Major Arrival

by ddagent

Summary

Major Bernie Wolfe arrives on AAU and proceeds to turn Serena's ward (and life) upside down.

Notes

So I decided that we needed a 'Major Wolfe turns up on AAU and is both infuriated and infatuated with Serena Campbell'. And here we go! Originally was going to be a oneshot, but it got to around 12,000 words and then I realised I needed extra scenes in the middle. So here is my first Holby multi chapter!

A huge and eternal thank you to ktlsyrtis, who has been invaluable. From reading through each new scene to giving me hugs during the fuck up that was Saturday, the only reason that this is at the stage that it is is because of you. So thank you!

Happy reading! : )
miss you, serena. curry&shiraz this wknd?

Serena’s thumb hesitated over the reply button as she considered her response to Robbie’s third text in the last week. She hadn’t meant to ignore him, but a series of late nights and busy shifts had put her former lover on the backburner. She typed maybe, will have to check diary, before quickly deleting it. He would expect another message, then, and Serena already knew her answer. Sorry, busy weekend. Maybe another time? was sent before Serena could second guess herself.

As she and Jason walked up the ramp to the Wyvern Wing, her message alert went off. Serena fished her phone out of her bag, frowning to see the Robbie notification on her lock screen.

“Is that Robbie?” Jason asked, peering over her shoulder. “Is he coming over for fish and chips tonight?”

Serena shook her head. “No, no he’s not, Jason.” She slid her phone into her handbag, knowing she would have to face her ex sooner rather than later. “But maybe you two could watch the football next weekend?”

“I’d like that.” Serena would have considered the matter dropped, but she recognised the expression on her nephew’s face. A question was coming, and she better have the right answers. “Auntie Serena, do you not like Robbie anymore?”

No answer for that. No buzzer, nil points. She liked Robbie. She was fond of him. But fondness did not make for a great love affair. Yes, he and Jason were now great pals, and sure the sex was as enjoyable as before. But Serena hadn’t ditched one middle aged man all those years ago just to come home to another. Only instead of finding Edward in bed with a young agency nurse, she found Robbie scratching his stomach as he drank beer and watched the rugby.

Jason still expected a response. The truth was as good as any. “I still like Robbie, Jason. But as a friend. Nothing more.”

“I don’t understand. He makes you laugh. He helps you drink your wine. Sometimes I can hear you two—”

Serena waved her hand in front of Jason’s face, hopefully putting an end to that line of conversation before any of the porters heard. “Thank you, Jason. I agree; Robbie satisfies certain aspects of my life. But I don’t just want satisfactory. I want something exciting. Something…spectacular.”

After putting up with Edward and a string of dull administrators (Angus and his well intentions came to mind), Serena deserved spectacular. But pickings were slim. Between work and Jason she didn’t have the freedom to go to wine bars or coffee shops to meet men. Her choices were limited to board members (greasy haired pencil pushers who understood as much medicine as WebMD); Holby doctors (unattractive, egotistical medics that would put Serena and her sex life back into watercooler gossip); or patients (never going to happen). Satisfactory isn’t looking so bad now, is it?

“Look Auntie Serena, it’s an ACMAT VRLA!”

Serena had no clue what Jason was talking about, although she guessed he was referring to the military truck driving across the Holby car park. It pulled up in front of the Wyvern entrance, a string
of soldiers emerging like a clown car. A young woman – also in fatigues – was gingerly removed from the back. The last to emerge was a woman around Serena’s age, blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail. Their eyes met for a moment before the blonde followed her platoon through the automatic doors.

“What’s going on?”

Serena pursed her lips; watching the soldiers until they disappeared from view. “I’m not sure, Jason. But no doubt we’ll find out soon enough.”

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Hey Mum, it’s Cam. Me and Lottie are in Greece till the end of the week, got a cheap last minute thing. Didn’t realise you were flying in! Hopefully see you before you head back. Take it easy!

Bernie looked at the email her son had sent her, and the photo attachment of her children on some sunny beach far away from Holby City. They looked healthy (which was good) and happy (even better). But that didn’t stop the ache in Bernie’s chest as she realised she would likely be spending her two week leave in the hotel pool and gym, rushing through a meeting with her children in a Costa somewhere rather than everything she’d had planned. And she had made plans. Even if she hadn’t actually got around to the confirming part.

Still, maybe it was a good thing that Cam and Charlotte were out of the country. Her big homecoming hadn’t exactly gone to plan either.

“ETA two minutes from Holby City!”

Bernie hit the back of the truck, signalling that they’d heard. She turned to their patient, one of their own, lying on a stretcher between their legs. “Pryce, how are your symptoms?”

“They haven’t eased, Major.” A point proved as Lieutenant Pryce threw up the remaining contents of her stomach. She’d been suffering from nausea the last couple of weeks but Pryce had been insistent that it was nothing. This was something. “Are we nearly there?”

Bernie squeezed Pryce’s hand. She wasn’t much older than Cam. “Nearly there, soldier.”

Their vehicle slowed to a crawl, and Bernie felt the jolt as the officers out front secured the vehicle. The veil that had fallen over her team after Pryce had fallen ill was lifted and they all snapped to attention. With precision the Lieutenant was lifted from the truck and wheeled into Holby City hospital. Bernie was the last to emerge, throwing one final look at the duffel bag that held her entire civilian life. So much for leave. At least this was something she could do; medicine. She’d never excelled at being a mother in the same way. Not like the brunette she saw by the entrance. Son by her side, her hand gently tucked around his arm. She could never imagine being like that with one of hers.

But there was no time to fall down that rabbit hole. As Bernie followed her team through the automatic doors, she quickly took control. “Holby said we were to take her to AAU. Roberts, I want an ultrasound ASAP and a theatre immediately. I don’t want to wait.”

In the field, every second counted. Pryce could be suffering with anything from a bad case of food poisoning to an intestinal obstruction. Immediate diagnosis and surgery was a necessity. Yet as Bernie strode onto AAU, she realised that this would not be an easy manoeuvre. Most of the bays were full, and Roberts was arguing with a nurse as to where to put Pryce. Alex – Captain Dawson – was standing in front of a computer monitor displaying the list of surgeries scheduled for the day. All
“Major Wolfe?” A dark haired man in light blue scrubs approached her. Bernie gave a nod. “You called ahead but, as you can see, we’re a little busy this morning. We can free up a bed as soon as we can.”

“We’ll need a theatre bay.” Bernie strode over to Alex – Captain Dawson – and looked at the list of surgeries scheduled. “Half of these can be rearranged. They’re not a priority.”

The Scotsman in the light blue scrubs winced. “They’re a priority to the patients, Major. I understand that your officer’s symptoms are severe.”

“Abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting.” Bernie stared the young man down. “Lieutenant Pryce needs an ultrasound, and we need a theatre slot. My team are more than happy to do this ourselves.”

His nostrils flared. “I understand your urgency, Major, but we have other patients on AAU that are just as deserving of treatment.”

*Deserving of treatment.* Bernie knew how to prioritise patients effectively. This doctor wouldn’t last two minutes back in Afghanistan. “I don’t think you understand at all.”

“Then enlighten me.”

The buzz of the ward dropped away; a voice reaching out over the din. The Scotsman turned, relief flooding his face as he saw the new arrival. A woman. Dark hair, around Bernie’s age. Well-dressed although wearing the awful shoes required of hospital wards. Attractive, although half of that was likely due to the power that seemed to vibrate off of her. *Finally. The leader of this rabble.*

“I don’t know who you are, but this is my ward. And on my ward, I give the orders.” A scowl; dark eyes that would intimidate most. But Bernie wasn’t most people. “I suggest we continue this discussion in my office.”

Bernie would rather not discuss it at all. But she had the distinct impression that it wasn’t a suggestion. “By all means.”

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In truth, Serena had expected to hear the story of the soldiers in Holby City through the grapevine. Perhaps overhear Fletch and Raf discuss their antics; or listen to Jason chatter about their arrival over fish and chips. She’d half imagined Ric descending from Keller in a grump, put out by the jackboot General taking over his ward. But the five soldiers and their patient weren’t causing havoc on Keller. They were on AAU. And the jackboot General was more a slim blonde with a rather powerful stare.

*Maybe on another ward. But not on mine.*

Serena heard the *clomp* of army issue boots on the linoleum floor as the officer in charge followed her back to her office. The blinds were already down, and the soldier firmly shut the door behind them. Serena retreated to her desk, shrugging off her coat and depositing her bag beside her computer. The soldier stood, rigid and unmoving, behind the spare chair. She made no move to sit.

Serena was going to sit. “I seem to be out of the loop. Do you mind telling me why you’re trying to commandeer my ward?”

The soldier’s mouth was fixed in a firm line. “One of my officers is in need of medical attention. We were advised to take her to AAU. She needs an ultrasound, most likely surgery.”
Serena resisted the urge to roll her eyes, surprised that the soldier even knew what an ultrasound was. “I see. Well, unless you intend to perform the surgery yourself…”

“I do.” The soldier stared defiantly at Serena across her office, that thin line picking up into a smirk. “Intend to perform surgery, that is. We are officers with the Royal Army Medical Corps. Just arrived back in the UK.”

“I see.” Serena had never met an army medic before. They seemed to be a brazen lot. “Name, rank, serial number?”

Another smirk. “Bernie Wolfe. Major. Serial number’s not important.”

Serena raised an eyebrow, her mouth lifting in surprise. Berenice Wolfe was considered one of the best surgeons in the country, let alone the RAMC. Whilst her own name held weight in certain circles, it was always regarding her administrative prowess rather than her surgical skill. Several doctors in this very hospital would give their right arm to perform surgery with Bernie Wolfe. Serena would readily admit that she was one of them.

“Whilst your reputation precedes you, Major Wolfe, you still don’t have the right to turn my ward upside down,” Serena admonished, staring down the soldier. Nice eyes. Nice mouth. If it ever did anything but smirk at her. “We can try and accommodate you.”

Her shoulders tightened. “One of my officers is in need of urgent medical attention.”

Despite the strong façade, Serena could see the quiver in Bernie Wolfe’s jaw. She imagined it was similar to her reaction last year when Fletch was stabbed. It was never quite the same when it was one of your own. “She’ll get the care she needs, Major. I’ll look after her personally. But we have certain procedures to follow.”

“We don’t have time-“

“This isn’t an active war zone, Major.” Bernie actually stepped back, the bite in Serena’s voice catching her off guard. “I told you when I first came in that this is my ward, and we’ll do things my way. You are more than happy to assist in my diagnosis and any surgery that your officer needs. But I am in charge. Are we clear?”

The woman actually had the audacity to shake her head. “I’m not going to sit here and wait until some administrator crosses all the t’s and dots all her i’s. Time is key.”

“Do I have to repeat myself? This is-“ Before Serena could give Bernie Wolfe a good tongue lashing, there was a knock at the door. “Come in!”

Her office door swung open; Henrik Hanssen looking rather amused at the tableau in front of him. At the appearance of the CEO, Serena slumped back in her chair. Major Wolfe was a soldier. Perhaps she’d follow orders given from someone of a higher rank.

“I was recently informed of your arrival, Major Wolfe. I am Henrik Hanssen, CEO of this hospital.” They exchanged nods rather than handshakes. “I have contacted your superiors to apprise them of the situation. They have assured me of your full cooperation with Ms Campbell, and indeed I have guaranteed her full cooperation with you.”

Bernie’s gaze swivelled from Hanssen to her. Those dark eyes seemed to challenge her, tease her. Serena didn’t rise to the bait. “Of course, Mister Hanssen. Ms Campbell will have our full cooperation whilst we treat Lieutenant Pryce at Holby City.”
“Very good.” Hanssen watched both of them intently; staring first at Bernie, then at her. “As you were.”

Hanssen’s arrival had made them press pause on their argument, and his departure rather left it fizzled out. Leaning back in her chair, Serena tried to plot her next move. Normally, an interloper on her ward would be knocked into place by the knowledge that she would be the one wielding the scalpel. Not this time. Bernie Wolfe was formidable. Long legs; slim shoulders. Fatigues and dark boots that summoned a men-in-uniform kink that Serena had thought long suppressed. Probably wouldn’t take much for Major Wolfe to lift her up; push her against the nearest wall.

Rolling her eyes, Serena realised that she needed to get out more. “So, shall we be friends, Major?”

The dark eyes that Serena had first registered as cold seemed almost warm, now. “By all means. I’ll even make you a bracelet.”

