved it.'  
**Lucy Treloar, author of *Days of Innocence and Wonder***

'Engaging, moving and full of heart, *Whenever You're Ready* is a touching story of friendship, forgiveness and second chances.'  
**Suzanne Leal, author of *The Watchful Wife***

'*Whenever You're Ready* is a rich portrait of inner lives and the stories we tell ourselves and each other as a way of dealing with the world. Each of the women in this compassionately drawn, inherently relatable novel feels like she could be a friend.'  
**Sophie Green, author of *Weekends with the Sunshine Gardening Society***

'*Whenever You're Ready* is a compelling and astute exploration of friendship, grief and families in the rapidly changing and generally rapid world ruled by real estate and Instagram . . . Big-hearted and entertaining, Bolton is a natural-born storyteller and her debut novel is a gift to us all.'  
**Lee Kofman, author of *The Writer Laid Bare***

# WHENEVER YOU'RE READY

Trish Bolton

  
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## CHAPTER 8

ALICE GLARED AT THE YOUNG couple who looked settled in for the afternoon until they were so uncomfortable—less than five minutes later—they left.

‘Honestly, Alice,’ said Lizzie, laughing.

They arranged themselves around the table, Alice half-expecting that at any moment Claire would sweep by in one of her floaty pastel dresses, kiss them hello and chide them for thinking she would leave without saying goodbye.

‘Jane spoke beautifully,’ said Lizzie.

As goodbyes went, Claire’s was one of the better Alice had attended. And she’d attended quite a number. She loathed funerals and wakes, particularly dry wakes, with only a cup of tea to sustain you. At her age, something stronger was required, to cast reality in a softer light.

It was also the not knowing what to say, and when eventually whatever it was had been said, hearing immediately how meaningless the words you'd searched for sounded.

Lizzie filled their glasses.

They toasted. 'To Claire and Jeremy.'

How strange it was to see Lizzie, no Claire beside her. Thank goodness for the grandchildren, thought Alice. And Margot.

Margot hadn't been an easy child, headstrong and defiant; the loss of Tom, and absent parents, had surely contributed to Margot going off the rails. Alice might have had her suspicions about what *going off the rails* had meant, but it was one of the many things Claire and Lizzie hadn't shared with her.

Still, Alice had been terribly afraid when Margot disappeared that Lizzie might lose her daughter, too. She'd rallied around, but it was Claire to whom Lizzie turned; Claire always with the right word, unfailingly optimistic that Margot would return. And one day she had.

A young man, shy and slender, hair upswept, offered canapés and replenished the dwindling champagne.

'Those deep-fried thingies,' said Alice, pointing to the tray, 'are they vegan?'

'Ham and cheese, madam . . . perhaps you would prefer a falafel?'

'Oh, yes, please,' she said, smiling up at him. 'You are such a life saver.'

Alice looked longingly at the young man as he disappeared into the garden in search of falafels.

Lizzie shook her head. 'Flirting at your age.'

Alice smoothed her black velvet pants. 'So what?'

'A five-decade age difference is what.'

'You don't get a pang every now and then?'

‘Not that I’m telling you about,’ said Lizzie. She did occasionally have those dreams: quite confounding. She wished they’d come along more often.

The young man returned bearing a tray of falafels. He placed the tray on the table and offered serviettes, Alice cooing her thanks. Blushing, he made a quick exit.

‘Anyway, even if we did,’ said Lizzie, ‘what are we going to do about it?’

Alice tossed her disconcertingly red curls. ‘Do I really have to tell you?’

‘Men don’t want to have sex with any woman over fifty,’ said Lizzie. ‘Even men our own age won’t come near us.’

‘They don’t know what they’re missing,’ said Alice.

‘Is there something you haven’t told me?’

Alice kept Emilio to herself.

Lizzie dropped her voice. ‘I’ve heard that death can make you . . . is there a polite way to put it?’

‘Horny,’ said Alice. ‘Makes perfect sense if you think about it. When someone dies, you’re reminded that time’s running out. It’s like, how many more Christmases? How many more trips to Bali? How many more times will I have sex?’

Lizzie covered her mouth to muffle her laughter.

Alice topped up their glasses. ‘It used to be birthdays and weddings, then you turn sixty and suddenly you’re in permanent mourning.’

The sun had disappeared, the wind picking up, people buttoning their coats and pulling their scarves close as the chill settled in.

Lizzie skewered a falafel. ‘No one tells you.’

‘I couldn’t do what Claire did,’ said Alice.

‘We put animals out of their suffering, don’t we?’

Alice bit into her falafel. Lizzie could never hear a word against Claire. Lizzie's devotion to Claire had rankled, many times, rankling more so as the years passed. But that was life: it rankled even when there wasn't much of it left. 'That's different.'

'How is it different?'

Alice hesitated. 'You can't compare putting an animal out of its misery to topping your husband.'

'A husband who had dementia.'

At their age dementia was the blackest spot on the horizon, constantly on their minds and on the minds of watchful relatives, so much so that misplacing the keys could be interpreted as befuddlement, a story told twice to the same person seen as a sign; forgetting a word, telling. Any lapse of memory interrogated as an indication that the brain was in terminal decline.

'Must we talk about death?'

Lizzie raised an eyebrow. 'We are at a wake.'

'All the more reason . . .'

'I can't help thinking the stress of caring for Jeremy caused Claire's cancer,' said Lizzie.