“Wonderful. Now come along, let’s check out your patient before we start braiding each other’s hair.”

Serena almost thought that was a laugh she heard as she brushed past Major Wolfe. Bernie followed her onto the ward as they made a beeline for the soldier now in one of the bays. Several pairs of eyes– both in fatigues and scrubs – watched as she and the Major joined her team. One of them was carrying a file, likely with the patient’s notes.

“Can I see her notes, please?”

The medic, an attractive woman with short brown hair, looked straight past Serena to Bernie. She could feel the Major hover behind her, felt her breath on the back of her neck. Surprisingly, it was not unpleasant. “Show her, Captain Dawson.”

A brown folder was thrust in her direction. Serena skimmed through, noticed a few complaints of nausea and abdominal pain. “How are you feeling today, Lieutenant?”

“Not great,” Pryce said, one fist clutching at the cot whilst the other grabbed her stomach. “I want to throw up, but there’s nothing left.”

Serena frowned, reviewing the notes in front of her. She felt Bernie’s voice warm beside her ear. “Initially we thought it was turbulence but she kept vomiting after we landed.”

“I see. Doctor Digby?” The F2 finished with the patient just to her left and immediately attended Pryce’s bedside. “FBC and an abdominal CT on Lieutenant Pryce, please. Nurse Fletcher if you could take Major Wolfe and the rest of her team to the family room?”

The medics were rooted to the spot, despite Fletch standing nearby with his arm out ready to offer directions. They all looked to their commanding officer. So did Serena. “Please, Major. As soon as the results come in, I’ll let you know.”

Bernie stared, her dark eyes darting between Serena and her officer. Eventually she gave a firm nod, leading her little Wolfe pack off Serena’s ward. There was a sigh of relief around the room as the soldiers departed; their presence making the air just a little heavier. But despite the Major conceding to her most recent orders, Serena feared that their battle wasn’t quite over.

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There was no such thing as a family room in the field. Just a phone call; a disembodied voice speaking from a million miles away. Bernie couldn’t imagine this room being any more comforting
to the friends and family of patients on AAU. The chairs were lumpy and stained; the coffee vending machine weak and bitter. There were a few magazines yet neither she nor her officers flicked through them. They were used to action; motion. Sitting and waiting was not in their nature.

“What are you thinking, Bern?”

Alex’s voice was soft in her ear. Sitting side by side in the family room in Holby City was the closest they had been together since… “I think we should already be in theatre. The longer we wait…”

“I know.”

Roberts was drinking coffee by the machine. Ashby was on his phone, calling his wife to let her know he’d be late home. Greene was literally twiddling her thumbs. No one saw, or cared, Alex’s hand rest atop of hers. It was an act of comfort, Bernie knew. But she still pulled away. Half of it was habit; so used to keeping their relationship in shadows and secret spaces. The other half was self-preservation. They didn’t work. Why continue down that road?

“I’ll go check on the results.”

She received two nods and a grunt as she picked herself up from the chalk green sofa and headed back out to the ward. There was no sign of Doctor Digby or Ms Campbell. Bernie considered asking Nurse Fletcher, or even storming into Ms Campbell’s office and insisting to see the test results. But her procession was halted by a question to her left.

“How have you ever killed anyone?”

Bernie turned; greeted by a young man in a porter’s uniform and the patient with a bleeding leg he was wheeling onto the ward. She laughed, surprised by his question. But she could see that he was serious. “No, no I haven’t. I’m with the RAMC, we’re non-combatant.”

The young man nodded. “You’re an army medic. You can help this man, then. He put a Stanley knife through his leg.”

The patient huffed in his wheelchair. “I didn’t do it on purpose!”

Bernie stared, momentarily thrown by the young man’s assertion that she could help. She could, but she had the distinct impression that AAU was a tightly run ship and Ms Campbell would not care for her assistance. But thinking of Ms Campbell’s face when she caught Bernie attending to one of her patients was almost enough of an incentive to do it. The fact that it would keep her mind busy from Pryce’s test results was another.

“I’ll take a look. Could you bring him to bay five, please, um?”

“Jason.” His smile was bright, eager. “And you are?”

“Major Wolfe. Bernie.”

Jason wheeled the man with the leg wound over to bay five as requested. Together they helped him onto the cot, careful not to disrupt the knife in his leg. Bernie snapped on a pair of latex gloves, snipping at the man’s trousers so she could get a better look at the wound. The tip of the knife was broken off but thankfully wasn’t embedded too deep. She should be able to remove it without much damage. As she got to work, Jason the porter hovered by her elbow. She wasn’t used to being under such scrutiny.

“Do you have somewhere else to be, Jason?”
“Not at the moment.” Jason watched as she removed the tip of the blade, depositing it in a pan to her left. “Why are you here?”

Bernie glanced behind to Pryce’s bed. “One of my medics is ill. Ms Campbell is letting us use her ward.”

Jason nodded, his head practically resting on her shoulder as she began to clean the wound. “I see. Auntie Serena must like you. She doesn’t usually let outsiders use her ward.”

She paused, turning to smile at Jason. “Auntie Serena?”

“Yes. Auntie Serena. I live with her; she drives me in in the mornings. Sometimes we drive home together. Tonight we will, our shifts match. We’re having fish and chips.”

A memory of freshly battered fish and salt and vinegar laden chips sprang to mind. Bernie’s stomach grumbled. “That sounds good.”

Jason smiled. “You can join us, if you’d like. Robbie used to join us for fish and chips, but not anymore. Auntie Serena wants someone exciting. An army major is certainly exciting.”

Bernie laughed; sure that Auntie Serena would not be happy with her nephew’s attempts at matchmaking. Not that she was entirely adverse to the idea. Serena Campbell was a beautiful woman. But she doubted they had much in common. NHS Administrator was a far cry from a trauma surgeon. Bernie wondered when Ms Campbell had last picked up a scalpel. She was easy on the eye, though. Dark eyes, sinful lips. A commanding presence that nearly put Bernie in her place.

“I thought I told you to wait in the family room.”

A shiver ran through Bernie; Serena Campbell’s voice making her stomach flutter. She threw her a smirk. “Never been very good at following orders.”

“A wonderful quality for a soldier.” Bernie had earned a smile, her first. Quite a smile. “I appreciate your help, Major, but you really should wait for the results.”

Before Bernie could respond, Jason intervened. “It was my fault, Auntie Serena. I asked Major Bernie to help.”

She watched as Serena softened in front of her nephew, however briefly. “It’s all right, Jason. No one’s in trouble. Why don’t you pop off, let me and the Major have a chat?” Chat seemed to be code for telling off; if the glare Serena threw her way was any indication. Whilst Serena attended to her nephew, Bernie finished cleaning and stitching the wound of her patient. She made a few notes on his chart before joining Serena by the nurse’s station. It seemed she was to be escorted back to the family room by Ms Campbell herself. But she was right. The look on her face, the frustration, was more than worth it.

“You know, trauma is what I do, Ms Campbell. I’d like to help. Although I have to say, I don’t think very much to your facilities.”

Serena’s jaw locked; her forehead creasing. “Yes, well, welcome to the NHS. If you don’t like it, you can return to the family room. And stay there.”

Bernie had no intention of returning to that room, not when she could be doing something. “I thought we were friends, Ms Campbell.”
She snorted. “What do you want, a cup of tea and a biscuit? A little handholding?”

“Wouldn’t say no to a chocolate Hobnob.”

A second Campbell smile. She was lucky. But before Bernie could push her luck any further, Doctor Digby arrived back on the ward with a tablet in hand. She cut across the ward to Ms Campbell, handing over the tablet with no preamble. *Pryce’s test results.* She watched Serena’s face for any indication of just how bad it was. Serena wouldn’t last two rounds on poker nights back at the barracks.

“Pseudo aneurysm of the splenic artery,” Serena said, passing her the tablet. Bernie saw the shadow on the CT scan, felt her shoulders tighten as she realised what that meant. “It’s close to rupturing, so we’ll need to get her into theatre as soon as possible.”

Bernie nodded, biting her bottom lip. She had said *hours* ago. But, in the nature of *cooperation,* she held her tongue. That was, however, until Doctor Digby provided them with the blood test results. “It seems that Lieutenant Pryce is pregnant.”

*Pregnant.* Would explain why the Lieutenant was eager to get home; why she had seen nothing wrong with her constant bouts of nausea. *Morning sickness.* Not a pseudo aneurysm that would leave her in intense pain; vomiting bile until her eyes teared up. This would be a difficult procedure, even for her. In pregnant women, the mortality rates almost doubled. Bernie could no longer hold her tongue.

“We should have been in theatre. We could have been done by now-“

Serena dismissed Doctor Digby with a nod, keeping her voice down but her tone harsh. “There was no way to know that this would be the diagnosis. She could have quite easily had a bad prawn sandwich!”

Bernie let her frustration, her anger, roll through her. “Well it’s a splenic artery repair. I hope you know a damn good vascular surgeon because I’m going to need one in theatre. That is, if I’m allowed to take my patient into theatre now?”

“She’s not your patient, she’s your colleague. I have half a mind not to even let you in that theatre bay!”

An insistent shrill of a telephone was the only noise in the ward other than their bitter debate over best practice. “You need me in that theatre bay. Ever since we arrived-“

“-you’ve been *chucking* your weight around!” Serena growled. “Big *macho* army medic who thinks she can waltz onto *my* ward-“

*Your* ward? I have yet to see what actually *qualifies* you-“

“Enough!”

Whilst earlier it was Serena who had intervened in her argument with the Scotsman, it was now him who broke up their spat. Di Lucca stood by the nurse’s station, phone in hand. He looked at Serena. “RTC, multiple causalities. Youngest is a fourteen year old boy. ETA twelve minutes.”

Serena nodded. “Right, everyone, let’s get ready! Fletch: transfer anyone who can be moved to another ward. Raf: clear and prep theatre, it’s likely we’ll be using it.” Everyone followed her orders
without question, moving instantly at Serena Campbell’s command. Eventually Serena turned to her. “You want to be anything other than a nuisance today? Scrub in.”

Despite her rank, Bernie followed her command.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

As always, a huge hug to the Bernie to my Dom. ktlsyrtis you've been amazing. From reading over my scenes to giving me names of supermodels that Serena would masturbate over...you're the best <333

Thank you to everyone who read and commented on the last chapter; I'm so glad you're enjoying the story! Here is chapter two, happy reading!

__Bernie Wolfe__ was the topic of conversation everywhere. From the line in Pulses when she’d popped in to get a quick coffee, to Keller ward where she’d been asked to assist on a quick consult. Even Ms Effanga had cornered her on the lift to ask what she was like, whether she could meet her. By the end of the day people would be bringing their medical textbooks and NHS hoodies down so they could get __Major Berenice Wolfe__ scribbled in black marker.

Serena found the woman frustrating, both professionally and personally. She had yet to see how she was in surgery. __Now was a good a time as any.__

“__Here,___” Serena said, pressing a bundle of pale blue scrubs into Bernie’s arms. “__Locker room’s just round the corner, I’ll be right there.__”

Bernie gave a firm nod, her mind already cleared and preparing for surgery. “__There are four extra bodies in the family room if you need them.__”

“I’ll send Raf in; see if any are up to surgery. I need clear heads. They’ll be no good to me if they’re worried about Lieutenant Pryce.”

“If they can’t compartmentalise in surgery, then they’re no good to me either.”

Serena appreciated the sentiment, sharing a brief smile with the Major before she was hustled off the ward. Lou pushed the last few discharge forms in front of her face, blocking the view of the departing trauma surgeon. Serena scribbled her name at the bottom, allowing three of their patients to return home before the ward went to hell. With the forms signed and her team prepping the ward, all that was left was to prepare herself. Nodding briefly at Raf, Serena quickly left the ward and joined the Major in the locker room.

Bernie was still unknotting her boots. “__Sorry. Not used to scrubs.__”

“How long has it been since you performed in an actual theatre?” Serena asked, opening up her locker. She started removing her earrings; the pendant around her neck.

The clomp of two boots on the wooden bench behind her signalled progress. “__University? The army gave me a bursary, helped me with tuition fees. Been with them ever since I graduated. But trauma is my bread and butter, no matter where it is. What about you? When was the last time you were scrubbing into theatre?__”

Serena made a noise, halfway between a groan and a snarl. She glared at the Major over her shoulder. “__Yesterday, I’d have you know. You may be the great Bernie Wolfe but I’m not some F1__
who doesn’t know the difference between a scalpel and a pair of forceps.”

“I hope that’s true.”

She turned; ready to give the Major a good dressing down at her assumption that Serena wasn’t up to the task. Instead she found herself rendered speechless, distracted by the sight of Bernie Wolfe undressing. Her fatigues were neatly folded in a pile in front of her, revealing a pair of long legs and small breasts in plain black underwear. A few scars littered her body; stretch marks around her stomach that were a twin to Serena’s own. Although the fatigues had given Bernie strength, power, Serena could see the same strength in the muscles of her arms, her thighs.

Serena swivelled back, focusing her attention on the inside of her locker. She took in a deep breath, shaking herself out of the desire to turn and stare at the Major. She focussed, instead, on removing her blouse. Her fingertips fumbled over the small buttons, the clasp of her trousers. She shoved her clothes, unfolded, into her locker; hand snatching immediately at the scrubs inside. Serena thought she imagined Bernie’s gaze, hot on her back, as she changed.

When she finally turned around, Bernie was lacing up a pair of trainers that had been discarded in the corner. She looked good in blue. “You ready, Ms Campbell?”

“Just about.” She checked the time. “Go ahead; I’ll be right behind you.”

Bernie offered a rare smile, practically bouncing like Tigger out of the locker room. Her energy was infectious, and a part of Serena found herself looking forward to the surgery ahead. Working with Bernie Wolfe! She’d have to keep that one to herself or the woman would be more insufferable than she already was. Serena took one last look at her locker, grabbed her spare scrub cap, and followed Bernie back onto the ward.

Five causalities. One was sent up to Darwin; Fletch calling through to let Jac Naylor know to expect a patient. Two were treated on the ward. The other two required major surgery. Raf took one of the patients, bringing in Morven and one of the medics to help him. Bernie had recommended that Captain Dawson go with the second patient, whilst she and Serena tackled the fourteen year old boy. He was in a bad way, a perforated liver and severe damage to his leg. He was their priority.

Both parties went their separate ways; Bernie and Serena quickly taking up position in the scrub room. They exchanged brushes without a word until, “How do you want to handle this?”

Serena cleaned her hands, her nails; more than once drifting over to stare at the poor boy in front of them. “You take the liver, I take the leg?”

A nod. “Do you have much vascular experience, Ms Campbell?”

“Oh, a little.”

The joke was lost on Bernie. Some surgeons would disagree with finding humour in surgery, but Serena knew better than most that a little levity went a long way. Like the scrub cap she wore into theatre. Not her usual leopard print affair but rather a camouflage cap that had been a gift in a hospital Secret Santa two years before. Serena thought she could see the Major’s smirk underneath her mask. “Interesting choice of scrub cap, Ms Campbell.”

“In your honour, Major.”

Any more opportunities to flirt flew by the wayside as they got down to business. Serena focussed on the leg, repairing the damage to the arteries and veins. The pulse in the leg was weak; the damage from the collision extensive. The trauma to the liver was even worse. Yet despite the alarms and the
dip in heart rate, Bernie Wolfe persisted. Serena almost wished she had the opportunity to watch her rather than be focussed on her own work.

“More suction, please!” Bernie’s hands worked almost effortlessly inside the abdomen of the young boy. “How’s things your end, Ms Campbell?”

“Trying but we might have to amputate.”

Bernie raised her head above the boy to appraise Serena’s skill. Her eyebrows lifted high into her scrub cap. “I’m surprised you’ve been able to do as much as you have.”

“Well, you know, needle point as a girl…”

They shared a look over their patient, a knowing and appreciative smile, before they both returned to their respective surgeries. Somehow Bernie was able to repair the liver, the patient stabilising in response. Serena caught the tail end of her surgery; saw the look of awe on the attendants faces. They closed him up just as Serena managed to increase blood flow back to the leg. It would be touch and go; she might have to go back in again. But for now amputation was off the table.

“He’s stable,” Bernie said, her voice warm in Serena’s ear as she watched her tie off the artery.

“He is. We’ll close him up, send him to ITU.”

“Let me.” Bernie’s gloved hand brushed hers. “You check in on your ward, see how the other patients are doing.”

“Thank you.”

Serena squeezed Bernie’s arm as she brushed past, heading back out to the scrub room to remove her blood soaked gloves and surgical gown. As she washed her hands and forearms, she felt the exhaustion of the day overwhelm her. Long surgery, intricate surgery, was always draining. She would need a coffee and something sweet if she was to pick herself up for the afternoon. But just as she thought about that large, hot coffee she was going to buy in Pulses, Raf entered and pulled her back to reality.

“The young woman made it through surgery,” he said, smiling despite the weariness in his voice. “How about the boy?”

“He’s heading for ITU. So far, so good.” She gave him a weak smile. “Keep your fingers crossed.”

Raf made a display of doing just that before leaning in. “So, did the Major live up to her reputation?”

She did, oh she did. Serena didn’t know whether to be disappointed that Bernie Wolfe hadn’t been knocked off her pedestal, or thrilled that together they had done something extraordinary. She was beginning to see a pattern regarding her run-ins with Bernie Wolfe. For every harsh word there was a soft smile. For every argument there was a flirtation. Since arriving on her ward earlier that morning, Bernie had done nothing but confuse her. Serena only hoped to find some clarity before the day’s end.

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In Iraq, Bernie Wolfe rarely saw a break between surgeries. As soon as she had stabilised – or called – one patient, another would take their place. Downtime was rare. Calls to Marcus, her children, were a luxury so infrequent that sometimes she had forgotten the sound of their voices. Her relationship with Alex had only flourished when her job description had changed from medic to teacher. She
enjoyed the rush of surgery. But after everything she’d seen, everything she’d done, Bernie was grateful for even the smallest moments of peace.

So whilst the rest of her team had retreated to the family room, Bernie had gone off in search of coffee. Di Lucca had given her directions to Pules, the coffee shop on the ground floor. A handful of porters and nurses nodded at her as she passed; the AAU scrubs she wore identifying her as part of Holby, someone who belonged. It wasn’t an unpleasant feeling.

In line, Bernie glanced up at the board. What on earth was a macchiato? Someone joined her in the queue, and she felt compelled to ask. Turning, she was surprised to find Serena Campbell behind her, still in her light blue scrubs. “Do you remember when coffee was just coffee?”

Another Campbell smile. “Strong and hot is all I care about on a day like today.”


Serena shook her head. “No, no, it’s all right.”

“Please. Consider it an olive branch.”

Dark eyes sparkled back at her, that rather pretty mouth of Serena’s now wearing a smirk. “Well, in that case, I’ll have a coffee and a pastry, please.”

Bernie’s stomach grumbled for the second time that day, remembering the watery cheese and tomato sandwich she’d eaten on the plane. Taking out the purse she’d rescued from the duffel bags dumped in the family room, Bernie bought two coffees (one black, no sugar; one with just a splash of milk) and two pastries. The glaze would stick to her teeth, but she rather found she didn’t care. Bernie took a seat in the corner with a view of Pules. She was thrilled when Serena took the seat opposite.

“How are the rest of the patients?” Bernie asked, hands wrapping around the coffee mug.

Serena’s smile was weak; her eyes tired. “Our boy in ITU is responding well. The young lady Raf and your Captain Dawson dealt with is now back on the ward. The patient we transferred to Darwin didn’t make it.”

It was never easy to lose a patient. Even one that they had no hand in. Bernie thought back to how close they had come to losing that boy on the table. If she hadn’t have been there… “You know, I think I owe you an apology?”

Serena looked up from her coffee. “You do?”

“I do.” Bernie swallowed. “If we’d gone straight into surgery with Pryce, we’d have been done well before that phone call came in. I’d have been at my hotel room whilst that boy was on the table. So, you were right.”

She half expected Serena to gloat. Instead, she reached across the table and brushed her hand with hers. “We were both here when that boy came in. Nothing else matters.”

Bernie bowed her head, both surprised and more than a little grateful that she wasn’t on the receiving end of a Campbell lecture. Working together in surgery had forced their relationship to turn a corner; petty squabbles over Pryce’s treatment seemed almost trivial after what they had just achieved. Together they had done something extraordinary. That boy would go home to his family with a working liver and a functioning leg.
Another surgeon would have amputated straight away. Cut their losses rather than try and fix the damage. But not Serena Campbell. Bernie had seen her work when she’d closed the wound. Intricate, delicate surgery completed by someone with a high level of expertise. She’d worked with two other vascular surgeons in her career and neither of them were as capable as Serena. Shit. Bernie felt her shoulders sag; guilt for her earlier assumptions overwhelming her. Needlepoint as a girl my arse. “You’re a vascular surgeon, aren’t you?”

Serena’s face was a picture. Her eyes lit up, her smile wide and eager just like her nephew. “I am.”

“So all my cracks about you being just an administrator…”

“Oh, those are all true. Harvard MBA; been both acting and deputy CEO at Holby.” Another smile over the rim of her coffee. “I like to do it all.”

Bernie groaned, slumping back in her seat. “I think I owe you another coffee.”

“Don’t fret, Major,” she said; a glint in her eye. “But if you do feel so inclined, I’ve always considered a nice bottle of Shiraz a perfect apology gift.”

Bernie chuckled, catching Serena’s eye as she, too, laughed. Definitely turned a corner. The silence between them was comfortable as they took sips of hot coffee, nibbles of warm pastry. Whilst Serena watched the patrons of Pulses, Bernie watched her. She found herself hypnotised as Serena broke into their midday snack; as a flake of pastry clung to her bottom lip. Her easy smile; her warm if weary eyes. Bernie knew she was attracted to Serena. But as she got to know more about her, she felt the first flicker of something else. Something…more.

“So,” Serena said, dragging Bernie out of her daydreams. “After Pryce’s surgery you’ll be on your way. What does an army Major get up to on leave, anyway?”

Was Serena imagining her off drinking and sleeping her way through one of Holby’s finest watering holes? In reality, her plans were a lot tamer. “I had planned to see my children. Have a meal; maybe get the train into London. I even thought about taking them to the zoo.”

Serena’s face lit up. “How old are your children?”

“In their twenties.” Both of them laughed. “I don’t know, I just missed so much of them growing up that whenever I come home from leave I just want to fit it all in. Doesn’t matter anyway, they’re in Greece this week. Maybe I’ll catch a film or something.”

“Well, if you get bored, feel free to come and work a shift here. I’m sure I’ll find something for you to do.” Although it was said in jest, Bernie seriously considered taking Serena up on her offer. She had never been very good at sitting still. “What about your husband? I’m sure he’ll be glad you’re back.”

Bernie thought about Marcus and his new wife, a nurse from St. James’. After the bitter conversations they’d had through lawyers and over satellite phones, her ex would surely prefer for her to stay overseas. “Divorced, I’m afraid. How about you? Jason mentioned a ‘Robbie’?”

Ex-boyfriend, Bernie decided, if the wide eyes and spluttering from Serena’s side of the table were any indication. She wondered what had gone wrong, wondered if working well together in surgery and one cup of coffee was enough to ask. “My last ex-boyfriend.” She was right. “To go along with my dastardly ex-husband. It’s always nice to find another surgeon in the divorcee club.”

“I think there’s quite a few of us by now.”
“Oh I’m sure.” Bernie had seen many of her friends’ marriages end over late nights, missed dinners, and agency nurses. Hers had ended over a ten year commission. She considered asking Serena more about her ex-husband (there’s a story there) but it quickly became apparent that they were now on her. “So, are you back on the dating scene? I suppose it’s hard to do in the field, but there must be plenty of strapping young soldiers to take your fancy. Always loved a man in uniform, myself.”

“I’m gay.”

It always felt odd, saying it aloud. It had been a thought niggling at the back of her mind for so many years that the words felt strange on her tongue. Afterwards she always held her breath, waiting. Waiting for the barely concealed revulsion; the awkward babble from the other person. But Serena didn’t balk, didn’t run. In fact she just squeezed Bernie’s hand again; her only displeasure aimed at herself.

“I’m sorry, I just assumed with your… anyway,” Serena said, chastising herself across the table.

“Any lovely female medics that have caught your eye?”

Bernie was surprised when her first thought was you, rather than Alex; a flirtatious suggestion rather than re-treading old ground. Huh. Interesting. It seemed she was more over Alex than she’d thought. But despite moving on, Alex was still part of her life; her history. “There was someone but we’re not together anymore. I thought we had something but that something only worked in an active war zone.”