Alice's hand went protectively to her breast. 'I'm convinced stress caused mine.'

'I should have done more,' said Lizzie.

'You had enough going on,' said Alice. 'Your mother's stroke, finding a nursing home.'

'You can't help wondering if you'd just done this, just done that . . .'

'Claire wouldn't want you to feel guilty.'

The crowd was already thinning, people finishing their glass of champagne before hurrying back to their lives.

'Do you think Claire worried about going to hell?' asked Alice.

'What a question.'

‘Catholics believe if you die with a mortal sin on your soul, you go straight to hell.’

‘Claire left the church decades ago.’

‘Once a Catholic, always a Catholic.’

Lizzie shrugged and brushed falafel crumbs from her dress. ‘We should mingle.’

Alice paused mid-sip. ‘I didn’t know Ed was coming.’

Ed was moving through the crowd, shaking hands, charming men and women alike; Lizzie, too, if she wasn’t careful. He spotted her, turned his smile on high-beam and made his way towards her.

Lizzie could always convince herself she was no longer attracted to Ed. Until she saw him again. And then those old feelings . . .

He was more beautiful than handsome. The pale blue eyes—she didn’t notice until too late, how cold the blue—the dark curls, the effortlessness of him. She had been determined not to be one of the women who fell all over him. Marriage and children had been off the agenda. It was the only way women could get ahead.

She had resisted him for two whole years.

Alice put down her glass. ‘Why is he here?’

‘Why shouldn’t he be here?’ asked Lizzie. ‘He and Claire were close once.’

Ed might have stratospheric approval ratings in the polls, but Alice was no longer persuaded.

Alice and Ed had been close, too. But once he and Claire fell out, Alice had kept her distance. On the few occasions they ran into each other, Alice had bordered on rude. Alice being loyal, Lizzie had supposed.

‘Ladies,’ Ed said, with a slight bow.

Alice stayed only long enough to exchange niceties before withdrawing.

Ed's eyes, blue pools of concern, fixed on Lizzie. Those eyes that made everyone he met feel they were somehow special.

As usual he was beautifully dressed; he had always had style. Lizzie took in the tailored grey blazer, virgin wool no doubt; the polo shirt, which, once the blazer was off, he'd wear with sleeves gently rolled; the linen trousers.

'Lizzie.' His arms were around her and it felt warm and safe and familiar. A split second of insanity, when she wished they were still together,

From their union had come Margot and Tom, so they made a play of being friendly and civilised, even though within ten minutes, they couldn't stand being in the same room.

'You look wonderful,' he said. 'You always look wonderful.'

Lizzie came to her senses and twisted out of his embrace.

'I haven't stopped thinking about you since I heard the news.'

She almost believed him. 'Have you seen Margot? She's been looking for you.'

He shook his head. 'I'll text her.'

Ed looped his arm through hers and they walked to a quiet spot in the garden.

'Did you get a chance to speak to Jane?' Lizzie asked.

He nodded. 'I passed on my condolences.'

'It's a shame you never got to know her—you'd like her.'

'How could Claire do that to her daughter?' He shook his head. 'What on earth possessed her?'

Lizzie was immediately defensive. 'Claire had it all planned, probably for months. It wasn't something impulsive. She knew exactly what she was doing.'

He took a mouthful of beer, wedding ring glinting. 'That's not what I heard.'

Ed, always in the know.

‘There’s all sorts of gossip flying around.’

‘Got a mate who works at the Coroner’s Court.’

Ed had lots of mates, mates who owed him. She bet he owed them, too. ‘What did your mate say?’

He spoke quietly. ‘That it all went terribly wrong.’

Lizzie’s heart raced. ‘What do you mean *wrong*?’

‘Are you sure you want to hear this?’

She wasn’t at all sure. ‘Claire was my friend.’

He inclined his head so his mouth sat close to her ear, slid his arm around her waist. ‘It looks like Jeremy fell out of bed—broken arm, head injury.’

Lizzie closed her eyes and leaned on him for support.

‘From what they can piece together, Claire was trying to get help but was so affected—the place was bedlam, apparently—they found her in the hallway.’

Lizzie felt as if she’d been struck. ‘Does Jane know?’

‘Patched him up, said you’d never know.’

People were glancing their way, ready to pounce on Ed as soon as their conversation finished.

‘Incredibly selfish of Claire.’

Lizzie removed his hand from her waist. ‘Perhaps you could save your judgement for another time.’

He looked around. ‘Who here is not thinking the same thing?’

‘If they are, they have the decency to keep it to themselves.’

‘Come on, Lizzie. You’ve got to admit it was a helluva thing to do.’

‘You were friends for a long time, good friends. I thought this might be a sad day for you.’

*Some show of emotion. Something. Anything.*

'I am sad, very sad.' Ed cleared his throat and for a moment Lizzie saw something she couldn't identify in his eyes. 'I was very fond of Claire.'

'Please don't tell anyone . . . especially not Margot.'

'Of course not . . . how could you even . . . ?'

She didn't trust him. Who knew who he'd tell? And if the media were to discover it had all gone wrong, Claire would be further damned.

She made one last effort to defend her friend. 'Claire would have thought she was doing the right thing.'

'Herself, okay, but poor defenceless Jeremy?'

'They'd made a pact long ago not to prolong things.'

He turned on her. 'You of all people should know how precious life is.'

'Shut up,' she said, and walked away.