Serena nodded as if she understood. Bernie wondered how many hearts she had broken at Holby City over the years. “Workplace romances rarely work out. I can’t imagine what it’s like in the field.”

It should be awful; a nightmare. But not a lot had changed, not really. They had never slept in the same bed; they had always eaten as part of a group. In surgery they were as professional as ever. But the private moments with Alex, the intimate ones, they had all disappeared. As had her enthusiasm for the work. The rush of trauma had been replaced by the steadiness of mentoring. The affection she shared with Alex had been replaced by a solitary soldier’s life. Working on AAU today had summoned up old emotions. Her love of trauma. The first rush of attraction.

“You know, if it ever gets too awkward, you could always work here,” Serena said, draining the last of her coffee. “I’m serious; I could do with a trauma surgeon. Of course you’d have to follow my orders and not run Rambo around my ward.”

Bernie laughed. She could imagine her and Serena butting heads. Flirting over surgery, laughing over coffee. She could imagine a lot of things with Serena. Coffee. Drinks. Dinner. More intimate activities. “It’s a tempting offer.”

“I’m sure you receive dozens of them. The great Bernie Wolfe. I’m surprised you haven’t been mobbed by fans.”

Serena’s eyes sparkled as she laughed, and Bernie found herself unable to look away. She was beautiful. So beautiful. And she held her gaze, even when a barista dropped a tray in the back. Be brave, Bernie. You’ve been a coward for far too long. “Say, would you want to, maybe, after your shift-“

But before Bernie could finish asking Serena Campbell out for a drink, a scuffle and a knocked chair stole Serena’s focus. Bernie watched her roll her eyes, lean back in her chair, and shake her head as two doctors practically threw themselves in front of their table. One, a young man in burgundy scrubs; another, a confident woman in navy scrubs. She elbowed the young man out the way and
thrust her hand in front of Bernie’s face.

“Bernie Wolfe, it’s an honour.” Bernie shook her hand. She liked a firm grip. “Mo Effanga, I work up on Darwin. It’s our cardiothoracic ward.”

The young man quickly threw an elbow of his own; pushing so far forward he nearly knocked the plates off the table. “Dominic Copeland. Whole hospital is buzzing about your arrival; such a pleasure to meet you.”

The two doctors took turns interrupting each other and complimenting Bernie. It was rather like the *Punch and Judy* show she’d taken the children to see at Southend when they were little, except without all the hitting. Well, *almost* without all the hitting. Bernie knew she was a big deal; had spent her whole life building that reputation. But it was always a little unnerving when she got to see the reality of it. As Ms Effanga talked about a patient of hers suffering a trauma injury, and Doctor Copeland reeled off a series of compliments about a paper she’d written years ago, Bernie could practically hear the eye roll from across the table.

She liked that Serena wasn’t intimidated by her. She liked that Serena pushed back. *She liked Serena.*

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Despite RTCs and RAMC medics, Serena had found enough time in her day to have not one, not two, but *three* cups of coffee. The third cup was bought for her by Mo Effanga, an offering made to Bernie that she had taken full advantage of. Bernie had insisted both coffees (a latte this time, with an extra shot) were in to-go cups. Serena had taken two sips of her coffee, mostly drinking foam, before Bernie had constructed some emergency that required their presence on the ward *immediately*. But to her surprise, they took the long way back to AAU.

“Journalism,” Serena explained, noting the look of confusion on Bernie’s face. “*I know, I don’t get it* either. But it seems to make her happy. What about yours? Do they have any idea what they’re doing?”

As they’d walked, skirting the outside of AAU, Serena had learned more about Bernie’s children. *Cameron, Charlotte.* She’d even seen pictures of them on Bernie’s rather outdated smartphone. That had led to a conversation about Jason, about Elinor. And here they were. Talking about their families. As if they were real friends.

“Cam’s in the middle of a rotation at St James’. He *hates* it; Marcus keeps checking up on him. On the ward, at his flat. Now that we’ve divorced, Marcus can’t keep spoiling them. Sometimes he actually has to be the bad guy.”

“Sounds like Edward. I was always the *bad parent* because I decided to have a career. Edward was always the *fun one* that snuck my fourteen year old daughter *whiskey.*”

Bernie groaned in sympathy, immediately relaying a story of Marcus letting the kids trash the house after Cameron’s sixth form prom. It was nice to find someone who *understood.* Someone to compare notes regarding ridiculous ex-husbands, unruly children, fighting the old boys club. Although they’d had their differences at the start of the day, common ground and coffee grounds had led to a rather pleasant chat that Serena was reluctant to end.

As they made their fourth circle of AAU, they moved on from family woes to hilarious medical stories. Bernie was laughing into the rim of her empty coffee cup as Serena finished her story. “So *Fletch* cleaned the tap up and gave it to him to take home!”
Bernie honked, eyes watering. The poor gentleman with a tap up his bum was always a rib tickler. “Poor Fletch. So, this patient…plumber by trade?”

“I have no idea.” Serena giggled, elbow brushing Bernie’s as they walked. “I do know it took three of us to take the damn thing out!”

Bernie smirked. “Sounds like you need a big, macho army medic around the place.”

Serena paused their procession, now only five paces away from the entrance to AAU. In the blue scrubs, coffee from Pulses in hand, Bernie Wolfe looked like she truly belonged. “Is that an offer?”

“It could be.” But the sparkle in Bernie’s eyes told Serena a different story. They were teasing, flirting. Simple banter between two surgeons of a similar stature. Shame. Serena rather liked the idea of Bernie Wolfe hanging around a little while longer. Even if all she did was smirk at her. “I’ll need some incentive.”

Serena sniggered, quickly getting into their new game. “Like what?”

“I don’t know…” Bernie shrugged, forehead furrowing as she tried to make up a list of ridiculous demands. “I had a professor at Cambridge who said for five percent of surgeons, the only incentive is medicine itself.”

Her eyes narrowed, unsure where this was going. “And the other ninety-five percent?”

“Nice car, cushy office, bit of eye candy around the nurse’s station.”

Serena chuckled, Bernie’s honking laugh quickly joining hers. The idea of presenting that contract to Hanssen made her sides hurt. “Got your eye on Doctor Digby, do you?”

Bernie quickly shook her head, blonde hair falling out of her ponytail. “Doctor Digby is young enough to be my daughter. I like someone my own age.”

“The old biddies club.”

“Attractive consultant surgeon society, surely.”

Bernie’s laughter faded away; the trauma surgeon looking at her borrowed shoes rather than at Serena. Good thing, too, or she would have seen the fine peach blush across her cheeks and neck. Attractive. A simple compliment, but Bernie didn’t seem the type to throw out compliments without thinking. She meant them. Every word. Her stomach fluttered as Bernie’s compliment awakened the vanity in her. At the end of their relationship, Robbie’s compliments had gone from you’re enchanting, Serena to I like your arse in that. Serena appreciated a compliment. Especially from a beautiful woman. And Bernie was beautiful.

Clearing her throat, ignoring the elephant dancing in the corner, Serena picked up the dropped thread of conversation. “Flattery will get you everywhere, Major.”

Bernie beamed, her dark eyes lifting to hold Serena’s gaze. She felt unseasonably warm all of a sudden. “So, if I wax poetic about how beautiful your eyes are, can I get an earlier surgery slot for Lieutenant Pryce?”

And we’re back to that. At least they were flirting rather than fighting. Progress. “Flattery won’t get you that far.”

“How far will it get me?”
The warmth in her stomach continued to build. *Too much coffee,* she decided. She also decided she’d spent enough time skiving off with Bernie Wolfe and actually needed to do some work. Together they walked onto AAU, still as they left it. Lieutenant Pryce was sleeping her way through a batch of painkillers; Raf was studying their surgeries for the day. Lou quickly dropped two patient files into her hands. *Break over.*

“Back to the salt mine,” Serena said, dumping the files on the nurse’s station temporarily. “Why don’t you talk to Raf, see if you can’t—calmly—discuss what surgeries might be postponed?”

“I don’t know what you’re trying to insinuate, Ms Campbell.”

She gave her a pointed look. “Bull in a china shop comes to mind. But I think we’re finally on the same page.”

“I agree. *I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship,*” Bernie uttered in a truly horrible impression of Humphrey Bogart. Serena couldn’t keep a straight face. Even Bernie winced. So she stuck her hand out. “Friends?”

“Friends.”

Serena shook Bernie’s hand. Warm, firm. *An officer’s handshake.* Serena had shaken many hands in her lifetime, had even taken a seminar on it. But they’d never covered this in the eight hour course. The crackle of electricity that ran through their hands. The warmth of their gaze, magnified by physical contact. Bernie’s fingers wrapped tightly around her own, those long, *talented* fingers. Serena could feel the thump of her heartbeat in her ears, wondered if Bernie could feel it against her wrist.

“Major Wolfe!”

Raf’s shout across the ward broke their connection; Serena immediately dropping her hand. Bernie gave her a quick smile before joining Raf, stopping only to take a squirt of antibacterial gel. Serena followed suit. *Cleanliness, cleanliness, cleanliness.* Serena thought she could use the entire bottle and still wouldn’t be able to shake the warmth of Bernie’s hand, the feel of her calloused fingers in hers.

*That woman confused her.* Serena had hoped to find clarity but instead was left with more questions than answers. Like why her stomach somersaulted when Bernie turned back from the surgery monitor and smiled solely at her. Like why her gaze kept straying to the movement of Bernie’s hands; the shape of her bum in those hospital scrubs.

*Bernie’s gay. You’re imagining an attraction just because of the miniscule possibility she’s attracted to you.* But that wouldn’t explain her earlier ogling of Bernie in the locker room, practically *tearing* herself away from staring at those taut thighs, those small breasts. Serena had wondered—when they’d first met—what it would be like for Bernie to press her up against the wall. *You haven’t had sex in a while. Haven’t even masturbated. You’re just frustrated.* But this wasn’t the first sexual fantasy she’d had involving a woman. There was her first professor at university; the summer she’d spent furiously masturbating to pictures of Kim Alexis.

*Perhaps it’s time to stop ignoring that elephant, Serena.*
Chapter 3

Serena Campbell was nothing if not a scientist. She could look at a patient, study the symptoms and the scans in front of her, and produce a diagnosis. Shut away in her office, far away from the real patients on AAU, she examined the symptoms and signs in front of her and produced her diagnosis.

She, Serena Campbell (vascular surgeon, mother of one, lifelong Shiraz drinker) was bisexual.

The symptoms had always been there; a pre-existing condition she’d had since birth. Serena had ignored the signs the way a patient ignored their headache or that new freckle on their shoulder. Her teenage masturbatory fantasies had been brushed off as growing pains; rebellion against her strict – and intensely homophobic – Catholic school. Attraction to teachers, other students, even her appreciation of Jac Naylor had all been chalked up to an admiration of other women in her field.

She’d bargained and argued with herself; feeling the weight of her upbringing and the expectations placed upon her every time her eyes lingered on another woman, every time her mind strayed to them. Flirting and smiling and touching and that little voice reassuring the part of her still afraid of disappointing her parents and teachers. *You’re not gay. You like men too much!*

But it was here, in the middle of a shift no less, that she finally said the words out loud. “Serena Campbell…bisexual.”

The words felt good on her tongue. In her self, a shadow was lifted. No more holding back; no more denying who she was or what she wanted. She could flirt with intent! She could look at a woman she found attractive without the heat of guilt and shame on the back of her neck. If she wanted to masturbate to pictures of Kim Alexis she bloody well could! Although the model didn’t hold a candle to Serena’s latest attraction; one Bernie Wolfe. Beautiful, infuriating Bernie Wolfe who had been on AAU less than a day and had already turned her ward and her life upside down.

Bernie Wolfe who was knocking on her office door.

Serena hurried; tried to make it appear like she was busy doing paperwork rather than sitting in the near dark thinking about pretty girls. When she was ready she called her in. But as Bernie slid herself between the door and its frame, Serena realised she wasn’t ready in the slightest. Her mind went blank. The act of breathing completely escaped her. All when faced with Bernie’s warm smile, those dark eyes. Eyes that lingered on her mouth, the deep ‘vee’ of the scrubs she had still not changed out of. Eyes that wanted her. *Bernie wanted her.*
That thought alone terrified the life out of her.

Clearing her throat, Serena looked at the space over Bernie’s shoulder rather than at the Major herself. “Bernie. I hope you and Mister Di Lucca have been playing nicely together.”

Bernie’s grin was infectious. “Oh yes, we’ve been sharing our toys and everything. I’m even invited over for tea. His mum’s cooking spag bol.”

“Well I’m glad to hear it. Won’t have to put either of you on the naughty step,” Serena chuckled; her nerves making it sound jittery to her own ears. But Bernie didn’t seem to notice.

“No, no naughty step today. We’ve managed to get a theatre slot; fifteen hundred hours. That’s—“

“Three o’clock. I am aware, Major; I have seen a digital clock before.”

Bernie bowed her head, hiding her bright smile and shining eyes under a waterfall of blonde fringe. “Well, good. I’ll expect you there at fifteen hundred. Camouflage scrub cap; well shined shoes. I’ll let you off the sixty pound pack.” She looked up, meeting Serena’s gaze. “I’m looking forward to us working together again.”

The thought of them working together, hands brushing, heads bowed low, brought a flush to Serena’s cheeks. That tiny voice in the back of her mind tried to tell it was nothing more than admiration; that it was just excitement at working with the great Bernie Wolfe. But Serena knew better now. She knew she wanted those talented, skilful, famous hands on her. Touching her, lifting her, inside her. Serena took a gulp from a nearby water bottle, feeling the surety of her desire and the insecurity of her newfound sexuality overwhelm her. I can’t breathe.

“Well, uh, we’ll have to see about that.” Serena gestured to the paperwork littering her desk; suddenly looking for an out. “Pains of being an administrator, I’m afraid. I might not be done in time.”

Bernie looked at the stack of files and forms that needed Serena’s attention and signature. She strode over, gathered the files in her arms, and dumped them on the other desk. Serena couldn’t fight the smirk, the roll of her stomach, as Bernie took the place of her paperwork. The Major’s hand lingered by hers. Serena was quickly reminded of the energy that had crackled between them the last time their hands had met.

“I told you earlier, Ms Campbell, I need a damn good vascular surgeon. You’re...” Serena felt another compliment coming on. Didn’t trust she could handle it. Thought she’d end up straddling Bernie on her desk. “Serena, your work in surgery today was some of the finest I’ve seen. You’re wasted on paperwork.”

Serena huffed. “I happen to like paperwork, thank you very much.”

Bernie leaned forward, lowering her voice a few octaves. “But we both know you belong in theatre. That you want to be there. That rush, that kick.” Bernie wet her lips; Serena squirming in her seat as her eyes followed the path of her tongue. “Those hands of yours, Serena, are far too good to just be crossing t’s and dotting i’s.”

Serena wanted to reach for her water bottle again but didn’t relish giving Bernie the satisfaction. Infuriating woman. “You know, my mother warned me about women like you.”

“She did?”

“Mmm. Bad influences.” Serena got to her feet; a huge mistake as now she and Bernie were within
kissing distance. *Such lovely lips.* “Next thing you know, you’ll have me smoking cigarettes behind
the bike sheds.”

Bernie laughed, a rich throaty laugh that made Serena tingle. She stared at Bernie’s throat; at the
curve of her jaw; at her thin lips, wet from her tongue. Serena wondered if they would taste of
coffee, maybe the pastry from earlier. Robbie had always tasted of cheap filter coffee and the fry up’s
he had at his local greasy spoon. Sometimes beer. Sometimes the overwhelming taste of hamburger.
Bernie would be different. Softer tastes, softer scents. Softer embraces. Another voice, a stronger
voice, echoed in her head. *Kiss her.*

But she didn’t.

For a moment it looked like Bernie would take the opportunity. To lean forward, to brush her hand,
to steal a kiss. But then Raf, ever her guardian angel, chose that moment to appear. He knocked
twice on her half open door, not waiting for an answer before joining them inside. His only surprise
at seeing the Major so comfortable, so at home in Serena’s office, was a single raised eyebrow.

He brushed it off; quickly launching into his reason for entering. “Sorry to disturb, but we’ve just had
a transfer up from the ED. Car accident; learner driver reversed back onto his dad as he was trying to
get off the driveway. Could be a vascular injury.”

“How could be trauma,” Bernie interrupted, cutting off Serena’s enquiry about the damage. She stared at
the Major, once again amazed at her brazen, almost arrogant approach to medicine. But as Bernie
stared back, dark eyes almost glinting, Serena felt a familiar flutter in her stomach. Her follow up did
nothing to dampen it. “Perhaps we could look at it together? Another team up before Pryce’s
surgery? Campbell and Wolfe against the ward.”

Raf’s eyebrow raised a little higher. If it was anyone else - a porter perhaps, or a nurse from another
ward – gossip regarding the two of them would go around the hospital quicker than the common
cold. A small flirtation would mutate into a full blown lesbian orgy by the time Jac Naylor and her
team got hold of it. *Perish the thought.* Serena had no intention of being the focus of the rumour mill
yet again. Not when her own feelings were so new, so unclear.

She needed time, and space, to think about what she wanted.

“Perhaps another time, Major. I’m actually very busy. Lots of paperwork, lots to do.” Serena resisted
the urge to push Bernie off her desk; instead merely guided her to the door with as little contact as
possible. “Learner driver is all yours; Raf will be on hand if you need any help.”

She practically threw them both out of her office; Bernie’s muscular arm the only thing stopping her
from closing the door completely. “Serena, I…”

“Can’t talk now; absolutely swamped. See you later, Major.”

With a firm thump, Serena finally closed the door; succeeding in putting a barrier between herself
and Bernie. Through a crack in the blinds she saw the disorientated trauma surgeon try to understand
what had just happened. A blonde head snapped in her direction and Serena ungraciously tried to
hide herself from view. *This is ridiculous.* But she had to keep her distance. For her reputation, for
her own peace of mind. For Bernie, too. Serena liked her. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt
her.

Arthur Shaw, forty-two, admitted to the ED after his son reversed into him. A cursory examination
by the doctors in the ED had led to his transfer to AAU. Damage to his leg: pulse weak, bruising on
the skin. Lacerations to his face and arms where he’d hit the gravel driveway. Perhaps not the most
exciting patient Bernie had ever worked on, but surely enough to keep her interest.

But Bernie suspected that she could perform an atrio caval shunt in a lift stuck between floors and it
still wouldn’t steal her interest from Serena Campbell.

It wasn’t in her nature to fall so hard, so quickly. It had taken six years of university and two drunken
shags before she’d finally agreed to a date with Marcus. Alex, too, had fought a weary battle. Two
tours and a litany of sleepless nights had come before Bernie had finally given in to their mutual
attraction. But Serena had qualities both her former lovers did not. She was a woman, for starters.
Beautiful, intelligent. An amazing surgeon, a mother of a university-age daughter, a history of
struggling and succeeding in a male dominated profession. Bernie could continue to list the qualities
she liked about Serena Campbell but feared she would write an essay on Mister Shaw’s patient
notes.

 “…idiot boy,” were the first words Bernie heard when she tuned back into their conversation. “No
doubt thinking about that lass on the corner. All boys that age are girl mad!”

“I know how they feel,” Bernie said to herself, stealing a glance at Serena’s office. “I’m sure he’ll be
more focussed next time. First time I ever took my Dad’s car out, I drove straight into a post box.
Had to spend the rest of the weekend scrubbing red paint out of the bodywork.”

The ashen face of Shaw’s seventeen year old son lifted, just for a second. But then his focus quickly
returned to his father’s leg. “You’ll fix him, yeah? Patch him up? He won’t need to lose the leg or
anything, right?”

“Until we get into theatre, we can’t know anything for sure.” In her professional opinion, however,
Bernie knew she’d be able to repair the damage. Would be even easier if there was an attractive
vascular surgeon acting as my right hand. “Honestly, Mister Shaw, I’ve seen a lot worse.”

“Really?”

Before Bernie could elaborate, Doctor Digby interrupted. “Major Wolfe has just come back from
Afghanistan. One of the country’s best trauma surgeons. You’re very lucky to have her.”

She was surprised by Doctor Digby’s ringing endorsement. Obviously Serena’s influence cast a long
shadow over the ward. Her opinion, her word, was law from the registrars down to the agency
nurses. Bernie had won the respect of those assisting her in theatre but she had no doubt that it was
Serena’s new affection for her that had won over the rest. She had made rather a large entrance
earlier. Bull in a china shop comes to mind. Once again, without even meaning to, her thoughts
strayed to Serena Campbell.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the open door of Serena’s office and a blur of blue heading for
the ward entrance.

“I have to attend to another matter, Mister Shaw.” Girl mad. Just like your son. “Doctor Digby will
clean your arms and face whilst we wait for the results of the x-ray you had in the ED. I’ll be back
soon to check in.”

Bernie threw her stethoscope around her neck and quickly left Doctor Digby to it. She followed the
path Serena had taken, ten paces behind, and saw her enter the locker room. Bernie tried to tell
herself she wanted to keep Serena abridged of the new addition to AAU but in reality wanted to
know what had gone on in her office. They’d had a moment. And then…nothing. Bernie wanted to
know what had happened in the few seconds between I’m going to kiss her and why am I being pushed out the door? Nudging the locker door open with her shoulder, Bernie hoped to find out. But instead of finding Serena Campbell, all she found was Nurse Fletcher checking his phone.

Forehead creasing, Bernie asked, “Have you seen Ms Campbell?”

Fletcher looked up from his phone, taking a glance at the near-empty locker room. “Funny. She was here just a second ago.”

Where the hell did she go?

As the afternoon progressed, each hand of the clock ticking down to fifteen hundred hours, Bernie grew more and more frustrated. It seemed as if magic was another one of Serena’s many talents: any time Bernie thought Serena was in her office she was actually on the other side of the ward; whenever Bernie entered either the side room or the family room she was told Serena had just left. She was starting to question her own sanity. Furthermore, she was starting to doubt whether she had felt a spark between them as their hands shook, or whether she had seen the lust in Serena’s eyes when they’d nearly kissed.

Bernie hoped talking to Serena would give her some clarity. But the one instance where their paths had crossed had only left Bernie feeling more confused! She’d volunteered to retrieve a few items from the medical supply cupboard, only to open the door and find Serena Campbell huddled in the corner with a box of empty syringes. Bernie would have laughed if she wasn’t so concerned.

“Serena, are you alright?”

Her head bobbed manically as she stumbled to her feet, clutching the box of syringes closer to her chest. “Yes, yes, fine, fine. Just…doing a little inventory. Syringes, check!”

Perhaps Serena was having a nervous breakdown. Perhaps her flirting had made her uncomfortable. “Serena – Ms Campbell – if I’ve done anything…”

“You haven’t done anything.” A hand lifted from the cardboard corner Serena had been worrying to press gently against her upper arm. Bernie felt that familiar spark as they touched. “It’s…I’m…busy. So, incredibly busy. I hope Raf is giving you lots to do!”

“Mister Di Lucca is certainly keeping me on my toes.”

Serena was staring at her own hand, at the small circles her thumb was making against Bernie’s bicep. “Good, good. I have to go. Excuse me.”

And then, again, she was gone!

Despite Serena’s reassurance that Bernie wasn’t at fault for her change in behaviour, she couldn’t help but take it to heart. In breaks between patients, Bernie went over all the signs and symptoms she’d observed and came to a diagnosis. Serena was straight. Despite their flirting, despite the chemistry between them, Serena just wasn’t interested in women. The ex-boyfriend, and the ex-husband, should have tipped her off. But Bernie saw what she wanted to see. It was clear to her, now, that Bernie had overstepped and Serena was uncomfortable. She would make her apologies and hope that, somehow, they could still be friends. Bernie had so few friends that weren’t actively serving. She didn’t want to lose Serena.

After assisting Mister Di Lucca in theatre, Bernie quickly made her way back onto the ward; gaze sweeping over every bay, every bed looking for Serena. Nothing. Bernie decided to try her office; knocked twice before pushing her way inside. No one. She huffed; deciding to wait her out there
rather than charge all over Holby City hospital looking for her. Bernie plonked herself down in
Serena’s chair, eyeing the paperwork that Serena had used as an excuse not to be around her. AAU
Fiscal Responsibility Study. Bernie was suddenly glad of the lack of administration in her own line of
work.

Pushing away from the stack of papers, Bernie accidentally knocked Serena’s mouse. Her desktop
sprang to life, revealing a series of open tabs. Bernie tried not to look but The First Time you Realise
you’re Bisexual was staring back at her. Feeling her stomach twist, she glanced at the other open
tabs. Google searches about bisexuality, bisexuality later in life, an image search of Kim Alexis
(bizarrely), and a series of articles entitled dating women for the first time.

Serena Campbell was bisexual. Serena Campbell was bisexual! Bernie punched the air and spun on
her chair, pleased as punch that Serena Campbell was bisexual!

Spinning around, Bernie didn’t notice the office door open until she came face to face with Serena
herself. She paused; tried to think up a lie that would cover her blatant snooping of her browser
history. But as she looked at Serena, hands tying themselves in knots, she began to understand what
had really happened between I’m going to kiss her and why am I being pushed out the door? Bernie
had realised (well accepted) she was gay in the middle of the Afghan desert. Serena had realised in
her office. Back then she had been terrified. She could see the same terror in Serena.

So she just reached over and turned off the monitor. “I didn’t mean to barge in. I was wondering if I
could help with the paperwork?” She smiled. “I’d really like us to work together on Lieutenant
Pryce.”

“I’d like that too.” The jerky dance of Serena’s hands stopped. “Sorry I’ve been all over the place
this afternoon.”

“Serena, it’s alright.”

“No, no, it’s…it’s not. After our earlier conversation, something…happened. With the board.”
Serena looked at her, as if challenging her to call her out on her quite blatant lie. Bernie did not. “An
administrative policy the board has always danced around has become more pressing. They can’t
ignore it any longer. I decided to put all the facts together, make a definitive decision, before I
advised them on their next move.”

“Very wise. So, is the board going to implement this new policy?”

Serena beamed; nodding once, twice. “They are. It’s new, and exciting, and terrifying, but the board
is excited to see where it takes them.”

“Well, as someone whose brass ignored a similar policy for many years, I’m glad your board is
finally ready to explore it.” Bernie bit her lip, wondering if this next part would overstep. “If your
board would like any guidance, I would be more than happy to share my expertise.”

“I’d – they’d – like that.”

They settled into a comfortable silence, eyes locked on one another. Bernie could see the weight
Serena had been carrying around for hours suddenly drop from her shoulders. She noticed the glint
in her eye; the way Serena’s gaze often dropped to her mouth. She really wanted to ask her out for
that drink. But she held back, wanting Serena to feel comfortable. The next move made would be
hers.

“Bernie,” This is it. This is it. “Bernie…is that your phone?”
So focussed on Serena, she hadn’t even noticed the steady beep of her alarm going off. It was nearly three o’clock; Mister Di Lucca would be prepping Lieutenant Pryce for surgery. **Pryce.** In her desire to get closer to Serena, she’d put her medic on the backburner. That was why she was here, after all. Not to explore other surgical opportunities; not to flirt with beautiful surgeons. But to heal and help her medic. “It’s time for the splenic artery repair. Ms Campbell, would you like to join me?”

Her smile made the last few hours of uncertainty utterly worth it. “I’d be glad to.”

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Serena was *unbelievably* relieved to be going into theatre. A splenic artery repair was difficult, but at least it would give her something to think about other than the emotional and professional challenges of the day. Coping first with an interloper, and then confronting her own sexuality, had provided Serena with one of her more taxing days at Holby City. But she’d made it through. After a challenging surgery and two coffees, she and the Major had become good friends. And after ducking into side rooms, offices, and store cupboards, Serena had decided to embrace her new sexuality. She’d spent the last fifty years actively suppressing this side of her. It was about time she explored and enjoyed what it meant to be bisexual.

Serena’s first exploration was to be the trauma surgeon that had rocked up on her ward and turned her life entirely upside down. But *after* surgery. She wanted to give herself a rest; focus on sutures and statistics. For the first time ever, Serena was grateful for the sound of the taps; the scrape of the scrub brush under her nails. Without the focus of surgery, no doubt she would be consumed with thoughts of Bernie Wolfe (as she was now free to stare and consider and *imagine*, without that little voice in the back of her head telling her otherwise).

Without surgery she would no doubt fixate on every accidental touch; on every brush of Bernie’s arm against hers. Her smile, *those lips,* as they shared a glance. The way she looked in AAU blue; the possessive *jolt* in her stomach every time she saw the Major in NHS scrubs. Bernie’s fingers under water. *Long fingers. Capable fingers.* Serena could imagine them on the nape of her neck. Perhaps brushing across her chest; teasing a supple nipple. Maybe even lower, sliding through her-

*Dammit Campbell, get yourself together!*

“How’s Lieutenant Pryce?” Serena stammered, starting a conversation to distract herself from erotic and *certainly* inappropriate thoughts regarding Bernie Wolfe.

Bernie smirked, as if she knew the reason for Serena’s sudden interest. “She’s fine; a little apprehensive. Managed to catch a quick word with her before the anaesthesia took hold. Told her that she was in great hands. The ‘great Bernie Wolfe’, and *you.*” Serena beamed. “The finest vascular surgeon in the South West.”

Serena knew she was being teased; knew she was expected to rise to the bait. Bernie’s dilated pupils, her flushed skin, told her that she wasn’t the only one in dire need of a distraction. *Fine. I’m game.*

“The ‘great Bernie Wolfe’, you say? Maybe *before.* But now? You’ve barely been inside a real theatre for *years.* Might be too much for you.”

“Ha! I do believe that was your description, Ms Campbell.” There was a glint in Bernie’s eye as she finished with her scrub brush. “*Anyone* can work in a theatre. Not so in the field. You’re more than welcome to come back to Afghanistan with me; get some *hands on* experience. *We could bunk up together.*”

Serena felt her cheeks flame as images of Bernie and herself stuck in a small military cot flooded her
imagination. Bernie’s smirk, knowing she’d thrown her back into her fantasies, was too infuriating not to retaliate. “Only if you take a shower first. The RAMC might not pride itself on cleanliness, Major, but the NHS certainly does.”

Bernie bending forward to awkwardly sniff at her scrub top was her concession. Serena walked into theatre with her head held high. But, as was common with Bernie Wolfe, it wasn’t long before she got the upper hand. The splenic artery repair started well enough. But soon Serena became… distracted. She had severely underestimated how well they would work together; how in sync they could be. Every slice, every stitch, done to perfection. Up close she could appreciate Bernie’s talents: the adorable concentration on her face; her skill with a scalpel. And her hands. Even inside the abdomen of a young woman, Serena still couldn’t shake her fixation with the good Major’s hands.

“I think we’re nearly there,” Serena said, renewing her focus on the task in front of her. “You really do live up to your reputation, Major.”

“Well, Ms Campbell, I’ve always been good with my hands.”

**Frustrating woman.** Serena had never been rendered so incapacitated in all her life. Most of the doctors she knew, despite excellent surgical skill, were simply *shite* in bed. Yet Serena had the distinct impression that Bernie excelled at whatever field she chose to perform in. *You won’t get the best of me, Major.* “It certainly shows. I’m sure you’ve put in the hours, practicing by yourself.”

Bernie lifted her head, eyes darkening. “*Excuse me?*”

“Practice stitching; handwork,” Serena said, her tone light and airy as if she was simply discussing the weather. “I’m sure that, with all the recent changes to your working environment, you must have a lot of time on your hands to…practice.”

Despite the straight line of her shoulders, Bernie didn’t miss a beat. “I like to be ready for any situation, Ms Campbell. What about you? Are you keeping your scalpel sharp?”

“Well I may not be as well versed in trauma as you, but I’m a fast learner.” Serena finished her work on the artery. “Might even be able to keep up with you, one day.”

“Of that I have no doubt.”

The surgery was practically textbook. No bleeding, no elevated heart rate. No drama of any kind other than the sexual frisson between the two surgeons. After all the aggravation, all the arguments, Lieutenant Pryce would make it off the table and into side room B happier and healthier than before. It felt rather anticlimactic, all things considered. Serena would have at least expected a mad rush to save her life or an argument kicking off between Bernie’s medics and her own staff.

Instead there was just, “I think that’s it, Ms Campbell. Did you want to tie off the artery?”

Serena smiled through her surgical mask, noting the sparkle in Bernie’s eyes now that her Lieutenant was safe. “How about we take a side each? In the spirit of our new found partnership.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

They finished the surgery effortlessly, closing Lieutenant Pryce without so much as a *beep* from the monitors. Over the table they exchanged glances; Serena’s stomach fluttering every time her eyes met Bernie’s. It had been a strange sort of day. She’d started it ignoring Robbie’s texts; telling Jason that she had wanted someone exciting, someone *spectacular.* She’d end it having faced and accepted her attraction to someone who embodied both of those traits.
Now all she needed to do was bite the bullet and ask Bernie out for a drink. Easy peasy. *Asking a woman out was no different than asking a man out.* Right?
Here we are. The Final Chapter. I really wanted to finish this before I left for Birmingham this weekend and I'm so thrilled that I managed to get it done. Thank you to everyone who has read and commented on the story so far; you have all been so amazing in your praise! I really hope you enjoy the conclusion.

Huge thanks to ktlsyrtis who should be nominated for sainthood after putting up with my doubts this evening. Love you, babe.

They parted ways, after surgery. Secret smiles and brushes of hands as they scrubbed out together. Serena headed for her ward and Bernie just…stood. Her whole purpose for being at Holby City was now complete. There was no longer any reason to stay.

Yet Bernie was reluctant to go.

Her feet carried her outside the scrub room. She considered waiting at Pryce’s bedside; waiting for familiar blue eyes to open so she could share the good news. But that could be hours yet. Her family – a mother, a sister – arrived just as Bernie stepped back onto the ward. Now that they were home, now that she was safe, Major Wolfe could do no more for the Lieutenant. It was up to her other family now.

Her feet, still in borrowed trainers, paused by the door to the family room. Through the glass window she could see her team. Ashby was packing up his bag; heading home to his family. Roberts was asleep; the jet lag finally catching up with him. Greene and Dawson were nowhere to be found. Perhaps they were with Pryce; perhaps they were helping out on the ward. Bernie thought about pushing open the door, joining them on the chalk green upholstery. But her mind was too keyed up from surgery and they were already halfway home.

Her feet, as if knowing the way already, took her to Serena’s office. Inside, Serena was in deep conversation with an older man in burgundy scrubs; both laughing and smiling. Through the open door, Serena met her eye. Her smile was instantaneous; warmer than any Middle Eastern sun. Bernie wanted to bathe in it, soak it all up. But she had meant it, earlier. She wouldn’t push Serena. She would let her make the next move.

So, with nowhere else to go, Bernie retreated to the locker room.

It was cool inside. Nurse Fletcher had since returned to the ward and Bernie had the whole room to herself. She took up position in the corner, back flat against a row of lockers. Taking out her phone, Bernie scrolled to the last message her children had sent her. Happy, healthy. She’d had so many plans for these two weeks. For the first time in years she had been counting down to leave; eager to see her family without the weight of expectation, responsibility. Now her duty was done. Now she could relax. But the thought of stepping outside Holby City terrified her.

Here she knew what she was doing. Symptoms, Surgery, Serena. Everything outside these four walls was filled with uncertainty.
The door opened. Bernie lifted her head, hoping to find Serena. Instead, she was met with a pair of well shined shoes; a neatly ironed pair of trousers. Lifting her head even higher, Bernie was greeted by the pinched face of the Holby CEO. Other than their meeting that morning, referee to the first grudge match between Major and Consultant, Bernie had had little to do with Henrik Hanssen. But Serena spoke warmly of him. Any man who had the brains to hire Serena Campbell was someone worthy of her time.

“Mister Hanssen,” she said, struggling to her feet. “Were you looking for Ms Campbell?”

“For you, actually. I was just informed as to the success of Lieutenant Pryce’s surgery, and I wanted to offer my congratulations.”

Bernie nodded, shoving her hands into her pockets. She was unused to praise after surgery. *Good job* was rather redundant in the field. “Well, thank you. It was a team effort. Ms Campbell is a very gifted surgeon. It was a pleasure to work with her.”

“Indeed. I’m glad to see that, despite your earlier engagement in verbal fisticuffs, you have both been able to form an amicable relationship.”

“As am I.”

Bernie expected a curt nod, perhaps a curl of a lip indicative of a smile, before Hanssen’s quick departure. But instead he stood, tall and imposing, looking at her like a praying mantis about to devour its prey. She wondered what the real reason was for their impromptu little chat. Although she didn’t always agree with the army top brass, at least they spoke from the hip. Nothing subtle about a court martial.

“Was there something else, Mister Hanssen?”

His smile was unsettling; as if the muscles were not used to being in that position. “Major Wolfe, your presence at Holby City today has caused quite the stir.” *I turned your vascular surgeon; ‘stir’ is an understatement. “Many of the surgeons in this hospital have attempted to request a consultation from you.” Only one succeeded. “And despite the initial teething problems with the staff on AAU, I’ve been informed that they are very grateful for your assistance on the ward today.”

“Okay.”

Hanssen’s smile – if it was a smile – was thin. “Holby City prides itself on its surgical excellence. I am aware that many institutions – including Holby under a previous administration - have offered you positions on their surgical team. I am also aware that you have recently signed a ten year commission with the armed forces.”

“Yes, that’s all true.” Bernie rubbed her forehead. “Sorry, Mister Hanssen, it’s been a long day. Would you mind getting to the point?”

A pinpoint of colour appeared on his cheek. “Certainly. Holby City has just received funding for a new trauma bay. As a trauma specialist, I wish to gauge your interest in acting as a consultant in its formation.”

“I’m sorry?”

“A consultant, Major. I wish to know whether you would be available to Ms Campbell-” *Always. “- and the board, to assist them in the design and operation of a trauma bay here on AAU. It is merely an administrative post but if you were to leave the army, there would be a position on the surgical team ready and waiting for you.”
A retirement plan. She’d never really considered one before. Thought she’d be with the army until she became too old to hold a scalpel. But if today had shown her anything, it was that she missed the rush of surgery. *Would be nice, not getting shot at. Would be nice, seeing her children at weekends. Would be nice, seeing Serena Campbell every day.* She would have this, waiting for her, when she got out. Her very own trauma bay. A readymade life.

It was certainly a tempting proposition. “I’d have to think about it.”

“Of course.” Hanssen cleared his throat. “If you would, however, I’d very much like a firm decision before your return to Afghanistan. Good day, Major.”

“Good day, Mister Hanssen.”

Returning to her spot by the lockers, Bernie sucked in a deep breath. She had two weeks to make up her mind. Two weeks to see her children; to see if there was *something* with Serena. Just the idea of the offer cleared the fog rolling across her brain. There was more outside these four walls, now. There was a future, an *attractive* future, as someone other than Major Wolfe. She’d never had that before.

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“So that was the great Major Wolfe.”

It was. *The Great Vanishing Major Wolfe.* One minute Bernie had been there, standing in the doorframe, looking as if her whole purpose in life was *her,* Serena Campbell. The next minute she had moved on. Perhaps she wanted to check in on Lieutenant Pryce. Perhaps she didn’t want to interrupt her conversation with Ric. Serena hoped for the former, but feared the latter. *Damn that man.* He’d swan in, wanting all the gossip on the new arrival, and had possibly scared Bernie away in the process. *Damn him.*

Perching on the edge of her desk, *just like Bernie had,* Ric cleared his throat to regain her focus. She stared at him, blinking, trying to recall what – if anything – he’d just said. “Sorry, Ric, miles away.”

“So I can see. I was just asking about Major Wolfe. She’s got quite the reputation. Doctor Copeland seems particularly smitten.” Ric leaned closer. “So what’s truth and what’s fiction?”

Serena shrugged. “As far as I can tell, it’s all true. She’s a very good surgeon. Exceptional, really. She has the most talented hands.” Serena coughed, shifting her gaze to the linoleum floor. “Marvel with a scalpel. All the nurses are impressed; the anaesthesiologist looked like he’d seen a miracle. She’s…*nice.* She knows what she wants, what she’s capable of. Highly intelligent. *Warm.* I thought she was cold when she first arrived. But, Ric, she’s so…*warm.*”

After blissfully imagining those arms wrapped around her, lips pressed to the curve of her neck, Serena realised that she’d fallen down the rabbit hole again and quickly made herself look busy with the papers on her desk. “She lives up to her reputation, that’s all.”

“It sounds like she’s one hell of a woman.”

“She is.”

Serena had never met anyone who so impressed her, who so complemented her like Bernie Wolfe. She couldn’t stop thinking about her; about the prospect of a *drink* and what else it might lead to. If Ric hadn’t popped down to gossip like a nosy parent in a playground, she could be asking Bernie out right now. *Say, do you fancy a drink? You look thirsty; shall we split a bottle of Shiraz? All this sexual tension is killing me; please let’s do something about it.* But no. She was *here,* entertaining
Ric. Still, if he was going to interrupt her day he might as well be useful.

Clearing her throat, Serena tried to broach the subject as nonchalantly as she could. “You’ve dated plenty of women before, haven’t you? I mean you’ve been married five times. I’m sure you have little tricks, little ways of asking a woman out for a drink?”

Ric eyed her warily. “Why the interest? Want to be on the lookout in case I ever decide to ask you to dinner?”

Serena rolled her eyes. That man’s ego was beyond her. “Humour me. Please.”

Ric considered her for a moment, before launching in to his answer. “It’s all about engagement. She has my full attention from the moment I join her in conversation. I smile. A little physical contact; nothing too overt. And then, I’d like to buy you a drink sometime. A statement, not a question. Simple formula; desirable results. So why the interest?”

Full attention, smile, physical contact. She could do that. “No reason. Just pure, academic interest.”

“Okay…”

He was intrigued; his interest piqued by such an unusual request. But there were some boundaries between them and so he kept his questions to himself. Serena didn’t want that, not really. She wanted him to pry it out of her, to work it out. I’m bisexual! Now that she had realised, now that she had decided to embrace it, she wanted to tell everyone. There was an exciting new part of her, an exciting new direction in her life and she wanted to tell the people closest to her. And that included Ric Griffin.

“I want to ask a woman out for a drink.”

Ric leant back, his face full of surprise. He quickly narrowed in on her open door. “The Major?”

She nodded, feeling almost giddy at being able to share it with someone. “Yes, Bernie. She’s…we’ve…there’s a connection between us. I’d like to see where it goes.” Suddenly Serena was reminded of the subheading in ‘Bisexuality in your later years’: people might not take it well. “How-what do you think about that?”

Ric shrugged. But he was smiling. “She sounds like a fine woman. You’re certainly smitten. Babbling on-“

“How-what do you think about that?”

“Do I have to bring up Francois Yeats or will you shut up on your own?”

“Point taken,” Ric chuckled; still smiling at her. She’d come out. To Ric Griffin. And he was okay with it. “I think this is wonderful, Serena. You deserve someone who makes you happy. Although, dating a soldier-“

Serena was trying to focus on the prospect of a drink, not on the two week time limit before Bernie left for another time zone. “It’s a drink, Ric, not a marriage proposal. But…thank you. For your advice and your…support.”

Ric’s pager went off before things between them could get any mushier. Serena escorted him to the door, Ric squeezing her elbow as they stepped outside. “Good luck, Serena. And if she says no, send her up to Keller. I’ll have words.”

She snorted. She’d love to see that. “Thanks Ric. Thank you.”
Buoyed by Ric’s support, Serena felt ready to ask Bernie out for that drink. All she had to do was find her. She poked her head into side room B, finding a still sedated Lieutenant Pryce and her relieved family. The family room had just two medics inside, neither of them Bernie Wolfe. Serena considered running down to Pulses when she literally ran into Henrik Hanssen.

“Ah, Henrik!” Serena smiled warmly at the CEO; the expression fading when she realised he was sneaking across her ward “I…uh…I’m looking for Major Wolfe. Have you seen her anywhere?”

“Major Wolfe is in the locker room. We just had a rather pleasant chat, as a matter of fact.”

_The locker room._ Perhaps Bernie was changing out of her scrubs, ready to head home. After all, her work was now complete. There was no longer any reason for her to stay at Holby City. Serena had hoped she’d stay a little longer, just for her. _If wishes were horses_...Maybe she could still catch her. She was halfway across the ward when she realised what else Henrik had said. But, as she turned to confront him, she realised that disappearing acts were catching.

Serena made a mental note to ask Bernie about it later, over a drink at Albie’s. _If she said yes._ The prospect of asking Bernie Wolfe out for a drink turned her stomach into a blender; her legs like jelly as she left the ward. She had to wipe her hands on her scrub bottoms so she could properly grip her key card. This was like being a teenager all over again! _Please let her say yes._

Taking in a few deep breaths, Serena counted to five and opened the door.

Bernie was, thankfully, still in her AAU scrubs. But rather than sitting on the bench or taking a nap (as she’d caught Fletch doing more than once); she was sitting on the floor, back propped up against the lockers. Bernie looked lost in thought and Serena wondered if it was right to disturb her. But she’d heard the sound of the door and her head shot up, blonde hair falling everywhere. Bernie’s smile upon seeing her was warmer than any Italian resort; richer than any glass of Shiraz. Never before had Serena felt so _wanted._

“There you are. I’ve been looking for you.”

“You found me.”

_You found me, darling._ “Yes, yes I did. Everything alright?”

Bernie nodded; the corners of her smile fading. “I’m fine. Just…It’s been a very, _very_ long day.”

A flight from half way around the world and the medical emergency of one of her team. _Long day_ was an understatement. Perhaps this wasn’t the right time to ask her out for a drink. Perhaps they could just swap numbers, just for now. “I can ask Fletch to call you a taxi, if you’d like. Take you back to your hotel. Clean sheets, bubble bath. Room service. All well-deserved and no doubt _well_ overdue.”

“No, no thank you.” Bernie sighed. “If it’s all the same to you, Serena, I’d rather stay here a little longer. I need to think through a few things. Can’t do that in a quiet hotel room.”

“Of course.” Serena joined Bernie on her side of the room, sliding down to sit beside her. The lockers were cold against her back, yet Bernie’s knee felt warm against her palm. Her touch seemed to lift Bernie’s smile. “You can stay as long as you’d like, as long as you need. You’re more than welcome to help me with ward rounds. Or, you could even help me with that paperwork…”

Bernie groaned, her head falling back against the locker. “Anything but paperwork.”

“Oh, I see how it is. _Lying to get me into your operating theatre._ You surgeons are all the same.”
Bernie snorted, a heady laugh quickly tumbling out of her mouth. Serena laughed with her; delighted to see that the brightness of Bernie’s smile had reached her eyes. So close, closer perhaps than they had ever been, Serena could appreciate just how beautiful Bernie really was. She stared at her mouth; at open lips that seemed ready for hers. She took in lines and fallen eyelashes and the dark roots of her hair. There was a tan line just visible underneath her scrubs. Ric was right. She was smitten. Two weeks would not be enough. But a drink was a good place to start.

“You know, I finish in a couple of hours.”

Bernie’s eyes sparkled like they had during surgery. “You do?”

“I do.” She felt familiar butterflies in her stomach, and Serena squeezed Bernie’s knee to anchor herself. Why was she so nervous? But what if she still says no? “I do. There’s a pub, Albie’s, just across the road. Does a really nice bottle of Shiraz. What—what do you think?”

“About what?”

Bloody infuriating woman. Serena elbowed her in the ribs. “Don’t make this easy on me, will you?”

“I’m sorry, Serena, I couldn’t help myself.” Bernie’s smug smile faded into one of genuine delight. She placed her hand atop of Serena’s, linking their fingers. Just like their handshake earlier, the air around them seemed to crackle and pop. “I would love to go for a drink with you.”

And that was it. She had a date. With Bernie Wolfe! Not even the sound of her pager could distract her from the weight of Bernie’s hand; the delight of future events. She had a date. The end of her shift couldn’t come quickly enough.

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Serena’s shift was finally over. Bernie’s time at Holby City was now complete. With great care she removed her blue scrubs, folding them in a neat stack and leaving them on the pile of clothes to be laundered. Her fatigues remained untouched, resting inside her duffel bag. Instead, for the first time in six months, Bernie put on civilian clothes. Flimsy trainers; one good kick and they’d be ruined. Skinny jeans that Charlotte had insisted she buy. A white fitted shirt, showing off the tan from long hours in Afghanistan.

The Major was shut away in the duffel bag. She was now Bernie Wolfe. Just Bernie.

Just Bernie looked strange in the mirror of the staff toilets. Different, somehow. Maybe she was just happy. After all, she was going on a date with Serena Campbell. Anxious fingers teased her hair; finger-brushing blonde curls until they looked less like the bird’s nest she was accustomed to. Rough pinches to her cheeks and lips were given in the absence of makeup. Normally she wouldn’t bother. But this was Serena Campbell. She wanted to make a little effort. Not bad.

Still, a little eyeliner wouldn’t go amiss. Bernie stepped outside, hoping to catch one of the nurses before they went home for the night. Instead, Serena was already waiting for her in the hall. With coat and bag in hand, Bernie was reminded of their first meeting earlier that day. But now there was a fresh coat of lipstick on her mouth; a little mascara across her eyelashes. Serena making an effort just for her made her stomach flutter.

“Ready for that drink, Ms Campbell?” she said, foregoing the quest for eyeliner; hoping it would be enough.
It was. Serena turned on her heel, mouth falling open as she got her first look at Just Bernie rather than Major Wolfe. Serena looked her up and down; eyes lingering on her denim clad legs, the dark shadow of her bra underneath her shirt. Serena wet her lips, staring at her with pure hunger. Suddenly she felt like committing every soldier-back-from-war cliché and dragging Serena to the nearest sturdy surface for a proper welcome home.

Maybe another time. “Enjoying the view?”

“Oh yes. Oh yes.” Serena giggled; thumb brushing the chain of her necklace. She enjoyed another lingering look before her gaze quickly dropped. “I very much like you out of uniform, Major.”


Serena snorted, as if she didn’t quite believe the compliment. “Flattery will get you everywhere, Bernie.”

“Will it get me a drink with the prettiest consultant at Holby City?”

Bernie expected a teasing smile; perhaps another tangle of fingers as she was escorted to Holby’s premier watering hole. She did not, however, expect the wince of pain crossing Serena’s face. A figure approached them; Jason holding a book about British aircraft carriers. Suddenly Bernie recalled that it was fish and chips night, and that Serena would be taking her nephew straight home. Not, in fact, exploring their connection over a shared bottle of wine.

“I’m so sorry, Bernie. Taking Jason home completely slipped my mind,” Serena said, appearing genuinely in pain at the thought of cancelling their date. “Maybe another night? Jason goes to visit Alan on Thursday. We could have that drink then.”

The last thing that Bernie wanted to do was push. The last thing she wanted to do was to come between Serena and her nephew. But the last thing Bernie wanted to do was go to her hotel without having that drink. A consultant’s life was busy. Thursday would become Friday and suddenly Bernie would be on a plane to Afghanistan. So she decided some covert tactics were in order. After all, Jason was the one who suggested she date his aunt in the first place.

“Good to see you again, Jason.” He smiled. “I really enjoyed our conversation earlier. I actually wanted to let you know that you were right. Army major, certainly exciting. And your aunt agrees, one hundred percent.”

“Really?” Bernie nodded. “Interesting. I thought her shouting would put you off.”

Bernie sniggered, earning a glare from Serena. “Not one bit. I actually really like your aunt, and I was hoping we could have a quick drink before I go back to my hotel. Would that be alright, Jason?”

Serena looked between the two of them, utterly confused as to what was going on. Jason, thankfully, was considering her offer. “That would be acceptable, yes. You two can have a drink. But I’d like an extra-large cod and a pickled egg from the shop. For my trouble.”

“Two drinks,” Serena bargained, finally catching on. “And you can have a large gherkin as well.”

Jason’s grin was almost as wide as theirs. “Deal. You should have told me earlier, Auntie Serena. I like Major Bernie. All of this could have been avoided.”

“Apologies, Jason. Turns out you have excellent taste in women.” Serena smiled at her nephew, linking one arm with his; the other sliding through Bernie’s. She turned to her, excitement practically
radiating off of her. “Come on, let’s get that drink.”

Albie’s was a sweet English pub, with many a drunk NHS worker inside. Jason found some of his fellow porters and decided to sit with them rather than watch you two make eyes at each other all night. He wasn’t far wrong. Bernie couldn’t keep her eyes off Serena as they took up post at the bar. Even in a packed pub, with nurses and doctors jostling for tables and drinks, they were in their own little bubble. Elbows pressed close together like in the scrub room; hands brushing on the sticky bar top like they had in the locker room. Soft smiles, knowing smiles. Smiles just for each other.

The bartender finally came their way. “Shiraz?”

“You know me so well.” Serena grinned, glancing briefly at Bernie before addressing the bartender. “Two glasses, please.”

Not normally a fan of red wine, Bernie took the proffered glass in the spirit it was given. Shiraz was personal to Serena, and sharing a glass of her favourite tipple felt more intimate than if she’d asked for a tumbler of whiskey. Drinks in hand, they tried to find a table. Nurse Fletcher and Mister Di Lucca waved at them from a table in the back, but Serena moved them forward with a firm hand to her elbow. They waited in front of a junior doctor finishing his drink; Serena staring intensely until he downed the rest of his pint and headed home.

They sat together, chairs pulled tight; practically on each other’s laps. Bernie sipped her wine; the Shiraz fruitier than she remembered. Beside her, Serena chugged half her glass in one go. She stared sheepishly at Bernie over the rim, slowly lowering it from her lips.

“Sorry. I’m just a little nervous.”

Bernie squeezed her hand. “I understand. Would it help if I told you that this was my first ‘first date’ with a woman too?”

“Really?”

She nodded, taking a sip of her wine. “My colleague – the one I told you about – she was my first girlfriend. Hard to find a romantic first date spot in the field. By the time we came back to the UK we were already in a relationship. Not quite the same. The last time I went on a first date was – god – twenty six years ago. Even that was a disaster. Marcus tried to show off and ended up choking on a piece of chicken.”

Serena snorted. “Better than Edward, who’s idea of a first date involved tequila shots and flirting with the waitress right in front of me. Still, even that wasn’t as bad as the Boston surgeon who spent our entire date telling me why my menstrual cycle should exclude me from performing intense surgeries.”

“Fuck off.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Serena’s eyes shone, her body leaning closer to hers. “So I’m glad it’s you I’m doing this with. I’m glad we got our drink.”

Bernie beamed. “Me too.”

After that, their nerves seemed to evaporate. Perhaps this wasn’t really their first date. Perhaps the coffee and conversation they had shared earlier, where they had learned about their children; their lives as surgeons, had been the real first date. Because there was no awkward stammering about favourite colours and hobbies and how many siblings. They talked about the doctors waiting at the bar; gossip that Serena could share with her but not her staff. They talked about why Bernie had
joined the army, what it meant to her. Every topic was indulged and encouraged; every distraction and name call ignored.

As Serena finished a story about her time at Harvard, Bernie realised there were only a few drops left in her second glass. Two drinks: *that was the deal.* She stubbornly refused to drain it, wanting this night to last forever.

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“You know, I ran into Hanssen earlier. He mentioned you two had a pleasant chat. Anything I should know about?”

“Oh, *that*,” Bernie said, toying with the stem of her wine glass. “He was talking about your new trauma bay. Invited me to consult on the operation, the construction.”

*New trauma bay?* This was the first Serena had heard of it. She’d wanted one for years, ever since she’d first moved to AAU. But the funding had never been there. Bernie Wolfe was somehow her lucky penny. She’d shown up, helped unlock a part of herself, and unwittingly got her a trauma bay to boot. Hanssen inviting Bernie to consult on it was just the cherry on the top of a particularly delicious sundae.

“What would that mean?” she asked, taking a sip of her diminishing second glass. *Two drinks only; got to make this last.* “For you, I mean, what would your role be?”

Bernie shrugged. “I’d offer advice, input where needed. I’d be available for telephone and email consultations.” She caught the glint in Serena’s eye. “For *professional* calls only, Campbell.”

“Shame. ‘Scrubs’ is not an exciting answer to the question ‘what are you wearing’?”

Bernie smirked, her other hand slipping off the table to rest against Serena’s thigh. “Depends on what you’re wearing under your scrubs.”

Serena groaned at the image; fingers clutching the stemware so hard she was sure it would break. “You don’t play fair, Major.”

“Oh I do. I just *always* win. I’m very, very competitive.”

There was little distance between them now. Sparkling eyes and lustful looks were crumbling Serena’s already weak resolve. *You can’t snog her in the middle of Albie’s. You just can’t.* But she wanted to taste the Shiraz on Bernie’s lips; to feel the press of cotton and denim against her as she was hoisted up against a wall by a woman very much *out* of uniform. She wanted to kiss Bernie for the first time and realise how much she had been missing, and understand how grateful she was to have the chance to explore it all for the very first time.

But through the throng of people she could see her nephew pointing at his watch. “Unfortunately, Bernie, it’s midnight and Cinderella has to go get fish and chips.”

She clocked Jason too. “Of course. Let me walk you out? It’s the least Prince Charming can do, after all.”

Serena drained the rest of her glass and joined Bernie and her duffel in heading outside. Jason looked eager to head home and she couldn’t blame him. She should be thanking him, really. He’d allowed her some wiggle room in his schedule so she could have a drink with Bernie. A wonderful, *wonderful* drink. Serena couldn’t remember the last time she had connected with someone so quickly, so easily. Someone who understood the pitfalls of family life, of working with male egos.
Someone who matched her and challenged her and made her stomach flutter.

Prince Charming indeed.

Outside Albie’s, a taxi was waiting. Jason offered Bernie a mock salute before climbing inside. They remained, standing awkwardly in front of each other, well aware of Jason’s presence and the taxi driver reading a crumpled copy of The Sun. Serena decided to keep their goodbyes short and sweet. “I’m really glad you decided to invade my ward today.”

“Well, I’m really glad they sent us to Holby.”

The thought of what this day could have been like had Bernie not shown up was unthinkable. Perhaps she would have lost that boy on the table; perhaps Lieutenant Pryce would not have received the right care at another hospital. She would be none the wiser to her sexuality and Bernie would be stuck in a hotel room all alone. I’m really glad you decided to invade my ward today didn’t even come close to her true feelings.

Serena reached up and brushed her lips to Bernie’s cheek, savouring the warmth of her skin under her lips. After, she slid a folded business card into Bernie’s palm. “Call me about the job; I’d be happy to answer any questions you have. Or just…call me.”

Bernie smiled, brushing her fingertips against the spot where Serena’s lips had touched her cheek. “I will, Serena. Good night.”

“Night.”

Serena gave Bernie one final smile. But with every step towards the taxi, she felt a growing unease in her chest. Like Lieutenant Pryce’s surgery, it felt anticlimactic. There should be something more. As she approached the cab, she paused. Holding up a single finger to Jason, she offered him her most persuasive smile.

“One more minute.”

Serena quickly turned, walking with purpose back to Bernie. She looked confused, mouth open as if to ask what was wrong. But then, Serena kissed her.

All her thoughts, all her daydreams of what kissing Bernie would be like proved false. Her lips were chapped from too much sun; stained with Shiraz and tasting slightly of nicotine gum. There was nothing soft about the way Bernie hauled her closer, desperate not to have a sliver of air between them. They both smelled of alcohol and sweat from Albie’s, and the crisp night air made them both shiver. Bernie kissed like she was going away to war, and Serena fought back determined to have as much of her as she could in the time that they had left.

As passion gave way to exploration, Serena felt Bernie’s hands cup her face. Her lips lingered against hers, leaving a kiss to her bottom lip; the corner of her mouth. Serena groaned at the pressure of teeth against skin; at Bernie’s slight intake of breath as her tongue once again tasted the Shiraz on her lips. Just like she was reluctant to finish her wine, Serena was reluctant to open her eyes. But she had to. She opened them a second before Bernie and was witness to the sheer contentment playing across her face.

A perfect kiss to end an imperfect day. “I’ve wanted to do that all day.”

Bernie smiled, nose brushing hers. “Me too. Does this really have to be goodnight?”

Serena wanted nothing more than to kiss Bernie all over again. Thankfully Jason, their exasperated
matchmaker, piped up from the back of the taxi. “Auntie Serena, the shop will be closing soon! You can continue kissing Major Bernie in the taxi but we must go!”

“Of course, Jason, of course.” Serena ran her thumb across Bernie’ bottom lip. “Dinner?”

“I’d love to.”

Like a pair of giddy first lovers, they ran for the taxi. Serena clambered in first, squeezing her nephew’s hand and kissing his cheek as a thank you for being such an understanding young man. After tossing her duffel in the boot, Bernie joined them on the backseat. Serena gave the driver the address, immediately reaching over to tangle her hand with Bernie’s. They shared another kiss; light and quick. A reaffirmation that this was real. That wherever this was heading, it had the ability to survive the different worlds they both lived in.

Two streets away from the chip shop, Jason started talking to Bernie about the book he was reading. Serena took the opportunity to check her phone, finding two missed calls and three texts from Robbie. The latest was an offer to bring fish and chips round for the three of them. After exchanging a lingering glance with Bernie, Serena sent a single message back.

*Sorry, have other plans. Busy welcoming home a member of the armed forces. x*

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